



Re-thinking ethical leadership: An interdisciplinary integrative approach [☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 March 2011

Revised 28 February 2012

Accepted 5 March 2012

Available online 26 March 2012

Keywords:

Ethical leadership

Interdisciplinary approach

Justice

Responsibility

Sustainability

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is (1) to identify critical issues in the current literature on ethical leadership – i.e., the conceptual vagueness of the construct itself and the focus on a Western-based perspective; and (2) to address these issues and recent calls for more collaboration between normative and empirical-descriptive inquiry of ethical phenomena by developing an interdisciplinary integrative approach to ethical leadership. Based on the analysis of similarities between Western and Eastern moral philosophy and ethics principles of the world religions, the present approach identifies four essential normative reference points of ethical leadership – the four central ethical orientations: (1) humane orientation, (2) justice orientation, (3) responsibility and sustainability orientation, and (4) moderation orientation. Research propositions on predictors and consequences of leader expressions of the four central orientations are offered. Real cases of ethical leadership choices, derived from in-depth interviews with international leaders, illustrate how the central orientations play out in managerial practice.

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1. Introduction

The recent high-impact ethics scandals in the banking sector and the oil industry have aroused strong public concern and led to a lively debate on business ethics, making ethical leadership one of the “hot topics” in organizational practice. In view of these distressing events, organizations are expected to assume responsibility and to increase their efforts in demonstrating ethical governance and promoting ethical leadership throughout the organizational hierarchy (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009).

Despite the importance of this issue, the body of social scientific research on ethical leadership still is rather small (see Brown & Treviño, 2006; Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2009; Toor & Ofori, 2009; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006) – though growing – and has critical shortcomings. A review of the pertinent literature reveals that current research on ethical leadership focuses on an empirical-descriptive Western-based perspective. The widely shared definition of ethical leadership (from Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120) – “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct ... and the promotion of such conduct to followers” (e.g., used by Detert, Treviño, Burris, & Andiappan, 2007; Piccolo, Greenbaum, Den Hartog, & Folger, 2010; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009) – appears to be rather vague as it does not specify any particular norms ethical leaders can refer to. Hence, in order to prevent ethical relativism, several researchers called for more collaboration between normative and descriptive approaches in ethics research (Klein, 2002; Treviño & Weaver, 2003) and demanded specification of the relevant norms for ethical leadership (Giessner & van Quaquebeke, 2010). As Bellah (1983, p. 373) put it: “Without a reference point in the tradition of ethical reflection, the very categories of social thought would be empty.”

[☆] The present research was supported by a project grant from the German Excellence Initiative of the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich. I am deeply grateful to Felix Brodbeck, Daan van Knippenberg, Sabine Boerner and Steffen Giessner for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript. I also thank the editor Leanne Atwater and three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions. The paper greatly benefited from discussions with Ulrich Eisenbeiss and Omri Boehm on Western and Eastern philosophy.

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In answer to these calls, the present paper develops an interdisciplinary normative approach to ethical leadership and transfers it to the social sciences. Integrative analysis of the seminal works in *ancient and modern moral philosophy* from the *West and the East* – ranging from Kant, Plato, Aristotle to Tagore and Confucianism (see [Chen, 1997](#); [Cline, 2007](#); [Morgan, 1992](#); [Radhakrishnan, 1992](#)) – and of the *ethics principles of the world religions* – Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism (see [Harvey, 2000](#); [McGrath, 2006](#); [Radhakrishnan, 1998](#); [Rice, 1999](#)) yielded four essential normative principles of ethical leadership, the so-called *central ethical orientations*: (1) *humane orientation*, (2) *justice orientation*, (3) *responsibility and sustainability orientation*, and (4) *moderation orientation*. All four central ethical orientations present established leadership attributes in *general leadership literature in the social sciences* as well (e.g., [Brown et al., 2005](#); [Ferdig, 2007](#); [Johnson, 2009](#); [Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011](#)). However, a comparative analysis with *social scientific literature on ethical leadership* ([Brown et al., 2005](#); [Ciulla, 1995](#); [Kalshoven et al., 2011](#); [Resick, Hanges, Dickson, & Mitchelson, 2006](#)) showed that current approaches have concentrated on humane and justice orientation but have neglected both responsibility and sustainability orientation and moderation orientation. Implications for future research and managerial practice are clearly outlined. Research propositions are offered on the antecedents and outcomes of leader expressions of the four central ethical orientations. Real cases of day-to-day business situations and moral dilemmas from in-depth interviews with international senior leaders are given to exemplify how the four central orientations can explain leader ethical decisions.

To sum up, this paper contributes to ethical leadership literature by (1) providing a coherent review and a critical discussion of current conceptual approaches to ethical leadership in the social sciences, (2) identifying four central normative principles for ethical leadership by means of an interdisciplinary analysis of Western and Eastern philosophical and religious ethics approaches, (3) offering research propositions on the antecedents and consequences of leader expressions of the four central orientations, and (4) illustrating how the central orientations play out in leader practice by giving real business examples of ethical leadership choices.

2. Current social scientific literature on ethical leadership

The following section gives a review of the predominant and most widely cited approaches to ethical leadership in current research, also reflecting partially overlapping concepts such as transformational, authentic, spiritual, and servant leadership. As usual in literature reviews (cf. [Treviño et al., 2006](#)), the present work includes approaches that have a sound theoretical foundation and a substantial realized or potential impact on the field. Critical points in these approaches are identified and discussed.

2.1. Approaches to ethical leadership in the social sciences

A leader's morality and ethical conduct¹ have been – more or less explicitly – addressed as an element in well-established leadership theories: particularly, in transformational leadership ([Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999](#)), authentic leadership (e.g., [Avolio & Gardner, 2005](#)), spiritual leadership ([Fry, 2003](#); [Reave, 2005](#)), and servant leadership theory ([van Dierendonck, 2011](#)). For instance, by definition, transformational leaders are assumed to demonstrate high ethical standards ([Bass & Avolio, 1994](#)), authentic leaders are assumed to consider the ethical consequences of their decisions ([Brown & Treviño, 2006](#)), and servant leaders are assumed to have a strong sense of responsible morality ([Sendjaya & Cooper, 2011](#)). However, while all these theories appear to integrate an ethical element into their conceptualization of leadership, they do not specify what ethical principles leaders should apply and promote.

In practice-oriented books, several conceptual approaches focused specifically on the subject of *ethical leadership* and defined key elements of ethical leadership from a more normative point of view (see [Piccolo et al., 2010](#)). The most widely recognized approaches (cf. [Bass & Bass, 2008](#); [Brown et al., 2005](#); [Resick et al., 2006](#)) include [Ciulla \(1995\)](#), [Gini \(1997\)](#), [Kanungo and Mendoca \(1996\)](#), and [Northouse \(2001\)](#). [Kanungo and Mendoca \(1996\)](#) emphasized the aspect of altruism and regarded ethical leaders as engaging in virtuous behaviors beneficial to others and refraining from acts that could harm others. Similarly, [Ciulla \(1995\)](#) saw respect for the rights and dignity of others as an essential characteristic of ethical leadership. Focusing on the power aspect of leadership, [Gini \(1997\)](#) pointed out that ethical leaders use their power in socially responsible ways that reflect socialized – contrary to personalized – power motivation ([McClelland, 1987](#)). Adhering to Aristotle's work, [Northouse \(2001\)](#) suggested five principles of ethical leadership: ethical leaders respect others, serve others, are concerned about justice, manifest honesty, and build community.

The majority of social scientific empirical-descriptive research on ethical leadership is based on the work conducted by [Brown and colleagues \(2005, 2006\)](#), using their definition of ethical leadership and applying the corresponding measure (e.g., [Detert et al., 2007](#); [Mayer et al., 2009](#); [Piccolo et al., 2010](#); [Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009](#)). Coming from a social learning perspective, [Brown et al. \(2005, p. 120\)](#) 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

¹ In line with previous literature on ethical behavior ([Jones, 1991](#); [Kanungo & Mendoca, 1996](#); [Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008](#)), the terms “ethical” and “moral” are used interchangeably in the present paper. Ethics refers to the study of morals and relates to moral principles, values, and rules of conduct governing the individual or the group, wherein moral concerns the distinction between good and bad or right and wrong (cf. [Jones \(1991\)](#) for a discussion of the difficulty to precisely define the terms ethical and moral). In their original meanings, the terms ethics and morals are closely linked: the former comes from the Latin word *moralis*, the latter from the Greek *ethos* which both refer to “custom of life” ([Titus et al., 2002](#)). Values are central to ethics and can be defined as general beliefs that “transcendentally guide actions and judgments across specific objects and situations” ([Rokeach, 1979, p. 72](#)).

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