

Implications of Conscientiousness for Ethical Leadership: The New Role of Organizational Psychology

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This paper discusses the main variables related to ethical leadership, and the behaviors exhibited by ethical leaders, along with the particular personality characteristic of conscientiousness. Initially, several definitions of both ethical leadership and conscientiousness are displayed, which shed light on answering the implications of conscientiousness on ethical leadership. Diverse articles are also included to further elucidate the main research question, which is the implications of conscientiousness on ethical leadership. This literature review combines the traditional definitions and reviews of the variables, along with the research findings of the presented articles, their methodology designs and results, to support the beneficial impact of conscientiousness on ethical leaders, and discover its additional effect on employees' mindset, perceptions, and behaviors.

Keywords: conscientiousness, ethical leadership, morality, moral courage, personality, moral ideology

Implications of Conscientiousness for Ethical Leadership

Personality has been widely investigated across the years in literature as one of the main important contributors to successful leadership. Several aspects of leadership, i.e. transformational leadership, ethical leadership, leadership emergence, and leader-member exchange (LMX) (Jada & Mukhopadhyay, 2019) are some of the examples that personality has shown to bear significant outcomes for the efficiency of managers and leaders. The presence of a competent leader has a substantial impact on organizations' general development, originating from astounding employee relationships, both team-member exchange (TMX) and LMX. This results in greater cooperativeness and communication between the staff members, which then has a positive impact on creativity and innovation, and consequently in performance and productivity. Even though different personality traits are considered to bear more favorable outcomes for leadership competence and performance, this systematic literature review will aim to analyze and evaluate the personality trait of conscientiousness and its implications, as a predicting factor of ethical leadership. A basic theoretical background of ethical leadership and conscientiousness will first be analyzed, leading to the incorporation of diverse research methodologies and results to support the proposed research question.

Theoretical Background on Ethical Leadership and Conscientiousness

Ethical leadership is described as the illustration of a standardized acceptable behavioral pattern of leaders,

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and the encouragement of leaders to promote the same mindset and set of actions to their followers (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). This theory is comprised of two elements: “moral person” and “moral manager” (Brown et al., 2005). This first aspect of ethical leadership, the “moral person”, is characterized by leaders’ ethical behaviors as well as their followers viewing it as such (Brown et al., 2005). The second, “moral manager” involves explicit communication of ethical actions from leaders to followers, establishing ethical standards, and either rewarding or punishing behaviors based on their ethical substance (Treviño et al., 2003, as cited in Wang, Chiang, Chou, & Cheng, 2017).

Additionally, conscientiousness is a personality facet originating from Costa and McCrae’s (1986) *BIG 5 Model of Personality*, and is one of the five dimensions used by experts to classify and analyze individuals. People who score high on conscientiousness are more hard-working and well-organized, punctual, ambitious, and preserving (Costa & McCrae, 1986, as cited in Christiansen & Tett, 2013). Furthermore, they tend to be more disciplined, dutiful, detail-oriented, and reliable. On the contrary, individuals whose scores are lower, are more negligent, lazy, disorganized, and lack purpose/direction, as well as more spontaneous, flexible, and impulsive (Christiansen & Tett, 2013).

The relationship between personality and morality is traditionally explained by high scores on agreeableness and conscientiousness (Saucier & Goldberg, 1996; Walker & Hennig, 2004, as cited in Chuang & Chiu, 2016). One important distinction, however, is that under the presence of an ethical leader, agreeable employees behave accordingly due to their lack of confrontation and aggression, thus, behaving according to their leaders because of trust. Conscientious employees, however, engage in moral acts because they believe in their individual inherent morality as well as comprehending and appreciating ethical tendencies (Bowling & Eschleman, 2010). Low-conscientiousness people are often more sensitive to contextual situations; hence, they are more likely to respond favorably to ethical leadership demonstrated by their supervisors (Evans, Davis, & Neely, 2021).

A conventional and established example of a proposed theory to explain ethical behavior is proposed by Brown et al.’s (2005) adaptation of social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), aimed at exploring the reason behind ethical leaders exerting a positive influence on follower’s attitudes and behaviors (Wang et al., 2017). Through this theory, it is posed that ethical leaders serve as role models capable of attracting followers’ attention, leading to a more significantly persuasive technique, which is also combined with the aforementioned “moral manager” aspect of ethical leadership, applying reinforcement and/or punishment to elicit followers’ desired ethical behaviors (Wang et al., 2017). However, this systematic literature review analyzes different unconventional theories to demonstrate how the same outcomes of ethical leadership can be achieved by incorporating the aspect of conscientiousness, but it is crucial to consider several theories as a foundation of ethical leadership before evaluating its outcomes.

Research Outcomes

Bababola et al. (2019, utilized Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory¹ (SCT), in which they also include the behavioral manifestations of a specific personality trait (conscientiousness) in order to investigate the presence of “leader moral reflectiveness” (the cognition aspect of SCT), which consequently produces behaviors of ethical leadership. Conscientiousness is shown to bear the most significant outcomes for the prevalence of ethical leadership (Horn et al., 2004, as cited in Bababola et al., 2017). In addition, by applying Reynolds’ (2008)

¹ “An individual’s specific cognitive reflection in any given domain is central to predicting his or her behavior course of action in that domain” (Bababola et al., 2017).

sociocognitive conceptual model of “moral attentiveness” and “moral reflectiveness”, and more specifically the behavioral manifestations of ethical leadership (Bababola et al., 2017), the researchers’ hypotheses were supported. Unlike information coding, which is a big part of moral attentiveness (Reynolds, 2008, as cited in Bababola, 2017), concentrating on the behavioral aspect is more crucial, since information processing is an automatic function, in contrast to moral reflectiveness, which involves individual deliberate patterns of behaviors, rendering it the most prominent of the two, as ethical leadership is explained and maintained more by actions than cognitive processes (Brown et al., 2005, as cited in Bababola et al., 2017). Based on Reynolds’ (2008) research about the possible link between conscientiousness and ethical leadership, Bababola et al. (2017) aim to expand on the topic, proposing that aspects of conscientious individuals (i.e. self-discipline, careful, organized, attention to detail, and methodical decision-making), as well as their consistent reflection regarding the morality of their actions, can have a positive impact on employees, thus, forming their four main hypotheses:

“H1: Leader conscientiousness is positively related to leader moral reflectiveness.”

“H2: Leader moral reflectiveness is positively related to perceptions of ethical leadership.”

“H3: Leader moral reflectiveness mediates the relationship between leader conscientiousness and ethical leadership.”

“H4: The indirect relationship between leader conscientiousness and ethical leadership through moral reflectiveness is moderated by decision-making autonomy.”

By utilizing the mini-IPIP (Donnellan et al., 2006) for the levels of conscientiousness, leader moral reflectiveness scale (Reynolds, 2008), decision-making autonomy scale (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006), and ethical leadership scale (Brown et al., 2005), the aforementioned factors were preliminary measured in a Nigerian sample ($N = 115$), and subsequently in a Chinese sample ($N = 714$), as culturally, decision-making is highly valued (Hofstede, 2001, as cited in Bababola et al., 2017). All of the researchers’ hypotheses were supported in both samples, excluding H3 for the Nigerian sample (Bababola et al., 2017). This research highlights the main topic of this systematic literature review, as it focuses on the relationship between conscientiousness and ethical leadership.

Research by Resick et al. (2013) as cited in Chuang and Chiu (2016) supports that the actions of a moral leader involve and promote a respectful and fair environment for the subordinates, which consequently increases their prosocial behaviors and is the predictor of Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB). However, these “moral” behaviors are closely correlated with the aforementioned facets of conscientiousness, so it is plausible to assume that conscientiousness can be the mediating variable between ethical leadership and OCB. Research also indicates that subordinates’ ethical views and opinions are shaped positively by the presence of a moral or ethical leader (Brown et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2011, as cited in Chuang & Chiu, 2016). Chuang and Chiu (2016) also comment that ethical leaders are more useful for subordinates with low moral personality. This is explained because employees with high moral personality are already engaging in OCBs independently of their leaders, as they gain intrinsic motivation from their actions, whereas employees with low moral personalities need their leaders’ reinforcement to behave accordingly (Chuang & Chiu, 2016). Therefore, the researchers tried to explain subordinates’ moral personality mediating the positive impact between ethical leadership and OCB (H1), and the negative impact between ethical leadership and Workplace Deviant Behaviors (WDB) (H2). It is important to note that workplace and follower incivility are also significantly mediated by ethical leadership, which substantially arises from conscientiousness (Taylor & Pattie, 2014). Thus, the WDB element from Chuang

and Chiu (2016) shows a correlation with Taylor and Pattie's (2014) "follower incivility", which are both mediated by ethical leadership.

In order to enrich the study by providing more extensive information on the specific aspects of ethical leadership, the researchers also utilized Forsyth's (1981) two-dimensional model of moral ideology, containing "idealism" and "relativism". The first is explained through the belief that moral actions generate the most beneficial result (Bass, Barnett, & Brown, 1999, as cited in Chuang & Chiu, 2016). Individuals with low idealism scores are more benefit-oriented, and they allow minimal losses in their decision-making processes if they produce the most desirable outcomes. Researchers claimed that employees with either high or low scores on both "moral personality" and "idealism" can engage in OCBs and refrain from WDB either because of their own application of moral acts (in the high scores of the aforementioned variables) or because of the presence of an ethical leader (in the low scores). Thus, H3 and H4 tried to investigate the impact of ethical leadership, employees' moral personality, and idealism to predict OCBs and WDBs. More specifically, the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB will be reduced when idealism and moral personality scores are high (H3), and the relationship between ethical leadership and WDB will be reduced when idealism and moral personality scores are high (Chuang & Chiu, 2016).

"Relativism" on the other hand, is characterized by the notion of either accepting or rejecting universal moral rules and values as well as questioning their applicability (Chuang & Chiu, 2016). High scores indicate that people would not conform to basic social norms and moral rules (i.e. not helping a co-worker) while also viewing morality as situation and context-specific, whereas low scores predict the opposite. Consistent with "idealism" hypotheses, the "relativism" hypotheses (H5, H6) are comprised in a similar manner:

"H5: Ethical leadership, subordinates' moral personality, and relativism will interact to predict OCB, such that the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB will be weakest when relativism is low and moral personality is high."

"H6: Ethical leadership, subordinates' moral personality, and relativism will interact to predict WDB, such that the relationship between ethical leadership and WDB will be weakest when relativism is low and moral personality is high."

The materials included for this research purpose were the Ethical Leadership scale by Brown et al. (2005), Saucier's (1994) scale to measure conscientiousness, openness to experience, and agreeableness, Forsyth's (1980) scale of idealism and relativism, Williams and Anderson's (1991) scale to measure OCB, and Bennett and Robinson's (2000) scale for WDB (Chuang & Chiu, 2016). Relating these research findings of 300 participants with conscientiousness, it was found that participants' levels of conscientiousness are a result of high scores of moral personality, which consequently predicts high levels of OCB and fewer levels of WDB. Moreover, higher levels of ethical leadership and moral personality predict more OCBs and significantly fewer levels of WDB. This research demonstrates the close relationship between conscientiousness and ethical leadership and stresses their importance for management implications (Chuang & Chiu, 2016).

Through past research, investigators were able to assess the facets of personality by combining diverse methods and theories of cognition, behaviors, as well as morality, which have shown to adequately explain the current issue of ethical leadership. Likewise, Wang et al.'s (2017) research aimed at exploring the general leadership facts of ethical leaders on both a quantitative and qualitative approach. This piece of evidence is remarkable as it mirrors the characteristics of conscientiousness quite closely. More specifically, in order to develop an ethical leadership scale, the researchers employed a pool of 315 Chinese and Taiwanese respondents

(college students, full-time job employees, and individuals holding managerial positions) for both a qualitative and quantitative approach.

Regarding the qualitative aspect of Wang et al.'s (2017) study, the participants were initially asked to provide a clear illustration of the characteristics of an efficient leader, who engaged in "normatively appropriate conduct", according to Brown et al.'s (2005) theory, and actively promoted such conduct through behavioral patterns. Subsequently, participants were asked to portray a leader from their past experiences that they viewed as ethical. In order to classify and categorize the responses, the researchers screened the answers from their research according to the characteristics of an ethical leader. By combining different sets of qualitative data and representative statements, the researchers finally established the fundamental dimensions of the Chinese Ethical Leadership Scale (CELS) (Wang et al., 2017). These dimensions include reliability, fairness, role modeling, openness to criticism, moral courage, and incorruptibility. The majority of the participants' responses were circulated around the aspect of reliability, which bears rigid correlations with the conscientiousness personality trait. The "reliability" variable from Wang et al.'s (2017) CELS tool "refers to the responsibility and trustworthiness of a leader, one who never shirks responsibility and consistently keeps his or her promises" (p. 514). Similarly, a close relationship was noticed between conscientiousness and the description of role modeling, which encompasses many aspects of self-discipline (Wang et al., 2017).

Consistent with moral courage from Wang et al. (2017), a recent study by Pakizekho and Barkhordari-Sharifabad (2022) examined the relationship between ethical leadership, conscientiousness, and moral courage, however, utilizing different tools from that Wang et al. (2017) proposed. The participants of their study comprised 178 nurses, using the Ethical Nursing Leadership Questionnaire (Barkhordari-Sharifabad et al., 2017, as cited in Pakizekho & Barkhordari-Sharifabad, 2022), which measured the level of ethical leadership from nurses' perspective. Factors from this questionnaire worth mentioning, which bear significant correlations with research from Wang et al. (2017), include the "pioneering" element, which involves around "ethical role model" and "professional insight" from the leader, and the "task-orientation" factor, which implies responsibility, reliability, and accuracy of the leader (Pakizekho & Barkhordari-Sharifabad, 2022). These insights are reasonably correlated with the CELS dimensions from Wang et al.'s (2017) tool, as well as with the conscientiousness personality characteristic, suggesting a close interrelationship between the variables, and thus, rendering the study important to analyze.

Regarding the facet of conscientiousness, the researchers utilized Ardan and Beheshtirad's Questionnaire of Conscientiousness (2015), originating from the Barrick and Mount model (1993), the items of which significantly equate to Costa and McCrae's (1986) insights. This tool examines two dimensions: dependability, and achievement orientation, with a total of 16 items, eight in each category, on a Likert scale format. More specifically, the first dimension, dependability, refers to attentiveness, responsibility, organization, and maintaining order, while the second one, achievement-orientation, analyzes characteristics such as: embracing high standards, seeking excellence, and challenging goal-setting (Pakizekho & Barkhordari-Sharifabad, 2022).

The "moral courage" variable was later measured using the Moral Courage Questionnaire originated by Sekerka et al. (2009), comprised of five dimensions: moral agency, multiple values, the endurance of threat, going beyond compliance, and moral goals. Taking a closer look and further analyzing these five elements, facets of conscientiousness can be observed. For instance, the "moral goals" element involves goal-setting contingent upon honesty, respect, and behavioral patterns centered around moral virtue (Pakizekho & Barkhordari-Sharifabad, 2022). Results of this research showed that ethical leadership is significantly dependent on the levels

of conscientiousness and moral courage. These findings shed light on the ways managers can improve the levels of conscientiousness and moral courage in the nursing occupation through exercising ethical leadership behaviors (Pakizekho & Barkhordari-Sharifabad, 2022).

Brown et al.'s (2005) research tool about ethical leadership along with the IPIP (Goldberg et al., 2006) to measure conscientiousness was used for Evans et al.'s (2021) research. The main hypotheses tested, include the mediating factor of "organizational cynicism", which according to the researchers is defined as one's negative belief towards the organization they work for, because of the employee's mindset of the organization's corruption and lack of integrity, which in turn creates animosity and feelings of discontent towards the organization (Dean et al., 1998, as cited in Evans et al., 2021). More specifically, their primary hypotheses which strongly relate to this systematic literature review involved: (1) the negative correlation between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism, and (2) ethical leadership's negative correlation with organizational deviance through organizational cynicism (Evans et al., 2021). The prominent role of conscientiousness is influential and elucidates the main research question of this literature review regarding Evans et al.'s (2021) research variables. As the researchers' state, conscientiousness is strongly related to both variables (ethical leadership and organizational cynicism). The fundamental reason lies behind the previous aforementioned articles, which highlight the characteristics of conscientious individuals engaging more in self-management attitudes and practices, which leads to efficient goal-setting, intrinsic motivation, as well as self and situational awareness (Evans et al., 2021). Subsequently, conscientiousness is strongly related to self-efficacy at work, experiencing more positive effect and satisfaction, and negatively correlated with perceived contextual constraints (Gerhardt et al., 2007, as cited in Evans et al., 2021), which renders conscientious individuals to seek challenge and accomplish their goals through positive coping mechanisms such as consistent planning and persistence. Results of their study indicated that people with low scores of conscientiousness exhibited higher levels of organizational cynicism when ethical leadership was low, and at higher levels of ethical leadership, low conscientious individuals reported lower levels of organizational cynicism (Evans et al., 2021). These findings extensively highlight the importance of ethical leadership and its effects through the substantial impact of conscientiousness, which has been shown across the literature to be the personality trait related to the most efficient organizational outcomes.

Discussion

The aforementioned systematic literature review displays a noteworthy amount of substantial evidence to support the main research question presented. A reasonable amount of both traditional and unconventional theoretical background serves the purpose of developing a solid base for the development of ethical leadership and conscientiousness, as well as their consequential impact on employees' mindsets, attitudes, and behaviors. The reported articles and their related research results depict a close relationship between conscientiousness and several aspects of ethical leadership comprised of diverse supplementary analytical theories. More specifically, originating from Bandura's social learning theory and SCT (Wang et al., 2017; Bababola et al., 2019), this paper discusses their importance as they greatly clarify and explain possible antecedents of ethical leadership. Bababola et al.'s (2019) research results successfully confirmed their hypotheses, based on Reynolds' (2008) initial research aims to explain the relationship between conscientiousness and ethical leadership. Forsyth's (1980) theory of "idealism" and "relativism" shed light on a wide variety of research (Bass, Barnett, & Brown, 1999; Chuang & Chiu, 2016) as it provides the behavioral component regarding the conscientiousness-ethical leadership equation, demonstrating the importance of the theory for managerial implications in the workplace.

Moreover, the reported research measurements from the existing literature (Wang et al., 2017; Ardalan & Beheshtirad, 2015; Pakizekho & Barkhordari-Sharifabad, 2022) are also fundamental tools to consider in order to correlate the conscientiousness personality factor with mindsets and behaviors related to ethical leadership, and more specifically, the ways these aspects are exhibited in an organizational setting. Theoretical elements such as “moral attentiveness” and “moral reflectiveness” (Reynolds, 2008), “idealism” and “relativism” (Forsyth, 1981), moral courage (Wang et al., 2017; Pakizekho & Barkhordari-Sharifabad (2022), and background information on ethical leadership, moral person and moral manager (Brown et al., 2005), as well as conscientiousness (Christiansen & Tett, 2013), significantly emphasize the strong correlation between the core variables this systematic literature review analyzes. Results from the studies are, likewise, meaningful and substantial information to contemplate. This review focuses its attention on organizations, and individuals holding leadership or managerial positions, to realize the antecedents of several aspects of ethical leadership, and the powerful influence that conscientiousness carries.

Limitations and Future Research

Even though the research question is confirmed, this study comes with limitations as well. It is important to note that two of the most informative research pieces of evidence incorporated Chinese, Taiwanese, and Nigerian samples (Babalola et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2017), where aspects of conscientiousness (self-discipline, decision-making, attention to detail) are culturally appropriate and exceptionally valuable. Due to cultural differences, the Western or European world can assumingly operate under different factors, where an expanded variety of personality traits would prove more relevant and useful for executing a conducive managerial or leadership role.

In order for this systematic literature review to include more specialized research articles, the thorough focus on conscientiousness contributed to another limitation. That is, narrowing down the research focus solely on conscientiousness, and thus, neglecting the rest of the personality factors, not only from the *BIG 5* (Costa & McCrae, 1986) but from diverse personality indexes as well. Future research can implement various tools of measurement for the same factors, but also inspect and evaluate the extreme conscientious leaders, as excessively unusual levels of conscientiousness may presumably lead to workaholism, due to achievement-orientation and maintaining order, and thus, possibly reaching burnout levels faster.

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