

In the Eye of the Beholder: An Exploration of Managerial Courage

Michelle Harbour · Veronika Kisfalvi

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Abstract There is growing interest in the positive organizational literature in the complex interplay between the positive and negative facets of organizations, individuals, and situations. The concept of courage provides fertile ground to study this interplay, since it is generally understood to be a positive quality that is manifested in challenging situations. The empirical study presented here looks at courage in a strategic decision-making context and takes an interpretive perspective; it focuses on the cognitive structures and subjective understandings of managers and administrators involved in merger projects as a way to understand the dynamics surrounding managerial courage. Our study makes several contributions: it shows that managers consider courage to have a moral dimension, e.g., to be a positive and ethical response to a risky or difficult situation in which there is an interplay between organizational and personal interests; it identifies two kinds of managerial moral courage; it proposes a conceptual model with which to understand how evaluations of what is courageous and what is not are made; and finally, it offers four schemas developed from the data that add to our understanding of moral courage in management.

Keywords Cognition · Courage · Emotions · Managerial moral courage · Strategic decision

Introduction

Research on decision-making under conditions of risk has mainly focused on the elements that negatively influence the process (Kahneman and Lovallo 1993; Thaler et al. 1997; Whyte 1989). More recently, with the emergence of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) (Fineman 2006a), there has been growing interest in the more positive influences; this stream of research can also potentially reconcile academics' interests in both negative and positive organizational phenomena. While POS focuses on the "positive outcomes, processes, and attributes of organizations," it is increasingly heeding Robert's (2006) call for more balanced approaches and taking into account the negative elements that also exist within organizations (Cameron et al. 2003, p. 4). For example, both positive deviance and negative deviance are now recognized terms in the POS lexicon (Cameron et al. 2003). Positive deviance is defined by Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003, p. 209) as consisting of "intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways" while negative deviance is a "significant [negative] departure from norms." Courage, traditionally considered to be an ethical concept involving conditions of risk or difficulty (particularly in the philosophical literature) has become a topic of interest in this literature (Sekerka and Bagozzi 2007; Worline and Quinn 2003) since courage in organizations can have both a positive aspect (when recognized as a quality or a competency) and a negative one (it can result in adverse consequences for the actor) (Comer and Vega 2011; Sekerka et al. 2009). In addition, as Srivastva and

M. Harbour (✉)
Département des sciences administratives, Université du Québec
en Outaouais, Pavillon Lucien-Brault, Case postale 1250,
succursale Hull, Gatineau, QC J8X 3X7, Canada
e-mail: michelle.harbour@uqo.ca
URL: www.uqo.ca

V. Kisfalvi
HEC Montréal, 3000, chemin de la Côte-Sainte-Catherine,
Montréal, QC H3T 2A7, Canada
e-mail: veronika.kisfalvi@hec.ca