

The NGO Halo Effect: How Moral Goodness Can Explain Unethical Behavior

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Abstract

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are perceived to be morally good, yet NGOs engage in multiple types of unethical behaviors. Research explains NGO's unethical behavior despite their moral goodness. We conceptualize how NGO unethical behavior can be explained *because* of their moral goodness. We propose that the three characteristics inherent to NGOs—the nondistribution constraint, being private, and voluntary—can explain why NGOs can be perceived to be morally good. We apply the construct of the halo effect and focus on the perception of people in NGOs to conceptualize how they can overestimate the goodness of their NGO's mission, morality, and people, including themselves. We define this as the *NGO halo effect*. We propose that the NGO halo effect can relate to unethical behavior by people in NGOs by three moral mechanisms—moral justification, moral superiority, and moral naivety. We discuss our model's implications for theory building and future research.

Keywords: Nongovernmental organization, unethical behavior, halo effect, moral mechanism, perception.

Introduction

NGOs are perceived as ‘good’ organizations. Burt (2014) notes that when an organization is categorized as an NGO, it is perceived of as ‘good’ in virtue of this categorization. Other scholars have noted the general distinguishing feature of NGOs to be their predisposition to do good (Frumkin, 2002; Minkoff & Powell, 2006; Raelin, 1994). NGOs have further been described in positive terms such as caring and warm (Aaker et al., 2010), altruistic (Rose-Ackermann, 2016), and selfless (Dolšak & Prakash, 2021).

Yet, multiple types of unethical behavior take place in and by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Examples of NGO’s unethical behavior include sexual exploitation (Scurlock et al., 2020), fraud and corruption (Gibelman & Gelman, 2001, 2004; Liu et al. 2019), abuse of power (Gallagher & Radcliffe, 2002), and poor handling of reports of staff misconduct (McVeigh, 2020). A recent systematic review identified 71 scholarly articles that studied different unethical behaviors involving NGOs showing the range of unethical behaviors that take place across different types of NGOs (Chapman et al., 2022).

Coupling the perception of NGOs as good organizations with the recognition that they can behave badly points to a seeming paradox. At the core of this seeming paradox is a moral claim implying that there is limited room for NGOs to be and do anything other than good (Raelin, 1994). We claim this assumption to be a reason for why NGO goodness has not been explored in the literature as a factor relating to NGO unethical behavior. Research on NGOs’ unethical behavior has focused on individual factors (Andreoli & Lefkowitz, 2009; Fremont-Smith & Kosaras, 2003; Gibelman & Gelman, 2004), organizational factors, (Cordery & Baskerville, 2010; Gibelman & Gelman, 2001; McDonnell & Rutherford, 2018) and sectoral factors (Chapman et al., 2022). While these factors explore different characteristics that are associated with NGO unethical behavior, they do not consider whether and how moral goodness can be an explanatory factor. In this article, we explore if and how can we understand

NGO unethical behavior in relation to the perception of NGO goodness. As we focus on unethical behavior in and by NGOs, we explore perceptions of people internal to NGOs.

Our article makes several important contributions on NGO unethical behavior. First, we make a case for why a conceptual lens is required to understand NGOs' unethical behavior with the positioning of NGOs as moral organizations. We conceptualize that NGOs' unethical behavior is not a paradox, but that it can be seen as *congruent* to the moral goodness of NGOs. Second, we generate a conceptual model of moral goodness as an explanatory factor for NGO unethical behavior, whereby we present new thinking on how NGO behavior can tip from the ethical side of the moral spectrum to the other side. In so doing, we contribute to understanding how the same general organizational characteristics that cause the good side of organizations can also cause their bad side in the context of NGOs (Durkheim, 1985; Palmer et al., 2016; Vaughan, 1999). Third, we show how characteristics inherent to organizations can be enabling factors for unethical behavior. Understanding organizational specific factors, rather than generic factors, can be an effective strategy to detecting, preventing, and responding to unethical behavior.

We present nine propositions how people in NGOs can enable moral mechanisms that can relate to unethical behavior. Propositions one to three look at the three characteristics inherent to NGOs (i.e., the non-distribution constraint, being private, and voluntary) to explain why people in NGOs can perceive their NGO to be morally good. In propositions four to six we propose how this perception of goodness can lead to the tendency for people in NGOs to overestimate and glorify the goodness of their NGO; we term this the *NGO halo effect*. In propositions seven to nine we present how the NGO halo effect can enable moral mechanisms that can relate to unethical behavior by people in NGOs. See Figure 1 for our conceptual model. Our article's structure follows the steps how we conceptualize the NGO halo effect and its influence on NGOs' unethical behavior, and we close with research implications.

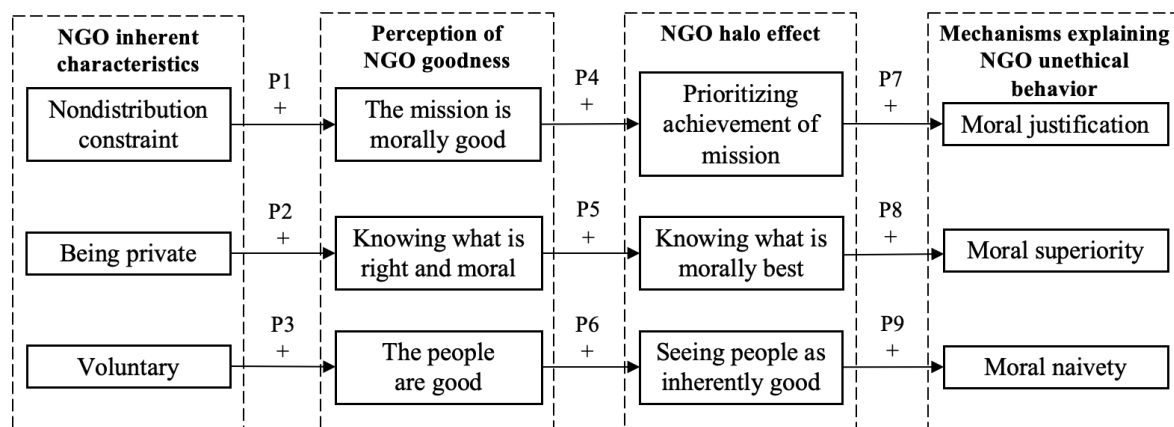


Figure 1: The NGO halo effect as an explanation for NGOs' unethical behavior

NGOs as Morally Good Organizations

A commonly used way to refer to NGOs is based on their characteristics. Salamon and Anheier (1992) note five characteristics to indicate what an NGO is: (1) formal, (2) private, (3) nonprofit distributing, (4) self-governing, and (5) voluntary. Salamon and Sokolwski (2016) argue that three of these characteristics are inherent to NGOs namely, being private, nonprofit distributing, and voluntary. Different terms have been used to describe organizations with these characteristics, such as nonprofit-, charity-, and voluntary organizations. For the purposes of this article, we use the term NGO, and consider this term to be synonymous.

Different types of NGOs have all three inherent characteristics. To classify the different types of NGOs, Yaziji and Doh (2009) divide NGOs along two dimensions: (1) for whom the NGO is designed to benefit, being either the self or the other, and (2) the NGO's activity, being service and/or advocacy. In this article we focus on other-benefiting NGOs, (i.e., NGOs in which capital and labor contributors are not members), and both service and/or advocacy NGOs, (i.e., NGOs which work to shape the social, economic, or political system to promote a given set of interests; NGOs which provide goods and services to clients; and hybrid NGOs that pursue both sets of activities). Thus, we focus on NGOs whose purpose is to serve others,

and whose mission is based on an ideology to affect the public good. Examples include NGOs such as welfare, development, and human rights organizations and exclude NGOs such as universities, religious groups, and local football associations. Below we discuss how the three inherent characteristics give rise to the perception that the NGOs we center on are morally good.

The Nondistribution Constraint

Salamon and Sokolwski (2016) note one of the inherent characteristics of NGOs to be non-profit distributing. Commonly referred to as the *nondistribution constraint* (NDC), this characteristic restricts people in NGOs from distributing any profits to those who control the organization. As Young (2013:1) asks, “If not for profit, then what [motivates NGOs]”? The NDC implies that NGO resources should be used in service of the NGO mission, with the objective of benefitting the public good and creating value for people beyond those internal to the organization (Hansmann, 1980, 1987; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Salamon & Sokolwski, 2016).

The NDC draws attention to the centrality of mission for NGOs. Scholars note the mission to be a “clarion call” (Minkoff & Powell, 2006:591) and “flame” (Frumkin, 2002:24). The mission signals what people in the NGO regard as good, and through that signal induces people to invest their time, energy, and resources. The mission provides people with the opportunity to express their beliefs through engaging with the NGO, and the satisfaction that their values are being put into action (Minkoff & Powell, 2006). We argue that people willingly work or volunteer in an NGO when they perceive the mission to reflect their own beliefs of what is moral and right.

Proposition 1: If the NDC characteristic is present, then people will perceive their organization’s mission to be morally good.

Private Character

Being private is another inherent characteristic of NGOs (Salamon & Sokolwski, 2016). They define being private as “forms of individual or collective action that are outside the sphere and control of government” (2016:1528). Because this characteristic establishes that NGOs are separate from and not controlled by government, the missions of NGOs do not have to be in line with state laws or governmental policies. For example, there can be pro- and anti-abortion NGOs regardless of what the government’s stance on abortion might be.

The characteristic of being private gives people in the NGO the autonomy to define its mission according to what they consider good. NGO missions are “inherently expressive” (Frumkin, 2002:20) of what NGOs consider reflecting “goodness, good works, altruism, high standards and moral probity” (Leat, 1994:22). Thus, by virtue of being private, people in NGOs have the freedom to determine the NGO’s mission according to their own belief about what is good.

Proposition 2: If the private characteristic is present, then people in the organization will perceive themselves to be knowledgeable about what is right and moral.

Voluntary Character

Being voluntary is another inherent characteristic of NGOs and is defined as “pursuing activities without compulsion” (Salamon & Sokolwski, 2016:1528). This characteristic refers to the free association of people to give their time, money, or labor for joint action based on shared values without the NGO demanding anything in return from those who invest in the NGO (Borzagao & Tortia, 2006; Frumkin, 2002). Scholars note people who voluntarily give to embody a “selfless spirit of altruism” (Eliasoph, 2020:566) and to be perceived of as “warm, which typically includes perceptions of generosity, kindness, honesty, sincerity, helpfulness, trustworthiness, and thoughtfulness” (Aaker et al., 2010:225).

An NGO's mission gives people the voluntary choice to support the NGO and can prompt them to volunteer their resources. Being voluntary suggests a kind of self-sacrifice because people willingly give up part of their own resources to support a mission they consider to be good. An NGO's mission can thus function as a moral standard whereby any individual who willingly align themselves with it can be seen as virtuous (Tooby & Cosmides, 2010).

Proposition 3: If the voluntary characteristic is present, then people will perceive themselves and other people in their organization to be good.

As the three inherent characteristics are a necessary condition for an organization to be characterized as an NGO, we argue that the three propositions will hold for NGOs. Considering the propositions together, we argue that people in NGOs perceive their NGO to be morally good. In the next section, we conceptualize how the perception of a morally good organization can lead to a halo effect, whereby people in the NGO can overestimate their NGO's goodness.

The NGO Halo Effect

The halo effect is the tendency for people to have an overall positive perception based on a first positive impression (Thorndike, 1920). The halo effect is when one is "unable to treat an individual as a compound of separate qualities and to assign a magnitude to each of these in independence of the others" (Thorndike, 1920:28), explaining why people assume general perceptions to be consistent with existing impressions (Lachman & Bass, 1985; Forgas & Laham, 2007).

Organizations can be subjects of the halo effect, whereby a general positive perception about an organization leads to broader positive inferences about that organization (Coombs, 2012; Hornsey et al., 2020; Ruddle et al., 2022). According to Rosenzweig (2007), the halo effect involving organizations is "pervasive" (p. 7) and has a "powerful influence" (p. 9) on

how organizations are judged. The halo effect has been identified in the food (Provencher, 2016), automotive (Frank, 2012), and corporate (Rosenzweig, 2007) industries and has been used to explain consumer bias regarding corporate social responsibility (Smith et al., 2010).

The literature on the halo effect regarding NGOs is much less extensive than the literature on the halo effect and other types of organizations. The NGO sector has been referred to as sanctified (Wagner, 2000), angelic (Smith, 2000), and noted to have a halo (Ruddle et al., 2022), and others have hinted at a halo effect. Handy and Russel (2018) argue that perceiving NGOs as morally good organizations generates the belief that NGOs behave ethically, and Keck and Sikkink (1998) show that the perception of NGO goodness is connected to the belief that NGOs are principled and moral actors. However, to our knowledge, only one scholar explicitly explores the existence of the halo effect in relation to NGOs. Steinberg (2004, 2006, 2009) contends that human rights NGOs in Israel have a halo effect because foreign media accept their claims and recommendations at face value, without checking the NGOs' credibility.

Conceptualizing the NGO Halo Effect

We apply the notion of the halo effect to NGOs to arrive at the concept of the *NGO halo effect*. Building on the three inherent characteristics, we conceptualize how an initial perception of moral goodness can lead to the goodness of the mission, morality, and people in the NGO being overestimated by employees, volunteers, or other people in the NGO.

Glorifying the Moral Goodness of the Mission

When the mission is perceived by people within the NGO to be good, there can be a tendency for the goodness of the mission to be overestimated. An NGO's mission occupies a "holy place" within the NGO (Moore, 2000:190), and the centrality and holiness of the mission can

lead the NGO's people to elevate the mission's goodness, and thereby its importance. We posit that a glorified mission is like the apple of the eye for people in the NGO, leading them to prioritize achieving the mission due to the elevated importance given to it. As Frumkin (2002:23) observes, fulfilling the NGO's mission "can be a satisfying end in itself."

Proposition 4: If people in the NGO glorify the moral goodness of the mission, then they will prioritize achievement of their NGO's mission.

Glorifying Morality

Like a halo on the mission, there can also be a tendency for people in the NGO to overestimate knowing what is moral and right. As noted, being private allows people in NGOs to independently define their mission, i.e., people in NGO have the autonomy to self-determine what a good mission is. A mission reflects what people in the NGO believe to be right and wrong, and it allows them to distinguish and differentiate themselves from other moral conceptions, such as the law, generally accepted conceptions of what is good, and other organizations' missions (Ellemers et al., 2014; Minkoff & Powell, 2016; Sachdeva et al., 2011). When they overestimate their morality, people in NGOs can be convinced that they know what is morally best, and that others are wrong and immoral.

Scholars refer to strong beliefs in what is right and moral as moral conviction (Skitka et al., 2005; Zaal et al., 2011), and they explain that those who hold these convictions believe that they know what is objectively right, i.e., it is not just opinion or belief. Furthermore, they consider those who do not share their knowledge of what is right as 'immoral' (Skitka et al., 2005). For example, people in prolife NGOs can believe to know what is better for human dignity, while people in prochoice NGOs can believe that they know what is more humane; both could consider their own stance as right and moral, and the other's stance as immoral.

Proposition 5: If people in the NGO glorify their NGO's morality, then they will believe to know what is morally best.

Glorifying the Goodness of People in NGOs

Like a halo on the mission and on knowledge on what is right and moral, there can also be tendency for people in the NGO to glorify each other. The mission can elicit support from people with a common consideration of what is good. The voluntary characteristic refers to volunteers dedicating their time on their own volition, and staff seeking employment, often at lower wages (Borzagao and Tortia, 2006), to support a mission they consider worthy. As discussed, this can then generate the perception that the people who work and volunteer for NGOs are good (Oster, 1995). When people's goodness is overestimated, people may consider themselves and others in the NGO to be better than they actually are, i.e., inherently good. For example, people's intelligence, capability, and skillfulness (Aaker et al., 2010) of how to do good may be overestimated, as may be their commitment to doing good. Eulogizing the NGO's people as heroes (Tomazos & Butler, 2010), angelic and saintly (Wagner, 2000), and warm (Aaker et al., 2010) is suggestive of them being trusted to behave and in line with moral codes (Aaker et al., 2010).

Proposition 6: If people in the NGO glorify themselves and other people in the NGO, then they will believe that they are inherently good.

NGOs' Unethical Behavior

In this section, we discuss how an overestimation of the NGO's moral goodness by the NGO's people, i.e., the NGO halo effect, can explain unethical behavior by people in NGOs. We uphold the definition of unethical behavior to be behavior that violates generally accepted

moral norms of behavior (Jones, 1991; Treviño et al., 2006), and we seek to explain unethical behavior on behalf of- and against NGOs (Coleman, 1987).

Moral Justification

We claim that the glorification of the mission by the NGO can lead to the likelihood for people within the NGO to adopt an *the-end-justifies-the-means* mentality: i.e., the attitude that to achieve its mission, any behavior, good or bad, will be seen as justifiable. A the-end-justifies-the-means mentality implies that attention is given to the means only to the extent that it contributes to achieving the end, ignoring whether it is moral or not. The glorification of the NGO's mission implies that fulfilling the mission is more important than *how* it is fulfilled. The NGO halo effect can thus increase the possibility for unethical behavior by people in the NGO when they prioritize fulfilling the mission over how it is done.

The psychology literature commonly refers to *the-end-justifies-the-means* as moral justification. Moral justification is making unethical behavior ethical by portraying it as serving a good purpose (Bandura, 1990; Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, 1999). Bandura's (1999:194) widely cited process of moral justification explains how "detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes." Thus, unethical behavior is justified when it is for the sake of what is believed to be a good end. Burbano and Ostler (2021) imply such a motive amongst NGOs delivering liver transplants and whose employees engage in unethical behavior, i.e., they find that unethical behavior is justified by people in the sampled NGOs to ultimately benefit their patients.

Outside of the NGO context, moral justification has been used to explain unethical behavior as an end-justifies-the-means mentality, to explain harmful behavior in the name of protecting honor and reputation (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994), military misconduct (Kelman, 1973), righteous ideologies, nationalistic beliefs, and religious principles (Reich, 1990). Forsyth

(1992:462) eloquently summarizes moral justification: “harm is sometimes...necessary to produce good”.

In the case of the NGO halo effect, there can be a tendency for people in NGOs to justify their unethical behavior if the behavior is for the sake of achieving the NGO’s mission. For example, Greenpeace constructed an underwater ‘boulder barrier’ to deter trawlers from their harmful fishing practices (Rowlatt, 2021). Greenpeace (2021:1) noted in a statement that because government was not acting against trawling, “until this broken system changes, it’s up to us to step in and stop the destruction.” Large boulders, while harmless to marine life and surface fishing, is considered illegal as it is dangerous to the people on the trawler ships (Rowlatt, 2021). This example can highlight that while the NGO allegedly behaved unethically, Greenpeace justified its behavior as upholding their mission of conservationism. Given the NGO halo effect, we can show that achieving the mission was prioritized over how the mission was achieved.

To summarize, the glorification of the NGO mission can lead to priority being given by people in the NGO to achieving the mission over how it is reached. Through moral justification, unethical behavior can be cognitively redefined such that the behavior is seen as morally good: because it protects and preserves what people consider to be ultimately moral, i.e., the mission of the NGO. In this way, unethical behavior by people in NGOs does not happen because of altered moral standards but because of what they venerate to be of ultimate moral importance.

Proposition 7: If people in the NGO believe that achieving the mission should be prioritized over other activities, then unethical behavior by people in the NGO will result.

Moral Superiority

We posit that the glorification of morality can lead to the likelihood for people in NGOs to disregard laws and generally accepted conceptions of morality. As noted, people in NGOs can operate on their own belief of what is good and bad, i.e., their own moral law. We posit that by virtue of being autonomous, people in NGOs could define their own moral law and reason that their moral law is morally superior.

Overly positive self-categorization of morality can happen at the organizational level. Evidence shows the centrality of group moral norms in people's moral judgements, and adherence to these norms can help achieve and maintain a positive group level conception of morality (Ellemers & Van den Bos, 2012; Ellemers et al., 2014). When group goals and values are agreed to be supremely important (Giner-Sorolla, 2012), they are characterized within the group as a moral standard that is used to define what is right or wrong—which is not necessarily shared with other groups (Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). Social identity theory explains that people seek to differentiate their group from other groups, and people can elevate their group's morals when these are not shared by other groups (Ellemers et al., 2014). An NGO's mission—which is supremely important to NGOs—is characterized by what people in NGOs believe to be right (Minkoff & Powell, 2006). An NGO's mission inherently differentiates it from NGOs with other moral standards. This can lead to the belief by people in the NGO that its mission is right, whereby people can elevate their sense of moral goodness over others.

The social psychology literature links moral superiority to unethical behavior. Moral superiority creates a sense of self-righteousness, which can lead to dissociating from conceptions that are at odds with the belief of what is moral, thus increasing the risk for conflict and making violence more probable (Skitka et al., 2005). For example, Kleineweise (2021) empirically demonstrates that group settings with high moral norms is an antecedent of wrongdoing, and Sedikides and colleagues (2014) argue that the effect of moral superiority is

so pervasive that violent criminals consider themselves to be more moral than the law-abiding citizens in their community.

We consider moral superiority to make unethical behavior by people in NGOs more likely, as moral superiority can make people believe that they have the authority and right to act on their own moral law. If people in an NGO believe to know better than the law or social conventions, then they could be compelled by their own moral law to contravene legally and socially accepted moral norms. For example, research has shown that orphanages are harmful to child development (Sherr et al, 2017; Van Doore, 2016). However, despite international standards and empirical data on the harmful effects of orphanages, the number of orphanages continues to grow (Cheney & Rotabi, 2017), even though 80 percent of children in orphanages have a surviving parent or both (Cheney, 2017). People in some evangelical NGOs purport to know what is best for ‘orphaned’ children and have created a gospel-centered methodology called “orphanology” (Cheney, 2017:5) to incite followers to serve in orphanages. While this methodology is a way to promote their belief in what is good for ‘orphaned’ children, it disregards global policy and data, and can put children at risk of harm.

In sum, being private gives people in NGOs the freedom to act on what they believe to be moral and to not conform to laws and conventional conceptions of morality. The NGO halo effect can thus lead people in NGOs to believe that their moral law is *the* moral law, and that they are morally superior to those who do not share the same understanding of what is good. This feeling of moral superiority can lead people in NGOs to act according to their own moral law and contravene established laws and socially accepted conceptions of what is good and bad.

Proposition 8: If people in the NGO believe that their knowledge of what is right and moral is better than others, then unethical behavior by people in the NGO will result.

Moral Naivety

We propose that the glorification of NGO staff and volunteers can lead to the inability by people in NGOs to differentiate between the belief that people are inherently good and the reality that good people can behave badly. We argue that if people believe other people in the NGO and themselves to be inherently good, then managing their ethical behavior would not be seen as necessary, as any unethical behavior is not expected. An empirical study shows that people do not expect NGOs to make use of compliance techniques, as it was seen to diminish the NGO's perceived moral goodness (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2018). Yet, Dolšak and Prakash (2021:2) argue that the dominance of the "virtue narrative" can create conditions for lapses in monitoring and governance, hindering the ability to weed out unethical behavior. For example, an empirical study shows that the reliance on volunteers' good faith meant that there were no protocols in place managing when volunteers could leave. This resulted in volunteers leaving without paying their rent: "They left without paying their rent for the 4 weeks they spent here. Now we have to cover the cost. Needless to say, we were all in shock." (Tomazos & Butler, 2010:377).

There is a higher likelihood for unethical behavior in organizations that do not properly manage the ethics of their people than in organizations where there is proper ethics management. Scholars note that organizations show unethical behavior when they do not have the systems to detect and weed it out (McDonnell & Rutherford, 2008). For example, Kaptein (2010) shows that well-embedded ethics and compliance programs positively influence the ethical culture of an organization. This culture has a negative influence on the frequency of unethical behavior in organizations, as shown by Kaptein (2011) and Treviño and Weaver (2005). By taking all kinds of interventions, such as developing a code of conduct, installing an ethics helpline, and conducting ethics training, organizations can prevent, detect, and respond to unethical behavior.

However, when people in organizations are under the impression that ethics should not or should be less managed because they believe that their people will naturally and always act ethically, the likelihood of unethical behavior increases, especially when this belief turns out to be incorrect. For example, people in an NGO might believe that they do not need ethics and compliance programs because they mistakenly believe that their staff would not engage in unethical behavior. Without such programs, unethical behavior cannot be signaled or reported within the NGO, and adequately discussed or investigated. This could increase the likelihood for unethical behavior to take place, as people do not have mechanisms in place to detect, prevent and respond to unethical behavior.

In sum, the NGO halo effect can lead to the belief by people in NGOs that they are inherently good, and so managing their own ethics is not seen to be necessary. This moral naivety can make unethical behavior by people in NGOs more likely.

Proposition 9: If people in the NGO believe that their moral goodness does not need to be managed, then unethical behavior by people in the NGO will result.

Conclusion and Research Implications

We conceptualize the NGO halo effect to explain how the glorification of NGO moral goodness by people in NGOs can relate to their unethical behavior. We focus our conceptual model on NGOs that serve others based on their ideological mission to affect the public good. We refer to the three inherent characteristics of NGOs established in the literature—the nondistribution constraint, being private, and voluntary—to explain why NGOs can be perceived by people in NGOs to be morally good. We propose that due to these three characteristics, an NGO could be perceived by its people as good in three different aspects. Namely, (1) the NDC can contribute to the perception that the NGO's mission is good; (2) the characteristic of being private can contribute to the perception that the NGO knows what a good mission is for the

public good; and (3) it being voluntary can contribute to the perception that the people who work and volunteer for the NGO are unquestionably good.

When people in NGOs perceive their NGO to be morally good, there can be a tendency for them to overestimate the organization's goodness. Drawing on NGO's inherent characteristics, we conceptualize what the NGO halo effect is, namely (1) if people in the NGO glorify the moral goodness of the mission, they will prioritize achievement of their NGO's mission; (2) if people in the NGO glorify the NGO's morality, they will believe that they know what is morally best; and (3) if people in the NGO glorify the moral goodness of other people in the NGOs and themselves, they will believe that people within the NGO are inherently good.

We posit that the NGO halo effect can explain why people in NGOs behave unethically. We presented three propositions for how the NGO halo effect can relate to NGO unethical behavior: (1) the glorification of the NGO's mission can increase the likelihood of moral justification, if any means to meet the mission—ethical or unethical—can be justified by people in the NGO; (2) the glorification of the NGO's morality can increase the likelihood of moral superiority, if people within the NGO believe to know better than the law or generally accepted morality and thus ignore them; and (3) the glorification of NGO employees and volunteers can increase the likelihood of moral naivety, if people in NGOs do not, or partially, consider the need to manage their organizational ethics. The NGO halo effect explains unethical behavior by people in NGOs resulting from their perceived moral goodness of NGOs and not despite this perception.

Our conceptual model of the NGO halo effect represents a start in the study of moral goodness as an explanation for unethical behavior in and by NGOs and requires confirmation and possible adaption. Further research could measure the extent of the halo effect within and across NGOs and assess whether the halo indeed influences unethical behavior. For example, interviews could be conducted to determine how positively people talk about their NGO's

mission, their NGO's morals and morality, and other people in their organization. Based on these interviews, items can be generated and captured in a survey that establishes a polarization of the terms used by the interviewees. E.g., if an interviewee refers to their NGO's mission as 'a calling', then the survey could capture this term on one end of a multipoint bipolar scale, for the other end to refer to 'not a calling'. Items could be generated to measure the halo on the halo's three dimensions, i.e., the NGO's mission, knowledge of what is good and moral, and people. Calculating the mean of responses for each dimension could indicate the strength of the halo, and this mean could be correlated with the mean for items relating to unethical behavior to determine whether there is a positive association between the two. Organizational demographic factors can be controlled for to understand whether certain factors, e.g., faith, size, location, primary revenue source affect the size of the halo, and whether certain unethical behaviors are more strongly correlated to certain types of NGOs.

We also do not consider our three moral mechanisms to be exhaustive. For example, while we have conceptualized one moral mechanism to originate from each of the three characteristics inherent to NGOs, we envisage that there could be additional mechanisms directly stemming from these characteristics. We discussed how the voluntary characteristic can lead people to overestimate their own moral goodness and that of other people in the NGO. As a result, people may feel like they can consequently "license" any unethical behavior because of the high moral credentials they confer onto themselves and others in their NGO. Moral licensing has been extensively researched in other contexts (Blanken et al., 2015; Merritt et al., 2010), but no research has been applied to understanding how it can explain NGOs' unethical behavior (Chapman et al., 2022). People who believe themselves and others in the NGO to be inherently good can feel licensed to take back from the NGO—such as steal, cut corners, exploit vulnerable beneficiary groups—as a compensation for their sacrifice of being and doing. Further research on how the NGO halo effect can spark additional moral

mechanisms, such as moral licensing, can help understand the multiple pathways that influence unethical behavior in and by NGOs.

Further research could also explore whether the NGO halo effect influences voluntary failures (Salamon 1987, 2013) and whether this in turn can impact unethical behavior by people in the NGO. The four voluntary failures—philanthropic insufficiency, particularism, paternalism, and amateurism—explain the shortcomings of NGOs in terms of efficiency (Powell & Bromely, 2020). However, the voluntary failure theory has not been explored in relation to the shortcomings of behavior in NGOs (Ott & Dicke, 2016). We can envisage that the glorification of people could increase the likelihood of amateurism within the NGO, i.e., the belief that because people are good then training and development of their professional skills to fulfil the NGO's mission is not needed (Salamon 1987, 2013). A weak or absent focus on professionalizing the skills and abilities of staff and volunteers could increase the likelihood of people in NGOs to engage in unethical behavior (Chapman et al., 2022). Exploring the linkages between the NGO halo effect and voluntary failures could further deepen understanding of the factors and mechanisms that influence NGO unethical behavior.

It is not inherently problematic for people to perceive the organization they work or volunteer for as morally good. It is reasonable to expect individuals to view their organization in a generally favorable light. However, in our article we hope to show that people in NGOs should be aware of the ways in which perceptions of mission, knowledge of what is right and moral, and people can become liabilities when overestimated by people within the organization. People in NGOs should therefore seek to develop and implement not only clear policies and procedures, but also create and sustain a culture that embodies diversity of information, open discussion, openness to critique and contradiction, and reflexivity. Such a culture within NGOs can prevent the internal perception of moral goodness from being exaggerated and activating moral mechanisms that slip into unethical behavior.

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