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BETWEEN MORALITY AND PERSONALITY: INTEGRATING ETHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

This article proposes an integrative theoretical analysis of the moral and psychological leadership fundamentals, building on the assumptions of two referrals papers: “Ethical Leadership: A Review and Future Directions” (Brown & Treviño, 2006) and “What We Know About Leadership” (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). The research compares the two major perspectives on leadership – the ethical one, based on normative behavior and moral influence, and the other one, psychological, building on personality and social adaptation – in order to emphasize their complementarity in explaining and understanding effective leadership.

While ethical leadership focuses on the way in which leaders influence organizational moral behaviour through their personal example, communication, and normative reinforcement, the theory of Hogan and Kaier explains why certain personality traits (like emotional stability, consciousness, or empathy) foster ethical behaviours and leadership performance. Integrating the two approaches contributes to the understanding of effective leadership as simultaneously being a moral and psychological process: morality guides leaders' actions, while personality sustains consistency and stability.

The article proposes a three-level conceptual model: intrapersonal (character and personality), interpersonal (moral behaviour and influence), and organizational (ethical culture and collective results), offering thus a valuable framework for future research regarding the interdependence between personality, ethics, and leadership performance.

Keywords: ethical leadership, personality, organizational culture, character, social influence, values

1. Introduction

Leadership emerged as a widely analyzed concept of paramount importance in management, psychology, and sociology, and is frequently addressed in human resources practice, given the fact that previous studies have shown the relationship between leadership and a series of organizational aspects, such as performance, well-being, and organizational success in general (Northouse, 2018). Organizations and society are confronted with several ethical challenges, like scandals, corruption, and public mistrust in leadership at various levels. In the context of exposed corporate misconduct and declining trust in institutions, questions on how leaders can act ethically and be performant have become more urgent than ever. Frequently associated with vision, empowerment, ethics, direction, and support, the desirable leadership styles are more prevalent in recent literature, based on their relevance and necessity in uncertain contexts, sometimes defined by precarity, volatility, or fierce competition. Among the leadership styles defined as positive are the transformative, ethical, servant, and authentic ones, which are seen as determining desired organizational outcomes, such as engagement, motivation, and trust (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Brown & Treviño, 2006).

The moral dimension of leadership is also receiving much attention, from both psychology and management studies, being considered the foundation of ethical behaviour, organizational culture, honest decision-making processes or functional and balanced human relationships. Despite the growing research interest in ethical leadership and effective leaders' personality, the literature remains fragmented. Trying to understand how, in some circumstances, leadership can contribute to moral and efficient organizations, while in other cases fails to do so, this paper sets out to explore how ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006) and personality-based leadership (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005) approaches address this issue. The article aims to compare and integrate the two models, emphasizing common characteristics, differences, and theoretical implications, answering the

following research question: How can moral fundamentals (normative ethics) and the psychological ones (personality, character) be reconciled in understanding effective leadership?

2. Conceptual framework

Ethical leadership – a normative and relational model

Ethical leadership theory is rooted in moral philosophy, particularly virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism or utilitarian reasoning. Integrating these three major perspectives offers a solid base for understanding contemporary ethical leadership conceptualizations. Leaders could be thus evaluated based on their character (virtue ethics), but also by respecting moral principles (deontology) and by the positive impact of their actions on organizations or communities (consequentialism). In this way, ethical leadership theory becomes an intersection space for moral philosophy, organizational psychology, and managerial practice. These traditional approaches inform how scholars conceptualize moral behavior, motivation, and responsibility in leadership contexts.

Ethical leadership was conceptualized as a particular form of moral influence exercised in an organizational context (Ciulla, 2018). Although moral values were generally associated with the idea of leadership, a systemic definition of ethical leadership as a theoretical model was proposed relatively recently. Ethical leadership emerged in the early 2000s as a distinct construct within organizational behavior, focusing on leaders who demonstrate normatively appropriate conduct and promote ethical behavior among followers (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Seen as a normative and relational model, ethical leadership was defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005: 120).

This approach encompasses both behavioral and relational aspects, and values serve as the foundation for ethical decision-making and moral influence. Ethical leadership involves not only adhering to moral norms but also embodying and enacting shared values that sustain organizational integrity. Brown and Treviño (2006) portray ethical leaders as both a moral person and a moral manager, leading to trust, prosocial actions, and decreased deviance. Their model emphasizes the observable behaviors of ethical leaders, including fairness, communication, and reinforcement of ethical standards. According to this perspective, ethical leadership is defined as a bidimensional construct, based on the two complementary components: the moral person who demonstrates integrity, honesty, and equity regarding their own behavior, and the leader as a moral manager, who transmits, models, and rewards ethical behaviors inside the organization (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Consequently, ethical leadership goes beyond the simple conformation to rules or codes of conduct, becoming an active process of modelling moral norms through example and authentic communication. From a communicative standpoint, it has been argued that any act of leadership entails a performative moral dimension (Vlăduțescu, 2019), insofar as the leader’s message not only transmits information but also exercises a form of symbolic power. Ethical leadership, therefore, involves not merely moral intent but also discursive responsibility — the strategic use of communication to construct and sustain fairness and trust within the organization.

Recent empirical research continues to demonstrate that ethical leadership produces prosocial and constructive behavioral outcomes in organizations. Beyond its effects on trust, fairness, and reduced deviance, ethical leadership also stimulates voluntary and value-driven behaviors among employees. For instance, Nwanzu & Babalola (2025) found that ethical leadership fosters employees’ voluntary pro-environmental behaviour through the mechanism of psychological ownership, showing how moral influence extends beyond interpersonal relationships to broader organizational citizenship intentions. These findings reinforce the idea that ethical leadership is not limited to enforcing formal ethical standards, but actively nurtures intrinsic moral motivation that shapes discretionary and socially responsible actions.

Taken together, ethical leadership emerges as a complex and relational construct that integrates personal dimensions (the leader’s character), normative dimensions (moral principles), and organizational dimensions (communication processes and ethical culture). When these dimensions intersect, ethical leadership becomes an expression of institutional morality in practice — a continuous process of cultivating values that promote dignity, accountability, and mutual trust across organizational life.

Furthermore, ethical leadership conceptually distinguishes itself from other forms of moral ruling, like servant, authentic, or transformational leadership, by the accent on normative responsibility and procedural justice (Treviño, Brown & Hartman, 2003). If transformational leadership focuses on emotional and motivational mobilization of the members of the organization, and authentic leadership emphasizes the congruence between leaders’ values and actions, ethical leadership focuses on what is morally correct regarding organizational decisions and in treating people.

Although conceptually clear and with a strong empirical base, this framework is limited by its managerial orientation. Furthermore, individual differences are neglected and observable conduct is of first importance, risking reducing ethics to compliance and role modelling.

Leadership as an expression of personality: an adaptive psychological framework

Complementary to this approach, leadership was also conceptualized as the expression of personality through an adaptive-psychological model (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). In their ample and critical review of empirical literature on personality, leadership, and organizational effectiveness, Hogan & Kaiser (2005) argued that leadership is one of the most important but frequently misunderstood phenomena in the social sciences. The authors formulate three fundamental statements according to which leadership is a real and consequential phenomenon, significantly impacting teams' performance and the quality of life for the subordinates. Secondly, leadership is based on group dynamics, representing an adaptive function needed for the collective survival of the species. Their third thesis stipulates that personality predicts leadership, or in other words, people lead according to their characteristics. Prosperity and cohesion are seen as outcomes of "good" leadership, while "bad" leadership, also called toxic, destroys and brings distress. From this perspective, leadership is not only an organizational process, but a moral force that can determine social good or bad.

This evolutionist perspective considers that people have evolved as social beings living in groups, where survival is determined by cooperation and coordination. Therefore, leadership is an adaptive mechanism aiming to solve two major problems of living in a group: "getting along" and "getting ahead", an efficient leader being the one who has the capacity to build and maintain performant teams (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Another important aspect of this approach is the description of the leader's personality as two-faced: identity, how the individual perceives himself, and reputation, how others perceive him. More than that, they discuss the "bright" side and the "dark" side of the leader's personality. Reputation has a bright side, namely those desirable features noticeable in positive contexts (extraversion, conscientiousness, emotional stability) and a dark side, describing those dysfunctional tendencies which appear in stressful conditions (narcissism, paranoia, rigid perfectionism). The dark side of the personality is often responsible for managerial failure, because these leaders may seem charismatic and competent, but, in time, they destroy trust and team cohesion (Hogan & Hogan, 2001).

The adaptive-psychological model (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005) has the advantage of being developed on solid empirical evidence, offering clear performance predictions. On the other hand, the approach is rather descriptive, lacking the normative perspective, showing how effective leaders should be.

A critical integrative analysis: leadership as a moral-psychological process

The above-described perspectives have some convergence points, stating that leadership is essentially moral and depends on the leader's character. While the personality offers the psychological substrate for morality (Hogan & Kaiser) through empathy, self-control, and emotional stability, ethical leadership (Brown and Treviño) offers the behavioral and social mechanisms through which morality becomes a visible influence. This integrative view is further reinforced by recent work from D'Amato, Murugavel, Medeiros, & Watts (2024), who piloted an assessment center to measure and develop both the "moral person" and "moral manager" dimensions of ethical leadership. Their study demonstrates that ethical leaders can be assessed and cultivated in a structured organizational context, strengthening the argument that leadership is not only a matter of stable traits but also of practiced moral reasoning and relational influence. This supports the concept of leadership as a dynamic moral-psychological process, rooted in both inner character and socially mediated behavior.

A broader and more nuanced understanding of leadership can be achieved by integrating the two perspectives and conceptualizing leadership as a multilevel organizational process. At the intrapersonal level, leadership is grounded in the leader's character and personality, which shape moral identity, emotional regulation, and the capacity for ethical judgment. These internal dispositions form the psychological foundation upon which all subsequent leadership behaviors rest. At the interpersonal level, leadership becomes visible through moral behaviour and ethical communication — the ways in which leaders interact with followers, model integrity, frame decisions, and use discourse to foster trust, fairness, and mutual respect. Finally, at the organizational level, leadership extends beyond individual actions to influence the development of an ethical culture and the achievement of collective results. Here, leaders shape norms, practices, and institutional values, creating contexts that either support or hinder employees' well-being, motivation, and long-term career sustainability. Integrating these three levels allows leadership to be understood not merely as a set of individual traits or behaviors, but as a dynamic moral-psychological process embedded within the broader social fabric of the organization. For example, a leader with a stable personality and internalized moral values (bright side) is expected to shape

subordinates' ethical behaviours, leading thus to a positive organizational climate, defined by reciprocal trust and cooperation.

3. Discussion and future directions

Values represent the moral and cognitive nucleus of leadership. They guide decisional processes, determine organizational priorities, and define how leaders and the members of the organization interpret the concepts of good, correctness, and responsibility. Values represent not only individual beliefs, but shared cultural structures, offering coherence and sense to collective actions. Values act as trans-situational principles that express universal motivations like honesty, correctness, responsibility, and respect (Schwarz, 1992). In the context of leadership, such values become standards in evaluating moral conduct and for building an ethical organizational culture. Recent research further shows that ethical leadership strengthens employees' sense of belonging and psychological safety, which in turn enhances creativity, especially when supported by an ethical organizational climate (Whang & Chen, 2025). These findings highlight that values are not merely individual moral standards but relational and organizational forces that shape collective outcomes. Therefore, ethical leadership is defined not only by personal virtue but by contextual sensitivity and the ability to cultivate environments that support dignity, responsibility, and shared meaning.

Ethical leaders assume a double role: value-kippers, through their own behavior, and values mediators, through communication and decision-making processes. They transform personal and collective values into organizational norms, offering a moral framework that guides employees' behaviors. For example, Brown and Trevino (2006) argued that ethical leaders shape desired behaviors through social learning processes, where subordinates imitate and internalize the values promoted by those leaders perceived as moral.

From a more applied perspective, Stănescu (2023) draws attention to the fragility of moral values in an informational environment increasingly shaped by disinformation and digital manipulation. The importance of transparency and communicational integrity is emphasized as an emergent dimension of ethical leadership, especially in the context of digital media, because leaders are confronted with the pressure of protecting organizational values in the context of informational wars. Other researchers (Porumbescu, 2022) draw upon the contextual and conditioned values character, noticing how unequal resources access, for the immigrants coming to Romania, affects the possibility of actually implementing moral and educational principles. When these perspectives are applied to leadership, it becomes apparent that values are never exercised in a vacuum; rather, their enactment is contingent on the organizational and social conditions that structure particular contexts. Therefore, ethical leadership is defined by both contextual sensitivity and moral reflexivity, adapting values implementation to the cultural and structural organizational context.

Across leadership theories, a consistent theme emerges: ethical leadership involves the moral use of power to serve the collective good. Yet, theories diverge in their assumptions about what "ethical" represents, and it is reflected in leadership behavior. Existing frameworks tend to treat values as static or predefined, rather than socially constructed and context-dependent. Moreover, models remain Western-centric, focusing on rationality and individual morality, rather than relational ethics. A value-based approach to ethical leadership emphasizes moral reflexivity, shared meaning-making, and contextual sensitivity. Leaders co-create ethical norms through dialogue, empathy, and the alignment of personal and organizational values. Ethical leadership is inherently relational and culturally embedded. A value-based framework recognizes that moral legitimacy arises from interactions of trust, respect, and authenticity within diverse contexts.

4. Conclusions

Hogan & Kaiser (2005) argue that effective leadership is not sustained merely by charisma, but is founded on character, competencies, and self-awareness, personality being the most important predictor of leadership success or failure. While effective leaders promote cooperation and collective morality, toxic leaders, who may also appear charismatic, steadily erode organizational trust and, in time, will negatively impact performance. Thus, leadership should be understood not only as a psychological process, but also as a moral and social act, determining communities' prosperity or decline.

Effective leadership is simultaneously defined as moral and psychological. Morality lacking self-control could turn into dysfunctional idealism, while competencies without ethics may lead to manipulation and organizational failure. An integrative model shows how personality sustains ethics, while ethics in turn guides personality in leadership actions.

Synthesizing, the analysis presented above has a dual contribution, both from a theoretical and practical perspective. At the theoretical level, this article emphasized the need to integrate personality psychology and normative ethics in studying leadership. At the practical level, leadership selection and training should combine

selection methods aiming to evaluate personality regarding both the bright side and the dark side, with training focused on ethics, values, and moral norms. What could be considered a limit of the present research, namely the theoretical approach lacking an empirical validation, might be addressed in future research by investigating the relationship between personality, morality, ethical behavior, and organizational performance.

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