

Ethical Leadership and Unethical Pro-Organisational Behaviour: The Mediating Mechanism of Reflective Moral Attentiveness

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This study examines the mediating effects of reflective moral attentiveness on the relationship between ethical leadership and subordinates' unethical pro-organisational behaviour (UPB). Based on two-wave survey data obtained from 233 employees in 60 teams from Chinese government agencies, we found that ethical leadership was positively related to reflective moral attentiveness. In addition, we found that reflective moral attentiveness mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB, such that ethical leadership negatively influenced subordinates' unethical pro-organisational behaviour through enhancing reflective moral attentiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade a growing body of research has demonstrated the important role played by ethical leadership in reducing the unethical

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behaviour of employees (Den Hartog, 2015; Van Gils, Van Quaquebeke, Van Knippenberg, Van Dijke, & De Cremer, 2015; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Zhu, Treviño, & Zheng, 2016). In such research scholars have typically relied on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) to explain how ethical leaders reduce the unethical behaviour of subordinates by modelling appropriate ethical behaviour and stressing the importance of acting in an ethical manner (e.g., Mayer et al., 2009; Mayer, Kuenzi, & Greenbaum, 2010; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012). However, most of this research has focused on unethical behaviour that is done with the intention of harming the organisation, and very little attention has been paid to unethical behaviour that is conducted with the intention of benefitting the organisation, referred to in the literature as unethical pro-organisational behaviour (UPB) (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). A brief scan of any news outlet evidences the alarming prevalence of UPB, and while such behaviour may appear to benefit the organisation in the short run, the long-term costs are becoming much more widely recognised with a growing number of high-profile organisational scandals, such as the Wells Fargo account fraud scandal and the bribery and embezzlement scandal concerning the former Chairman of Samsung Group, Lee Jae-yong. In addition, although prior research has started to look at the mechanisms linking ethical leadership to unethical behaviour (Mayer et al., 2010), and the potential moderators of the ethical leadership–unethical behaviour relationship (e.g., Van Gils et al., 2015) prior research has tended to focus on team level constructs over and above individual level constructs. Another notable gap in the literature to date is the scant empirical evidence around the role of morality constructs in the ethical leadership–ethical behaviour relationship. One study that has introduced moral judgment into this relationship is Van Gils et al. (2015), who looked at moral attentiveness as a moderator of the relationship between ethical leadership and unethical employee behaviour; however, results from their two-study research are limited by the cross-sectional design of the first study and the reporting of hypothetical behaviour in the second study. A second relevant study is that by Zhu et al. (2016) whose model in part looked at the relationship between ethical leadership and subordinate moral attentiveness. That study did not, however, address the resultant effects of subordinate moral attentiveness on any behavioural outcome. In the current study, we focus on the role of a key individual-level morality construct in the ethical leadership–(un)ethical behaviour relationship, given that Reynolds' (2008, p. 1028) original work on moral attentiveness stressed that “moral attentiveness pertains to the process by which *an individual* actively screens and considers stimuli related to morality” (emphasis added). Further also to Reynolds' conceptualisation of moral attentiveness as a process, we consider a mediation model whereby

we treat moral attentiveness as a mediator, rather than a moderator, within the ethical leadership–(un)ethical behaviour relationship; and we employ a lagged design to address some of the limitations of cross-sectionality.

Specifically, the current study examines whether ethical leadership reduces subordinates' willingness to engage in UPB through the mediating mechanism of moral attentiveness, which Reynolds (2008) argued is characteristic of those who chronically access a distinct cognitive framework that informs the perceptions of stimuli through a morality-focused lens. As a construct rooted in the social cognitive tradition, recent research has confirmed that moral attentiveness can be altered by strong external stimuli such as ethical leadership (Jennings, Mitchell, & Hannah, 2015; Zhu et al., 2016). In light of this work we examine whether ethical leadership can reduce UPB through the mediating mechanism of subordinates' moral attentiveness. We argue that this is likely to occur through enhancing subordinates' reflective moral attentiveness, that is, having subordinates reflect upon the ethical issues they face at work.

In examining these issues, we make three main contributions to the literature. First, we make a theoretical contribution by examining the individual-level social learning processes linking ethical leadership to UPB amongst subordinates. Researchers have only just begun to look at the underlying mechanisms that may explain why ethical leadership may reduce the unethical behaviour of subordinates (Den Hartog, 2015), and prior research has not considered the influence of ethical leadership in reducing the extent to which subordinates reflect upon ethical issues in the workplace. Second, researchers have yet to investigate why ethical leadership might reduce the willingness of employees to engage in unethical conduct with the intention of benefiting their organisation. Our study hence sheds light on an increasingly prevalent conundrum for contemporary organisations. Third, we make an empirical contribution by examining whether moral attentiveness can be influenced by social influence processes in the workplace. Although studies have begun to examine whether moral attentiveness can be developed in a classroom setting through training and education (Wurthmann, 2013), our study is novel in that it examines whether leaders can influence subordinates' moral attentiveness in an organisational setting. As such it addresses Reynolds' (2008) call for more work on contextual factors that predict the moral attentiveness of employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership refers to “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, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). This definition alludes to four key behaviours that characterise ethical leadership. First, ethical leaders demonstrate “normatively appropriate” behaviours suited to the context they are operating in, which promote their legitimacy and credibility as role models. Second, ethical leaders draw subordinates’ attention to ethical issues within the organisation by engaging in ethical discussions with them and encouraging them to speak up about ethical issues (Brown et al., 2005). Third, ethical leaders regulate their subordinates’ behaviour by setting clear ethical standards and reinforcing such standards through reward and disciplinary systems. Finally, ethical leaders weigh up the ethical consequences of their decisions and make moral choices that can be emulated by their subordinates (Brown et al., 2005). In other words, for a leader to be perceived as ethical, they must demonstrate to their subordinates that they are both a moral person and a moral manager (Brown et al., 2005). As well as upholding ethical principles in their decision making and displaying traits such as trustworthiness, honesty, and integrity, that is, being a moral person (Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003), ethical leaders also establish ethical standards, communicate those standards effectively to their subordinates, and use reward and disciplinary systems to align subordinates’ behaviour to those standards, that is, act as a moral manager (Brown & Treviño, 2006). It is the moral manager dimension that distinguishes ethical leadership from other leadership styles that have a moral component such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, or authentic leadership. Although these leadership models highlight the importance of acting as a moral person (see, for example, Eva, Newman, Miao, Wang, & Cooper, 2019), they do not stress the importance of acting as a moral manager.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) has been adopted as a theoretical lens to explain how ethical leadership reduces unethical behaviours (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Zhu et al., 2016). The premise of social learning theory is that individuals can learn what appropriate behaviour is by observing and emulating the conduct of others (Bandura, 1977). In an organisational context, leaders are a major source of role modelling by virtue of their status and power (Bandura, 1986). Through rewarding and punishing the behaviour of subordinates within an organisational hierarchy, leaders provide subordinates with clear direction as to the kinds of behaviours expected and the motivation to emulate modelled behaviour (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2013). Ethical leaders are an especially important source of observation and emulation as they are considered trustworthy, honest, and credible. In line with the key tenets of social learning theory, previous work has generally established a negative relationship between ethical leadership and subordinates’ unethical behaviour (e.g., Bedi, Alpaslan, & Green, 2016; Mayer

et al., 2009, 2010, 2012), including behaviours conducted with the intention of benefitting the organisation (Schwarz, Newman, & Allen, 2014). Research has also begun to examine the social learning mechanisms linking ethical leadership to unethical behaviours. However, this work has predominantly focused on team-level mediators such as ethical climate and ethical culture (Mayer et al., 2010), and has neglected to examine the role played by ethical leadership in reducing unethical behaviours by having employees identify and reflect upon the ethical issues they may face in the workplace. In the following sections, we propose that ethical leadership will reduce the propensity of subordinates to engage in UPB through the mediating mechanism of reflective moral attentiveness.

Ethical Leadership and Moral Attentiveness

Moral attentiveness is a self-conscious moral orientation first described by Reynolds (2008). According to Jennings et al. (2015), a self-conscious moral orientation refers to the internalisation of moral ideas that precipitate a particular responsiveness or sensitivity to ethical issues. As a self-conscious moral orientation, moral attentiveness refers specifically to one's propensity to give chronic consideration to ethics and morality (Reynolds, 2008). People with high levels of moral attentiveness are both alert to ethically charged situations and aware of the moral consequences of ethically charged information (Culiberg & Mihelič, 2016).

Reynolds (2008) distinguished moral attentiveness from other morality-based individual differences constructs such as moral awareness (Rest, 1986) and moral sensitivity (Sparks & Hunt, 1998), by arguing that moral attentiveness functions as a sensemaking lens that helps people to categorise information as moral or amoral (Sturm, 2017), and is independent of events in a given context. To explain the nature of moral attentiveness, Reynolds (2008) employed Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Reynolds (2008) observed that constructs such as moral awareness and moral sensitivity, which rest on cognitive developmental assumptions, "treat information as an objectively moral exogenous factor" (p. 1027), hence ignoring that individuals have a natural inclination to construct meaning around moral matters in idiosyncratic ways depending upon the amount and type of attention paid to them. By drawing on the key assumption of social cognitive theory that behaviour is a function of the interaction of an individual with his or her environment (Bandura, 1986), Reynolds (2008) argued that people vary in the degree of attention that they pay to moral matters based upon the varying amounts of attention they give to a moral stimulus. According to Reynolds, characteristics of a moral stimulus, such as its vividness, salience and accessibility (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) influence the attention it receives. Vividness refers to how

interesting the stimuli is, salience refers to the contextual significance of the stimuli, and accessibility refers to how readily the stimuli can be recognised through the individuals' cognitive frameworks.

Moral attentiveness comprises two dimensions: reflective moral attentiveness and perceptual moral attentiveness (Whitaker & Godwin, 2013). Reflective moral attentiveness refers to the degree to which moral matters are considered and reflected upon in day-to-day decision making. Perceptual moral attentiveness refers to the propensity to recall moral content in the environment. Perceptual moral attentiveness can hence be considered as an automatic response, whereas reflective moral attentiveness is intentional (Reynolds, Owens, & Rubenstein, 2012; Sturm, 2017). Reynolds (2008) demonstrated these two dimensions of moral attentiveness to be significantly correlated yet conceptually distinct.

Although employees with high levels of perceptual moral attentiveness are more cognisant of the moral content of their behaviour, researchers stress that this does not necessarily translate into moral behaviours that involve action (Reynolds, 2008). Indeed, prior work suggests that reflective moral attentiveness has stronger effects on ethical decision-making and ethical cognitions than perceptual moral attentiveness (Wurthmann, 2013). For example, Wurthmann (2013) found that although business ethics education enhanced both the reflective and perceptual moral attentiveness of students, it was reflective rather than perceptual moral attentiveness that mediated the effects of business ethics education on the extent to which individuals perceived that ethics and social responsibility are important. In addition, Reynolds (2008) found that whilst reflective moral attentiveness is associated with employees' moral behaviour, perceptual moral attentiveness is not. Thus, in the current research we focus on *reflective moral attentiveness*, rather than *perceptual moral attentiveness*, as it is the action-oriented moral attentiveness component that can have real impact on UPB.

Ethical Leadership and Reflective Moral Attentiveness. Prior work examining the attenuating influence of ethical leadership on unethical behaviour has primarily drawn on the social learning theory which posits that individuals learn by observing and emulating salient others in their daily lives (Bandura, 1977). In an organisational context, the social learning theory posits that due to the status and power of leaders within the organisational hierarchy, leaders are important sources of observation and emulation, and can act as role models for employees. By engaging employees in discussions about the morality and ethics of their decisions and behaviours (Eva et al., 2018), and highlighting regularly that they should reflect on moral issues before making decisions (Brown et al., 2005), subordinates working under an ethical leader will learn that it is appropriate to reflect on moral issues

in their lives, and will be more likely to consider and reflect upon moral matters in their own daily decisions independent of the leader.

Although it has been claimed by Barnes, Gunia, and Wagner (2015) that moral attentiveness was originally conceptualised as a trait, and thus cannot be affected by outside influence, Reynolds (2008) was clear that moral attentiveness is an attention process reflecting the chronic perception and consideration of morality. Consistent with the social cognitive basis of moral attentiveness, recent work suggests that moral attentiveness can be developed through ethical guidance by the leader. For example, Jennings et al. (2015) argued that role models such as leaders can influence the development of different aspects of subordinates' moral self, such as moral attentiveness. They point to empirical literature linking the behaviour of leaders to similar constructs such as moral identity and moral efficacy (e.g., Hannah et al., 2011).

Zhu et al. (2016) used the social cognitive theory to posit that ethical leadership would influence subordinates' moral attentiveness. They argued that strong ethical leaders direct the attention of subordinates in an ethical direction, which primes them to notice and attend to ethical issues. As Zhu et al. explained, ethical leaders can be particularly persuasive because they are seen as legitimate and credible role models. Given that ethical leaders are compelling role models, and given that they tend to regularly communicate about ethical issues, it makes sense that the followers of ethical leaders should attend to ethical issues. As a result, we take the approach that self-conscious moral orientation can be developed through the social learning processes such as those fostered by ethical leaders. Therefore, we argue that ethical leadership should have a positive effect on the reflective moral attentiveness of employees:

Hypothesis 1: Ethical leadership is positively related to reflective moral attentiveness.

We extend the work done by Zhu et al., however, by further considering an important behavioural outcome of the ethical leadership–moral attentiveness relationship.

Unethical Pro-Organisational Behaviour

Unethical pro-organisational behaviour (UPB) refers to “actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members, and violate core societal values, mores, laws, or standards of proper conduct” (Umpress & Bingham, 2011, p. 622). This definition highlights two dimensions of UPB. First, UPB is unethical in that it involves committing an action that goes against widely held societal values, laws, or norms (Graham et al., 2015). Second, UPB is intentional insofar

as employees engage in the UPB with the intention of benefitting the organisation, members of the organisation, or their leader (Effelsberg et al., 2014). It is therefore different from other self-centred unethical behaviours that are conducted with the intention of benefitting the perpetrator (Miao et al., 2013). Examples of UPB could be lying to clients, disposing of potentially harmful organisational documents, and withholding or manipulating information from the public to protect the organisation's best interests (Graham et al., 2015).

Previous research has begun to examine the link between different styles of leadership and UPB. For example, Graham et al. (2015) found a positive relationship between transactional leadership and UPB, and Effelsberg et al. (2014) found that transformational leaders may unintentionally encourage subordinates to commit higher levels of UPB through heightening their organisational identification. This research complements that which has demonstrated a link between leadership (and specifically ethical leadership) and deviant behaviour (e.g., Van Gils et al., 2015; Mayer et al., 2009). Although research has begun to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB, findings have been mixed, and researchers have not examined the mediating mechanisms linking the two variables. For example, whilst Schwarz et al. (2014) found a negative relationship between ethical leadership and UPB, Miao et al. (2013) found evidence of a curvilinear relationship. These studies drew on the reciprocity tenet of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964); when an employee feels that a person (ethical leader) has treated them well, they reciprocate in the form of desired behaviours. The present study builds upon this previous work by examining the mediating mechanisms linking ethical leadership to UPB. Rather than considering the reciprocal exchange relationship to explain the ethical leadership-UPB relationship, we draw on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) to understand the underlying relationship, that is how ethical leaders develop reflective moral attentiveness in employees to reduce UPB. From a social learning theory perspective, we consider reflective moral attentiveness as an employee characteristic that can be developed through leader influence that may lead to sustained improved employee ethical decision making, independent of immediate leader influence inducing reciprocal ethical behaviour.

Mediating Effects of Reflective Moral Attentiveness

Previous research by Van Gils et al. (2015) has looked at whether moral attentiveness influences the ethical leadership-ethical behaviour relationship in terms of the moderating effect of moral attentiveness. The argument underlying this investigation was that some subordinates might pay more attention to moral content than others and as a result, react more strongly to ethical leadership. We take a contrasting view and conceptualise

moral attentiveness as a mediator; in so doing we pay particular reference to Reynolds' (2008, p. 1028) original contention that "moral attentiveness pertains to the *process* by which an individual actively screens and considers stimuli related to morality" (emphasis added). Based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), we argue that ethical leadership will reduce subordinates' UPB through the mediating mechanism of reflective moral attentiveness. More specifically, as discussed earlier, through highlighting the need for subordinates to reflect upon ethical issues in their working lives and engaging them in discussions about the need to act in an ethical manner, subordinates under an ethical leader will be more likely to consider and reflect upon moral issues when making decisions independently of the leader. For example, in situations where employees face an ethical dilemma, that is, they have to decide whether or not to do something for the benefit of the organisation that is ethically dubious, subordinates working under an ethical leader will be more likely to consider and reflect upon the ethical issues involved before making the decision (Graham et al., 2015), which in turn will reduce their willingness to engage in UPB.

In support of these arguments there is growing evidence that reflective moral attentiveness reduces the propensity of employees to engage in unethical behaviour. For example, Culiberg and Mihelič (2016) found that reflective moral attentiveness reduces the willingness of individuals to engage in bribery for the benefit of their organisation. Similarly, Sturm (2017) found that reflective moral attentiveness reduced unethical decision making through enhancing individuals' moral awareness. Moreover, Wurthmann (2013) found that reflective moral attentiveness mediated the effects of business ethics education on the extent to which individuals perceived that ethics and social responsibility are important. We expect that reflective moral attentiveness will mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Reflective moral attentiveness mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and unethical pro-organisational behaviour.

METHOD

Sample and Procedures

Data were obtained through surveying employees from 60 senior management teams in government bureaus in Zhejiang Province, which is located in the Yangtze River Delta Region of China. In 2015, a member of the research team conducted a leadership development programme for senior managers in the public service sector within Zhejiang Province. At the completion of

this programme, participants were asked to indicate if they would like to be contacted for research in the future—71 senior managers indicated that they would be interested. Upon starting the project, a member of the research team visited each of the 71 senior managers across 71 government bureaus and explained the purpose and voluntary nature of the study. In total, 60 senior managers agreed to participate with a response rate of 85 per cent (17 from Hangzhou, 13 from Ningbo, 14 from Fenghua, and 16 from Xiaoshan).

The senior managers provided the research team with the names and contact details of their immediate subordinates who were mid- to low-level managers in the government bureaus. In total, the research team contacted 248 followers, of whom 233 responded across the two time points (a response rate of 94%). The senior managers held positions such as Head of Social Insurance, Head of the Labor Law Department and Head of the Human Resources Department. The mid- to low-level managers held positions such as Director of Medical Insurance, Director of the Human Resources Information Services and Director of Labor Relations.

Before data collection commenced the questionnaire was translated from Chinese to English by bilingual members of the research team using the back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1993). In order to reduce the effects of common method bias associated with self-report cross-sectional data (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012), data were collected over two time points. At time one, employees were asked to rate the ethical leadership behaviours of their bureau head (who was their direct supervisor), their own moral attentiveness and provide demographic information. Four weeks later at time two, employees rated their UPB. Each of the surveys was coded with a unique identification number in order to match employee responses at time one with those at time two. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential, and informed that their participation was voluntary. The participants received a cover letter, paper-based questionnaire, and an envelope at work. The participants completed the questionnaires in their own time, placed it in the envelope provided, and handed it back to the researcher directly.

In total, 233 employees completed the survey across the 60 teams. Sixty per cent of the sample were female, 94 per cent were aged 35 or below, and 50 per cent had completed postgraduate study. Employees had been working for their employers for an average of 6 years ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 3.26$) and their respective team for 4 years ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 2.54$).

Measures

All variables used in this study were multi-item measures that had been previously validated in earlier studies. Each of the variables was measured on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

Ethical Leadership. Employees rated the ethical leadership of their supervisor using the 10-item ethical leadership scale (Brown et al., 2005). Sample items included “My supervisor defines success not just by results but also the way that they are obtained” and “My supervisor discusses business ethics or values with employees” ($\alpha = .92$).

Reflective Moral Attentiveness. Employees rated their reflective moral attentiveness using Reynolds’ (2008) five-item measure. Sample items included “I regularly think about the ethical implications of my decisions” and “I often reflect on the moral aspects of my decisions” ($\alpha = .84$).

Unethical Pro-organisational Behaviour. To rate their UPB, employees used the six-item UPB scale to suit the public sector context (Umphress et al., 2010). Sample items included “If needed, I would conceal information from the public that could be damaging to my organization” and “If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good” ($\alpha = .80$).

Control Variables. We controlled for several demographic characteristics as previous research has revealed that demographic characteristics may influence unethical employee behaviour (Erdogan & Liden, 2002). Specifically, gender, age, education, organisational tenure and team tenure were included as controls in line with previous UPB research (Miao et al., 2013). Age was coded in five-year incremental blocks ranging from 0 = 21–25 through to 7 = 56–60. Gender was coded as 0 = male and 1 = female. As all employees had a college degree, including some who also had obtained a postgraduate degree, we coded education as 0 = college degree and 1 = postgraduate degree. Organisational and team tenure were measured in years. In addition, we controlled for perceptual moral attentiveness. Whilst perceptual and reflective moral attentiveness are conceptually distinct they are significantly correlated (Reynolds, 2008) and thus perceptual moral attentiveness was controlled for using Reynolds’ (2008) seven-item measure. Sample items included “Many of the decisions that I make have ethical dimensions to them” and “In a typical day, I face several ethical dilemmas” ($\alpha = .89$).

Method of Analysis

The analysis was conceptualised at the individual level. While some previous research on ethical leadership has conceptualised ethical leadership as a team-level variable (e.g., Eva et al., 2018), we have conceptualised it at the individual level for the purposes of this study as reflective moral

attentiveness is an individual's perception. Reynolds' (2008, p. 1028) original work on reflective moral attentiveness stressed that "moral attentiveness pertains to the process by which *an individual* actively screens and considers stimuli related to morality" (emphasis added). Thus, we sought to see how an individual's perception of the ethical behaviours of their leader shapes their own moral attentiveness and subsequently their unethical pro-organisational behaviour.

In saying this, the data consisted of employees nested within teams, therefore we had to address the non-independence of the data. To do so, we utilised the TYPE = COMPLEX function within Mplus to correct for the clustering effects and offer a more accurate coefficient estimation (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). To test the hypotheses, we performed structural equation modelling in Mplus using the maximum likelihood estimator with robust standard errors following recommendations by Preacher and colleagues (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Preacher et al., 2010). In order to construct the confidence intervals for the indirect effects of the mediation, we utilised the Monte Carlo method of confidence interval construction, using 20,000 replications for testing indirect effects as recommended by Preacher and Selig (2012). In order to facilitate the interpretation of effect sizes, all the variables were *z*-standardised prior to analysis.

RESULTS

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

In order to establish the discriminant validity of the study measures, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using the robust maximum likelihood estimation in Mplus. The hypothesised three-factor model (where the indicators for each of the three study variables loaded onto their three separate factors) yielded a better fit χ^2 ($df = 186$) = 294.493, RMSEA = .050 (95%CI .039 – .061), TLI = .935, CFI = .943, SRMR = .053, than a two-factor model (where reflective moral attentiveness and ethical leadership were considered as a combined factor) χ^2 ($df = 188$) = 640.337, RMSEA = .102 (95%CI .093 – .110), TLI = .734, CFI = .761, SRMR = .121, and a one-factor model (where all variables were loaded onto a single factor) χ^2 ($df = 189$) = 927.073, RMSEA = .129 (95%CI .121 – .138), TLI = .567, CFI = .611, SRMR = .154. These results provide evidence for the distinctiveness of the measures used in this study.¹

¹ For reference, we ran the CFA with perceptual moral attentiveness in a four-factor model. This model demonstrated a strong fit to the data: χ^2 ($df = 344$) = 513.260, RMSEA = .046 (95% CI .037 – .054), TLI = .932, CFI = .938, SRMR = .053.

Descriptive Statistics

The means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations of the study variables are presented in Table 1. Ethical leadership was positively correlated with reflective moral attentiveness ($r = .15, p < .05$) and negatively correlated with UPB ($r = -.15, p < .05$). These correlations are consistent with our hypotheses.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 2 presents the standardised indirect effects from the structural equation modelling analysis. As predicted in Hypotheses 1, ethical leadership was positively related to reflective moral attentiveness ($\beta = .15, p < .05$). For Hypothesis 2, that reflective moral attentiveness will mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB, the estimated indirect effect was $-.03$ (95%CI = $-.065, -.001$). As zero is not contained within the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect, Hypothesis 2 was supported. The standardised indirect effects from the regression analysis is reported in Table 3.

DISCUSSION

In this study we found that ethical leadership was positively related to subordinates' reflective moral attentiveness and subsequently acted as a mediating mechanism between ethical leadership and UPB. More specifically, we found that moral attentiveness mediated the relationship between ethical leadership in such a way that ethical leadership negatively influenced subordinates' UPB through enhancing reflective moral attentiveness. These findings are consistent with prior research that suggests it is reflective moral attentiveness that has attenuating effects on followers' unethical behaviour (Reynolds, 2008; Wurthmann, 2013). In the following sections, we examine the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Theoretical Implications

Our study makes a contribution to the literature by examining whether moral attentiveness can be fostered by social influence processes in the workplace. Our findings showed effects of ethical leadership on subordinates' reflective moral attentiveness such that subordinates working under ethical leaders reflected more on ethical issues. In line with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and extant work that suggests that moral attentiveness can be developed through training and education (Wurthmann, 2013), our study adds to Zhu et al.'s (2016) work which suggests salient others in the workplace, in this case the leader, act as an important contextual

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities and Correlations among the Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Age ^a	1.41	0.76	—								
2 Gender ^b	0.60	0.49	-.21**	—							
3 Education ^c	0.50	0.50	-.01	.02	—						
4 Team tenure (years)	3.90	2.54	.32**	-.03	-.03	—					
5 Organisational tenure (years)	5.65	3.26	.54**	-.17**	.03	.48**	—				
6 Perceptual moral attentiveness	2.61	1.07	.13*	-.10	-.01	.08	.06	(.89)			
7 Ethical leadership	3.49	0.87	.14*	-.09	.05	.09	.13*	-.19**	(.92)		
8 Reflective moral attentiveness	4.36	0.62	0.08	.10	-.06	.02	.11	.06	.15*	(.84)	
9 Unethical pro-organisational behaviour	2.52	0.79	-.07	-.09	.05	-.09	-.08	.10	.09	-.15*	(.80)

Means based on individual-level data (N = 233).

^aAge coded: 0 = 21–25 to 7 = 56–60.

^bGender coded: 0 = male; 1 = female.

^cEducation coded: 0 = college; 1 = postgraduate.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Cronbach alpha coefficients on the diagonal.

TABLE 2
Results of the Standardised Direct Effects

	<i>RMA</i>	<i>UPB</i>
Ethical leadership	.15*	.15*
Reflective moral attentiveness (RMA)	–	–.17**
<i>Control variables</i>		
Perceptual moral attentiveness	–	.15*
Age	.04	–.07
Gender	.14*	–.07
Education	–.08	.03
Team tenure	–.07	–.07
Organisational tenure	.13	–.03

Note: UPB = unethical pro-organisational behaviour.
p* < .05, *p* < .01.

TABLE 3
Results of the Standardised Indirect Effects

	<i>Standardised indirect effect</i>	<i>95%CI</i>	
		<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>
Ethical leadership – Reflective moral attentiveness – Unethical pro-organisational behaviours	–.03	–.065	–.001

Note: Based on 20,000 Monte Carlo simulations.

antecedent of employees’ moral attentiveness. Further, by examining these issues our study allowed us to answer the calls of researchers for more work on how the social context in which employees operate influences the moral attentiveness of employees (Reynolds, 2008).

In addition, our work extends that by Zhu et al. (2016) by providing evidence that reflective moral attentiveness mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB. In contrast to findings by Van Gils et al. (2015) who argued that moral attentiveness is a boundary condition that constrains the ethical leadership–ethical behaviour relationship, we found that moral attentiveness plays a processual role, consistent with Reynolds’ (2008) original conceptualisation. In so doing, the present study contributes to theory by highlighting how ethical leadership reduces the willingness of employees to engage in unethical behaviour with the intention of benefitting the organisation. Although limited prior research has considered team attitudes and behaviours as the mechanism through which ethical leadership influences

unethical behaviour, our findings speak to a new conversation around the mediating influence of individual morals (Mayer et al., 2010). Specifically, our regression analyses show that ethical leadership reduces UPB through enhancing subordinates' reflective moral attentiveness which leads employees to reflect on ethical issues and renders them less willing to engage in unethical behaviour that is intended to favour the organisation.

Moreover, while previous research has considered the direct relationship between ethical leadership and UPB from a social exchange theory perspective (e.g., Miao et al., 2013), our findings demonstrate from a social learning theory perspective how moral attentiveness can be developed in subordinates through the ethical leader's influence on reducing UPB.

Practical Implications

This study has highlighted the integral role played by managers in influencing their subordinates' moral orientations, in this case their moral attentiveness, and reducing their UPB. Examining such issues are important from a practical standpoint given UPB may cause significant reputational damage to the organisation (Umphress & Bingham, 2011).

By highlighting how ethical leadership can reduce UPB, our study has important practical implications for managers. First, it suggests that managers should be encouraged and rewarded to adopt a leadership approach that encourages subordinates to reflect on the ethical and moral issues facing them at work. To reduce unethical behaviour, organisations might implement ethical leadership development training programmes which highlight the importance of role modelling ethical behaviours, encourage managers to stress the importance of acting in an ethical manner to their subordinates, and encourage managers to reward subordinates for their ethical behaviour, rather than their performance alone (Mayer et al., 2009).

We advise managers that rather than dealing with ethical issues alone, they should bring ethical issues to the attention of their subordinates, and work together to solve them, so subordinates are able to vicariously learn from their leaders how to deal with ethical issues at work. Additionally, to reduce unethical behaviour in their organisations, managers might consider recruiting employees with high levels of reflective moral attentiveness. This could be done through the use of psychometric testing, case-based scenarios or ethical questions to determine potential employees' reflective moral attentiveness.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with all research this study has limitations. First, although we measured the dependent variables four weeks after the independent and mediating variables, the independent and mediating variables were measured at the same

time. As such we cannot determine conclusively whether ethical leadership has a causal effect on moral attentiveness. To ascertain conclusively that ethical leadership causes moral attentiveness, future research should use experimental designs to establish causality where the level of ethical leadership is manipulated. Nevertheless, we note that the results of our model are consistent with theoretical predictions that social factors drive individuals' moral orientations, which subsequently influence their intentions and behaviour. We are also conscious of the fact that participants may have been influenced to respond in a particular way to the survey because their responses were being matched with other members of their team. While we tried to ensure that participants were not influenced to respond in any particular direction (e.g., making the surveys confidential and using sealed envelopes) we cannot rule out that this has occurred. Again, we recommend experimental designs to overcome this limitation. As the present study was carried out in government agencies in a single Chinese province, future work should seek to establish its generalisability to other organisational and industrial contexts. Finally, while we have focused on ethical leadership in this research, it would be interesting to consider other leadership styles. There are several moral values-based leadership styles (e.g., servant leadership—Sendjaya, Eva, Butar-Butar, Robin, & Castles, 2018) and these could be controlled for in future research to see if ethical leadership has predictive power above and beyond other leadership styles with a moral component. Additionally, when considering UPB, an improved understanding may be gained by considering the organisational context within which ethical decision processes occur. Thus, future research may benefit from exploring the possible moderating role of ethical work climate (see Victor & Cullen, 1988).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study examined moral attentiveness as a mechanism driving the relationship between ethical leadership and the UPB of subordinates. More specifically, it established that ethical leadership enhanced subordinates' reflective moral attentiveness which in turn mediated the effects of ethical leadership on UPB in such a way that it reduced subordinates' willingness to engage in UPB. We hope the present study will encourage researchers to further consider the influence of leadership on the moral orientations of subordinates such as moral attentiveness, and its subsequent influence on subordinate behaviours.

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