Ethical leadership: Mapping the terrain for concept cleanup and a future research agenda

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Abstract

Ethical leadership has attracted massive attention in the twenty-first century. Yet despite this vast literature, knowledge of ethical leadership suffers from two critical limitations: First, existing conceptualizations conflate ethical leader behaviors with followers' evaluations of leaders' characteristics, values, traits, and followers' cognitions. Second, we know little to nothing regarding the causes and consequences of ethical leadership behaviors as most of the evidence not only confounds concepts, but also precludes causal inferences due to design problems. Thus, we first present a review of the definitions of ethical leadership that alarmingly reveals a hodgepodge of follower evaluations of leader behaviors, traits, and values. We then address this concept confusion by drawing upon signaling theory in presenting a new conceptualization of ethical leadership behavior (ELB) defined as signaling behavior by the leader (individual) targeted at stakeholders (e.g., an individual follower, group of followers, or clients) comprising the enactment of prosocial values combined with expressions of moral emotions. As such, enacting prosocial values and expressing moral emotions are each necessary for ethical leadership. Next, we review the nomological network of ELB at the individual, dyad, and group levels. We conclude with a discussion of future research directions in testing new theoretical models, including a set of theoretical and methodological recommendations.

Keywords: Ethical leadership; moral-based emotion; signaling theory

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Moral-based forms of leadership, such as ethical (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005), authentic (Banks, McCauley, Gardner, & Guler, 2016; Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011), and servant leadership (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2019) continue to gain relevance in the 21st century. This is fueled, in part, by corporate and political scandals (Adler, 2002), but also by a growing recognition that business should serve and promote positive outcomes for all stakeholders and not just shareholders (Freeman, 2019). Perhaps most important of these moral-based forms of leadership is ethical leadership given both the popular media attention (Deal, 2018) and supporting empirical evidence when comparing it to other leadership styles (for detailed reviews see Banks, Gooty, Ross, Williams, & Harrington, 2018; Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, & Wu, 2018). Ethical leadership has been characterized by past research in a variety of ways, but largely describes the extent to which the conduct of a leader is normatively appropriate (Brown et al., 2005) and promotes wellbeing for stakeholders (Yukl, Mahsud, Hassan, & Prussia, 2013). Yet, despite the recognized value of ethical leadership, several critical issues remain unaddressed that have both theoretical and practical implications (Banks et al., 2018).

First, recent meta-analytic reviews have indicated that there has been little to no investigation of ethical leadership *behaviors* (Bedi, Alpaslan, & Green, 2016; Hoch et al., 2018). Behaviors can be defined as "the internally coordinated responses (actions or inactions) of whole living organisms (individuals or groups) to internal and/or external stimuli, excluding responses more easily understood as developmental changes" (Levitis, Lidicker, & Freund, 2009). While this concern is not unique to the ethical leadership domain, it remains problematic that there

continues to be a conflation between ethical leader behaviors and followers' evaluations of the leader's values, traits, and behaviors (Fischer, Hambrick, Sajons, & Van Quaquebeke, in press; Alvesson & Einola, 2019). Day (2014, p. 862) argued that "Questionnaires remain a popular (if misguided) approach to studying leadership. If you design and publish a brief, easy-to-administer [ethical leadership] survey questionnaire, there is little doubt that researchers will use it. But we should not lose sight of the fact that the map is not the territory, and simply labeling a questionnaire as a measure of '[ethical] leadership' does not mean that it actually measures [ethical] leadership." In sum, the ethical leadership literature is largely based on evaluations (involving both attributions and contagion of emotion) that mix perceptions of leader behaviors and leader values, which are prone to retrospective biases (Hansbrough, Lord, & Schyns, 2015).

This oversight is a theoretical concern first and foremost. Currently, numerous theories can be applied to phenomena around ethical leadership, such as social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977), attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980), signaling theory (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011; Spence, 1973), and stakeholder theory (Harrison, Bosse, & Phillips, 2010), to name a few. Without an integrative framework, the theoretical landscape has become ambiguous and the conflation of key variables is a contributing factor. For the ethical leadership literature to move forward, this limitation must be addressed.

Second, there is little to no robust empirical evidence on the causes and workplace consequences of ethical leadership behaviors, because most of the available evidence to date is correlational in nature. Consequently, much of this evidence is potentially spurious. Research on the performance cue effect demonstrates that the causal inference of such perceptual measures is flawed (Antonakis, 2017). The conflation of behaviors and evaluations impedes causality (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013) due to endogeneity bias (for full review see Antonakis, Bendahan,

Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010). Evaluations, if studied correctly, are still worth studying. It is the conflation that is the problem (Fischer et al., in press). This concern is especially problematic given that the vast majority of research on task performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and counterproductive work behaviors are also subjective interpretations and prone to bias (Carpenter, Berry, & Houston, 2014; Hoyt, 2000; Rothstein, 1990). These are critical outcomes of ethical leadership. Moreover, as there is little direct evidence of antecedents and outcomes of ethical leadership (Bedi et al., 2016), there is also limited evidence of important contingency factors. We cannot advance ethical leadership behaviors without addressing such theoretical shortcomings. Additionally, such shortcomings also harm the advancement of training and development for leaders.

Thus, ethical leadership is heavily studied and poorly understood from a behavioral lens. Several previous reviews exist in this domain (Bedi et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2016; Palanski, Newman, Leroy, Moore, Hannah, & Den Hartog, 2019; Lemoine, Hartnell, & Leroy, 2019) and ours goes beyond these past reviews in the following three ways: 1) We untangle the conflation of perceptions, values, traits, and behaviors in the extant literature and use the techniques of Podsakoff, Mackenzie, and Podsakoff (2016) in offering an integrated definition of ethical leader *behavior*. 2) Whereas a lot of the previous reviews have taken a largely cognitive stance of ethical leadership and/or cast emotions as an outcome or antecedent of such ethical leadership, we demonstrate below that emotions, specifically, moral emotions are a key ingredient of the integrated definition of ethical leadership behavior. 3) Overarchingly, we move beyond the ethical leadership domain and consult best practice recommendations (e.g., Hughes, Lee, Tian, Newman, & Legood, 2018; Güntner, Klonek, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Kauffelda, in press) in

offering a future research agenda that is driven by robust, endogeneity bias free research methods at multiple levels of analyses.

We proceed in the following steps. First, we review the dominant definitions in ethical leadership and discuss the challenges with many of these prior conceptualizations that conflate evaluations of leader behaviors, traits, and values. We follow the steps advocated by Podsakoff et al. (2016) in evaluating definitions. We establish how and why the absence of behaviors impedes theoretical advancements in ethical leadership. We then address the absence of behaviors by presenting a new conceptualization of ethical leadership behaviors (ELBs) rooted in signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) and introduce the nomological network of ELB at the individual, dyad, and group levels. We conclude with a discussion of future research directions in testing the new theoretical models along with methodological recommendations.

Looking back to look ahead: A systematic review of ethical leadership concept definitions

In the following, we adopt the four-stage process recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2016) to develop good conceptual definitions. This process involves a broad review of how concepts have been used in the past to identify and organize their key attributes, which then helps to craft both preliminary and refined conceptual definitions. That is, in our development of a revised definition of ethical leadership behaviors, we first look back at previous research to improve the conceptual foundations for future research.

Stage 1: Identify potential attributes by collecting a representative set of definitions

In the first stage of this process, we collected a representative set of definitions and measures as shown in Table 1. We conducted a search on Google Scholar for “ethical leadership” and “measure” or “scale” or “questionnaire.” A review was conducted of titles and abstracts of search results. A supplemental review was conducted of the primary studies included

in past meta-analytic reviews of ethical leadership (Bedi et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018). Our search strategy achieved two primary outcomes. First, we were able to identify the most popular conceptualization-measure pairs of ethical leadership. Second, we achieved saturation, which is characterized as the point in a retrieval process in which new information that is observed becomes redundant and new knowledge no longer emerges (Becker, Ellevold, & Stamp, 2008).

We highlight in Table 1 how and why an absence of behaviors in the study of ethical leadership impedes theoretical advancements. In the first column, we present definitions of ethical leadership introduced by those who have sought to develop measures of ethical leadership. The second column shows the associated measure of ethical leadership, which in all instances is an evaluative questionnaire measure. In the third column, we organize these measures by type of definition and/or measure. Finally, in the last column we highlight the theoretical consequences of the definition and subsequent measurement of ethical leadership. This last point is critical to illustrate that while there are methodological limitations to how ethical leadership has been studied, the negative consequences are primarily theoretical in nature.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Based on our review, we identify seven commonly adopted conceptualizations—that is, definitions—of ethical leadership (see Table 1). Thereby, these conceptualizations fall in two categories: first, morally appropriate and useful leader behaviors (Wang & Hackett, in press), and second, virtue-based and well-intended leader behaviors (Newstead, Dawkins, Macklin, & Martin, 2019). The first type of conceptualization is reflected in an explicitly utilitarian definition of ethical leadership by Craig and Gustafson (1998), and in a quasi-utilitarian approach by Yukl et al. (2013) who defined ethical behaviors as benefitting and not doing harm to others. In addition, Brown et al. (2005) defined ethical leadership as “normatively appropriate

conduct" (p. 125), and hence in a norm-based manner too. In contrast, there are four other conceptualizations of ethical leadership, which reflect a leader's virtues or good intentions (Newstead et al., 2019). Riggio, Zhu, Reina, and Maroosis (2010) adopted such an approach most explicitly and defined ethical leadership as adhering to four cardinal virtues. In a similar way, Langlois, Lapointe, Valois, and de Leeuw (2014) regarded ethical leadership as a social practice that follows three ethical dimensions, and Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh (2011) located ethical leadership in the field of tension between altruistic and egoistic motives. Furthermore, the conceptualization of Spangenberg and Theron (2005) referred to positive leader intentions too, and highlighted the creation and sharing of an ethical vision.

Problematically, thus, none of the conceptualizations of ethical leadership exclusively refers to leader behaviors; all concepts conflate leader behaviors with other components. The problem with these definitions is we do not know what the focal concept is. The first type of conceptualizations mixes leader behaviors and evaluations of the behavior's appropriateness or helpfulness, and the second type mixes leader behaviors and evaluations of a leader's virtues or intentions. Such a conflation goes beyond mere measurement problems, like retrospective biases (Fischer et al., in press), but incorporates ambiguity in the heart of the theoretical pillars of the ethical leadership concept. Thus, neither of the two types of conceptualizations allows researchers to make unambiguous inferences about the causal impact of ethical leadership on focal outcomes like follower and/or organizational performance. The reason is that the non-behavioral component—that is, evaluations of appropriateness / helpfulness or evaluations of virtues / intentions—can account for the leadership-outcome link too. Consequently, there is a need for conceptualizing ethical leadership in truly behavioral terms to study the causal impact of ELBs on focal outcomes.

Next to these theoretical limitations, the commonly used empirical approach reinforces the abovementioned limitations even further. In the typical ethical leadership study, followers rate the degree to which they deem their supervisor as leading in an ethical manner (Bedi et al., 2016). Therefore, not only the conceptualizations but also the measurement tools conflate leader behaviors with followers' evaluations of these behaviors. Whereas follower evaluations are a critical part of the leadership process, and as such important to study in their own right (Fischer, Dietz, & Antonakis, 2017), conflating behaviors and evaluations does not allow for deciphering the distinct causal role of each of these components. Hence, conflation impedes both theoretical and empirical advancements.

For ethical leadership to make significant progress, a critique of the current landscape of definitions and measures is necessary. After conducting the Stage 1 review of definitions as described in Podsakoff et al. (2016), we see a need to distinguish between follower evaluations of a leader and ethical leader behaviors. In the next section, drawing upon signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011), we introduce our revised and non-conflated definition of ethical leadership.

Stage 2: Organize the potential attributes by theme and identify necessary and sufficient ones

The first stage in the Podsakoff et al. (2016) approach involves collecting a representative set of definitions (see Table 1). Upon review we have established the theoretical limitations of the definitions and subsequent measures in the extant literature. We now turn our attention to the second stage which entails examining potential attributes and themes across the definitions. We summarize this next stage in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

In our review of the definitions, we identified that *values* appear to be a consistent attribute. Almost every definition is built upon value-driven (evaluations/perceptions of) behaviors; value-based virtues (Riggio et al., 2010), or values-based "normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships" (Brown et al., 2005; p. 120). In addition, many of these definitions refer to values that are focused on the interests of others (e.g., subordinates, stakeholders, customers, suppliers) and not the self. For example, Riggio and colleagues defined an ethical leader as "one who adheres to the four cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice." The dictionary definitions of these virtues suggest they reflect traits that an ethical leader should possess, such as caution and wisdom in making decisions that affect the futures of others (prudence), courage during adversity (fortitude); moderation/restraint (temperance); equitable behavior (justice). Inherent to each of the virtues is an implicit (justice) or explicit (prudence) assumption of "others" affected by the leader's virtues.

Yukl and colleagues go a step further in emphasizing the "otherness" focus of ethical leadership: "Ethical leaders engage in acts and behaviors *that benefit others*, and at the same time, they refrain from behaviors that can cause *any harm to others*." (Italics added for emphasis). Thus, in addition to identifying *values*-based virtue or *values*-driven behavior espousal as an attribute, we contend that past definitions suggest that a focus on the well-being of others (i.e., prosocial) rather than oneself/self-interest is evident. In addition to this finding about prosocial values that emerged as a key attribute from our analyses of definitions, we found that no other attribute similarly appeared in all previous definitions of ethical leadership.

Further, this attribute of prosocial values is consistent with the definitions of ethical behavior in general in organizations:

> …routine ethical behavior that meets the minimum moral standards of society (e.g., honesty, treating people with respect); and extraordinary ethical behavior that goes beyond society's moral minima (e.g., charitable giving, whistleblowing) (Treviño, Den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014).

In reviewing the historical evolution of definitions of ethical leadership another striking pattern that we found is the dominance of the cognitive paradigm. That is, most of the definitions to date are founded in cognitions, that is, beliefs or values. Many of the early ethical leadership definitions stemmed from works in ethics and justice in general and as Treviño et al. (2014) noted, it reflected a "rational" view of ethical decision-making where affect and emotion were seen as the culprits. We have certainly traveled a long way from that viewpoint with the evolution of moral psychology (Graham, Haidt, Koleva, Motyl, Iyer, Wojcik, & Ditto, 2013; Graham, Iyer, Nosek, Haidt, Koleva, & Ditto, 2011) and emerging works in organizational behavior that fully explore the role of emotions in ethics, morality and thus ethical behavior in general (Lindebaum, Geddes, & Gabriel, 2017). While we later will discuss the content of moral emotions in detail, here, we suggest that these moral emotions are a necessary condition to building a definition of ELB, just as prosocial values are another necessary ingredient. Logically, such a conceptualization fuses two of the most fundamental human processes in judgment and behavior: cognitions (prosocial values) and emotions (moral emotions). Both prosocial values and moral emotions will be necessary in motivating ELB to emerge. The reason for this is that emotions direct our motivational energies and provide the impetus to *act*. It is important to note the cognition-emotion interplay and simultaneity via the nervous system. That is, evidence from neuroscience points out that both cognition and emotions occur simultaneously and neither takes

priority in this process (Dionne, Gooty, Yammarino, & Sayama, 2018). We first review prosocial values below.

Stage 3: Develop a preliminary definition of the concept

Prosocial values. Following Podsakoff et al. (2016), Stage 3 is the point that one develops a preliminary definition of the concept. To avoid confusion, we do not state the developed working definition, but present the final definition after Stage 4. Here, we describe the process to advance from Stage 3 to 4.

As we have highlighted above, prosocial values appear to be a necessary component of any definition of ELB. Prosociality in the workplace has become a popular area of study in the organizational sciences over the past three decades. The majority of this research can be clustered into three topics: prosocial motivation, prosocial behaviors, and prosocial impact (see Bolino & Grant, 2016). Throughout the thirty years of research, prosocial values and prosocial motivation have been used interchangeably. In what follows, we will provide a brief review of the prosocial motivation and human values literature to determine what can be gleaned from both, and how prosocial values could contribute to the definition of ELB.

Prosocial motivation is defined as the desire to benefit others or expend effort out of concern for others (Grant, 2008). Complicating this definition though are the dark sides to prosocial motivations, such as intentions to benefit one's own group at the harm of other workgroups (Thau, Derfler-Rozin, Pitesa, Mitchell, & Pillutla, 2015). The inclusion of this complication is to say that a behavior may be prosocially motivated, benefitting others *in* the group, while harming others *outside* of the group. Relatedly, De Dreu (2006) reported ample evidence from the conflict and negotiation literature suggesting prosocial motivation and self-serving motivation are independent dimensions, each operating on a scale from low to high.

Thus, the literature suggests that a specific behavior can involve levels of both prosocial motivation and self-serving motivation.

Conceptualizations of human values contain a helpful framework for navigating behavior and the motivation behind. However, they are unable to avoid complications similar to those of prosocial motivation. Schwartz and Bilsky (1987) developed a framework of values defining them as trans-situational goals with different degrees of importance that serve as guiding principles in one's life. The typology then designed by Schwartz (1994) included values that can be thought of as operating on one continuum anchored by two higher-order categories of values, self-enhancement and self-transcendence. Self-enhancement being related to values of achievement (pursuit of personal success), hedonism (personal gratification), power (dominance over others), and self-transcendence with the values of benevolence (concern for immediate others) and universalism (concern for the welfare of all people). However, while Schwartz's framework of human values is bipolar, acknowledging that some values are in opposition to others, some behaviors expose a tension between the two higher-order categories rather than a clear delineation.

As alluded to previously, prosocial motivation involves the desire to benefit others which may be at the expense of someone else. Consequently, a behavior associated with prosocial motivation is not necessarily ethical. Similarly, a behavior closely related with a self-transcendent value is not necessarily ethical, as one might act benevolently (concerned for immediate others) but do so in a way that is at the expense of the others (e.g., protect a guilty family member from going to jail). Such ethical dilemmas can be problematic in regard to the identification of specific ELBs because a behavior may be motivated by both prosociality and

self-interest. However, while not entirely clear, Schwartz's self-transcendent values framework provides the clearest understanding of prosocial values as they relate to ELB.

Schwartz's self-transcendent values contain two dimensions, universalism and benevolence, that concern the enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interest. Universalism, more specifically, captures comfort with the diversity of existence and values such as protecting the environment, broad-mindedness, social justice, wisdom, equality, a world at peace, and inner harmony. Relatedly, benevolence captures the promotion of close relationships and involves values such as helpfulness, honesty, forgiveness, loyalty, responsibility, true friendship, and meaning in life. These two elements pertaining to the enhancement of others contain values that are core to prosociality and consistent with other conceptions of prosocial values such as maximizing outcomes for the collective (Bogaert, Boone, & van Witteloostuijn, 2012), making judgements based on fairness, honesty, and equality (Sattler & Kerr, 1991), smoother interactions with peers (Rioux & Penner, 2001), and concern for others (Korsgaard, Meglino, & Lester, 1997).

Relatedly (and exploring Podsakoff's technique of comparing the attribute with the opposite), while self-interest is not necessarily unethical, the absence of any other-oriented component prohibits behavior from being ethical. Consequently, prosocial values help distinguish unethical behavior from behavior that may be ethical. Thus, moving forward we will conceptualize prosocial values as self-transcendent centered values that are concerned with the enhancement of others while transcending selfish interest as explained by Schwartz.

Ethical leadership behaviors and signaling. While prosocial values are an important component of ELBs, there must be a mechanism to deliver or send information of these values to others. Thus, our re-definition of ethical leadership draws largely upon signaling theory.

Ultimately, we also review other major theories within the ethical leadership literature. While some of these theories are important for the ethical leadership process in general, they are not immediately relevant for ELBs specifically. Hence, later these theories will be incorporated in the nomological network and into our individual- and multi-level models. We briefly summarize all these theories in Table 3. In column one, we present the theories and cite the seminal and/or key works associated with these theories. We then present a brief description of the theories while highlighting the role of ELBs.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

In our discussion here, we focus on signaling theory, and more specifically, on signals. An integration of the ethical leadership literature to date and signaling theory addresses the primary theoretical issues highlighted to this point and provides an avenue for better design and measurement in the study of ELBs. Signals are mechanisms that have origins in various fields, including evolutionary biology (Dawkins, 1978) and economics (Spence, 1978, 2002). Signaling theory has now permeated other literature areas, such as entrepreneurship (Connelly et al., 2011), strategic management (Karasek & Bryant, 2012), leadership (Antonakis, Bastardoz, Jacquart, & Shamir, 2016), and human resources (Banks, Woznyj, Wesslen, Frear, Berka, Heggestad, & Gordon, 2019; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991). Signals serve to reduce information asymmetries (Bergh, Ketchen, Orlandi, Heugens, & Boyd, 2019).

In the context of ethical leadership, signaling theory suggests that leaders may send ethical signals via their behaviors to followers, customers, suppliers, and investors for example. ELBs serve as signals to stakeholders, and as such, must be observable to trigger the social influence process inherent in leadership. These signals can take various forms, such as a leader's presence at a charitable event or volunteer initiative. There are many ethical behaviors that do

not rest on signaling; private donations are a case in point. However, these ethical behaviors are not *leadership* behaviors. Because leadership is a social influence process, others need to notice (at least unconsciously) these behaviors. Signals can also emerge from the content in a leader's speech or the way in which a leader decides to allocate rewards and punishments. For signals to be effective, a receiver needs to process the signals. This can be a function of signal observability (e.g., intensity, strength, clarity, visibility) as well as factors such as receiver attention and interpretation (Connelly et al., 2011). Such influences can potentially lead to signals being misinterpreted or perceived as weak, prompting the evaluation of the signal. Later in the article we discuss the role of congruence or lack thereof between signals sent by leaders and received by followers.

While we argue that signaling theory is the primary theoretical framework relevant for the study of ethical leadership *behaviors*, we acknowledge that such behaviors are only one component of the larger nomological network of ethical leadership, which consists of its antecedents, moderators, and consequences as depicted later in Figure 1. The nomological network of ethical leadership is informed by numerous theories (see Table 3). However, there is currently limited integration between these theories.

Stage 4: Refine the conceptual definition of the concept

In this section, we complete our conceptual review of ethical leadership and conclude with a new definition that includes necessary (but not sufficient) attributes. As previously mentioned, prosocial values are necessary to a definition of ELBs and are signaled to followers. In addition, in the fourth and final stage of the Podsakoff et al. (2016) process we now make an argument that the definition also should include the expression of moral emotions. Very specifically, emotions in general arise as a response to an event or entity and subsequently direct

our approach or avoidance behaviors (Dasborough, Hannah, & Zhu, 2020). They help decipher what is the next best course of action for an organism such that it is linked to survival and adaptation.

Moral emotions in particular are those emotions that arise out of events/entities/goals that are ‘‘linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent’’ (Haidt, 2003, p. 853). Thus, anger could be a self-focused emotion arising out of personal insults or a moral emotion occurring as a response to an injustice directed at others (Shao, 2019). For example, in delineating this social function of anger in guiding moral behavior, Haidt (2003) noted, *“Racism, oppression, exploitation, and ethnic cleansing can all lead people with no ties to the victimized group to demand retaliatory or compensatory action*” (p. 865). Similarly, Haidt (2003) said the following about another moral emotion that is known to be a self-conscious one, guilt: *“Baumeister et al. (1994) conclude[d] that guilt motivates people to treat their relationship partners well”* (p. 861). Tangney, Steuwig and Mashek (2007) expressed similar views:

“Moral emotions represent an important but often overlooked element of our human moral apparatus. Moral emotions may be critically important in understanding people’s behavioral adherence (or lack of adherence) to their moral standards……. Moral emotions provide the motivational force—the power and energy— to do good and to avoid doing bad (Kroll & Egan 2004).”

As can be seen in the exemplars of two moral emotions above, anger and guilt, they motivate action (Shao, 2019). Prosocial values reflect beliefs while moral emotions motivate us to action. Values serve a cognitive motivational function in stirring leaders into action based on their beliefs, while, emotions are the affective motivational fuel that spur such action. In

articulating the primacy of emotions in the moral and ethical reasoning process, Haidt (2003) noted, *"A few theorists have even begun to claim that the emotions are in fact in charge of the temple of morality and that moral reasoning is really just a servant masquerading as the high priest" (*p. 852). This statement reflects opinions in moral psychology that moral emotions precede and dominate moral cognitions (i.e., pro-social values). We do not subscribe to this view. Rather, we highlight it here to demonstrate how psychology and moral psychology in particular prioritizes the role of moral emotions.

Our position is in line with Dionne et al. (2018) that these moral emotions and prosocial values are deeply intertwined and to tease out the temporal sequencing is an impossible and unnecessary task for the purposes of this work. In line with this reasoning, here, we highlight four families of moral emotions that ethical leaders will first experience alongside pro-social values, and subsequent displays/expressions of such moral emotions serve as signals to followers and all stakeholders.

This classification of moral emotions has long been studied in psychology and is starting to gain precedence in leadership more recently (Haidt, 2003; Lindebaum et al., 2017; Sy, Horton, & Riggio, 2018). These four categories are distinguished from the other emotions (i.e., non-moral emotions) based on two criteria: They are elicited due to disruption/facilitation of another's goals (i.e., not self-focused). That is, "… emotions can be triggered easily and frequently even when the self has no stake in the triggering event" (Haidt, 2003, p. 853). The second criterion relates to the action tendency associated with the emotions. All emotions trigger action (e.g., aggression, withdrawal, reparative behavior) – for moral emotions this criterion requires a prosocial action tendency, that is the motivation to engage in actions that benefit a social collective rather than oneself. With these two criteria in place, prior works have identified

the four families of emotions (Sy et al., 2018). These four categories thus are: self-conscious moral emotions (shame, embarrassment and guilt); other-condemning emotions (anger, disgust and contempt); other-suffering (compassion) and other-praising (awe, admiration, elevation and gratitude).

As a result of this review, we suggest that moral emotions are an important component of ELBs. Consequently, prosocial values combined with moral emotions as described above serve as ELB signals. As such, enacting prosocial values and expressing moral emotions are each necessary conditions for ELBs. We subsequently define ELB as:

> Signaling behavior by the leader (individual) targeted at stakeholders (e.g., an individual follower, group of followers, or clients) comprising the enactment of prosocial values combined with expression of moral emotions.

The Role of Behaviors in Future Ethical Leadership Theory Advancement

In the previous sections we have acknowledged past accomplishments of the ethical leadership literature, but also highlighted opportunities for improvement. After following the four stages for evaluating concept definitions by Podsakoff et al. (2016), we introduced a refined definition of ELBs. In this section now, we transition to introducing a sketch of the nomological network of ELBs. That is, first we outline a set of antecedents and consequences of ethical leader signals; Figure 1a and Table 4 summarize the nomological network at the individual-level of analysis. Then, we extend our individual-level ideas to the dyadic and group level to provide a multi-level perspective, which is summarized in Figure 1b. Both for the individual and multi-level reasoning, we draw upon the new definition introduced in the previous section. In doing so, we also integrate the dominant theories of ethical leadership from Table 3 along with signaling theory, on which our definition is based.

[Insert Figure 1a and Table 4 about here]

Antecedents of ethical leader behaviors

We begin the theoretical integration and extension with a discussion of the antecedents to ELB (see Figure 1a, Box 1). In contrast to most existing research that has tended to focus on correlates and outcomes of ethical leadership (Bedi et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018), ELB (i.e., ethical signaling) is not an independent variable. Leaders are different and behave differently depending on, for instance, their personality and values; moreover, leaders adapt to the personality and values of their followers (DeRue, 2011; DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011). Thus, we sketch both leader and follower individual differences as antecedents of ELBs. In addition, we examine the role of the social context as an antecedent to ELBs in two ways: first, by leaders reacting to immediate demands of the situation at hand, and second, by leaders learning morally appropriate behaviors from ethical role models in their respective situation. The latter is of particular conceptual interest. Whereas social learning theory has always been one of the conceptual key pillars of ethical leadership research (Brown et al., 2005), it was mainly applied to followers, and how they learn from leaders about expectations related to ethics (Bedi et al., 2016). While this is an important point, we emphasize that leaders also engage in social learning, and that such social learning influences subsequent signaling behavior—a view that is also well established in the evolutionary biology literature (Boulet, Crawford, Charpentier, & Drea, 2010; Wright & Schiestl, 2009). Finally, it is also worth noting that leader behaviors are endogenous (Güntner et al., in press). In this context, frequency, urgency, and legitimacy of stakeholder demands can influence the expression of ELBs.

Leader-specific antecedents. Research focusing on individual differences as antecedents of ethical leadership has mainly examined demographic factors, such as age and gender

(Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011a). Hence, an opportunity exists to expand our knowledge of leader-specific antecedents by studying the role of a broader set of individual differences. For instance, trait honesty could elicit more ethical signals from leaders as could trait empathy (Bedi et al., 2016). The moral emotions components of ELB's are posited to arise from a leader's genetic makeup, childhood experiences and prior exposure to moral and immoral events. Thus, leaders develop the capacity to experience and express moral emotions throughout their lifespan, yet, this innate capacity is first built in via early developmental experiences and social learning. Greenbaum and colleagues (2020) summarized this tendency to experience the moral emotions as a function of genetic predispositions as well as early experiences as follows:

> "These emotions originate from biological hardwiring (e.g., Bloom, 2013; de Waal, 2005; Sagi & Hoffman, 1976), past experiences (Ekman, 1992), and social learning (e.g., Tangney & Dearing, 2002). For example, past research suggests that infants and primates are biologically predisposed to recognize unfair social interactions and to respond with moral emotions and behaviors (e.g., de Waal, 2006; Geraci & Surian, 2011). Additionally, people experience moral emotions when they are victims of mistreatment (e.g., Huang, Greenbaum, Bonner, & Wang, in press). … Finally, as children, individuals are often reprimanded for their behaviors that infringe upon the rights of other people and are taught that moral emotions are an appropriate response (e.g., shame; Lagattuta & Thompson, 2007)."

Follower- (and stakeholder-) specific antecedents. Followers have a pervasive influence on the behavior of leaders (DeRue, 2011), and there is a number of follower-specific antecedents that predict ELBs; the personality and values of followers are a case in point. Notably, if multiple followers have overlapping values, then leaders might be more inclined to

signal these values. For instance, if all followers value universalism, a leader might send more of universalism-related ethical signals. In such cases, there is no tension between conflicting values of followers, and the overlapping values of followers are a positive antecedent of ELBs. When engaging in ethical signaling, however, there might be many cases in which there is no straightforward approach that addresses all parties' values in the same way. For instance, a leader of a sales group has to consider—and in case of conflict, balance—both the interests and values of the one's group members and external stakeholders, such as clients. In other words, there is a tension between the proximal (i.e., group members) and more distant stakeholder (i.e., clients).

According to stakeholder theory, each stakeholder has its own utility function (Harrison et al., 2010), which denotes the interests and preferences, for different work outcomes. Thus, for being ethical leaders and not just leaders who narrowly address the idiosyncratic interests of one stakeholder group, leaders must attend simultaneously to the different interests of the distinct stakeholders. Doing so is not always trivial. There may be times when a signal prioritizes the welfare of a large number of stakeholders (a utilitarian approach) over the rights of an individual stakeholder (a deontological approach). In any case, the interests and values of followers' influence which type and how many ethical signals a leader sends; as such, followers' values are an antecedent of the (presence or absence) of ELB.

Situation-specific antecedents. There are a number of situational factors that influence ethical leader signaling, which manifest as ELBs or limit the use of ELBs. The organizational context likely matters a great deal (e.g., an ethical or unethical context). For instance, in an ethical climate, leaders might send more ethical signals (Cullen, Victor, & Bronson, 1993; Peterson, 2002), and they might do so for two reasons: first, they abide to the social norms prevailing in the context, and second, they learn ethically appropriate signaling by observing

others in their environment. As such, the social learning system, which rests on the observation of others' behavior as well as any associated consequences (Bandura, 1977), is fundamentally embedded in the leader's situation. Conversely, leaders may be hesitant to send ethical signals if they sense that such signals may not be well received. There are moderating factors here, such as a leader's moral identity (Wang & Hackett, in press) where an ethical leader might feel more motivated to engage in costly ethical signaling even at personal expense. Or, a leader may be hesitant to take on such actions especially if s/he worries that such behaviors may be futile.

Thus, leaders engage in social learning when they evaluate ethical signals sent by others in their organizational context and assess the reward and cost of that behavior. Based on this evaluation, the observing leader then either attempts to adopt and replicate the behavior or chooses to send a different signal. For instance, observing that those people signaling respectful treatment actually advance in the organization might increase leaders' inclination to signal respectful treatment themselves. Hence, such an organizational context is a positive antecedent of ELBs. If, by contrast, those signaling non-respectful treatment advance further or more quickly, then social learning of respectful treatment might be impeded, and such a context is a negative antecedent of ethical leadership behaviors. Critically, however, we know that not all observations of the behaviors of others have the same personal relevance for social learning; we learn notably from social role models (Bandura, 1977). Role models are primarily those people through which individuals learn these signals. For instance, leaders may learn ethical signaling via verbal instruction by their role model or by other organizational symbols.

From Ethical Leader Behaviors to Followers' Evaluations

Even though a leader sends an ethical signal, it is not necessarily the case that followers evaluate the signals as such. Thus, future research can explore how followers evaluate leaders'

signals as well as the contingencies between the signal and its evaluation. Role congruence and social identity theory seem to be particularly suitable for such an endeavor, because these two theories specify how people differentially interpret identical behaviors of different people depending on the respective identities and role prescriptions. In addition, attribution theory is pertinent too, because followers form attributions regarding the meaning of the signals being sent (Connelly et al., 2011). And attribution theory explains the process that individuals undergo as they search for explanations of the behavior they observe by inferring the underlying causes (Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002). In the following, hence, we draw on attribution, role congruence, and social identity theories to discuss the influence of the signal itself, signal-follower congruence, and signal-leader congruence on followers' evaluation of the signal.

Features of the signal itself. Connelly et al. (2011) reviewed a number of features of signals that can be sent in a variety of contexts. Perhaps one of the most relevant here is the cost of the signal. Signaling cost often plays an important role in signaling across contexts. The more a leader behavior comes at personal costs, the stronger is the signal. Thus, in the context of ethical leadership this can mean that the more a leader forgoes individual benefits for the sake of other stakeholder groups, the stronger is the signal and the more such a signal leads to an ethical evaluation. This can be juxtaposed with a leader making an ethical decision in which there is no immediate consequence for him or her. An example would be a leader talking about the importance of ethics, but not following through when it counts—that is, engaging in "cheap talk." Thus, the cost in the signal sent likely moderates the evaluations followers make about ELBs (Figure 1a, Box 4). As another example, a leader may be trained to display moral emotions, such as when engaging in emotional labor. After training, such displays may become habit for the leader, but they can also occur naturally as a result of an event. Receivers of such

signals may again judge the honesty of such emotional displays. We encourage future research that examines other attributes of a signal, such as signal observability and reliability.

Signal-follower congruence. The effects of ethical leader behavior are likely also contingent upon follower characteristics (Figure 1a, Box 3), such as follower expectations and social identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brewer & Gardner, 1996), such as followers' moral identities (Wang & Hackett, 2020). This interaction then determines follower's evaluation of the leader's ethics (Figure 1a, Box 4). If a leader signals values that are sacred for a certain social identity, then such signals are interpreted as ethical; social groups regarding these values as undesirable, by contrast, would interpret the signal less favorably. Thus, social identity theory involves individuals' self-concept forming as a result of their knowledge of membership within a social group (or groups) (Tajfel, 1982). This process involves identifying social categories to form evaluations of oneself and others. Signaling theory helps elucidate the process by establishing signals as identifiers of the boundaries of social categories. Once the social category of another person has been identified attributions can then form, such as the moral intentions of their behavior. Other individual differences, such as a self-serving bias may also influence whether or not a follower perceives or evaluates a leader as ethical. That is, a leader may engage in ELBs, but a follower may not perceive the leader's behavior or may not evaluate the leader as ethical because of biases, such as a self-serving bias.

Signal-leader congruence. Finally, signal-leader congruence can also matter as followers attempt to evaluate ELBs. For instance, if a signal is congruent with a leader's past actions, the signal might be evaluated as more ethical. In addition, early studies assessed attributions about the leader as to the causes of follower behavior (Green & Mitchell, 1979). There is some research building on this early work, which consistently found that attributions are

systematically related to followers' evaluating leaders and subsequently adjusting their behavior (Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002). In other words, leader behavior, but also characteristics innate in the leader, provide informational cues that followers use to form attributions about the cause of the leader's behavior, and which thus influence the evaluation of the leader.

Another example of the importance of signal-leader congruence is the role of gender in ethical leadership signaling. It is not yet clear if men and women signal ethics differently and if there are differences in how followers perceive and evaluate ethical signals sent by male leaders versus female leaders. However, role congruence theory suggests that followers may have different expectations for male and female leaders (Ritter & Yoder, 2004). As such, male or female leaders' ethical signals may be evaluated differently to the extent that these signals are consistent with followers' expectations for that leader. Thereby, expected gendered behaviors in leadership positions have been linked to two attributes: communal and agentic (Bakan, 1966; Eagly, 1987). Communal attributes are concerned with the welfare of others and are by and large associated with women. Agentic attributes are concerned with assertiveness, controlling, and confidence which is associated mostly with men. Hence, women may be evaluated more ethically if they signal in a communal manner, whereas men might be evaluated more ethically if they signal in an agentic manner. Consequently, these expectations could be an additional constraint that female leaders face compared to male leaders.

We summarize the overall phenomena in Figure 1a from ELBs (i.e., leader signaling) to followers' evaluations of the leader's ethics, and the contingency factors as Step 1 in the individual-level ethical leadership model. It should be noted that the conceptualization and measurement of ELBs (Figure 1a, Box 2) and follower's evaluation (Figure 1a, Box 4) are typically lumped together into one concept according to the conceptualizations listed in Table 1

(Brown et al., 2005; Yukl et al., 2013). Not only does this model separate out the behavior and evaluation concepts, it allows for the previously untheorized contingency factors (Figure 1a, Box 3) to begin to be hypothesized and tested.

From Ethical Evaluations of Signals to Follower Behaviors and Group Performance

We now transition to a discussion of how evaluations of ethical signals may influence follower behaviors and group performance. In general, followers who interpret a leader's signal as ethical should be more inclined to act ethically themselves. However, just as for the antecedents of ethical leader signals, the response of followers likely has some additional, potential moderating antecedents. Furthermore, ethical follower behaviors should affect the performance of the group or even the organization. In particular, ethical behaviors that are well aligned with the group and organizational climate might be particularly performance enhancing. Thus, there are likely again moderating variables. Follower-centric individual differences (e.g., honest followers might act more ethically) and situation-specific factors, such as organizational climate (e.g., in an ethical climate, followers might act more ethically) are all possible moderators. Again, future research should explore these relationships.

Furthermore, followers' evaluations of leader signals have their own causal implications. Ultimately, ELBs can unfold a positive effect on followers only if followers actually evaluate these signals as ethical; it is the interpretation of the signal that matters (Connelly et al., 2011; Gioia, Hamilton, & Patvardhan, 2014). Such an insight is also in line with research on ethical role models. Brown and Treviño (2014) demonstrated that those people who had more leaders in the past whom they evaluated as ethical, are evaluated as behaving more ethically themselves. Supposedly, hence, there is a positive spillover effect of ethical behavior. Such a positive spillover effect is strongly rooted in social exchange theory, which argues, among other things,

that people behave based on the principle of reciprocity and the subjective expectations of other people's behaviors (Blau, 2017 [1964]). Social exchange theory connects interactions between individuals with what they expect to receive from the interaction (Blau, 1968). Over time, these exchanges generate unspecified obligations which form the basis of the associated expectations (Emerson, 1976). For instance, stakeholders might reciprocate signals of ethical leadership, developing a social exchange among the leader and stakeholders. Thus, in line with social exchange theory, followers who evaluate their leaders as ethical will reciprocate by behaving ethically in the workplace too.

The (imperfect) intention-behavior linkage. There is no one-to-one correspondence between evaluating one's leader as ethical and behaving ethically oneself. Social psychology is replete with examples in which people violate even such basic norms as reciprocity; that is, norms are strong but not deterministic predictors of behaviors (for an overview, see Ross & Nisbett, 2011). Likewise, there is no one-to-one correspondence between people's ethical attitudes, intentions and behaviors. Evaluating a leader as ethical might trigger ethical behavior intentions among followers. But whereas intentions are strong predictors of behaviors, there are also suppression factors that can block such a link; an example is lack of perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991; Madden, Ellen, & Ajzen, 1992).

The (again imperfect) follower behavior-performance linkage. It might appear self-evident that more ethical follower work behaviors lead to more ethically desirable work performance. Indeed, often follower behaviors are treated as facets of leader performance (Hiller, DeChurch, Murase, & Doty, 2011). In addition, negative work behaviors such as stealing immediately hurt performance, whereas positive work behaviors such as helping colleagues increase performance (c.f. Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2017). Nevertheless, we have

known for decades that there are pervasive unanticipated and unintended consequences of people's behaviors (Boudon, 2016 [1981]; Merton, 1936). Recently, Sezer, Gino, and Bazerman (2015) outlined this logic in the moral domain too. People have ethical blind spots and there can be unintentional immoral consequences of people's behaviors; well-intended behaviors can turn out to be harmful. Ethical blindness is rooted in people's individual differences and work context (Palazzo, Krings, & Hoffrage, 2012). Thus, taken together, on average ethical follower behaviors lead to ethically favorable performance outcomes, but multiple factors can moderate such a link.

Emergence of ELB at the Dyadic and Group levels. Leadership is inherently a multi-level phenomenon. Yet, while other leadership models and reviews have progressed somewhat in advancing and testing multilevel implications (Dionne et al., 2018; Gooty, Serban, Thomas, Gavin, & Yammarino, 2012), the domain of ethical leadership has witnessed a slower progression on the Levels front. For example, in a state of the science review of all leadership theories conducted by Dionne and colleagues (2014), it was reported that roughly 30% of all ethical leadership works invoke a Levels perspective. Here, we explicitly address the dyadic and group level extensions of the newly developed concept of ELB as shown in Figure 1b.

[Insert Figure 1b about here]

A handful of studies have examined ethical leadership at group and organizational levels of analyses. For now, we note that there is little to no discussion, however, on how ethical leadership in general and ELB as introduced here (Figure 1b, Box 2) in particular emerges at the dyad (leader-follower relationship) and at the group levels (collection of followers reporting to the same leader). Admittedly, the multi-level implications of ELB's could be extended to collectives (see Dionne et al., 2018 for an example), but, in the interest of parsimony we only

present arguments for the emergence of ethical behavior at the dyadic and group levels for leaders as well as followers.

These emergence processes begin after the display of leader ELB signals (prosocial values plus moral emotions) at the individual level. The witnessing of such signals elicits attributions in each individual follower (Figure 1b, Box 4a). Such attributions are *effortful* and *conscious* processing of both what the leader is saying as well as what the leader displays (e.g., guilt, awe, gratitude). There is, however, another path here as well that is depicted in Box 4b that is follower's automatic contagion processes. Very simply, the moral emotions as signals could be deciphered via an effortful route as in 4a or an automatic, mimicry process of 4b (see also Dionne et al., 2018).

Drawing upon the social informational processing lens for the more effortful route, these signals (via prosocial values and moral emotions) serve as cues for follower (s) on what is important and how the leader feels regarding key work phenomena. This sets in motion sensemaking processes where a dyad (i.e., a leaders and follower) and the group (e.g., a leader and multiple followers) unpack the information contained in these cues. At the dyad level, this could result in two different forms of ethical behaviors for leaders and followers. Dyadic ELB is defined as the degree to which a leader and follower converge and have similar perceptions of the *leader's* ELBs (Figure 1b, Box 9). Such convergence occurs via shared prosocial values and moral emotions either via effortful processing or simple mimicry and contagion of the moral emotions. Dyadic ethical follower behavior is the degree to which they converge regarding follower ethical behaviors. The emergence of dyadic ELBs or ethical follower behaviors (EFBs) is thus not guaranteed, and, contingent upon *shared* sensemaking and contagion processes.

Two key points to note here: First, such convergence or similarity is at the core of all relationships (work and non-work) in many other domains (e.g., value fit, personality, motives, goals etc.). We suspect that the extent to which leaders and followers agree that the leader displayed ELBs, a coalesced dyadic ELB concept emerges and thus has downstream consequences for each individual's and dyad's outcomes such as trust, voice behavior in the dyad, psychological safety, and turnover (Figure 1b, Box 10) (for reviews of the importance of shared realities to relationships at the dyad level see Gooty, Thomas, Yammarino, Kim, & Medaugh, 2019; Gooty & Yammarino, 2016; Hardin & Conley, 2000).

Second, the emergence of EFB has received much less attention in general (despite reference to it at the individual-level in Brown & Treviño, 2006) and even less so at the dyad level. Much like dyadic ELB, here, we suggest dyadic EFB is defined as both party's convergence in perceptions of the follower's ethical behavior (Figure 1b, Box 11). This is an important outcome of ELB at the individual- and dyadic-levels. The leader thus serves as a role model and a sense-making agent that then encourages followers to behave more ethically as well. Further, since this is not simply one party's perception, it creates a foundation of shared reality regarding ELBs and EFBs for the relationship.

Turning to the group level, the sensemaking processes that ensue are somewhat different in that multiple followers attempt to decipher the ELBs and these perceptions will vary despite all being exposed to the exact same stimuli (i.e., ELBs). As such, we define group-level ELBs as the degree to which followers share perceptions regarding leader ELBs. A leader who conveys very strong ELBs and is consistent in those signals probably engenders higher convergence in followers whereas leaders that display weak signals (e.g., a leader who espouses prosocial values but does not engage in prosocial conduct or does not display moral emotion) engender scattered

(dispersed) perceptions of group ELBs (Figure 1b, Box 12). In addition, if the conditions are not ideal for shared sensemaking or mimicry/contagion processes to occur (e.g., geographically distant teams), the emergence of ELB at the group level is doubtful.

That is the emergence of convergence (or dispersion) is also contingent on internal processes in the group that could affect sensemaking such as personalities, motives, prior history with the leader, proximity, emotional contagion, mimicking and interpretation of moral emotions (e.g., Dionne et al., 2018) and so on. Upon emergence of such group ELB, it sets the tone for ethical climate (Figure 1b, Box 13) in the group as well as group outcomes (Figure 1b, Box 14). Note that group ELBs simply refer to the entire group's shared perception that a leader displays ELBs or not. Ethical climate is derived from such perceptions and it captures how much the group (as a whole not just the leader) values ethical behavior and conduct. As we conclude the current article, we now transition to a discussion of methodological recommendations for future research.

Methodological recommendations for future research

In the previous sections, we outlined that ethical leadership conflates leader behaviors with follower evaluations, and that such conflation impedes causal inferences. Thereby, conflation is a theoretical problem, but has negative consequences for the interpretability of empirical research too. Hence, future research should simultaneously improve both theory and measurement of ethical leadership. For this purpose, we will present suggestions for more rigorous empirical work on ethical leadership along four lines. We summarize these recommendations in Table 5.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

First, we need observational studies that provide accurate descriptions of ELBs in organizations; that is, we need naturalistic observations of leaders in situ. However, because the typical leadership study uses subjective questionnaire measures (Bedi et al., 2016; Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007), and because these questionnaires mix leader behaviors and follower evaluations (see, e.g., Brown et al., 2005), most current research does not provide an accurate description of ELBs. According to the measure of Brown et al. (2005), for instance, ethical leaders make "fair and balanced decisions" (p. 125). However, it is unclear which leader decision is fair to all stakeholders if there are conflicting stakeholder demands; and such situations are standard business cases (Freeman, Wicks, & Parmar, 2004). Thus, measuring the fairness of decisions—as done by Brown et al. (2005)—does not capture actual leader behaviors.

Consequently, and second, we need to measure leader behaviors and decisions objectively. Whereas the use of subjective questionnaires is standard research practice (Antonakis, 2017; Fischer et al., 2017; Hunter et al., 2007), there are rigorous alternatives too. For instance, already decades ago, Bales (1950) developed a procedure for objectively coding behavior in small group interaction, and Bales and Isenberg (1982) outlined how to use that procedure for studying leadership. In addition, recently Antonakis and colleagues suggested an objective method for coding a leader's charisma (Antonakis et al., 2016; Antonakis, Fenley, & Liechti, 2011); and Garner, Bornet, Loupi, Antonakis, and Rohner (2019) implemented the idea of coding charisma in a self-learning algorithm. Furthermore, selected research in related fields of organizational behavior demonstrates that there are concept-specific ways of capturing objective behaviors; measuring employee theft instead of using questionnaires of counterproductive work behavior is a case in point (Greenberg, 2002).

Third, a particularly useful method for studying ethical leadership is experimentation. Whereas naturalistic observations matter because they describe reality, experimentation is helpful for two reasons: a) randomized experiments are the gold standard for causality in empirical research, because they avoid endogeneity bias (Antonakis et al., 2010), and b) randomized experiments allow testing single theoretical mechanisms in an isolated manner with high precision (Zelditch, 2014). Thus, experiments are instrumental for both empirical and theoretical advancement; and there is already experimental research on ethical leadership that can serve as best-practice (e.g., Stouten, van Dijke, Mayer, De Cremer, & Euwema, 2013).

Fourth, our reconceptualization of ethical leadership outlines the time-sensitive nature of the concept. Hence, ethical leadership research needs to model the role of time correctly; that is, such research needs correctly modeled, repeated measures of leader behaviors, antecedents and consequences. The reason is that cross-sectional research implicitly assumes temporal stability of the antecedent-outcome relationship (Fischer et al., 2017), and that such stability is not a given for ethical leadership. For instance, across time, ethical leaders might behave differently in identical contexts if they engage in social learning; and followers might decode identical ethical signals differently if these followers gather more information about the leader. Therefore, correctly modeled repeated measures are necessary for accurate causal inference (Fischer et al., 2017).

Future Directions

A few directions for future research emerged from our review that we deem particularly important. First, our proposed conceptualization of ELB is heavily dependent on signaling theory. While signaling theory is a useful framework for advancing the study of leadership behaviors, it focuses largely on the signaler and the signaling content. This theoretical focus is

both a strength and a limitation; it is precise and rigorous but also somewhat narrow in focus. Therefore, we presented our theoretical models (Figure 1a and 1b) as well as the theories reviewed in Table 3, which point to other useful theories that might complement signaling theory. Moreover, we see promise in studying more explicitly the role of followership and its relevance for signaling theory. Recent work by Bastardoz and Van Vugt (2019) suggested conditions under which followers are willing to give up autonomy and potentially reduce their focus on personal goals. In turn, a positive consequence of followers' reduced focus on personal goals is the promotion of cooperation and coordination, which can produce a collective, and potentially ethical, benefit for a broad group of stakeholders. This occurs, in part, after followers receive and favorably interpret signals sent by [ethical] leaders. Such signals can convey an image of leader competence, and in the case of ethical leaders, strong morals on the side of the leader to the benefit of followers and other stakeholders. We encourage future research to continue to explore other theoretical frameworks, such as that by Bastardoz and Van Vugt (2019). That is, we hope that the framework presented here is not the final conceptualization of ELBs, but a solid starting point on which future scholarship can build upon.

As a second direction for future research, scholars should continue to investigate concerns of concept redundancy in the leadership literature (Banks et al., 2018). Concept redundancy has likely occurred in the area of leadership and other disciplines that are heavily dependent upon cheap and easy to administer questionnaires (Fischer et al., in press). This raises the concern if there is more to leadership questionnaires than an underlying notion of "I like my boss" (Yammarino, Cheong, Kim, & Tsai, 2020). If the answer were "no", then we would have to draw the sobering conclusion that the empirical knowledge base of leadership research is not as rigorous as we might believe it to be. Therefore, we echo calls by Fischer et al. (in press) who

encouraged studying actual behaviors and suggest that such an approach increases rigorous research in several ways, including a mitigation of concept redundancy. Third, a greater focus on behaviors in general might answer the question whether the return on leadership research is worth the efforts (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). In the case of studying ELBs, therefore, we might be finally able to give scientifically rigorous answers about the value of such leadership, and consequently, provide practitioners and policymakers with evidence-based practices that enhance stakeholders' benefits while mitigating personal costs due to unethical behavior.

Conclusion

Ethical leadership has received a great deal of attention recently due to corporate and political scandals as well as a growing recognition that businesses should promote positive outcomes for all stakeholders. In this manuscript, we addressed critical limitations that have obstructed theoretical advancements to ethical leadership research. We did this first through cleaning up the concept space by distinguishing followers' evaluations from ELBs. Then, we presented a new definition for ELB that may help overcome many of the challenges created by previous conceptualizations. Finally, we developed an agenda for future research that we hope will lead ethical leadership toward greater theoretical advancements as well as better training and development for leaders in practice.

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Figure 1a. Dissecting the causal path of ethical leadership

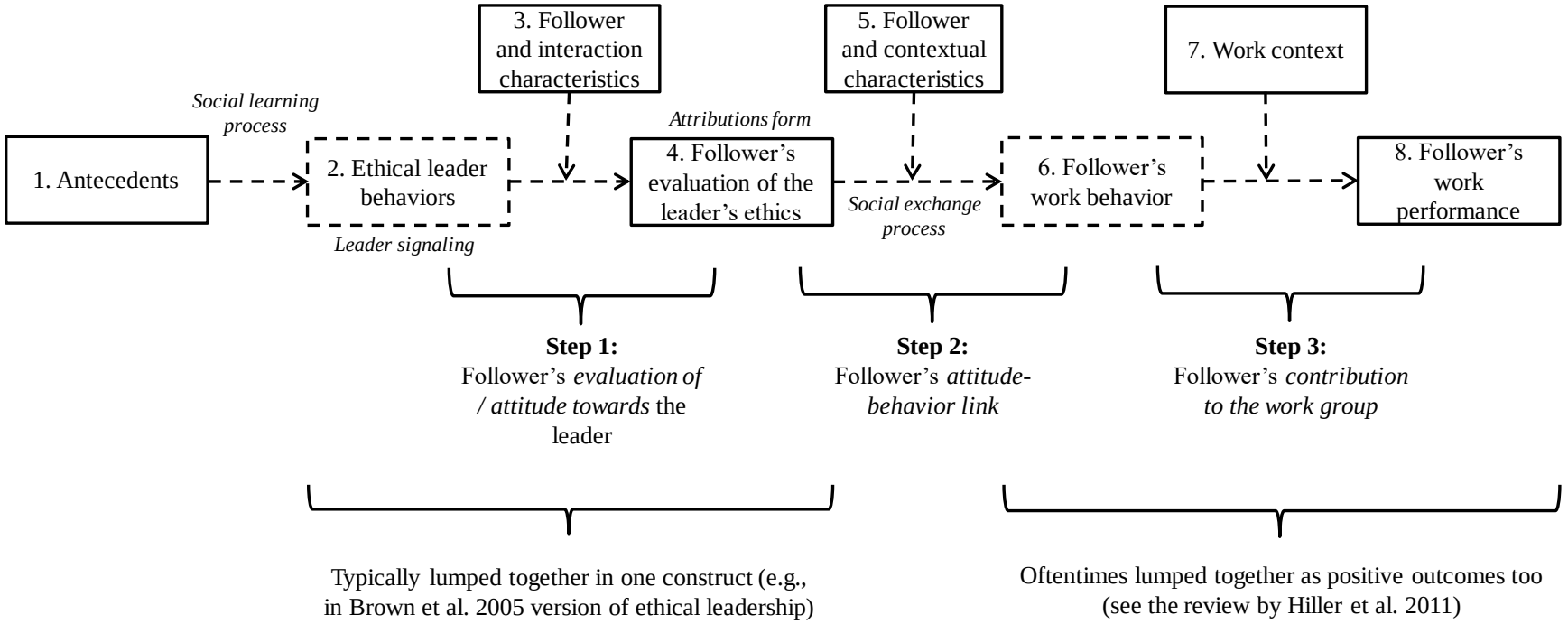

Figure 1b. Multi-level extensions of individual-level ethical leader behavior (ELB)

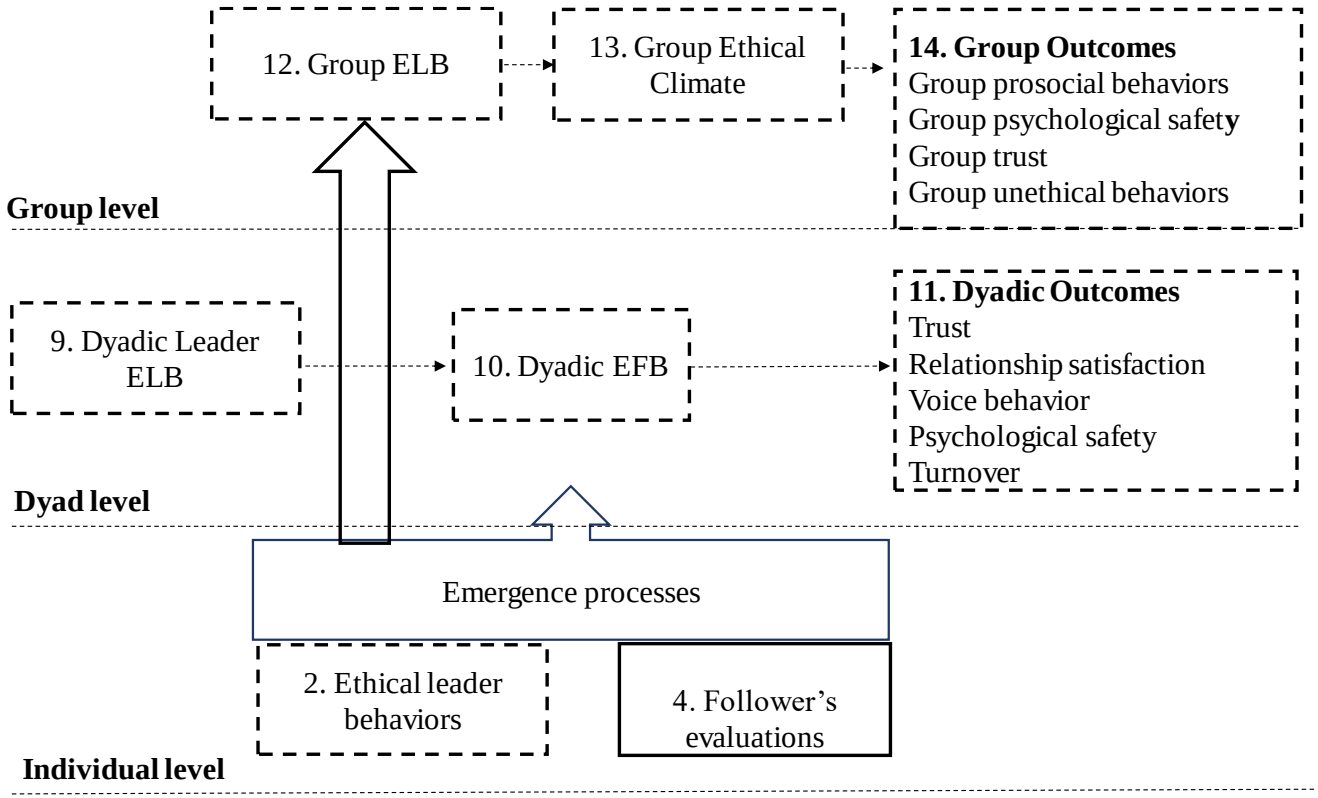

Table 1. A review of ethical leadership definitions and measures

Definitions of ethical leadership	Measures	Preliminary assessment of attribute implied	Theoretical consequence
1. Craig and Gustafson (1998, p. 129): "Rule-based utilitarian approach (Bentham, 1970) labels an act [leader] wrong or unethical if it violates explicit or implicit rules which, if followed by all, would maximize outcomes for the majority of individuals."	**Perceived Leader Integrity Scale (PLSI)** ▪ Example items: (a) Would do things which violate organizational policy and then expect his/her subordinates to cover for him/her; (b) Would limit my training opportunities to prevent me from advancing	Morally appropriate and useful leader behavior	▪ Assumes universal (i.e., utilitarian) approach to normative behavior ▪ Conflates leader behaviors with conforming to / violating appropriate norms
2. **Brown et al. (2005, p. 120)**: Ethical leaders engage in "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."	**Ethical Leadership Survey (ELS)** ▪ Example items: (a) My leader conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner; (b) My leader defines success not just by results but also the way they are obtained.	Morally appropriate and useful leader behavior	▪ Assumes that norms are not contested but taken-for-granted ▪ Conflates leader behaviors with conforming to / violating appropriate norms and(!) positive consequences
3. **Spangenberg and Theron (2005, p. 02)**: "Leadership of ethics comprises the creation and sharing of an ethical vision (based on careful diagnosis of the external and internal environments in which all relevant parties participate); preparing the leader, followers, and the organization - particularly its structures and culture - for implementing the vision; and the actual implementation process itself."	**Ethical Leadership Inventory (ELI)** ▪ Example items: (a) Articulates an ethical vision for the future that provides direction. Inspires confidence in the vision and obtains follower commitment to the vision; (b) Develops a collective ethical vision that inspires people and gives them a sense of purpose, is customer-focused and advances diversity of people.	Ethical vision creation and sharing	▪ Conflates leader behaviors with underlying motives

	Definitions of ethical leadership	Measures	Preliminary assessment of attribute implied	Theoretical consequence
4.	**Riggio et al. (2010, p. 235)**: An ethical leader "is one who adheres to the four cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice."	**Leadership virtue questionnaire (LVQ)** ▪ Example items: (a) Prudence: Does as he/she ought to do in a given situation. (b) Temperance: Seems to be overly concerned with his/her personal power	Values-based leader behaviors	▪ Assumes universal (i.e., virtue-based) approach to normative behavior ▪ Conflates leader behaviors with their underlying virtues
5.	**Kalshoven et al. (2011b, p. 52)**: "A tension between altruistic and egoistic motive."	**Ethical leadership at work questionnaire (ELW)** ▪ Example items: (a) Ethical guidance: Clearly explains integrity related codes of conduct; (b) Integrity: Keeps his/her promises	Values -based leader behaviors	▪ Conflates leader behaviors with their underlying motive / intentions
6.	**(Yukl et al., 2013, p. 38)**: "Ethical leaders engage in acts and behaviors that benefit others, and at the same time, they refrain from behaviors that can cause any harm to others (Kanungo, 2001)."	**Ethical leadership questionnaire (ELQ)** ▪ Example items: (a) My boss: Shows a strong concern for ethical and ethical values. (b) My boss: Communicates clear ethical standards for members.	Benevolence-oriented behaviors; Not causing harm	▪ Assumes universal (i.e., utilitarian) approach to normative behavior ▪ Conflates leader behaviors with benefitting others and avoiding harm
7.	**Langlois et al. (2014, p. 312)**: "ethical leadership is defined as a social practice by which professional judgment is autonomously exercised. It constitutes a resource rooted in three ethical dimensions – critique, care, and justice– as well as a powerful capacity to act in a responsible and acceptable manner."	**Ethical Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ)** ▪ Example item: (a) When I have to resolve an ethical dilemma: I check the legal and regulatory clauses that might apply; (b) When I have to resolve an ethical dilemma: I check my organization's unwritten rules	Values-based leader behaviors (critique, care, and justice)	▪ Conflates leader behaviors with perceptions of conformity to professional standards

Note: Some articles offered more than one definition. If a focal definition was not clear, the first definition introduced is provided above.

Table 2. Attributes of ethical leadership behaviors

Attribute	Theme	Necessary and/or Sufficient
Morally appropriate and useful leader behavior	Signaling behavior	Necessary, but not sufficient
Ethical vision creation and sharing	Signaling behavior	Necessary, but not sufficient
Values-based leader behaviors	Value-based signaling behavior	Necessary, but not sufficient
Benevolence-oriented behaviors; Not causing harm	Prosocial values based signaling behavior	Necessary, but not sufficient
Values-based leader behaviors (critique, care, and justice)	Prosocial values based signaling behavior	Necessary, but not sufficient

Table 3. The role of theories in ethical leadership

Theory	Description
1. Signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1978)	▪ Information asymmetries exist between leaders and followers ▪ Leaders signal via ethical behaviors and characteristics (e.g., moral emotions, such as shame, sadness, or righteous anger) ▪ Followers may have different reactions to ethical signals
2. Stakeholder theory (Harrison et al., 2010)	▪ Stakeholder theory suggests that leaders must develop knowledge of stakeholder utility functions ▪ Ethical leaders must consider both proximal and distal stakeholders
3. Attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980)	▪ Followers form attributions regarding the ethical behaviors by leaders
4. Social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977)	▪ Social learning theory is the process through which leaders learn norms around ethical leadership behavior from social role models
5. Social identity theory (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979)	▪ Social identity mechanisms lead to a different attribution of moral intentions
6. Social exchange theory (P. M. Blau, 1968; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005)	▪ Social exchanges develop as followers respond to ethical leadership behavior (signaling) ▪ Ethical leadership behavior can have beneficial and harmful effects for stakeholders, but overtime should have positive effects in the aggregate
7. Role congruence theory (Ritter & Yoder, 2004)	▪ Followers evaluate behaviors (signals) of leaders in terms of consistencies or inconsistencies for normative expectations. For example, there may be different expectations for female leader behavior than male leader behavior

Table 4. Recommendations for future research on ethical leadership

	Recommendations
Antecedents of ethical leader behaviors	In contrast to most existing research, ethical leadership (i.e., ethical signaling) is not an independent variable. Thus, future research can explore several sets of variables potentially predicting both degree and type of ethical signals that leaders send to followers. Exemplary, potential factors: • Leader-centric: individual differences (e.g., honest leaders might send more ethical signals) and moral identities • Follower-specific: values of followers; notably, if multiple followers have overlapping values, then leaders might be more inclined to signal these values (e.g., if all followers value self-enhancement, a leader might send more such ethical signals) • Situation-specific: organizational context (e.g., in an ethical climate, leaders might send more ethical signals)
From ethical leader behaviors to followers' evaluations	Even though a leader sends an ethical signal (in the form of action or inaction), it is not necessarily the case that followers evaluate the signals as such. Thus, future research can explore the contingencies between the signal and its evaluation. Exemplary, potential factors: • Features of the signal itself (e.g., costly signals might be seen as more ethical) • Signal-follower congruence (e.g., if the follower has values congruent with the signal, the signal might be evaluated as more ethical) • Signal-leader congruence (e.g., if the signal is congruent with a leader's past actions, the signal might be evaluated as more ethical)
From evaluations of ethical leader behaviors to follower behaviors and group performance	In general, followers who interpret a leader's behavior as ethical should be more inclined to act ethically themselves. However, just as for the antecedents of ethical leader behavior, the response of followers likely has additional, moderating antecedents. Future research might explore them. Exemplary, potential factors: • Follower-centric: individual differences (e.g., honest followers might act more ethically) • Situation-specific: organizational context (e.g., in an ethical climate, followers might act even more ethically) Furthermore, ethical follower behaviors should affect the performance of the group or even the organization. In particular, such ethical behaviors that are well aligned with the group and organizational climate might be particularly performance enhancing. Again, future research could explore these relationships.

Table 5. Methodological recommendations for the study of ethical leadership

Methodological recommendations	Description
1. Employ observational studies	▪ Observational studies provide accurate descriptions of ethical leader behaviors in organizations. ▪ The causal inference of observational studies is limited, in particular if leader behaviors are measured by subjective questionnaire ratings.
2. Measure behavior	▪ Behavior of leaders can be measured using objective measures, such as video recordings where behaviors are objectively coded by humans or machine learning (ML) algorithms. The content of communications can also be objectively coded by humans or ML algorithms. ▪ Behaviors of followers can be measured using objective measures of task performance (e.g., productivity), counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., incidents of theft), or citizenship behaviors (e.g., volunteer hours).
3. Use experiments	▪ Experiments avoid endogeneity bias and thus allow for stronger causal inferences. ▪ Experiments allow testing single theoretical mechanisms in an isolated manner and high precision.
4. Consider levels of analysis	▪ Experience sampling methods (ESM) can be used to capture differences at intra- and inter-individual-levels of analysis. ▪ Dyadic relations also need to be considered using leader-follower pairings. ▪ Groups/organizations provide the context for leadership and can affect both leader behaviors and the effectiveness of such behaviors.
5. Account for time scales	▪ The time scale of the phenomenon of interest needs to be considered (e.g., momentary, daily, yearly, career). ▪ Longitudinal designs can be utilized, but even cross-sectional data collections should account for time scales and ensure alignment between theory and methods.