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Do Role Models Matter? An Investigation of Role Modeling as an Antecedent of Perceived Ethical Leadership

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Abstract Thus far, we know much more about the significant outcomes of perceived ethical leadership than we do about its antecedents. In this study, we focus on multiple types of ethical role models as antecedents of perceived ethical leadership. According to social learning theory, role models facilitate the acquisition of moral and other types of behavior. Yet, we do not know whether having had ethical role models influences follower perceptions of one's ethical leadership and, if so, what kinds of role models are important. We conducted a field study, surveying supervisors and their subordinates to examine the relationship between three types of ethical role models and ethical leadership: the leader's childhood role models, career mentors, and top managers. We found that having had an ethical role model during the leader's career was positively related to subordinate-rated ethical leadership. As expected, this effect was moderated by leader age, such that the relationship between career mentoring and ethical leadership was stronger for older leaders. Leader age also moderated the relationship between childhood models and ethical leadership ratings, such that having had childhood ethical role models was more strongly and positively related to ethical leadership for younger leaders. We found no effect for top management ethical role models. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

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Introduction

National surveys show that few Americans have much confidence in the ethics and integrity of today's leaders of government, business, and other institutions (Jones 2011; The Harris Poll 2011). Thus, the popular perception is that ethical leadership in the workplace is weak. Given this cynicism, it is important to understand the antecedents of perceived ethical leadership. Knowing where ethical leadership comes from can help organizations strengthen it in the workplace, thus restoring trust in leadership.

Previous research (Treviño et al. 2000, 2003) has identified traits and behaviors associated with perceptions of ethical leadership. In their qualitative research, Treviño et al. proposed that in order to be perceived as an ethical leader, a leader must be seen as both moral person and moral manager. The moral person aspect of ethical leadership reflects the leader's honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, caring about people, openness to input, respect, and principled decision making. As moral managers, ethical leaders use leadership tools such as rewards, discipline, communication, and decision making to communicate the importance of ethics, to set standards, and to hold employees accountable to those standards (Treviño et al. 2000, 2003).

Brown et al. conceptualized ethical leadership from a social learning (Bandura 1986, 1991) perspective. They conducted a series of seven studies to develop the construct of ethical leadership along with an instrument, the ethical leadership scale (ELS), to measure followers' perceptions of ethical leadership (Brown et al. 2005). They defined

ethical leadership as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making" (Brown et al. 2005, p. 120). Their research indicated that ethical leadership is related to important employee attitudes and outcomes including trust in supervisor, interactional fairness, supervisor effectiveness, satisfaction with supervisor, and willingness to report problems to management. Additional research has found that supervisory ethical leadership is especially important in promoting positive and reducing negative employee behaviors in organizations (Kacmar et al. 2011; Mayer et al. 2009, 2012; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009; Walumbwa et al. 2011).

Despite these recent advances in our understanding of ethical leadership and its relationship to important outcomes, little is known about its antecedents (Brown and Mitchell 2010). A variety of personality-based antecedents have been proposed (Brown and Treviño 2006), but thus far only two traits, leader agreeableness and conscientiousness, have been found to be related to follower ratings of ethical leadership (Kalshoven et al. 2011; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009). Other research on antecedents by Jordan et al. (2013) found that ethical leadership is positively related to the leader's cognitive moral development and is maximized when the leader's cognitive moral development diverges from and is greater than the follower's cognitive moral development. Mayer et al. (2012) found that both dimensions of a leader's moral identity, internalization, and symbolization were related to ethical leadership. This information is useful for selection purposes, but individual differences are not very amenable to change. From a practical standpoint, identifying antecedents that can help organizations not only select ethical leaders but also develop them would be beneficial. Therefore, it becomes important to look to leaders' experiences for clues about whether and how ethical leadership might be identified or developed. In this study, we examine different types of antecedents of ethical leadership by studying the various kinds of ethical role models that leaders have had to see if they are related to employees' perceptions of ethical leadership.

Consistent with previous research, we define a role model as a "cognitive construction based on the attributes of people in social roles an individual perceives to be similar to him or herself to some extent and desires to increase perceived similarity by emulating those attributes" (Gibson 2004, p. 136). From an observer's perspective, role modeling is a process that involves identifying "someone I can look up to" (Weaver et al. 2005) as well as a process of learning from that model. According to Gibson (2004), role modeling can be differentiated from mentoring in that it does not require a close, personal relationship between models and observers. In fact, there are wide varieties of potentially important people who can be selected as role models such as distant leaders, co-workers, and inspiring individuals from all walks of life (e.g., teachers, sports heroes, religious figures, family members).

We focus on role models because prior research grounded in social learning theory has demonstrated their impact on moral judgment and action (Bandura 1991). Modeling influences have been associated with the development of prosocial behavior in children (Eisenberg and Fabes 1998) and ethical behavior in the workplace (Moberg 2000; Sims and Brinkmann 2002; Weaver et al. 2005). Within the leadership literature, both transformational leaders (Avolio 1999) and ethical leaders (Brown et al. 2005) have been described as ethical role models for others. The assumption is that having been exposed to ethical role models contributes to the development of one's ethical leadership (Brown and Treviño 2006; Weaver et al. 2005).

In this research, we investigate whether the ethical role models of leaders are related to employees' ratings of their ethical leadership. Because ethical role models can take many forms, we consider three different types of ethical role models that are potential influences on the development of ethical leadership—(a) childhood models (e.g., parents, teachers, and coaches); (b) career models (e.g., mentors or supervisors), and (c) top managers who model ethics for employees in the organization (Treviño et al. 2000). We ground our hypotheses in social learning theory (Bandura 1986, 1991) and the influence of modeling on the acquisition of moral reasoning and standards. Three main questions guided our research. Are role models related to ethical leadership? If so, what types of models (i.e., childhood models, career mentors, top managers) are influential? Given that the types of role models selected as well as the lessons learned from such models change over the lifetime of the learner (Gibson 2003), does leader age moderate the relationships between different types of role models and ethical leadership?

Theory and Hypotheses

Modeling, Social Learning, and Ethical Leadership

Social learning theory helps explain why individuals are likely to seek guidance from role models, and how role modeling might be related to ethical leadership. Social learning theory posits that individuals learn what to do and how to behave largely by observing and emulating role models.

Most adults are not ethically self-sufficient. Rather, they look outside themselves to peers and significant others for

ethical guidance (Kohlberg 1969; Treviño 1986). This is particularly true because ethical dilemmas often involve ambiguity and individuals attempt to reduce such ambiguity by turning to others for guidance.

The social learning process begins when individuals focus their attention on modeled behaviors. Among the potential models to choose from, attractive models capture a learner's attention. Attractiveness is based on a number of model characteristics such as nurturance (Yussen and Levy 1975), status (Lippitt et al. 1952; Lefkowitz et al. 1955), competence (Kanareff and Lanzetta 1958) and power (Bandura et al. 1963). We propose that ethical role models influence the development of ethical leadership by providing attractive exemplars of personal ethical behavior and the setting of ethical standards.

We focus on three likely sources of ethical role models—childhood models, workplace mentors, and top managers. For example, a beloved parent, coach or other childhood model can teach an individual about ethical leadership traits and behaviors such as honesty, caring, trustworthiness, and respect. They can also convey the importance of setting standards and boundaries for behavior. Such traits and behaviors related to ethical leadership might also be learned later in life by observing career mentors or supervisors as they make principled decisions, communicate ethical standards, and use the reward system to guide ethical behavior. Finally, by virtue of their important position atop the organizational hierarchy, top managers who are thought to be highly ethical and who make ethics a part of their leadership agenda are likely to be powerful models of ethical leadership for organizational members.

Childhood Models

We propose that having had ethical role models during childhood can influence the development of ethical leadership in adulthood. From a social learning perspective, children select attractive ethical role models and learn from them by observing and emulating modeled behavior. Individuals who are exposed to ethical role models as children will learn ethical behavior: behavior that facilitates their growth as ethical persons with the characteristics that can help them to become ethical leaders in the workplace.

There are many potential role models that children can look up to, but parents represent an important type of role model for children. The common notion that people learn ethics at Mom's (or Dad's) knee fits with this idea. Parents model not only through words, but more importantly through actions—most notably in the closeness of the bonds that they form with their children, the values they convey, the standards they set, and the disciplinary methods they use. Research has confirmed that the influence of parental modeling can have important and far-reaching consequences for the moral behavior of adults. In one such study, Oliner and Oliner (1988) investigated the heroic actions of "Righteous Gentiles," non-Jews who risked their lives to rescue Jews from the Nazis. According to these researchers, the parents of rescuers were influential in shaping these individuals to behave altruistically later in life. Specifically, compared to bystanders who took no action to protect Jews, rescuers were found to have had a close attachment bond with their parents who modeled the value of caring for others.

In another study, "fully committed" civil rights activists who were most involved and undertook great personal risks in the American South during the 1960s reported having parents who modeled altruism themselves (Rosenhan 1970). From a social learning perspective, direct modeling of behavior is important. In other words, perhaps the best way to teach empathy, tolerance, respect, and compassion to children is by treating them with empathy, tolerance, respect and compassion (Berkowitz and Grych 1998; Lickona 1983).

Parents can also pass on altruistic values to their children through their style of discipline. In particular, parents who set standards, explain to their children why rules are necessary, as well as the consequences of rule-breaking for others, treat their children with a certain level of respect and dignity. This style of discipline that emphasizes reasoning and the voluntary internalization of standards can promote healthy moral development in children (Hoffman 1980) and demonstrate an approach that can be emulated later in life. This approach sharply contrasts with an authoritarian style of parenting that is based on strict obedience to authority and coercion through physical punishment (either threatened or delivered).

Of course, parents are not the only influence on children's moral development. Especially with older children, other models such as teachers, coaches, and clergy become increasingly important in development of ethical attitudes and beliefs (Atkins et al. 2004; Perry and Nixon 2005; Sizer and Sizer 1999). Further, peers can also influence the learning of behavior and standards, but modeling by parents and other adults remains a powerful source of learning (Bandura 1986). Thus, individuals are likely to come across many potential ethical role models during their childhood. From a social learning perspective, the type of childhood role model (e.g., parent, teacher, coach) is not as important as having had exposure to such a model. Ethical models represent an attractive and credible source of information for children to learn normatively appropriate behavior. It is likely that the lessons learned from childhood models will be abstract ones such as learning the importance of honesty or caring rather than the specifics of

how to be an effective ethical leader in the workplace (Treviño et al. 2000). Nevertheless, managers who were exposed to strong ethical models as children can carry the "lessons" learned from such models into adulthood. These leaders will continue to be influenced by the lessons learned from these childhood models, making them more likely to be seen as ethical leaders by their followers.

Hypothesis 1 Having had a childhood ethical role model is positively related to perceived ethical leadership.

Career Models

A second type of role modeling that is a likely source of influence on perceived ethical leadership comes from career models (formal or informal). Much has been written about the impact of models and mentors on important workplace outcomes (Allen et al. 2004; Gibson 2003; Manz and Sims 1981; Ragins et al. 2000) in general, and on ethical behaviors in particular (Moberg 2000; Weaver et al. 2005). Having an ethical mentor provides an important opportunity for employees to learn about ethical leadership firsthand in the workplace.

Formal mentoring programs that promote learning from role models are common in many professions such as medicine (Kenny et al. 2003). And, informal role modeling occurs in most workplace settings. For example, research shows that employees learn by observing how supervisors administer rewards and discipline (Treviño and Youngblood 1990). In order for learning to take place, employees need not actually be the recipient of rewards or punishments themselves; rather they are able to learn vicariously by seeing how the behaviors of others in the workplace are reinforced.

Supervisors are likely to be important models because their position in a prestige hierarchy makes them attractive in that they enjoy status and power. Previous research suggests that supervisory role models are not uncommon—a typical rank and file employee can identify numerous positive role models, most of them having been supervisors (Gibson 2003). More specifically, most employees are able to identify a current or former supervisor as an ethical role model (Weaver et al. 2005). However, supervisory authority does not automatically make someone a good role model (Manz and Sims 1981). Supervisors must possess the other key elements of model attractiveness such as competence, nurturance and credibility. Ethical supervisors possess such characteristics (Brown et al. 2005). In fact, research shows that ethical leadership can enhance an individual's potential for promotion to higher levels of management (Rubin et al. 2010) which further enhances the ethical leader's credibility and attractiveness as a model. There is also then high functional value for observing and learning ethical leadership behaviors from such ethical role models at work.

Qualitative research by Weaver et al. (2005) found that the presence of an ethical role model in the work place helps foster ethical behavior. And, having an ethical model might encourage learners to act as an ethical mentor or model for others. Weaver et al. (2005) found that, when asked to identify someone who has served as an ethical role model for them, employees identified individuals whose behavior and decision making they could readily observe on a daily basis and these were frequently direct supervisors. The authors described ethical role modeling as a "side-to-side phenomenon" (p. 324) in that employees identified ethical role models from among those with whom they had worked closely. The behavior associated with ethical role models also overlapped significantly with behavior previously associated with ethical leadership (Weaver et al. 2005). Employees who have had such role models and who go on to become leaders themselves are likely to imitate the behavior of those ethical role models in their own leadership. Thus, consistent with social learning theory and the findings of previous research, we propose that having had workplace ethical role models is likely to be associated with direct reports' ratings of one's ethical leadership.

Hypothesis 2 Having had a workplace ethical role model is positively related to perceived ethical leadership.

Top Managers as Ethical Role Models

Top managers are widely thought to set the ethical tone at the top of organizations (Clinard 1983; Ferrell and Gresham 1985) and research has borne this out. Treviño et al. (2003) found that executive ethical leaders were frequently described as models of ethical conduct. Further, when top managers are personally committed to ethics, their organizations' ethics programs are more comprehensive, have stronger aspirational orientations (Weaver et al. 1999a), and are more fully integrated into everyday organizational practices (Weaver et al. 1999b).

Consistent with the broader literature on ethics at the executive-level (Mayer et al. 2009; Weaver et al. 1999a, b), we consider the modeling of "top managers" globally instead of focusing on a single executive as a role model. This approach is also in line with previous research on role modeling which suggests observers can piece "together a composite role model from attributes derived from a range of possibilities, both real and imagined..."; in other words, modeling can be based on "multiple role models, rather than a focus on selecting a particular exemplary person" (Gibson 2006, p. 702).

From a social learning perspective, top managers are thought to be important sources of ethical influence because their lofty position provides them with status and legitimacy, making them potentially attractive role models. Research supports the idea that top managers are ethical models for their followers and, ultimately, for others in the organization. Specifically, Mayer et al. (2009) found that the ethical leadership of top managers is positively related to the ethical leadership of their direct reports. Through a "cascading effect" (Bass et al. 1987), ethical leadership is thought to trickle down the levels of management from the top to the bottom of the organization (Mayer et al. 2009). Other research casts doubt on the cascading effect yet supports the ability of senior leaders to influence junior members of the organization via ethical culture (Schaubroeck et al. 2012) as well as other influence mechanisms (Hansen et al. 2012).

Overall, top managers are thought to set an important example for employees to follow. Given the prestige of their position, if top managers are perceived to be models of ethical conduct, then this should influence employees to emulate their conduct and positively influence ethical leadership at lower levels of management. Thus, we propose that having had a top manager as an ethical role model will promote one's own ethical leadership.

Hypothesis 3 Top management modeling is positively related to perceived ethical leadership.

The Moderating Effect of Age

How does the age of the learner influence social learning? As we have already noted, most of the literature on role modeling has focused on children learning from adults. Within organizations, role modeling is seen as an important aspect of organizational socialization for newcomers. Does the influence of childhood ethical role models wane in adulthood? Do other potential models (such as ethical mentors from work) become more important as time goes on? We expect it does and so we propose that leader age will moderate the relationship between different types of role modeling and ethical leadership.

The conventional wisdom in the management literature is that the importance of learning from role models diminishes during one's career (e.g., Moberg 2000). However, Gibson's (2003) research on role modeling in the workplace suggests that modeling is not just for newcomers—it is important for employees at any age. Thus, although the types of models sought out as well as the learners' motives for social learning change over time, employees continue to seek out and learn from role models. Younger employees look to models for clues on fitting in, doing well and moving up, but middle-aged employees learn similar lessons from models about how to succeed in unfamiliar territory (i.e., new positions, responsibilities, and challenges) as they advance in their careers (Gibson 2003).

We propose that the influence of childhood models is stronger for younger employees and weaker for older employees. Compared to older employees, younger employees are temporally closer to their childhood models and have had more limited exposure to role models during their careers. However, with older employees, the influence of childhood models is diminished and the importance of workplace models (both career models and top managers) is stronger. The influence of career models in the workplace is likely to increase with age as exposure to ethical mentors during one's career increases, becomes more proximal, and provides more functionally valuable information on appropriate ethical conduct in the workplace. Similarly, top managers will become more important sources of information for older employees as they are more likely to have job responsibilities and experiences that bring them closer to executive-level leaders.

From a social learning perspective, opportunities to observe and the lessons learned from different types of models varies with age. Specifically, older employees are likely to have had more contact with workplace models during their careers compared to younger employees. Also, the lessons learned from workplace models will provide greater functional value for the acquisition of ethical leadership behaviors compared to childhood models. Thus, we propose that age moderates the relationship between specific types of role models and ethical leadership.

Hypothesis 4 Age moderates the relationship between childhood role modeling and perceived ethical leadership such that the relationship should be stronger for younger leaders compared to older leaders.

Hypothesis 5 Age moderates the relationship between career role modeling and perceived ethical leadership such that the relationship should be stronger for older employees compared to younger employees.

Hypothesis 6 Age moderates the relationship between top management modeling and perceived ethical leadership such that the relationship should be stronger for older employees compared to younger employees.

Methods and Results

Sample

We conducted a field study, surveying employees from a large insurance firm in the United States. Our data were collected from two separate sources—managers and their

direct reports. Managers provided information on their role models (childhood, career, and top management) as well as other demographic and background variables (age, gender, and number of direct reports). Direct reports provided ratings of their managers' ethical leadership. Both surveys contained additional measures that were not part of this study.

Surveys were distributed through the company's internal mail system. A cover letter written by a senior manager was included with each survey explaining that the research had been approved by the company. Managers forwarded surveys to their direct reports. Anonymity was promised. A postage paid business reply envelope was provided with each survey so that both managers and respondents could return completed surveys directly to the researchers. All participants were told that the results would be used in aggregate—there would be no way to link responses to a specific individual or work group.

Our sample consisted of 217 managers (out of 600 distributed for a manager response rate of 36.2 %) who had clearly identifiable direct reports. The average age of managers was 41.4, and their average tenure with the company was 11.5 years. 44 % of our sample was men. A total of 1,561 surveys were distributed to direct reports. We received 659 completed surveys for a direct report response rate of 42.2 %.

Measures

Role Modeling

Because we could find no existing instruments of ethical role modeling that were applicable to the types of models studied in this investigation, we created our own measures for use in this research. The influence of childhood ethical role modeling was measured with two items ("As a child, I had strong ethical guidance that continues to influence my work today" and "In my early life, people instilled in me strong ethics and values that guide me now in my work"; $\alpha = .84$). Career modeling was measured with three items ("I have worked for at least one individual who has served as a positive ethical role model for me", "During my career, I have had at least one mentor who served as a positive ethical role model for me" and "At least one supervisor I have had became a positive role model for me regarding how to behave ethically"; $\alpha = .85$). Top management modeling was measured with three items ("Top managers of this organization represent high ethical standards," "Top managers of this organization guide decision making in an ethical direction," and "Top managers of this organization regularly show that they care about ethics"; $\alpha = .87$). Managers were instructed to indicate their level of agreement along a 5-point (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) response format.

Because the modeling measures were developed for this research, we pilot tested them in a separate sample of 155 managers drawn from the same organization from which our primary study sample was drawn. The characteristics of this pilot sample (average leader age = 42.7, gender = 49.7 % were men, and tenure with the company = 11.3 years) were similar to those of managers in our primary sample. The mean values in the pilot study were: childhood role model = 4.49 [standard deviation (SD) = .61], career models = 4.20 (SD = .68), and top management 3.75 (SD = .82).

We conducted an exploratory factor analysis with oblique (direct oblimin) rotation. An examination of the scree plot suggested a three factor solution. Eigenvalues for the three extracted factors were 3.26, 1.92, and 1.19. The remaining values were .5 and below. All items strongly loaded on their appropriate factor (loading > .7 with no cross-loadings > .2). The estimated reliabilities for childhood role model ($\alpha = .87$), career model ($\alpha = .79$) and top management ($\alpha = .87$) were acceptable.

In the present study, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (maximum likelihood estimation) on the three role modeling measures as well as the ethical leadership measure. Fit indices showed that our target four-factor model fit the data well. The comparative fit index = .95, the non-normed fit index = .93, the standardized root mean square residual = .05, and the root mean square residual = .06, which were consistent with recommended standards (Bagozzi and Yi 1988; Browne and Cudeck 1993; Joreskog and Sorbom 1993).

Ethical Leadership

Direct reports rated their manager using the ten-item ELS ($\alpha = .91$) (Brown et al. 2005). At least two direct reports rated each manager. On average, 3.04 subordinates rated each manager (i.e., 659 direct reports reporting to 217 managers). We averaged ethical leadership ratings from multiple direct reports to form one overall score for each manager. The mean r_{wg} (James et al. 1984) was .92 and the median was .96. These results supported the decision to aggregate individual responses to the group level.

Leader Age

Leader age was measured using a single self report item.

Controls

We controlled for leader gender (dummy coded 1 = male, 0 = female) and the manager's span of control (i.e., number of direct reports).

Results

The means, SD, and correlations are reported in Table 1. Ethical leadership was not rare in our sample. In fact, 43.3 % of the managers had ethical leadership ratings ≥ 4.0. It was also common for respondents to report having had some kind of role model. Most widely reported were childhood role models (92.2 % ≥ 4.0), followed by career models (85.2 % ≥ 4.0), and then top management models (55.8 % ≥ 4.0).

To test our hypotheses, we conducted multiple ordinary least squares regression. We ran three separate regression models—model 1 contained leader background and demographic variables (age, gender, and number of direct reports), model 2 included the three role modeling predictors, and model 3 included the hypothesized moderating variables. The results are reported in Table 2.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that having a childhood role model is positively related to ethical leadership. However, childhood role modeling ($\beta = -.02$, ns) was not significant in the main effects only model (model 2). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is not supported. Hypothesis 2 predicted that having an ethical role model during one's career is positively related to ethical leadership. The results indicated that having had a career role model ($\beta = .16$, $p < .01$) was significantly related to follower ratings of ethical leadership, supporting Hypothesis 2. Counter to our predictions, top management ethical modeling (Hypothesis 3) was not significantly related ($\beta = -.06$, ns) to ethical leadership. In addition, none of the control variables was related to follower ratings of ethical leadership.

Next, we tested the hypotheses that age moderates the relationship between childhood modeling and ethical leadership (Hypothesis 4), career modeling and ethical leadership (Hypothesis 5), and top management modeling and ethical leadership (Hypothesis 6). The results (Table 2, model 3) showed that two of the interaction effects (childhood model × age, $\beta = -.02$, $p < .05$; career model × age, $\beta = .02$, $p < .10$) were significant. The impact of having had a childhood model on ratings of ethical leadership (Fig. 1) is more strongly positive for younger managers compared to older leaders. Age enhances the relationship between career modeling and ethical leadership (Fig. 2), such that the influence of having an ethical model during one's career on ethical leadership was stronger for older leaders. Overall, these results are supportive of Hypotheses 4 and 5. We did not find a significant interaction, however, for the leader age by top management interaction. Thus, Hypothesis 6 is not supported.

Discussion

We investigated the relationship between different types of ethical role models and follower ratings of ethical leadership. We found, at least among respondents in this organization, that ethical role modeling is not rare. Childhood models were the most commonly reported type of ethical role model, followed by career role models and finally, by top management models. Given the cynicism about ethics in the workplace, it is noteworthy that a large majority of respondents reported having had ethical role models in their careers and more than half of respondents saw top management as modeling ethical behavior.

We found no support for the idea that seeing top managers as models of ethical behavior is related to a leader's ethical leadership ratings. But, leaders who reported having had career ethical role models were more likely to be rated as ethical leaders by their direct reports (Table 2). In addition, the importance of these career ethical role modeling effects varied with age (Fig. 2). Finally, we found no main effect of having had a childhood role model on ethical leadership. However, there was a significant interaction between having had a childhood model and leader age (Fig. 1).

The mean age of leaders in our sample was approximately 41 years old. Leaders one SD below the mean were about 34 and those 1 SD above the mean were approximately 49 years

Table 1 Means, SD, and correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ethical leadership	3.87	.47	(.91)						
Age	41.36	7.51	.07						
Gender	.44	.50	−.01	−.03					
Number of direct reports	9.05	5.62	−.12	−.12	−.16*				
Childhood role model	4.53	.59	.03	.11	−.03	−.03	(.84)		
Career mentor	4.30	.66	.19**	.10	−.10	−.01	.33**	(.85)	
Top management	3.80	.75	−.05	.10	.05	.02	.27**	.28**	(.87)

$N = 217$; gender coded 1 = male, 0 = female; reliabilities in (diagonal); number of direct reports indicated total number of subordinates reporting to a manager (including those not surveyed in this research). The mean number of direct reports studied in this research was 3.04

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 2 Results of multiple regression analysis

Variable	Model 1 controls only	Model 2 main effects	Model 3 moderating effects
Constant	3.84**	3.48**	2.51
Gender	−.03	.00	−.01
Number of direct reports	−.01	−.01	−.01
Age	.00	.00	.03
Childhood role model		−.02	.71*
Career		.16**	−.45
Top managers		−.06	.02
Childhood role model × age			−.02*
Career × age			.02†
Top managers × age			.00
R^2	.02	.06	.10
F	1.35	2.39*	2.51*

Gender coded 1 = male, 0 = female

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

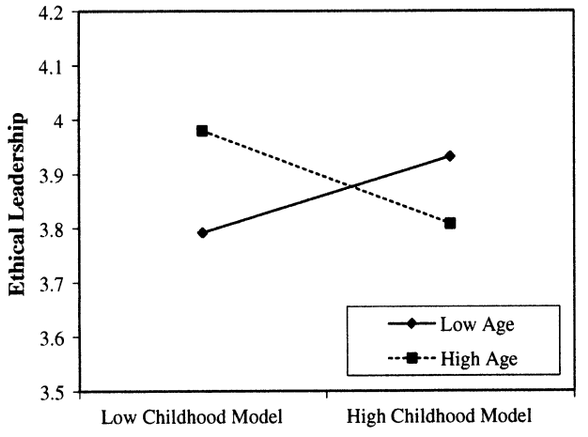

Fig. 1 Moderating effect of age on the relationship between childhood modeling and ethical leadership. Values for high = +1 SD, low = −1 SD

of age. As hypothesized, the impact of childhood modeling was strongest for younger leaders. This is likely because childhood experiences are more recent and salient for these leaders and the ethical lessons learned from childhood models extend into early adult experiences in the workplace. But, over time and with career advancement, the impact of childhood models diminishes, while the impact of career ethical role models increases (Fig. 2). Research suggests that individuals "...often solidify their values or even develop new moral values in adulthood in the process of interacting with other adults ..." (Eisenberg and Fabes 1998, p. 715). As one progresses in one's career, it is also likely that ethical role models at work become more available and the opportunity to learn from them increases.

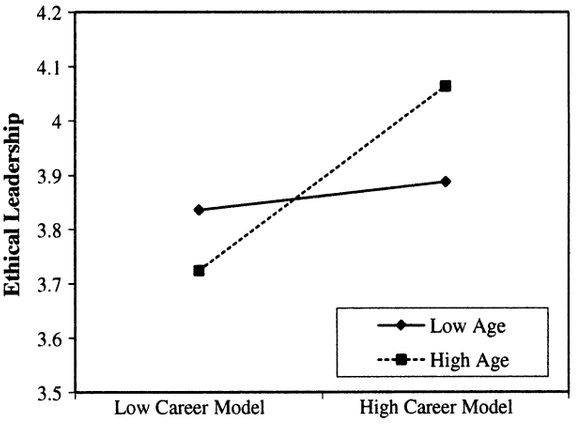

Fig. 2 Moderating effect of age on the relationship between career modeling and ethical leadership. values for high = +1 SD, low = −1 SD

Further, developing ethical leadership involves acquiring behaviors that go beyond the broad qualities associated with being an ethical person. The types of general values and behaviors (e.g., caring for others, honesty) learned from childhood role models appear to provide a solid foundation for ethical leadership in the beginning stages of a leader's career. However, ethical leadership also involves incorporating leadership behaviors such as communicating clear ethical standards and disciplining employees who violate them. These may be more readily learned from an ethical role model in the work context. These results suggest that role modeling for ethical leadership might be more effective over time when the model is from the same context (the workplace) compared to an individual from a different setting (childhood).

For most employees, the quantity and variety of models that they were exposed to during their lifetime increases with age. As a result, early childhood models should eventually be supplemented and perhaps replaced by models that are more proximate, salient, and relevant to the workplace domain. We speculate, that if older leaders (i.e., almost 50 years old in our sample) perceive that they continue to be greatly influenced by childhood models that they were exposed to approximately four decades earlier, this might reflect a lack of exposure to and learning from other types of models who could provide a more complete picture of what it means to be an ethical leader in the workplace. Future research is necessary to investigate the relationship between learner age and modeling influences.

We hypothesized but did not find support for the influence of top management ethical models on perceived ethical leadership. Given that this research was conducted in a single organization, we considered range restriction in our top management modeling variable to be a possible culprit. However, the data suggest that this was not the case.

Variation in the top management modeling variable (SD = .75) was greater than the variation for career mentoring (SD = .69) and childhood modeling variables (SD = .59), suggesting that respondents varied in their perceptions of top management ethical behavior. Rather, we suspect that our failure to find significant effects reflects the challenges top managers face as ethical role models for lower level supervisors in large organizations.

Upon further consideration, we believe that there are likely more substantive reasons why top management modeling was not significantly related to ethical leadership. In large organizations such as this one, senior managers are far removed from most employees and their leadership behaviors are generally aimed at the entire organization, thus providing little explicit behavior for lower-level leaders to mimic. Employees also have few opportunities to observe and form personal relationships with senior leaders. Thus, even if senior leaders are seen as behaving ethically, it is difficult for a lower-level leader to model specific leadership behaviors based upon that leader's behavior. Our findings are consistent with previous research on ethical role modeling which suggests that ethical role modeling is a "side by side" phenomenon (Weaver et al. 2005), one that requires frequent interaction between the model and learner.

This is not to suggest that top managers are irrelevant when it comes to organizational ethics. Research has shown that top managers play an important role in shaping the ethical culture of their organizations (Schaubroeck et al. 2012; Treviño et al. 2000; Weaver et al. 1999a). Research has also found that top management's ethical leadership has both direct and indirect effects on employee attitudes and behaviors at lower levels in the organization (Hansen et al. 2012; Mayer et al. 2009). Finally, although our results suggest that the direct impact of top managers as role models for managers at lower levels of organizations is limited, top managers are likely to be important role models for their own direct reports.

Implications for Research

This study contributes to the limited research on the antecedents of perceived ethical leadership and is consistent with a social learning perspective. It represents an important step in examining the relationship between role modeling and perceived ethical leadership. Although we have learned that childhood models and career mentors are linked to ethical leadership, many unanswered questions about this topic merit further investigation.

Previous research has found a link between a leader's agreeableness and conscientiousness and follower ratings of ethical leadership (Kalshoven et al. 2011; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009). One way to explain the link between personality and ethical leadership is with social learning theory, and specifically modeling. Are there specific traits that make ethical leaders more likely to seek out and learn from role models? For example, leaders who are more open to experience may be more aware of potential models in their environment and more willing to learn from them. Highly conscientious leaders might be more motivated to seek guidance and cues from ethical role models about how to boost their own responsibility and scrupulousness. Leaders who are more agreeable might have more opportunity to form close relationships with others during their career: relationships that are conducive to formal and informal ethical mentoring (Weaver et al. 2005). All of these questions might be pursued in future research.

Beyond the big five model, other individual differences should also be investigated. For example, cognitive moral development might influence the social learning of ethical standards and behavior from role models (Moberg 2000). At a conventional level of moral reasoning (characteristic of most adults), individuals look to others for ethical guidance. This suggests that leaders at a conventional level are more likely to look to role models for ethical guidance. Thus, a leader's level of moral reasoning might influence the number of models selected or the influence of such models on the development of ethical leadership.

Researchers should also examine the underlying factors that explain how ethical role models facilitate the development of ethical leadership. What is it about an ethical role model that enhances perceived ethical leadership? Does exposure to ethical role models strengthen leaders' moral identity (Aquino and Reed 2002), increase moral awareness (Rest 1986), advance moral reasoning (Kohlberg 1969), or encourage the internalization of moral values? All seem likely to play a role in the development of ethical leadership.

In addition, we do not know how conflicting messages from a particular model would influence ethical leadership or whether different modeling sources enhance or neutralize each other. Previous research on modeling suggests that conflicting modeling information from a particular source can be problematic. Inconsistences from the same model that are seen to be hypocritical have a particularly negative effect (Bandura 1986). But what happens when multiple modeling influences send congruent messages? Do modeling influences interact to enhance ethical leadership? To explore this possibility, we examined higher order interactions between career, childhood, and top management models in a post hoc analysis but did not find significant results. However, our ability to do so is constrained by the limitations of our sample size. Future research should examine these possibilities more closely in sample sizes large enough to detect higher order interaction effects.

The context for this research was a traditional office environment where face to face interaction between employees is the norm. However, the increasing prevalence of distributed organizations and the use of technologies to work and communicate may alter how people select, observe and learn from models. Whether and how effective ethical modeling can occur in these types of organizations must be studied further especially in work situations where employees are distributed or working virtually and have fewer opportunities for "side by side" interactions with ethical role models.

Finally, although the recent trend is to focus on positive organizational scholarship, researchers should examine the role of unethical role models and abusive leaders (Tepper 2000). Related research on ethical leadership suggests that negative leadership might be more important in predicting negative outcomes in some settings (Detert et al. 2007). Previous research suggests that peer modeling of unethical behavior impacts individual-level deviance and unethical behavior (Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly 1998; Zey-Ferrell et al. 1979). What impact does unethical leader modeling have on ethical leadership? Might negative role models motivate subordinate leaders to emulate or to avoid the modeled behaviors? If the leader chooses avoidance, can such a leader become an ethical leader without having had positive role models? Does having had a good ethical role model in one's career outweigh the influence of a bad ethical model? Does that depend on how successful each is in the organization? Research on role modeling in general suggests that older employees tend to learn from both positive (i.e., learn what to do) and negative (i.e., learn what "not" to do) role models (Gibson 2003), so it seems likely that having had both types of role model might influence ethical leadership in a positive way because the developing leader has choices among models. Such questions clearly require additional research.

Implications for Practice

This research has a number of implications for practice. First and foremost, the results point to a way that organizations may be able to promote ethical leadership by identifying and promoting ethical role models within their organizations. Given the importance of childhood modeling, especially for younger leaders, employers might ask young applicants about and select employees who have had experiences with strong ethical role models early in life. Then, it appears important to build on those early experiences by emphasizing the importance of ethical role models as one's career develops. This means emphasizing the important role that managers and mentors play in the development of ethical leaders. Also, given the increased mobility in the labor market and the likelihood that employee tenure in a single organization may be short, it will be important to ask prospective employees questions about whether they have had both types of role models and use this information in their leadership development.

The effect of senior manager ethical role models seems limited in terms of developing ethical leadership at lower levels of management, especially in large organizations. Certainly top management ethical leadership is important for creating and providing resources to support an ethical culture (Schaubroeck et al. 2012; Treviño 1990), but in terms of developing ethical leadership at the supervisory level, more proximal ethical role models are needed. Organizations interested in developing ethical leadership should make efforts to promote ethical role modeling among supervisors at all levels. One challenge to doing so is that Weaver et al. (2005) found that ethical role models tend to be humble. They are not likely to tout the fact that they are ethical role models. As a result, leadership development programs need to find them (perhaps through 360° evaluation programs) and emphasize the importance of their role without contradicting their humble nature.

Finally, given the prominence of corporate philanthropy, especially among large corporations, this research suggests that companies may wish to invest in organizations that promote opportunities for childhood ethical role modeling and development (such as scouting or Big Brother Big Sister programs). They can now tie such donations to their own strategic needs in a way that they may not have previously considered.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that require caution when interpreting the findings.

First, the research was conducted in a single organization. Although this allowed us to control for contextual factors that might influence ethical leadership (Brown and Treviño 2006), we do not know whether or to what degree our findings generalize to other organizations. For example, it seems likely that the potential modeling influence of top managers is greater in small organizations, where opportunities to interact with and observe senior leaders up close are more frequent.

Second, the role modeling measures were developed for this research. Although these measures were pilot tested and appear to have acceptable psychometric properties, we cannot rule out that some of our non-findings may be related to the way we measured these constructs. These measures should be subjected to more rigorous measure development processes in the future. In addition, our modeling measures were broadly written to capture three categories of models—childhood, career, and top

managers. Now that we have some evidence to suggest role modeling is related to ethical leadership, in the future these measures could be refined in order to tease out specific types of models (e.g., parents, former supervisors, etc.) and evaluate their impacts on ethical leadership development.

Finally, this study used a cross-sectional design. Our results indicate that role modeling and ethical leadership are related. And, theory suggests that the causal arrow flows from having had ethical role models in the past to be seen as an ethical leader oneself currently. However, future research should employ longitudinal data to establish causality.

Conclusion

Our findings support the idea that role modeling is related to ethical leadership. Having had an ethical role model during one's career is positively associated with ethical leadership. The importance of career ethical role models is stronger for older leaders. Similarly having had a childhood ethical role model is positively related to follower-rated ethical leadership, but this relationship diminishes with leader age. Overall, these findings suggest that organizations can promote and develop ethical leadership within their organizations by hiring young employees who have had strong ethical role models early in life and by supporting career ethical role models who play an important role in developing ethical leadership, especially for older leaders.

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