Ethical Leadership

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Summary

Business scandals in the early 2000s gave renewed rise to the question of how companies can be led ethically. Correspondingly, research on ethical leadership focuses on leaders as moral persons—but even more so as moral managers. This focus came with a more general shift within many Western societies toward issues of sustainability, social justice, and well-being, and it has simultaneously given rise to the development of related constructs such as servant, respectful, and authentic leadership. In general, ethical leadership research has contributed to a necessary debate about leaders' roles and responsibilities. Nonetheless, recent meta-analyses and critical reviews have criticized the minimal to nonexistent incremental value of the current operationalization of ethical leadership beyond other leadership concepts, underscored the philosophically all too simplistic notion of ethics underlying the concept, and highlighted its construct redundancy with the domain of follower-focused leadership. As such, there appear to be fruitful avenues for further honing the construct and its operationalization so that research can meaningfully inform leadership practice.

Keywords: ethical leadership, moral management, ethics, moral identity, leadership scales, counterproductive work behavior

Subjects: Organizational and Institutional Psychology

Introduction

Since the 1960s, the *how* of leadership has mostly fallen into one of two categories: person-orientation or task-orientation (Bowers & Seashore, 1966; Hollander, 1979; Schriesheim & Bird, 1979; Stogdill, 1950). The subsequent question was, To *what end* are these two basic leadership styles used? On this point, recent research has squarely focused on *change* as the core objective of leadership (Derue et al., 2011; Yukl, 2012; Yukl et al., 2002). The question that logically follows is, Within which (normative) boundaries? It is this question that is central to the bulk of research on ethical leadership.

Although the question of ethics in leadership is age old and has been deeply discussed by philosophers, the concept is relatively new in the literature on organizational behavior and psychology. Research on ethical leadership surged following a range of corporate scandals in the early 2000s—with Enron being a landmark—as it became clear that the literature lacked explanations for unethical leadership behavior. Moral components had already been identified as an important part of follower-focused leadership (the earliest references to ethical leadership as a style in itself derive from Burns' [1978] work on transforming leadership, as well as discussions

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of the ethical dimensions of transformational leadership [e.g., Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999] or charismatic leadership [Conger et al., 2000]). However, the field still lacked systematic research into the domain of ethical leadership at that time. It was then that the literature gained one of the most cited definitions of ethical leadership—as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). This research piece put ethical leadership on the map.

Since the publication of Brown and colleagues' initial studies, the number of articles specifically focusing on ethical leadership has increased substantially. As a result, recent meta-analyses have discussed the incremental effect of ethical leadership and its related constructs. These studies have specifically focused on ethics as a primary quality of the leadership style and contrasted it with leadership constructs, such as transformational leadership, that merely contain morality as one of their components. The findings show either small effects or effects that are limited to specifically ethical outcomes (Hoch et al., 2018; Ng & Feldman, 2015). Indeed, despite the volume of research on ethical leadership and the consensus on its importance, the domain does not come without challenges. This article discusses the current findings and issues with this line of research. As done in the literature overall, the discussion interchangeably uses the terms *ethical*—relating to behavior that is in accordance with established external rules and codes of conduct—and *moral*—relating to individual moral rules that guide awareness, judgment, and decisions about integrity and conduct in the situation (cf. Kohlberg, 1981; Treviño et al., 2006). Most of the ethical leadership styles have components relating to the code of conduct in organizations as well as components relating to personal integrity.

Operationalization and Dimensionality of Ethical Leadership

Researchers have published a variety of scales that measure ethical leadership. In early versions, ethical leadership was operationalized as moral managers who discussed business ethics with employees and disciplined those who violated moral standards (Treviño et al., 2000). More recent attempts have envisioned leaders as moral persons who adhere to moral standards both privately and publicly (Treviño et al., 2003). Although this theorizing conceptualizes ethical leadership as two dimensional—that is, moral person and moral manager—the 10-item Ethical Leadership Scale mostly treats ethical leadership as a one-dimensional concept (Treviño et al., 2000). To the authors' knowledge, no published study has empirically differentiated the characteristics of moral managers from moral persons. Others have extended the concept of ethical leadership to include multiple dimensions, such as the 35-item Ethical Leadership at Work Questionnaire that distinguishes seven dimensions: fairness, integrity, ethical guidance, people orientation, power sharing, role clarification, and concern for sustainability (Kalshoven et al., 2011). Likewise, Yukl and colleagues (2013) developed a one-dimensional, 15-item measure that aims to produce less overlap with supportive and empowering leadership behaviors. Specifically, they set out to minimize the conceptual overlap between leader-member exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and ethical leadership—and thereby distinguish ethical leadership from task- and change-oriented leadership.

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However, most of these scales reflect a hodgepodge of desirable leader behaviors, attitudes, and relational outcomes. Because these measures tap into so many elements at once, it is difficult to meaningfully advance research on the concept of ethical leadership. Moreover, because the operationalizations largely focus on follower perceptions rather than concrete behavior, they lack the clarity to serve for sound assessment (Fischer et al., 2020). In addition, the items are often normatively charged in a way that does not reflect the plurality of ethics. Indeed, one can argue that the current operationalizations may be better coined "moral leadership" because they prescribe leadership styles that depend on the leaders' personal adherence to certain ethical concepts that are rooted in a Western, usually utilitarian, perspective. The assessment of ethical leadership depends mostly on whether their observable behavior is normatively appropriate (Brown et al., 2005) because reliable insight into personal motives driving the behavior is difficult to obtain. This is not only a very simplistic notion of what it means to be ethical but also a gross reduction of "normative appropriateness," which occupies a central role in the definition of ethical leadership.

The concept also faces methodological criticisms, both as part of the general skepticism toward the heavy reliance on survey studies in leadership research (Fischer et al., 2020) and as a critique of the study of ethical leadership (Banks et al., 2021; Palanski et al., 2021). These critiques highlight that the measurement of ethical leadership is conflated with its outcomes, underlying motives in terms of leader virtues or values, or confirmation of norms (Banks et al., 2021). Thus, there are promising avenues for future research in terms of studying the actual behaviors of ethical leaders, adopting experimental approaches that address endogeneity concerns (Antonakis et al., 2010), and more strongly connecting the concept to its context via ethical theory.

Antecedents of Ethical Leadership

When trying to explain ethical leadership, researchers have focused on either external factors, such as organizational culture or climate (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990), or internal factors that mostly relate to leaders' moral personality characteristics (Den Hartog, 2015) or cognitive moral development. The latter generally derive from Kohlberg's (1981) conceptualization of moral maturity and development (Jordan et al., 2013; Schminke et al., 2005). Relatedly, the past decade has seen growing attention on leaders' moral character as a factor that can predict moral decision-making (Hannah et al., 2011) and specifically moral leadership (Hannah & Avolio, 2010; Wright & Quick, 2011).

Research on external factors has started from the question of whether unethical behavior in organizations stems from a "bad apple" that spoils the barrel (Treviño & Youngblood, 1990). Studies show that top-ranked ethical leaders do create an ethical climate that then positively influences the ethical leadership of middle- or lower-level managers (Dickson et al., 2001; Mayer et al., 2009; Neubert et al., 2009). Considering organizations as a whole, researchers have found that ethical climates exert positive effects, especially if the climate is based less on egoism and more on benevolence or principle (Martin & Cullen, 2006; Victor & Cullen, 1988). Likewise, research on organizational ethical culture has found mixed but mostly positive effects for the presence of ethical codes of conduct in organizations (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010), as well as that

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ethical leaders can reinforce said codes (Treviño & Youngblood, 1990; Treviño et al., 2000). Finally, ethical leaders can be an important component of the organization's ethical infrastructure (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003). Specifically, top managers have substantial influence on the structuring of incentive systems, as well as an important role in modeling ethical decision-making and setting priorities in the organizational context (Park et al., 2022). The structure of incentive systems can, in turn, reduce employees' focus on the ethical aspects of organizational decisions (Gino & Mogilner, 2014; Park et al., 2022; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999). Relatedly, ethical leaders can play an important role in sanctioning and surveilling unethical behavior (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003), and they may substantially influence employees' thinking process to help them refrain from unethical behavior (Manara et al., 2020).

One of the most researched internal antecedents of ethical leadership is leader moral identity—the extent to which moral values are central to the person's identity. The centrality of moral values—such as honesty, fairness, care, and compassion—is both an internalized characteristic and a matter of external symbolization and self-expression toward others (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Research has investigated leader moral identity as a predictor of both ethical leadership in itself (Grover, 2014; Mayer et al., 2012) and followers' moral identity centrality (Gerpott et al., 2017), as well as its interaction with follower moral identity. For instance, when there is better fit between leader and follower ethical leadership, those followers with higher ratings of moral identity rate their leader as more ethical (Giessner et al., 2015). Moreover, when both leader and follower score high on moral identity, their congruence can effectively predict higher (perceived) ethical leadership and fewer negative sentiments from the leader toward the follower (Qin et al., 2018).

Other studies related to leader and follower moral cognitions have found similar interaction effects. For example, studies have found positive effects of leader courage and honesty/humility on follower ethical behavior (Ete et al., 2020; Palanski et al., 2015). As an extension of this argument, studies have also found an interaction between leader and follower moral *disengagement*, namely that the negative relationship between leader moral disengagement and follower perceptions of ethical leadership was especially pronounced for followers low in moral disengagement (Bonner et al., 2016). Correspondingly, followers high in moral attentiveness also showed increased scrutinizing of perceived ethical leadership, reacting more strongly when ethical leadership was low (van Gils et al., 2015).

Underlying Mechanisms: Social Learning, Social Exchange, and Identification

Scholars theorize that ethical leaders influence their followers through a variety of mechanisms. Early studies drew on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Brown & Treviño, 2013) to suggest that ethical leaders are role models for their followers. By modeling ethical behavior in their personal interactions, ethical leaders become persons to look up to (Jordan et al., 2013; Weaver et al., 2005). Moreover, by reprimanding employees who violate ethical codes, ethical leaders encourage their followers to learn from the feedback provided to others. In addition to social learning, ethical leaders and their followers also engage in a social exchange (Blau, 1964) whereby followers feel inclined to reciprocate the leaders' moral behavior with their own (Brown

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et al., 2005; Peng & Kim, 2020). Similarly, ethical leadership has also been directly linked to the exchange quality in leader–follower relationships, as expressed by the notion of leader–member exchange (LMX) (Giessner et al., 2015; Peng & Kim, 2020). Social exchange, sometimes operationalized as LMX, and social learning are often tested in combination, with a recent meta-analysis showing LMX to be the stronger mediator in the effect of ethical leadership on performance (Peng & Kim, 2020).

In addition to the previously mentioned mechanisms, various researchers have discussed how ethical leaders influence the organization's norms and climate (Schminke et al., 2005) and thereby provide a basis for employee identification with not just the leader but also the organization as a whole (Bedi et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2015). Together, both aspects are supposed to increase followers' ethical behavior by encouraging them to emulate the norms of their leaders/organizations. Recent meta-analyses correspondingly found effects on employee identification, self-efficacy, as well as employee's willingness to speak up (Bedi et al., 2016). A meta-analysis comparing the strength of different mediators for specific outcomes found ethical culture to be the strongest mediator in the negative relationship between ethical leadership and counterproductive work behavior (Peng & Kim, 2020). However, most of the underlying data are correlational in nature, and hence any parallelism or sequential order implied in the mediation analyses stands on somewhat shaky ground. Although most of these studies show positive effects of ethical leadership, research has also reported potential negative behaviors resulting from ethical leadership, such as employees engaging in unethical behavior when they perceive it as helpful for the company (Miao et al., 2013). This highlights another largely unexplored mechanism of ethical leadership: that people weigh the cost and effort needed to conduct business ethically against the financial interests of the company—which could be considered an ethical consideration in and of itself (i.e., doing it for the group).

Ethical Leadership Effects on Organizational Citizenship Behaviors, Counterproductive Work Behavior, and Other Outcomes

The definition of ethical leadership heavily relies on leaders' behavioral outcomes (in terms of displaying moral management) and being a moral person (Brown et al., 2005). As a consequence, ethical leadership and leaders' ethical decision-making are near tautological; however, very few studies have researched whether moral leaders truly make ethical decisions (for an exception, see Hannah & Avolio, 2010). Instead, research has predominantly focused on how ethical leadership influences followers' (moral) behavior. Ethical leadership has been associated with a wide range of employee behaviors—most notably those in the ethical domain because they can potentially speak to the more unique normative effect of ethical leadership (for recent meta-analyses, see Bedi et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018; Peng & Kim, 2020). Initial studies, for instance, found positive relationships between ethical leadership and followers' organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB; Mayer et al., 2009), which include voluntary extra-role behaviors that are not directly rewarded but aid the organization, such as taking over other employees' shifts (Organ, 1988). As

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mentioned previously, this relationship is often explained through social learning and exchange processes (Mayer et al., 2009), ethical culture or climate, and follower identification (Peng & Kim, 2020).

A second outcome of interest is counterproductive work behavior (Bedi et al., 2016; Peng & Kim, 2020), which is basically the opposite of ethical behavior at work. Researchers have investigated how ethical leadership relates to decreases in various harmful work behaviors, such as organizational deviance (defined as voluntary behavior that violates organizational norms and harms the organization; Avey et al., 2011; Brown & Treviño, 2006; van Gils et al., 2015), interpersonal deviance (deviant behavior directed at other persons in the organization; Kuenzi et al., 2019; Mo & Shi, 2017), incivility (Taylor & Pattie, 2014; Walsh et al., 2018), and corruption (Manara et al., 2020).

A third line of research focuses on how ethical leadership (or variants of it) shapes the relationship between leader and follower. In particular, scholars argue that perceived integrity should foster more trust within followers (Craig & Gustafson, 1998; Palanski & Yammarino, 2009; van den Akker et al., 2009) and ultimately allow the relationship to evolve from being purely transactional to high quality (Craig & Gustafson, 1998; Yukl et al., 2013) Some recent studies on leader–follower relationships and ethics have considered how changes in ethical leadership within the same leader have corresponding changes in follower outcomes such as pride, contempt, and turnover intentions (Ng et al., 2021). Such results also corroborate the field's causal assumptions about ethical leadership.

Various researchers have also investigated the positive relationships between ethical leadership and employee performance (e.g., Piccolo et al., 2010), although they are less central to the core ethical argument. These studies support the notion that there is a clear instrumental basis for enacting ethical leadership from a business standpoint: For instance, ethical leadership has been found to improve employee well-being (Kalshoven & Boon, 2012) and reduce stress and burnout (Avey et al., 2012; Vullinghs et al., 2020). However, meta-analytical results raise some doubts about whether ethical leadership explains more variance on such general organizational outcomes in addition to other leadership styles. In many cases, the effects are either small (Bedi et al., 2016; Peng & Kim, 2020) or restricted to specific ethical outcomes (Hoch et al., 2018).

Related Moral Leadership Types and Distinctions

In parallel with ethical leadership, several other streams of research have developed notions of leadership with moral components (Lemoine et al., 2019). First, the literature on authentic leadership emphasizes leaders' display of their authentic self as part of an internalized moral perspective (Avolio et al., 2004; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Compared to ethical leadership, authentic leadership is strongly focused on leaders' self-awareness, balanced processing, and relational transparency. Meanwhile, the separate literature on servant leadership has focused heavily on leaders who prioritize followers and help them grow (Greenleaf, 1970). Conceptualizations of servant leadership predominantly revolve around the creation of value for multiple stakeholders simultaneously (Lemoine et al., 2019). Of course, these concepts overlap

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with ethical leadership in terms of being concerned for followers, showing oneself as a consistent moral person, and behaving morally in general. But ethical leadership is distinguished by its focus on the discussion and reinforcement of ethical codes of conduct in organizations (Bedi et al., 2016; Lemoine et al., 2019). Critical assessment of those concepts shows high intercorrelations among the concepts (Bedi et al., 2016) but also incremental validity over traditional leadership styles, such as transformational leadership, when investigated in the context of specific moral outcomes (Hoch et al., 2018).

Another stream of related research has evolved around the concept of respect in leader–follower relationships. This research on so-called respectful leadership centers on the dignity of the follower (Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010; Van Quaquebeke et al., 2009). According to the philosopher Immanuel Kant (Kant, 1987), respect should be core to any ethical consideration between human beings (Van Quaquebeke et al., 2007). As such, this research stream is more focused than the ethical leadership literature and therefore naturally covers a narrower territory in terms of mechanisms and outcomes. However, some studies have shown that respectful leadership has comparable effects to ethical leadership (Gerpott et al., 2019; van Gils et al., 2018; Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010).

As previously noted, moral leadership theories have been criticized for taking a largely context-free perspective on morality and moral theories (Fehr et al., 2015), as well as limiting their consideration of cultural perspectives (Buchtel et al., 2015; Eisenbeiss, 2012). Few studies have addressed this concern: The notable exceptions have tried to connect ethical leadership to moral foundations theory (Fehr et al., 2015) or build on relational models theory (Rai & Fiske, 2012). The latter argues that what is considered ethical leader behavior can depend on the relationship between leaders and their followers (Giessner & Van Quaquebeke, 2010; Keck et al., 2020). Such considerations about the moral core of ethical leadership are even more important in light of arguments by Greenbaum and colleagues (2015), who have questioned the idea that leadership always contains a moral component and instead suggest that leaders frequently practice amoral leadership.

Ethical Versus Unethical Leadership

Interestingly, the research streams on ethical and unethical leadership have developed somewhat separately. One reason for this is the theoretical argument that the absence of ethical leadership does not imply the presence of unethical or abusive behavior. However, there are several problems with this stance. First, if effects are interpreted linearly without the establishment of a clear "neutral" control condition, then it is difficult to identify the driver of said effects. In other words, does it matter more to actually be ethical or to simply not be unethical? Second, the absence of a neutral condition entails that we do not really know how to interpret low scores on certain ethical leadership scales. Are the effects of low ethical leadership on follower behavior simply due to the *absence* of ethical leadership, or do they reflect the *presence* of unethical leadership? In fairness, the question of whether the absence of a good relationship is a sign of a bad relationship generally riddles much of psychological research (for a discussion of this

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question in the context of leader–member exchange, see Gottfredson et al., 2020). Together, these challenges make it difficult to formulate concrete advice and practical implications based on extant survey studies or experimental studies that lack a neutral control.

On the other end of the ethical spectrum, there is an extensive literature on the different types of negative and unethical leadership. Although the term "unethical leadership" mainly appears in theoretical work (Brown & Mitchell, 2010), there have been attempts to assess the effects of negative leadership styles—such as abusive, destructive, undermining, narcissistic, and tyrannical leadership behaviors—that threaten or undermine the dignity of other people, and specifically the employees entrusted to the leader (Tepper, 2000, 2007). Abusive supervision—the most cited construct in that domain—is defined as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). A full discussion of this literature is beyond the scope of this article, but overall, abusive supervision has been found to negatively affect OCB and increase counterproductive work behavior or stress. Scholars have also tested some similar underlying mechanisms, such as social learning and exchange (for recent meta-analyses, see Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Zhang et al., 2019). In addition, unethical leadership has been associated with psychological mechanisms that cognitively distance the perpetrator from the unethical behavior, such as moral disengagement (cf. Bandura, 1999; Detert et al., 2008). Moral disengagement has been identified in leaders who show unethical leadership (Bonner et al., 2016) and in employees when they imitate their leaders' unethical behavior (Fehr et al., 2020). Moreover, studies have found that ethical leaders reduce moral disengagement in their employees, thus suggesting that ethical leadership matters morally (Moore et al., 2019).

Empirical Complexity and Research Questions

As highlighted previously, much of the research on ethical leadership has presented a simplified picture of its effects. This mainly derives from (predominantly cross-sectional) studies focusing on linear relationships between ethical leadership and its outcomes and also on explorations of underlying mechanisms and boundary effects in terms of moderators. Fortunately, the past decade has produced increasingly robust research models for investigating ethical leadership and its effects. These newer explorations show that ethical leadership can benefit many people but does not necessarily yield positive outcomes for all employees. For example, a recent study investigating the three-way interaction between ethical leadership (Wang et al., 2021), identification with the leader, and moral identity showed that the ethical leader's identification as a role model only occurs when the leader shows ethical leadership, the follower scores high on moral identity, and the follower identifies with the leader. The researchers also found that ethical leadership may evoke unethical behavior if followers are missing one of the two identity components (Wang et al., 2021).

Other studies—exploring the nonlinear relationships between ethical leadership and follower outcomes—reveal that ethical leadership can suffer from being "too much of a good thing." For instance, followers show lower levels of OCB when ethical leadership is either low or very high (Stouten et al., 2013). Curvilinear effects have also been found for the relationship between ethical

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leadership and unethical pro-organizational behavior, which was higher at moderate levels of ethical leadership than at high or low levels (Miao et al., 2013). Thus, whether ethical leadership benefits employees depends on the optimal level of ethical leadership in interaction with the employees' moral traits.

In addition to expanding model complexity, an increasing number of studies have taken a multilevel approach to ethical leadership by investigating its effects in samples of followers nested in teams (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009; Schaubroeck et al., 2012). These studies address so-called trickle-down effects of ethical leadership (Mayer et al., 2009) and clarify the influence that higher level managers' ethical leadership exerts on lower level managers and employees.

Current Directions

After two decades of rapidly developing research, ethical leadership has become a firmly established concept in the domain of organizational behavior—and its critiques have grown in tandem. These critiques relate to both the broadness of operationalization and the conflatedness of the subject with its outcomes and underlying motives (Banks et al., 2021), as discussed previously. In addition, researchers in the domain of ethical leadership are increasingly aware that relying on follower perspectives assessed in surveys limits the understanding of organizational dynamics. Increasingly, studies call for a richer focus on what (ethical) leaders actually do and more strongly connecting the concept to its context via ethical theory. In response, newer studies investigate ethical leader behaviors through interview techniques (Haar et al., 2019), experimental intervention studies, and other methods tapping directly into leader behaviors, such as video coding (Hemshorn de Sanchez et al., 2022). Others have called for the use of archival or big data (Palanski et al., 2021). Moreover, current studies in the domain of ethical leadership show that researchers are aware of the need to adapt the research to address current societal issues, such as ethical leadership in the context of burnout (Vullinghs et al., 2020), or the function of leadership in a remote working setting (Carsten et al., 2021).

Undoubtedly, ethics in leadership is an important topic that deserves attention. As such, scholars need to hone their theorizing and operationalization. It is only then that the field can be expected to generate research insights that are truly practice relevant.

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