



Ethical Leadership: An Integrative Review and Future Research Agenda

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Over the past decade, ethical leadership has increasingly become one of the most popular topics in the areas of leadership and business ethics. As a result, there now exists a substantial body of empirical research addressing ethical leadership issues, but the findings reported by this body of research are highly fragmented. The topic has advanced to the stage where a review and synthesis of existing literature can provide great value and help move the scholarly conversation forward. The primary purposes of this article are to (a) review empirical findings from the ethical leadership literature utilizing a framework consisting of the antecedents, mediators, moderators and outcomes of ethical leadership, and (b) suggest a set of interesting research opportunities, thereby facilitating future investigation. We base our synthesis on a review of 62 empirical studies on ethical leadership that were published between 2005 and mid-2015.

Keywords: antecedents, ethical leadership, literature review, mediators, moderators

In the early research on leadership a considerable amount of scholarly attention was devoted to leadership effectiveness (Ciulla, 1995), that is, a leader's performance in influencing and guiding followers' behavior toward achieving desired goals (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). More recently, however, media coverage of unethical leadership behavior has

increased, and there has been a growing number of empirical studies suggesting that moral principles may contribute to leader effectiveness in some circumstances. These factors have generated increased interest in leadership concepts related to moral aspects of leadership (Ciulla, 1995; Feng-I, 2011). For example, Burns (1978) argued that transforming leaders exert moral leadership by inspiring their followers to work for a collective goal, beyond their self-interest. Greenleaf (1977) suggested the concept of the servant leader, whose primary concern is the well-being and growth of his or her followers and who appeals to the higher ideals and moral values of his or her followers (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Greenleaf, 1998; Laub, 2000; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Page & Wong, 2000; Patterson, 2003; van Dierendonck, 2011). Luthans and Avolio (2003) proposed the concept of authentic leadership. Authentic leaders stress authenticity and self-awareness, and this leadership style is linked to ethical concerns such as altruism, ethical decision making, integrity, and the effect of role modeling on followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Coglisier, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003). Research on spiritual leadership has examined the motivational aspects of religious, spiritual, and ethical values (Chen, Yang, & Li, 2012; Fry, 2003, 2005; Fry, Hannah, Noel, & Walumbwa, 2011; Fry & Slocum, 2008). Although these leadership theories are based on different key concepts, they share a focus on moral value-based appeals through which leaders inspire followers.

The concept of ethical leadership has emerged as a prominent theme in the empirical leadership literature, with a dramatic increase in related research since the mid-2000s. According to Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005), ethical leadership can be defined 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” (p. 120). Recent meta-analytic studies provide a good analytical review of what we know about the outcomes of ethical leadership (Bedi, Alpaslan, & Green, 2015). However, given the amount of literature examining the antecedents, underlying processes and various contingency factors associated with ethical leadership, more holistic review and synthesis is now required to integrate the findings of existing empirical studies and provide guidelines for practitioners and directions for future research. Therefore, this study attempts to provide such a review by exploring the following three central research issues: (a) antecedent factors that influence ethical leadership development, (b) the underlying mechanisms through which ethical leadership influences follower outcomes, and (c) contingency factors that serve to either help or hinder the effectiveness of ethical leadership.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we briefly overview the key concepts of ethical leadership, compare it with other leadership approaches and discuss instruments that have been used to measure it. Second, we outline the method used for the structured literature review, summarizing the material collection process and presenting descriptive analysis of the 62 empirical studies on ethical leadership we identified. Third, we present the results of our conceptual analysis and review of those studies, focusing on antecedents, outcomes, mediating mechanisms, and moderators. Finally, we suggest promising future directions for ethical leadership research.

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Trevino, Brown, and Hartman (2003) found that ethical leadership is not only associated with a leader's traits (e.g., honesty, integrity and trustworthiness) and ethical behaviors (e.g., openness, concern, fairness and ethical decision making) but also linked to value-based management (e.g.,

setting ethical standards through communication and rewards). In other words, an ethical leader is viewed as an authentically moral person by his or her followers and as a moral manager who effectively influences employees (Trevino et al., 2003; Trevino, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). Thus, ethical leaders are moral persons who manifest moral traits and behaviors in their personal lives. In addition to these personal characteristics ethical leaders also practice moral management, actively influencing employees to be conscientious of ethics and encouraging them to act morally. They do this through communication, discipline, and the effects of role modeling (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Trevino et al., 2000).

Most studies that have tried to explain how ethical leadership affects follower behavior have drawn on two theories: social learning theory (Bandura & McClelland, 1977) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1986; Bandura & McClelland, 1977) is used by leadership researchers to describe how ethical leaders act as role models, attracting followers' attention to their ethical practices and decision-making norms, and thus spreading ethical behavior throughout the organization as followers emulate their leader. For example, Brown et al. (2005) argued that ethical leaders affect their followers' behavior first by acting as role models. In addition, followers learn the nature of accepted behavior by observing the rewards and punishments that ethical leaders assign. A second stream explanation of how ethical leaders may influence their followers is drawn from social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). Blau (1964) distinguished transactional exchanges—relatively clearly defined, contract-like *quid pro quo* relations—from social exchange relationships, which are relatively fuzzy, have a longer time horizon, and are based on trust and norms of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). According to the social exchange view, ethical leaders demonstrate fairness and caring for followers. Followers, in turn, feel obligated to reciprocate and act according to the ethical leader's expectations (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown et al., 2005).

Comparison With Other Leadership Types

The concept of ethical leadership is distinct from other prominent types of leadership such as transformational leadership, transactional leadership, spiritual leadership, and authentic leadership. Several researchers have pointed out the differences between leadership concepts, arguing that ethical leadership describes a distinct phenomenon, both on the conceptual and empirical level (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown et al., 2005; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Ofori, 2009). Notably, ethical leadership relies on the setting of moral standards and moral management, whereas transformational leaders focus more on vision, values, and intellectual stimulation (Brown & Treviño, 2006, p. 598). The focus on moral management is also a key difference among ethical leadership, authentic leadership, and spiritual leadership. Ethical leaders focus more on the transactional aspect of moral management of their followers and thus emphasize "other" awareness rather than the self-awareness that is a key facet of authentic leadership. The emphasis ethical leaders place on mechanisms of moral management is also different from a spiritual leader's focus on visioning, hope, or faith (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Although being distinct in their main focus, leadership styles may overlap. Ethical leaders, for example, influence follower behavior in ways that can be similar to other leadership styles. A recent meta-analysis by Bedi et al. (2015) provides empirical evidence for such similarities, suggesting a strong association among ethical leadership, transformational leadership, and the contingent reward dimension of transactional leadership. This suggests a partial overlap of these

concepts and complements earlier conceptual (Shao, 2010) and empirical contributions (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Howell & Avolio, 1992; Riggio, Zhu, Reina, & Maroosis, 2010), which had argued that ethical leadership might contain some of the aspects of other leadership styles such as consideration, inspirational motivation (Riggio et al., 2010), and idealized influence (Brown et al., 2005). Similar to transformational leaders, ethical leaders influence follower behavior through mechanisms such as role modeling (Avolio et al., 1999; Howell & Avolio, 1992), ethical decision making, and integrity, and they may use collective motivation and empowerment (Bedi et al., 2015; Shao, 2010; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Although transformational leadership covers aspects that are not part of ethical leadership, such as individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation, Bedi et al. (2015) noted that “the boundary between transformational and ethical leadership is blurred” (p. 531).

Operationalizing Ethical Leadership

To better understand and examine the impact of ethical leadership, it is necessary to develop a reliable and validated instrument that measures its key dimensions. Several researchers have developed measurement instruments that attempt to do so. First, Brown et al. (2005) developed the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) and tested its relationship to several other constructs and outcomes. The ELS is used in a substantial number of studies that examine the antecedents and outcomes of ethical leadership, the underlying mechanisms connecting ethical leadership to various outcomes, and various contingency effects. Second, De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) adapted three scales from the Multi-Culture Leader Behavior Questionnaire (Hanges & Dickson, 2004) in their examination of how ethical leadership affects the effectiveness of top management teams and the optimism of subordinates. Third, Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh (2011b) proposed the Ethical Leadership at Work Questionnaire, a multidimensional measure of ethical leadership that measures ethical leader behaviors such as fairness, power sharing, role clarification, people orientation, integrity, ethical guidance, and concern for sustainability. Finally, Gu, Tang, and Jiang (2015) used an adaptation of the Paternalistic Leadership Scale (Cheng, Chou, & Farh, 2000) to study the relationship between moral leadership and employee creativity. The Paternalistic Leadership Scale aims to reflect Chinese cultural context and Confucian ideology by emphasizing personal virtues and role modeling. Despite the availability of this variety of scales for measuring ethical leadership, the ELS remains the most commonly used measure of ethical leadership in empirical studies.

METHOD AND DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Material Collection

To review empirical studies related to ethical leadership we identified and analyzed a set of articles published in journals relevant to the field of business ethics. First, we selected seven top-tier journals focusing on the fields of business ethics, organization studies, organizational psychology, and general management from the Association of Business Schools' academic journal quality guide: *Business Ethics Quarterly* and *Journal of Business Ethics* in the field of business ethics; *Leadership Quarterly* in the field of organization studies; *Academy of Management Journal* in the field of general management; and *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Organizational Behavior and*

Human Decision Processes, and *Journal of Applied Psychology* in the field of organizational psychology. Second, we searched in those journals for articles with abstracts that produced a match for the search string '(ethic* or moral*) and leader*'. A time frame of 2005 or later was chosen for the search because most empirical studies on ethical leadership were conducted after Brown et al. (2005) developed the ELS instrument. To implement the search we first used the keywords in the EBSCO Business Source Premier database to identify 341 potentially relevant articles published between 2005 and 2015. From these, we eliminated studies that were not related to ethical leadership and excluded qualitative studies that focused on conceptual discussions of people's perceptions and understanding of ethical leadership (Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2014; Frisch & Huppenbauer, 2014; Resick, Hanges, Dickson, & Mitchelson, 2006; Resick et al., 2011), resulting in a set of 64 empirical articles. Although all 64 articles are included in the descriptive analysis section that follows, two articles that examine the moderating role of ethical leadership itself were excluded from the main conceptual analysis.

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 shows the chronological distribution of the survey-based empirical studies included in our analysis. We see a significant peak of publications in 2014 (i.e., 23 articles, 35.9% of all articles in the sample). By far the dominant publication outlet for survey studies on ethical leadership is the *Journal of Business Ethics* (i.e., 45 articles, 70.3%).

We read all 64 articles and analyzed the measures of ethical leadership and units of analysis that were applied in those articles. Brown et al. (2005)'s ELS is by far the most dominant scale used in empirical studies on ethical leadership, with 62 of the 64 articles adopting it. Of interest, a great number of different definitions and dimensions have been developed for authentic leadership and servant leadership (Gardner et al., 2011; van Dierendonck, 2011), and a dominant scale still has not emerged in those leadership areas. This may be one of the reasons for the relatively small number of empirical studies conducted on authentic leadership and servant leadership. In contrast, the emergence of the influential ELS scale has spawned a series of

TABLE 1
Distribution of the Articles Across the Seven Academic Journals

	<i>BEQ</i>	<i>JBE</i>	<i>JAP</i>	<i>JOB</i>	<i>OBHDP</i>	<i>AMJ</i>	<i>LQ</i>	<i>Total</i>
2007			1					1
2008							1	1
2009		2	1		1			4
2010	1	2		1				4
2011		5	1		1			7
2012		6				2	1	9
2013	1	7			1			9
2014	1	20					2	23
2015		3		1			2	6
Totals	3	45	3	2	3	2	6	64

Note. BEQ = *Business Ethics Quarterly*; JBE = *Journal of Business Ethics*; JAP = *Journal of Applied Psychology*; JOB = *Journal of Organizational Behavior*; OBHDP = *Organizational Behavior and Human Development Processes*; AMJ = *Academy of Management Journal*; LQ = *Leadership Quarterly*.

TABLE 2
Units of Analysis of Empirical Studies

<i>Ethical Leader</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Number of Articles (Sources)</i>
Top manger	Employees	1 (Shin, 2012)
	Middle managers and employees	1 (Ruiz et al., 2011)
	Middle manager and group	1 (Mayer et al., 2009)
	Team level	1 (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008)
	Firm level	3 (Eisenbeiss et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2014)
Middle manager	Employees	51
	Group	1 (Walumbwa et al., 2012)
	Soldiers	2 (Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Zheng et al., 2015)
	Employees and their spouse	1 (Liao et al., 2014)
Buyer	Suppliers	1 (Mo et al., 2012)
Other		1 (Rubin et al., 2010)

empirical studies on ethical leadership over the past decade. Table 2 classifies the articles chosen to represent the ethical leader and the followers. We see that middle managers dominate the studies, with 51 articles (79.7%) analyzing how their ethical leadership influences employees. Only a few studies (seven articles) looked at how top managers' ethical leadership shapes behavior at the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy (Ruiz, Ruiz, & Martínez, 2011; Shin, 2012), or analyzed group (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Mayer et al., 2009), or firm performance (Eisenbeiss, van Knippenberg, & Fahrback, 2015; Shin, Sung, Choi, & Kim, 2014; Wu, Kwan, Yim, Chiu, & He, 2014). Moreover, research on the interorganizational effects of ethical leadership remains especially rare, with the notable exception of Mo, Booth, and Wang's (2012) study exploring the role of a buyer's ethical leadership in dealing with supplier conflict. Most of the articles in our sample have examined effects within organizations, be it on the individual level, team level, or organizational level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, we review separately the antecedents, outcomes, mechanisms, and moderators that are identified in the ethical leadership empirical studies. Figure 1 shows a conceptual model derived from the empirical studies that helps us better understand the overall processes of ethical leadership.

Antecedents

The existing literature classifies antecedents of ethical leadership into two primary categories: leader characteristics and situational influences. As Brown and Treviño (2006) proposed, some leader characteristics cause followers to perceive their leader as an ethical leader, and some situational factors provide learning opportunities associated with the development of ethical leadership. The following section summarizes empirical results on these two major antecedents of ethical leadership: leader characteristics and situational influences (see Table 3).

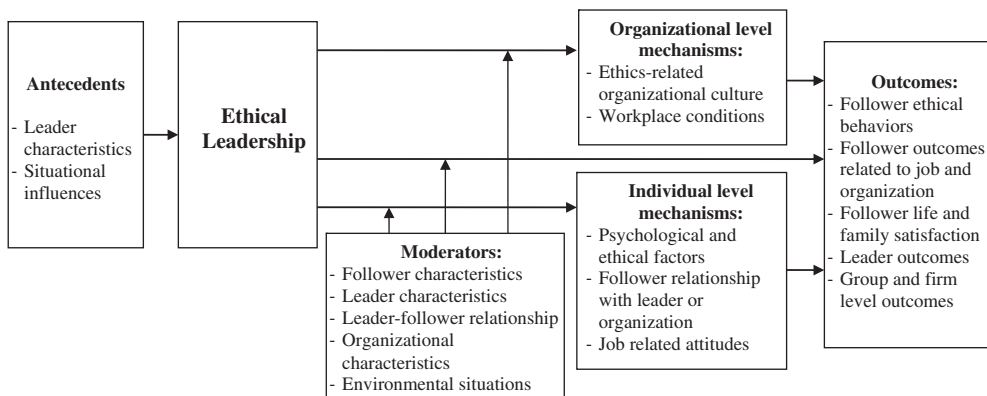


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model of ethical leadership.

Leader Characteristics

First, leaders with certain personality traits may be more likely to develop ethical leadership. Social learning theory posits that ethical leaders show specific personal characteristics that make them into attractive and credible role models and allow them to influence followers' perception of ethical leadership and followers' ethical behavior. Brown and Treviño (2006) discussed personality traits as antecedents of ethical leadership and proposed that a leader's agreeableness and conscientiousness will support the emergence of ethical leadership, whereas neuroticism exhibited by the leader should hamper ethical leadership, as neurotic leaders will be less attractive role models, induce less emulation of their practices, and be less able to influence follower behavior.

Following Brown and Treviño (2006)'s study, Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009) investigated the effect of three leader personality traits on the perception of ethical leadership. They found that leaders' agreeableness and conscientiousness were positively related to the perception of ethical leadership. To extend the Walumbwa and Schaubroeck study, Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh (2011a) investigated the Big Five personality traits (e.g., Openness, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability) and their relationship to ethical leadership. In line with the findings of Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, their results indicate that leaders' agreeableness and conscientiousness are the most relevant for ethical leadership. Leaders high in agreeableness adjust their behaviors to maintain social relations with others. Thus, they are more likely to be perceived as ethical leaders who are concerned about their followers and treat them with fairness and trust. Leaders high in conscientiousness behave in a manner that is consistent with their moral responsibility and the rules. Because ethical leaders not only behave ethically but also set clear ethical rules through communication and discipline, leaders' conscientiousness impacts followers' perception of ethical leadership. In addition, they found that leaders' emotional stability predicts ethical leadership after controlling for leader-member exchange (LMX). Leaders high in neuroticism are less likely to be viewed as role models, whereas leaders high in emotional stability are confident and secure. Because ethical leadership emphasizes the role modeling of leaders, emotional stability of leaders is important for the perception of ethical leadership.

TABLE 3
The Antecedents of Ethical Leadership

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Note</i>
Leader characteristics	Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009)	Supported (+)	
Agreeableness		Supported (+)	
Conscientiousness			
Neuroticism		Not supported (–)	
Openness	Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh (2011)	Not supported (+)	In Study 2, control for Leader–Member Exchange
Extraversion		Not supported (+)	
Conscientiousness		Supported (+)	
Agreeableness		Not supported (+)	
Emotional stability		Supported (+)	
Interactional justice to peers	Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Suárez-Acosta (2014)	Supported (+)	
Moral identity symbolization	Mayer et al. (2012)	Supported (+)	In Study 2, control for idealized influence, interpersonal justice, informational justice
Moral identity internalization		Supported (+)	
Supervisor moral disengagement	Bonner et al. (2014)	Supported (–)	Moderating role of employee disengagement (supported)
Situational influence			
Top management ethical leadership	Mayer et al. (2009)	Supported (+)	
Top management ethical leadership	Ruiz et al. (2011)	Supported (+)	
Child ethical models	Brown and Treviño (2014)	Not supported (+)	Moderating role of age : Childhood model and career model (supported)
Workplace ethical models		Supported (+)	
Top manager models		Not supported (+)	
Social distance between leader and follower through follower moral reasoning	Tumasjan et al. (2011)	Supported (–)	Mediating role of moral reasoning between social distance and ethical leadership
Follower rank	Pucic (2014)	Supported (+)	

Second, moral identity has been shown to predict ethical leadership. As a central part of a person's self-definition, moral identity motivates individuals to act as moral persons. Thus, it can predict ethical leadership (Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012). Because moral identity acts as a self-regulatory mechanism, leaders with strong moral identity act in ways that are consistent with their morals. This, in turn, causes them to be perceived as ethical leaders. Based on Aquino and Reed (2002) work, Mayer et al. (2012) found that two dimensions (i.e., internalization and symbolization) of moral identity predict ethical leadership. In other words, leaders with strong moral identity consistently display ethical leadership behaviors, in spite of competing pressures or ethical dilemmas.

Third, when leaders treat followers with respect and fairness it increases followers' perceptions of interactional justice, which increases the likelihood that followers will evaluate their leaders as ethical leaders who demonstrate ethical principles in the workplace. In other words, leaders set an example of moral behavior by demonstrating interactional justice toward peers, which manifests ethical leadership (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Suárez-Acosta, 2014).

Finally, morally disengaged leaders were shown to be less likely to be perceived as ethical leaders. Morally disengaged leaders do not visibly display ethical action or actively promote ethical standards, and are therefore not perceived as ethical leaders (Bonner, Greenbaum, & Mayer, 2014). Furthermore, followers with low moral disengagement (i.e., high moral engagement) are more likely to be sensitive to the ethicality of their leaders. That is, if leaders display a lack of moral engagement, followers who are morally engaged will subsequently evaluate them harshly as unethical leaders. Conversely, followers with high moral disengagement may not care about their leaders' ethical conduct or lack of moral engagement.

Situational Influences

Social learning theory suggests that ethical role modeling is an important antecedent of ethical leadership. Thus, ethical leadership depends on direct interaction or observation. Direct interaction or observation are crucial for both direct imitation effects and indirect learning to occur. Therefore, it might be harder to implement ethical leadership with followers who are geographically or hierarchically remote. The effect of top management ethical leadership flows down to immediate supervisors and might weaken as it traverses hierarchical levels (Mayer et al., 2009; Ruiz et al., 2011).

The role models chosen by leaders and followers are also likely to change over time. Brown and Treviño (2014) argued that leaders adopt multiple ethical models over their lifetimes and examined the effect of childhood role models, career role models, and top managers on ethical leadership. They found that only career role models, such as those provided by mentors, coworkers, and supervisors, predict ethical leadership. Moreover, the impact of career models on ethical leadership becomes stronger with age, because older leaders have presumably had more opportunity to observe the ethical conduct of their career role models in the workplace. Although the impact of childhood role models on ethical leadership was insignificant overall, childhood role models did influence ethical leadership for younger leaders. In sum, it appears that ethical values and behaviors learned from childhood role models influence ethical leadership early in a leader's career. However, as time passes the impact of childhood role models is reduced, whereas the impact of career role models becomes stronger.

Given that both reputation and followers' perceptions are critical to ethical leadership, variables relevant to followers' evaluations are considered as antecedents. Based on social identity theory, leadership categorization theory, and social cognitive theory, Pucic (2014) described the effect of follower rank on the perception of ethical leadership and found that lower ranked followers tended to rate their proximal leaders as lower on the scale of ethical leadership. Followers with lower rank have more specific expectation of their low-rank proximal leaders, thus they evaluate their leaders more strictly. However, as followers progress in rank, their expectation of leaders become more normative and abstract, thus they give higher ratings to their direct leaders.

On the other hand, based on construal-level theory (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007), Tumasjan, Strobel, and Welp (2011) argued that higher social distance made followers more critical of their supervisors. Where there was high social distance between leader and follower, the follower's evaluation of the leader was stricter than if there was low social distance between the leader and the follower. Followers' negative evaluations are mitigated by social closeness, because followers who are closer to leaders are more likely to understand their leader's circumstances (Tumasjan et al., 2011).

Outcomes

Researchers have examined various outcomes of ethical leadership, and our review identified 44 outcomes of ethical leadership. Based on the literature, we group these variables into five categories: follower ethical behavior, follower outcomes related to job and organization, follower life and family satisfaction, leader outcomes, and firm-level outcomes (see Table 4).

Follower Ethical Behaviors

Consistent with social learning theory, followers acquire ethical attitudes and values by observing ethical leaders and adapting their behavior through role modeling, or vicariously through other employees' experiences. Ethical leaders also set clear standards of conduct by communicating or sanctioning, thus they actively promote followers' moral reasoning and ethical conduct (Lu & Lin, 2014). Moreover, several studies point out that actions reinforce such communication: When leaders not only instruct followers to behave ethically but also behave ethically themselves, followers are less likely to engage in organizational deviance or morally questionable conduct (Arel, Beaudoin, & Cianci, 2012; Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011; Demirtas, 2015; Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Mayer et al., 2012; Mayer, Kuenzi, & Greenbaum, 2010; Mayer et al., 2009; Neves & Story, 2015; Stouten et al., 2010; Taylor & Pattie, 2014; van Gils, van Quaquebeke, van Knippenberg, van Dijke, & De Cremer, 2015; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Suárez-Acosta, 2014). Finally, when ethical leaders convey clear moral standards and encourage followers to speak up against unethical behavior and situations, followers are more likely to internally report wrongdoing (Bhal & Dadhich, 2011; Lee, Choi, Youn, & Chun, 2015; Mayer, Nurmohamed, Treviño, Shapiro, & Schminke, 2013).

TABLE 4
Outcome Categories in Ethical Leadership Studies

<i>Category</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>Selected References</i>
Follower ethical behaviors	Ethical behavior, employee misconduct, organizational deviance, counterproductive behavior, unit unethical behavior, booking questionable journal entry, whistle-blowing, reporting unethical conduct, interpersonal deviant workplace behavior, bullying, incivility, moral efficacy, moral voice	Arel, Beaudoin, and Cianci (2012); Avey et al. (2011); Demirtas (2015); Den Hartog and Belschak (2012); Lee et al. (2015); Lu and Lin (2014); Mayer et al. (2012); Mayer et al. (2009); Mayer et al. (2010); Mayer et al. (2013); Neves and Story (2015); Stouten et al. (2010); Taylor and Pattie (2014); van Gils et al. (2015); Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Suárez-Acosta (2014)
Follower outcomes related to job and organization	Organizational citizenship behaviors, helping, internal social capital, unit relationship conflict, Leader-Member Exchange Job satisfaction, employee well-being at work, optimism, turnover intention, job search behaviors, emotional exhaustion, work engagement, effort, personal initiative, promotability, voice behavior, affective organizational commitment, normative organizational commitment, in-role job performance, extra role performance	Avey et al. (2011); Avey et al. (2012); Bonner et al. (2014); Bouckennooghe et al. (2014); Chughtai et al. (2014); Demirtas (2015); Demirtas and Akdogan (2014); Den Hartog and Belschak (2012); Eisenbeiss and van Knippenberg (2015); Gu et al. (2015); Hansen et al. (2013); Kacmar et al. (2013); Kacmar et al. (2011); Mayer et al. (2012); Neubert et al. (2009); Neubert et al. (2013); (Newman et al., 2014; Ofori, 2009); Palanski et al. (2014); Pastoriza and Ariño (2013); Piccolo et al. (2010); Pucic (2014); Ruiz-Palomino et al. (2013); Ruiz et al. (2011); Sharif and Scandura (2014); (Shin, 2012); Tu and Lu (2014); Walumbwa et al. (2011); Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009); Wang and Sung (2014); Yang (2014); Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Suárez-Acosta (2014)
Follower life and family satisfaction	Life satisfaction, family satisfaction	Liao et al. (2014); Yang (2014)
Leader outcomes Group and firm-level outcomes	Leader promotability, top management team effectiveness Distribute justice, organizational fairness, firm-level (group) organizational citizenship behaviors, corporate social responsibility, financial performance, firm performance, interorganizational conflict	Rubin et al. (2010) Eisenbeiss et al. (2015); Mayer et al. (2009); Mo et al. (2012); Pucic (2014); Shin et al. (2014); Walumbwa et al. (2012); Wu et al. (2014); Xu et al. (2014)

Follower Work-Related Outcomes

Similar to transformational leaders, ethical leaders demonstrate consideration for followers and are thus more likely to engender followers' positive attitudes toward work and the organization. Followers working with ethical leaders perceive their work as more fair and meaningful, because their leaders listen to them and show respect, concern, and fairness. When ethical leaders demonstrate fairness and concern for followers, followers report higher levels of trust and gratitude. In this sense, the relationship between ethical leaders and followers can be described in terms of social exchange theory (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Gu et al., 2015). Based on social exchange theory, followers are likely to reciprocate their ethical leaders' fairness and caring by engaging in prosocial behavior such as organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs), which are beneficial to the organization and to coworkers (Avey et al., 2011; Bonner et al., 2014; Kacmar, Bachrach, Harris, & Zivnuska, 2011; Newman, Kiazad, Miao, & Cooper, 2014; Piccolo, Greenbaum, Hartog, & Folger, 2010; Ruiz et al., 2011; Sharif & Scandura, 2014; Shin, 2012; Wang & Sung, 2014; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Suárez-Acosta, 2014). Because ethical leaders express consideration for people and serve as role models of virtuous behavior, followers emulate them (Gu et al., 2015) and engage in helping others (Eisenbeiss & van Knippenberg, 2015; Kacmar, Andrews, Harris, & Tepper, 2013), following collective values rather than simple self-interest (Mayer et al., 2012; Pastoriza & Ariño, 2013).

Because followers feel confident and safe in their interaction with ethical leaders, ethical leadership increases followers' satisfaction with their leaders and their jobs (Avey, Wernsing, & Palanski, 2012; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Neubert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts, & Chonko, 2009; Ofori, 2009; Pucic, 2014; Ruiz et al., 2011; Ruiz-Palomino, Sáez-Martínez, & Martínez-Cañas, 2013; Sharif & Scandura, 2014; Yang, 2014) and reduces emotional exhaustion (Chughtai, Byrne, & Flood, 2014) and turnover intention (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2014; Palanski, Avey, & Jiraporn, 2014; Ruiz et al., 2011; Zheng et al., 2015).

Ethical leaders demonstrate strong work ethic and trustworthiness, which increases follower work engagement (Chughtai et al., 2014; Demirtas, 2015; Piccolo et al., 2010) and commitment to the organization (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2014; Hansen, Alge, Brown, Jackson, & Dunford, 2013; Neubert et al., 2009; Neubert, Wu, & Roberts, 2013; Ruiz et al., 2011). Followers feel an obligation and gratitude toward their ethical leaders for the concern and support they were shown and are thus willing to reciprocate with higher work effort. In other words, ethical leaders inspire and motivate followers, which triggers social exchange processes and results in higher performance (Bonner et al., 2014; Bouckennooghe, Zafar, & Raja, 2014; Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Eisenbeiss & van Knippenberg, 2015; Neubert et al., 2013; Ofori, 2009; Piccolo et al., 2010; Sharif & Scandura, 2014; Tu & Lu, 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2011; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009).

Follower Life and Family Satisfaction

A large share of the outcomes of ethical leadership reported in the literature are related to follower attitudes and behaviors at work. Due to the large amount of time spent at the workplace, the work situation and satisfaction has a strong impact on the follower's overall life. It is not surprising, then, that studies show that ethical leadership impacts not only followers' work satisfaction but also life satisfaction (Yang, 2014) and family satisfaction (Liao, Liu, Kwan, & Li, 2014).

Firm-Level Outcomes

The work of top managers has different characteristics and dynamics than that of lower level supervisors, and studies show that the role of an ethical leader also differs according to the hierarchical position of the leader (Brown & Treviño, 2006). For instance, the effect of ethical leadership in top management extends beyond employees' individual-level outcomes to firm-level outcomes. Some studies found that ethical leadership by top management has a strong indirect "trickle down" effect on supervisor ethical leadership, which increases firm- or group-level OCB (Mayer et al., 2009; Shin et al., 2014) and performance (Eisenbeiss et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2014; Walumbwa, Morrison, & Christensen, 2012). Also, by observing their ethical leaders, followers shape their perceptions of organizational justice and fairness. In particular, CEO behavior exerts an effect on the organizational climate (Pucic, 2014; Shin, 2012; Xu, Loi, & Ngo, 2014), which affects follower ethical behavior and willingness to behave ethically according to their leaders' expectations (Mo et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2014).

Leader Outcomes

Ethical leaders' behaviors affect not only their followers' performance and satisfaction but also follower evaluations of their own performance as leaders. Ethical leaders direct and guide followers with clear goals and norms in the workplace and tend to be perceived as effective leaders by their followers (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). Also, ethical leaders display trustworthiness, fairness, and concern for people. As a consequence, they are perceived as dependable and professional, which increases perceptions of their effectiveness and promotability within the organization (Rubin, Dierdorff, & Brown, 2010).

Mediating Mechanisms

A large number of studies have identified various mechanisms through which ethical leadership impacts followers' behavior and performance. Although the literature points out a number of complexities in mediating mechanisms, we can distinguish two broad categories of mechanisms through which ethical leadership works: followers' individual-level mechanisms and organizational level-mechanisms (see Table 5).

Individual-Level Mechanisms

Followers' psychological and ethical factors. Individual psychological factors play a critical role as mechanisms through which ethical leadership influences follower outcomes. Ethical leaders serve as role models for desirable behavior in the workplace. They also are concerned about the well-being and job development of their followers. Therefore, followers of ethical leaders are motivated to build positive psychological resources and expand their knowledge and skills to improve their job performance.

In addition, ethical leaders set clear ethical standards through communication and discipline, and thus encourage followers to have ethical attitudes and psychological states and to further engage in ethical conduct and decision making.

TABLE 5
Mechanisms of Ethical Leadership

<i>Level</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>Selected References</i>
Followers' individual level	Psychological and ethical factors	Psychological safety, psychological ownership, self-efficacy, psychological capital, promotion and prevention focus, moral efficacy, moral intensity, perceived accountability, attributed altruistic motives, fear of retaliation and futility	Arel et al. (2012); Avey et al. (2012); Bouckennooghe et al. (2014); Chughtai et al. (2014); Lee et al. (2015); Li et al. (2015); Liao et al. (2014); Mayer et al. (2013); Neubert et al. (2013); Steinbauer et al. (2014); Tu and Lu (2014); Walumbwa et al. (2011); Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009)
	Followers' ethical leadership in family	Followers' ethical leadership in family	Bouckennooghe et al. (2014); Chughtai et al. (2014); Hansen et al. (2013); Neves and Story (2015); (Newman et al., 2014); Ogunfowora (2014); Walumbwa et al. (2011); Xu et al. (2014); Zhu et al. (2015)
	Leader-Member Exchange, social exchange relationship, trust, identification with leader and organization, follower-leader goal congruence, affective commitment	Leader-Member Exchange, social exchange relationship, trust, identification with leader and organization, follower-leader goal congruence, affective commitment	Avey et al. (2012); Den Hartog and Belschak (2012); Palanski et al. (2014); Piccolo et al. (2010); Yang (2014)
Organizational level	Job-related attitudes	Employee voice, work engagement, job satisfaction, task significance	Demirtas (2015); Demirtas and Akdogan (2014); Eisenbeiss et al. (2015); Kacmar et al. (2013); Lu and Lin (2014); Mayer et al. (2010); Neubert et al. (2009); Shin et al. (2014); Walumbwa et al. (2012); Wu et al. (2014)
	Ethic-related organizational culture	Ethical climate, organizational ethical culture, organizational justice, perception of organizational politics Group conscientiousness	Walumbwa et al. (2012); Zheng et al. (2015); Stouten et al. (2010); Wang and Sung (2014)
	Workplace conditions	Team cohesion, group voice, workload and poor working conditions, workplace jealousy	

Psychological resources

Many researchers have found psychological resources such as psychological safety, self-efficacy, psychological ownership, and psychological capital to be important underlying mechanisms through which ethical leaders influence followers, resulting in positive work-related outcomes and attitudes. In other words, ethical leaders foster positive psychological resources that further lead to enhanced job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment, employee performance, voice behavior, and employee well-being in the workplace (Avey et al., 2012; Bouckennooghe et al., 2014; Chughtai et al., 2014; Li, Wu, Johnson, & Avey, 2015; Neubert et al., 2013; Tu & Lu, 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2011; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009).

Ethical attitudes

Ethical leaders support and encourage followers to have ethical attitudes such as perceived accountability, moral efficacy, and moral intensity, which lead to ethical conduct and decisions such as self-leadership focused on ethics, moral voice, and refusal to book questionable journal entries (Arel et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2015; Steinbauer, Renn, Taylor, & Njoroge, 2014). In addition, because followers are confident of their ethical leader's support, they are less likely to feel fear of retaliation and futility. As a consequence, they are more likely to report wrongdoing in the organization (Mayer et al., 2013).

Followers' ethical leadership in the family

Because followers emulate and learn from their ethical leaders in the workplace, followers with ethical leaders are more likely to demonstrate ethical behaviors in the family domain, which leads to an increase in the family satisfaction of their spouses. In other words, followers' ethical leadership in the family domain mediates the relationship between their ethical leadership perception in the workplace and their spouses' family satisfaction (Liao et al., 2014).

Follower's relationship with the leader or organization. Ethical leaders treat followers with trust and fairness, which can establish high-quality relationships with their followers and lead to stronger emotional bonds with followers through the social exchange process. Ethical leaders also effectively promote high moral values and share goals through role modeling and proactively communicating moral standards, thus enhancing followers' identification with the leader and with the organization. These follower relationships with the leader further promote their job-related performance and ethical behaviors.

Relationship quality

A relationship between ethical leaders and followers characterized by LMX, social exchange, and trust motivates followers to reciprocate with obligation, effort, and organizational commitment. Ethical leaders promote followers' performance, organizational citizenship behavior, work engagement, and commitment and restrain emotional exhaustion by establishing a high-quality relationship with their followers (Chughtai et al., 2014; Gu et al., 2015; Hansen et al., 2013; Li et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2011).

Identification

Because employees perceive their leader as an agent representing the organization, the leader's behavior influences followers' perception of their organization. When ethical leaders serve as role models by demonstrating ethical behavior and decisions, followers are willing to identify not only with their ethical leader but also with their organization. In turn, when followers identify with their ethical leader and organization they are motivated to increase their effort to achieve goals that are beneficial to organization, such as job performance (Bouckennooghe et al., 2014; Ogunfowora, 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2011; Zhu, He, Treviño, Chao, & Wang, 2015). Also, in this way, ethical leadership decreases followers' organizational deviance and increases their perception of organizational justice by fostering their affective commitment to the organization and trust in the organization (Neves & Story, 2015; Xu et al., 2014).

Job-related attitudes. Followers' job-related attitudes are frequently investigated as outcomes of ethical leadership, but these attitudes also function as mechanisms through which ethical leadership influences other outcomes. For example, ethical leaders enhance proactive behaviors such as personal initiative and restrain counterproductive behaviors by promoting work engagement (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012). When ethical leaders encourage followers to speak up, followers are more likely to feel a sense of meaning and well-being in the workplace (Avey et al., 2012). Also, the support and concern of ethical leaders increases their followers' job satisfaction, which is viewed as an indicator of employee well-being and life satisfaction. In turn, followers' job satisfaction further influences job-related attitudes and behaviors such as turnover intention and searching for other jobs (Palanski et al., 2014; Yang, 2014). In addition, ethical leaders motivate effort in the workplace through positive job assignments (task significance), which promotes meaningfulness and satisfaction in the workplace (Piccolo et al., 2010).

Organizational-Level Mechanisms

Leadership not only directly influences performance outcomes but also indirectly affects those outcomes through organizational context (Yukl, 2010). Next we address organization-level mechanisms through which ethical leadership leads to positive outcomes.

Ethics-Related Organizational Culture

Ethical climate and culture

Ethical leaders play a critical role in shaping the ethical climate or organizational ethical culture because of the way in which they model and communicate ethical norms to followers. Because leaders have positional power and status, the ethical norms they model and communicate are more likely to become shared values and norms through social contagion processes. In other words, ethical leaders create an ethical climate by exemplifying ethical behavior and exerting moral authority. Moreover, when followers share collective cultural beliefs and values about ethics in the workplace, followers are motivated to apply these rules and norms through interaction with other coworkers and supervisors. Consequently, followers are more encouraged to behave ethically and normatively (ethical behavior) and less likely to engage in misconduct

(Lu & Lin, 2014; Mayer et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2014). Followers are also motivated to demonstrate a positive attitude toward their job and organization, manifested in the form of job satisfaction, affective commitment, and low turnover (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2014; Neubert et al., 2009). Furthermore, ethical climate or ethical culture transmits the effects of ethical leadership to firm-level outcomes such as corporate social responsibility, firm-level OCB, and financial performance (Eisenbeiss et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2014).

Organizational justice

The perception that leaders are ethical increases followers' perception of organizational justice, because fairness demonstrated by ethical leaders is an important element of organizational justice. In turn, followers with higher perceptions of organizational justice are more motivated to reciprocate by being more engaged in work and less likely to behave unethically (organizational misbehavior; Demirtas, 2015). Moreover, procedural justice was found to mediate the effect of top management's ethical leadership on firm-level OCB and financial performance (Shin et al., 2014).

Perceptions of politics

Kacmar et al. (2013) suggested that perceptions of politics may be a mechanism through which ethical leadership influences individual outcomes such as helping and promotability. Because ethical leaders rely on ethical norms and values to guide behaviors in the workplace, they are less likely to resort to political manipulations. When followers perceive less politics in the workplace, they tend to display organizational citizenship behaviors beyond self-interest and demonstrate promotability.

Group conscientiousness

Walumbwa et al. (2012) found that group conscientiousness served as a link between ethical leadership and group performance. Ethical leaders convey the norms that support group conscientiousness through their role modeling, and in turn, group conscientiousness leads to higher group performance.

Workplace conditions. Ethical leaders not only create an ethical climate or culture in organization but also provide a desirable work environment in other ways, which further enhances followers' job performance.

Team cohesion and group voice

Ethical leaders encourage followers to share collective goals and values that are beneficial to the team or organization by providing clear ethical guidance and role modeling in social exchange relationships. As a consequence, followers are more likely to attach themselves to the team or a group and interact with other coworkers (team cohesion and group voice), both of which lead to higher group performance (Walumbwa et al., 2012) and reduced emotional exhaustion (Zheng et al., 2015).

Workload and working conditions

Ethical leaders show concern for their followers' well-being and job development by managing follower workload and striving for positive working conditions. This increases employees' comfort and satisfaction in the work environment. When the work environment meets their expectations and abilities, followers are more likely to be influenced by ethical leadership and further restrain unethical behavior such as bullying (Stouten et al., 2010).

Workplace jealousy

Because of the fair treatment exhibited by ethical leaders, followers are less motivated to engage in comparisons with their coworkers, and thus less likely to experience workplace jealousy and more likely to have the positive emotions that underlay prosocial behavior such as OCB (Wang & Sung, 2014)

Moderators

This section provides an overview of empirical findings on moderating variables in the relationship between ethical leadership and follower performance. There is a clear trend toward contingency-oriented approaches in ethical leadership studies. By incorporating contingency variables into research models, researchers aim to sharpen their understanding of ethical leadership effectiveness. For leaders who try to implement ethical leadership, finding out what contextual factors help or hinder this process is a key concern. Which specific situational characteristics are most helpful and which are most threatening to the positive outcomes of ethical leadership? Our study suggests that the main moderators discussed in the literature can be grouped into five categories. The following sections use these categories to summarize empirical results related to the following moderators: follower characteristics, leader characteristics, the leader–follower relationship, organizational characteristics, and environmental situation (see Table 6).

Follower Characteristics

Prior research clearly shows that follower characteristics do matter in the implementation of ethical leadership. On account of their individual differences, followers may respond in different ways to ethical leadership (Chuang & Chiu, 2016). When ethical leadership produces an impact on followers' behavior and performance, follower characteristics are important moderators of the relationship. Because personal differences among followers influence the effect of ethical leadership on their behaviors and performance, a leader's understanding of their followers' personalities may be helpful in enhancing the effectiveness of ethical leadership. Next we present the follower characteristics that have been shown to influence the impact of ethical leadership.

Mindfulness and moral emotion. Eisenbeiss and van Knippenberg (2015) found that follower mindfulness and moral emotion related to moral information processing increase followers' sensitivity and ability to perceive ethical leadership. Mindfulness and moral emotion

TABLE 6
Moderator Categories in Ethical Leadership Studies

<i>Category</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>Selected References</i>
Follower characteristics	Moral attentiveness, moral emotion, entity morality beliefs, mindfulness conscientiousness, self-esteem, core self-evaluation, intrinsic motivation	Eisenbeiss and van Knippenberg (2015); van Gils et al. (2015); Zhu et al. (2015) Avey et al. (2011); Taylor and Pattie (2014); Tu and Lu (2014)
Leader characteristics	Machiavellianism, ethical ideology, interactional justice, reputation for performance, CEO founder status	Demirtas (2015); Den Hartog and Belschak (2012); Neubert et al. (2009) Neves and Story (2015); Wu et al. (2014)
Leader–follower relationship	Leader–Member Exchange, value congruence, identification	Lee et al. (2015); Liao et al. (2014); Neubert et al. (2013)
Organizational characteristics	Internal audit function, coworker ethical behavior, perceptions of organizational politics, firm size,	Arel et al. (2012); Li et al. (2015); Mayer et al. (2013); Wu et al. (2014)
Environmental situations	Magnitude of consequences, Organizational change	Bhal and Dadhich (2011); Sharif and Scandura (2014)

also increase the degree to which followers display extra effort and helping behaviors in response to their leader.

Moral attentiveness. Followers high in moral attentiveness are more likely to interpret their leader's behavior and information in terms of morality. Therefore, followers high in moral attentiveness are more likely to perceive ethical leadership and be influenced by their ethical leaders, which leads to a reduction in organizational deviance (van Gils et al., 2015).

Entity morality beliefs. Individuals with stronger entity morality beliefs are more likely to see an ethical leader as their role model because they believe the leader's moral values and behavior are consistent and credible. Therefore, followers with stronger entity morality beliefs are more likely to respond to ethical leadership, which leads to follower relational identification and organizational identification (Zhu et al., 2015)

Conscientiousness and core self-evaluation. Taylor and Pattie (2014) found that conscientiousness and core self-evaluation have the effect of moderating the relationship between ethical leadership and follower incivility. Because conscientious individuals may be more concerned with moral duties and responsibility, when an ethical leader provides clear ethical standards conscientious followers are more likely to heed their leader's guidance and less likely to engage in follower incivility. On the other hand, because followers higher in core self-evaluation have more confidence in their own judgment, they are less likely to imitate others. Therefore, a higher level of core self-evaluation in followers weakens the effect of ethical leadership on follower incivility.

Self-esteem. Individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to react to situational factors and other people (i.e., their leader) because they are not confident in their own attitudes and behaviors. Conversely, because higher self-esteem individuals are confident in their own attitudes and behaviors, they are less likely to be influenced by their leaders. Thus, high follower

self-esteem dampens the effects of ethical leadership. That is, for followers with higher levels of self-esteem the positive effect of ethical leadership on organizational citizenship behaviors and the negative effect of ethical leadership on deviant work behaviors are both weaker than they would be for followers with lower levels of self-esteem (Avey et al., 2011).

Intrinsic motivation. Followers with high intrinsic motivation are more likely to focus on the meaning of work and seek opportunities for development. They tend to enjoy their relationship with their ethical leaders, and they are more likely to imitate their ethical leaders. Therefore, employees with high intrinsic motivation are more likely to be affected by ethical leaders, which leads to an increase in their general self-efficacy (Tu & Lu, 2014).

Leader Characteristics

When followers assess their leader, their perception of ethical leadership is influenced by the leader's characteristics. If leaders do not pursue ethical values, this will quickly become transparent to employees, decreasing their confidence in the leader. If leaders only pretend to care about ethical values but display unethical behaviors in practice, followers will perceive them as hypocritical leaders. In addition, ethical leaders should demonstrate performance ability in order to obtain follower trust and confidence in their leadership practices. Therefore, to promote ethical leadership effectiveness, managers need to develop both "morally good leadership" and "technically good leadership," as noted by Ciulla (2004). Next we review research results related to several leader characteristics.

Machiavellianism. Machiavellianism refers to deceitful manipulation undertaken to advance one's own self-interest. For example, leaders may pretend to act ethically while in fact aiming to obtain benefits to themselves. In time, followers will see through this facade and understand the real motives and moral values of their leaders. Therefore, although a leader with a high level of Machiavellianism may demonstrate ethical leader behaviors in public, he or she may be viewed by followers as an inauthentic leader because of her Machiavellianistic personality. Therefore, for leaders with higher Machiavellianism the effect of ethical leadership on follower behaviors in the workplace, such as work engagement, is weakened (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012).

Interactional justice perception. When a leader is perceived to exhibit interactional justice, the moral authority of the leader is enhanced, as is the attachment of organization members. Thus, ethical leaders perceived as having high levels of interactional justice are more likely to effectively establish an ethical climate (Neubert et al., 2009).

Ethical ideology. Ethical perspectives of leaders can affect the relationship between ethical leadership and perceptions of organizational justice, which in turn affects outcomes such as work engagement and organizational misbehavior. Ethical leaders with high idealism and ethical leaders with low relativism are more likely to promote perceptions of organizational justice (Demirtas, 2015), because idealistic leaders are concerned with the welfare of others and because leaders with low relativism tend to act based on ethical principles rather than based on particular circumstances.

Reputation for performance. A leader's reputation for performance increases followers' trust in the leader, and thus promotes the effectiveness of ethical leadership, strengthening its effect on outcomes such as affective commitment to the organization (Neves & Story, 2015).

Leader position. Higher leader status or hierarchical position can increase the impact of ethical leadership on followers. For example, employees are more likely to pay attention to the ethical leadership of a founder CEO than of a nonfounder CEO. Thus, the ethical leadership of a founder CEO may be expected to have a greater effect on organizational culture than the ethical leadership of a nonfounder CEO (Wu et al., 2014).

Leader–Follower Relationship

The relationship between leader and follower is another factor that is closely associated with the impact of ethical leadership. When relationship quality with a given leader is high, followers perceive an emotional bond and shared values with their leader and further integrate the leader's values and beliefs into their own identities. Therefore, to promote their leadership effectiveness ethical leaders need to actively build and develop their relationships with followers. The following presents several variables related to the leader–follower relationship.

LMX. The relationship between leader and follower affects the strength of the impact of ethical leadership on followers. A high-quality relationship between a leader and follower facilitates mutual trust and interaction. Therefore, in the case of high LMX, ethical leaders are more likely to enhance two regulatory foci: prevention and promotion focus mind-sets that reflect the motivational orientation of individuals. In addition, the high levels of interaction and trust increase the opportunities for ethical leaders to influence their followers (Neubert et al., 2013).

Value congruence. Value congruence between leader and follower leads to shared aspects of information and causes followers' decisions to be similar to those of their leader. Therefore, when followers observe the ethical behaviors of their leaders, with whom they share congruent values, they are more likely to emulate their leader and feel confident doing so, which leads to increased moral efficacy (Lee et al., 2015)

Identification. When followers identify with their ethical leaders, they are more likely to emulate their leaders and thus demonstrate ethical attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, the effect of ethical leadership on followers' behaviors, such as their demonstration of ethical leadership in the family domain, varies depending on the degree to which followers identify with their leaders (Liao et al., 2014).

Organizational Characteristics

Organizational climate or policy interacts with ethical leadership to influence follower ethical behavior and performance, as well as firm performance. When organizational systems evaluate members based on ethical criteria and organizational culture encourages followers to make ethical decisions consistent with ethical leadership, followers are more likely to receive consistent messages across the organization, thereby increasing the influence of their ethical leader. However, paradoxically, even within an unethical organizational culture ethical leaders can increase their leadership effectiveness by influencing followers to perceive them as authentic and courageous leaders.

Internal audit function. As Brown and Treviño (2006) described, organizational ethical climate or control systems affect how followers react to ethical leadership. An internal audit function can act as control system and provide a strong ethical environment, which supports ethical leadership. Arel et al. (2012) found that in the case of a strong internal audit function in conjunction with weak ethical leadership, followers were more likely to question their leaders' guidance and thus be less likely to book a questionable entry.

Coworkers' ethical behavior. Employees take into account information and guidance from both their leaders and coworkers in uncertain situations. When the message from both leaders and coworkers is consistent, it has a stronger effect. Thus, when followers observe coworkers' ethical behavior their confidence in their ethical leader is increased and they are more likely to exhibit ethical behavior themselves, such as reporting wrongdoing (Mayer et al., 2013).

Perceptions of organizational politics. Although perceptions of organizational politics have a negative impact on followers, when ethical leaders oppose internal politics this strengthens their position in the eyes of followers, as followers perceive their ethical leader as a more authentic leader (attributed altruistic motive), who acts against organizational pressures. (Li et al., 2015)

Firm size. Another organization-level influence seems to be firm size. Larger organizations have greater organizational inertia in the form of established routines and structures. Because of this, it is more difficult to effect change in larger organizations. Therefore, the impact of ethical leadership is weaker in shaping organizational ethical culture for larger firms than it is in smaller firms (Wu et al., 2014).

Environmental Situations

Situations that followers have to handle within the organization can be both dynamic and uncertain. However, in situations with high uncertainty, followers are more attracted by ethical leaders because ethical leaders provide behavioral guidance and show concern and support for the follower.

Magnitude of consequences. Magnitude of consequences functions as an indicator of moral intensity, which influences moral judgment and may motivate followers to report problems. In the case of high magnitude of consequences, followers feel a stronger pressure to act ethically and are more likely to support the ethical leader's behavior. Thus, ethical leadership is more likely to facilitate follower whistle-blowing in cases where consequences of unethical behavior are high (Bhal & Dadhich, 2011).

Organizational change. Because organizational change can cause stress and confusion for employees, the role of leadership is very important in situations of change. During times of organizational change, ethical leaders encourage followers to support the organizational change and actively participate in the change process. Therefore, when followers experience organizational change, they are more satisfied with ethical leaders, which motivates them to perform better, engage in more organizational citizenship behaviors, and enjoy higher job satisfaction (Sharif & Scandura, 2014).

FUTURE RESEARCH

In this section, we attempt to outline a set of limitations of the existing literature and to suggest future research opportunities to complement existing studies in the area of ethical leadership. Although significant progress has been made in the ethical leadership literature, several critical issues need to be addressed.

Undoubtedly the ELS instrument developed by Brown et al. (2005) has contributed greatly to the advancement of empirical knowledge in the field of ethical leadership by enabling a large number of survey-based empirical studies in the past decade. Of the 64 publications reviewed for this study, 62 adopted the ELS instrument to measure ethical leadership. Nevertheless, there is still ongoing debate concerning the definition and measurement of ethical leadership. For instance, Eisenbeiss (2012) argued that the term “normatively appropriate” in Brown et al. (2005) definition does not sufficiently describe ethical behavior. Furthermore, the ELS is dependent on interview-based research, and the scale was developed for measuring the perceptions of western managers and employees. Therefore, some researchers have pointed out a need to include Eastern values in concepts of ethical leadership (Resick et al., 2006). Some researchers have also pointed out the abstract nature of ELS and suggested the need to develop a measure that reflects “more concrete, visible ethical behavior” (Frisch & Huppenbauer, 2014; Kalshoven et al., 2011b). The term “ethics” itself is shaped by cultures and societies, and is thus a complex and multidimensional concept (Arslan & Chapman, 2001), which may not be most accurately measured in a single dimension. Thus, despite the great contribution of the Brown et al. (2005) ELS to the ethical leadership literature, a need remains for future studies to develop more fine-grained measures of ethical leadership that address these challenges.

The majority of empirical studies on ethical leadership have utilized convenience samples and have predominantly examined the role of middle managers’ ethical leadership. For example, 51 of 64 studies we reviewed focused on the relationship between middle manager and follower (i.e., employees, soldiers) as their unit of analysis. Of the 64 studies we reviewed, only seven examined the impact of ethical leadership by top management, and only one explored ethical leadership theory in the buyer–supplier relationship. Future research needs to diversify the unit of analysis far beyond the middle managers’ role. For instance, given the important role of top managers’ ethical leadership in influencing middle managers’ ethical behaviors, organizational climate, and firm-level performance (Eisenbeiss et al., 2015; Mayer et al., 2009; Shin et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2014), more attention should be paid to the effects of ethical leadership by top managers in organizations.

In addition, qualitative studies on ethical leadership are relatively scarce and have mainly focused on conceptual studies, thus limiting our knowledge of the application and longitudinal development of ethical leadership in authentic, real-life contexts. More in-depth and rigorous qualitative studies are necessary in order to expand our understanding of the practical and dynamic characteristics of ethical leadership. The role of ethical leadership may be different according to the duration of the leader and follower relationship, because this important relationship normally requires time to develop. It is also worth exploring the interaction effects of ethical leadership and organizational situation in time. There is also a need to further investigate how ethical leaders and unethical organizations interact from the long-term perspective. Li et al. (2015) emphasized that when firms show a high level of organizational politics, followers may perceive ethical leaders as more authentic and courageous leaders, which should increase

positive follower outcomes. However, the sustainability of an ethical leader–unethical organization combination is still questionable, raising the call for further longitudinal qualitative studies regarding the interaction effect of ethical leadership and unethical organizations.

In regards to the antecedents, some existing literature has investigated leader characteristics and situational influences as antecedents of ethical leadership, following the guidance of Brown and Treviño (2006). However, more research on the antecedents of ethical leadership is needed to strengthen our understanding of how to develop ethical leadership, and what the major challenges are in developing ethical leaders. A wide variety of leader characteristics and situational influences should be explored in order to learn how to cultivate ethical leaders more effectively.

Given that cultural values impact understanding of ethical conduct, followers' responses to their ethical leaders are expected to differ across cultures. For instance, in Chinese society followers expect ethical leaders to have superior morals related to the Confucian ethic. Existing studies are limited to a specific cultural context, so cross-cultural comparative studies are needed to test for the effects of different cultures on the relationships between ethical leadership and various outcomes. In particular, we need to explore whether national cultures and cultural practices enhance or hinder the effects of ethical leadership.

Finally, the existing literature has suggested various mechanisms that bridge ethical leadership to individual-, team-, and organization-level performance outcomes, but the discussion has mainly focused on either individual-level or organization-level mechanisms. Few studies have explored both mechanisms concurrently. For instance, the following questions are unexplored: (a) What is the nature and role of the relationship between individual-level and organization-level mechanisms in explaining how ethical leadership influences performance outcomes? (b) Do these factors act as complements? To address these questions and develop a more sophisticated understanding of the mechanisms underlying the link between ethical leadership and performance outcomes, it is necessary to simultaneously analyze both individual-level and organization-level mechanisms triggered by ethical leadership practices.

CONCLUSION

This article conducted a thorough review of empirical findings in the ethical leadership literature and provided an integrated framework that addresses the ethical leadership development and influence process. Although much attention has been paid to ethical leadership recently, the existing literature on ethical leadership remains diverse and fragmented, which can be seen as a symptom of the complex nature of ethical leadership. By reviewing the antecedents, outcomes, underlying mechanisms, and moderators of ethical leadership, this article provides an analytical framework that helps us synthesize fragmented knowledge from a broad array of literature. We have also suggested several topics for future research that will help extend our understanding of ethical leadership development and influence processes and enable organizations to develop ethical leaders and improve their effectiveness.

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