The Effect of Employees' Ethical Leadership Prototype on Ethical Leadership Effectiveness: The Mediating Role of Employee Reverence

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Abstract

Drawing on theoretical models of specific positive emotions in the workplace and implicit leadership theory, this study investigates the influence mechanism of ethical leadership on employee job performance, specifically examining the mediating role of awe and the moderating role of employee ethical leadership prototype. Through statistical analysis of empirical data obtained from a questionnaire survey study (193 supervisor-subordinate dyadic data) and two scenario experiments, the results indicate that: ethical leadership positively influences employee awe; awe mediates the positive effect of ethical leadership on organizational citizenship behavior, but the mediating effect on task performance is not significant; moreover, employees' ethical leadership prototype strengthens the positive relationship between ethical leadership and employee awe, such that employees with a high ethical leadership prototype are more likely to experience awe toward ethical leadership compared to those with a low ethical leadership prototype; awe mediates the effect of the interaction between ethical leadership and employee ethical leadership prototype on organizational citizenship behavior.

Full Text

The Impact of Employees' Ethical Leadership Prototype on the Effectiveness of Ethical Leadership: The Mediating Role of Elevation

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Abstract

Drawing on the theoretical model of discrete positive emotions in the workplace and implicit leadership theory, this study investigates the influence mechanism of ethical leadership on employee job performance, specifically examining the mediating role of elevation and the moderating role of employees' ethical leadership prototype. Through statistical analysis of empirical data obtained from a questionnaire survey (193 leader-employee dyads) and two scenario experiments, the results demonstrate that ethical leadership positively influences employee elevation; elevation mediates the positive effect of ethical leadership on organizational citizenship behavior, though the mediating effect on task performance is not significant; moreover, employees' ethical leadership prototype strengthens the positive relationship between ethical leadership and elevation, such that employees with high ethical leadership prototype are more likely to experience elevation toward ethical leaders than those with low prototype; elevation mediates the interactive effect of ethical leadership and employees' ethical leadership prototype on organizational citizenship behavior.

Keywords: ethical leadership, implicit leadership prototype, elevation, task performance, organizational citizenship behavior
Classification: B849: C93

1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a series of corporate scandals stemming from managerial ethical lapses (e.g., Enron, Lehman Brothers, Luckin Coffee), making ethical leadership (EL) a persistent focus of academic and practitioner attention (Carson, 2003; Hoch et al., 2018; Ng & Feldman, 2015). Ethical leadership refers to "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown et al., 2005). As a positive leadership style, ethical leadership not only enhances employees' affective commitment (Neubert et al., 2013), voice behavior (Neubert et al., 2013; Yang & Liu, 2014), and pro-social rule breaking (Xu & Zhu, 2017), while reducing turnover intentions (Ruiz et al., 2011) and counterproductive work behavior (Mayer et al., 2009), but also improves team performance (Tu et al., 2014) and organizational effectiveness (e.g., collective organizational citizenship behavior) (Shin, 2012).

Early research on the positive effects of ethical leadership primarily focused on cognitive explanatory mechanisms such as trust in leaders (from a social exchange perspective; Ng & Feldman, 2015), supervisory ethical leadership (from a social learning perspective; Mayer et al., 2009), and organizational identification (from a social identity perspective; Yang & Liu, 2014). In recent years, a few scholars have begun to explore emotional explanatory mechanisms (e.g., Mao et al., 2020; Velez & Neves, 2018). However, these studies have conceptualized emotions in broad terms rather than as discrete emotions. Many researchers

have pointed out that discrete emotions possess unique effects that cannot be explained by general emotions (e.g., positive affect), as they have more specific triggers and clearer cognitive content (Cropanzano et al., 2003; Vianello et al., 2010). Therefore, we argue that investigating the role of discrete emotions in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee behavior can better reveal the "black box" of this influence process.

Drawing on Hu and Kaplan' s (2015) theoretical model of discrete positive emotions in the workplace, we propose that ethical leadership can elicit a specific emotion toward the leader—elevation (defined as an emotional response to witnessing moral excellence in others; Haidt, 2003)—through demonstrating virtuous moral behavior, thereby enhancing employee performance (e.g., increased organizational citizenship behavior and higher task performance).

Furthermore, Fehr et al. (2015) argue that Brown et al.' s (2005) conceptualization of ethical leadership represents a relatively narrow perspective that captures the most representative behavioral traits of ethical leaders (e.g., concern for employee welfare, trustworthiness, fairness, integrity) (Brown & Treviño, 2006). We refer to the moral behaviors included in this narrow definition as prototypical moral behaviors. However, given individual differences in personality, education, and cultural background, people hold varying cognitions about what constitutes moral behavior (Graham et al., 2013). Some employees may consider fair treatment as moral, while others may not. This depends on individuals' moral foundations. Such differences in moral foundation perspectives manifest in organizational settings as variations in employees' beliefs about what moral behavioral characteristics ethical leadership should encompass (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Treviño et al., 2003) and differences in judgments about whether specific leader behaviors are ethical (Fehr et al., 2015). Therefore, we argue that examining the effectiveness of ethical leadership requires consideration of employees' cognitive differences in evaluating ethical leadership behaviors. Drawing on implicit leadership theory (Lord et al., 1984), we introduce the new concept of employee ethical leadership prototype (ELP) to capture the extent to which employees use prototypical moral behaviors as cognitive schemas for ethical leadership.

Our theoretical contributions are fourfold. First, by drawing on implicit leadership theory, this study attends to employees' cognitive differences in perceiving ethical leadership, enriching research on ethical leadership based on prototypical moral behaviors and providing a new theoretical perspective for future studies on the effects of ethical leadership on employee psychology and behavior. Second, after controlling for positive affect, we find that elevation can still explain the positive effect of ethical leadership on organizational citizenship behavior, demonstrating that this discrete emotion produces unique effects beyond general emotions. Third, by examining the interactive effect of ethical leadership and employee ELP on elevation, we reveal that the generation of elevation depends not only on leaders' moral behaviors but also on employees' cognitive evaluation of those behaviors, further enriching antecedent research on elevation. Finally,

by integrating implicit leadership theory into the ethical leadership framework to examine the moderating role of ELP, we extend the application scope of implicit leadership theory.

1.1 The Mediating Role of Employee Elevation

According to Hu and Kaplan' s (2015) theoretical model of discrete positive emotions in the workplace, employees' emotional states depend on specific work events, particularly the hassles and uplifts they experience daily (e.g., organizational policies, leader behaviors, or differences among employees). Through appraisal of these events, employees develop specific emotional responses that ultimately influence their attitudes and behaviors.

Elevation is an emotional response triggered by witnessing others' virtuous moral behavior (Haidt, 2003). Along with gratitude, it belongs to a class of moral emotions known as other-praising emotions (Greenbaum et al., 2020). Although both are elicited by others' good deeds, elevation differs from gratitude in that individuals experiencing elevation are not direct beneficiaries of the good deeds and typically do not reciprocate to the "benefactor." Instead, they view the benefactor as a role model and emulate them. Previous research has shown that leaders' interpersonal fairness and self-sacrificial behavior can evoke employee elevation (Vianello et al., 2010), and individuals experiencing elevation exhibit prosocial behavior (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Aquino et al., 2011; Vianello et al., 2010).

As a "moral person," ethical leaders possess ethical personal traits such as honesty, integrity, fairness, trustworthiness, and care for employees. Additionally, as moral managers, ethical leaders influence others' moral conduct through communication, rewards, and punishment by making fair decisions, intentionally modeling moral behaviors (e.g., self-discipline, responsibility), emphasizing the importance of ethics to employees, and holding employees accountable for moral behavior through reward and punishment systems while criticizing or punishing unethical behavior (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Treviño et al., 2003). These virtuous qualities and behaviors lead employees to form a holistic perception of the leader' s moral character, thereby identifying with and internalizing the leader' s moral values. Given that elevation is triggered by others' strong displays of virtue, we argue that ethical leadership behaviors can evoke employee elevation toward the leader.

Previous research has also confirmed that even after controlling for individuals' positive affect, witnessing extraordinary acts of kindness can still generate elevation toward others (Aquino et al., 2011).

Moreover, many emotion researchers contend that each discrete emotion triggers specific action tendencies (Frijda, 1987; Lerner et al., 2015). According to Haidt (2003), elevation induces tendencies to emulate moral exemplars and engage in prosocial behavior. This view is supported by prior studies. For instance, Algoe and Haidt (2009) used recall, video induction, diary, and letter-writing meth-

ods to elicit elevation and found that employees experiencing elevation were more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors such as helping others and donating to charities. Additionally, as a positive psychological experience, individuals feeling elevation toward others seek to "approach" them by emulating their behavior (Frijda, 1987). In organizations, when employees feel elevation toward their leader due to the leader' s virtuous moral behavior, they view the leader as a role model and engage in meaningful behaviors to enhance their own morality, such as actively completing work tasks, voluntarily helping colleagues, and defending the organization' s reputation. Consistent with our arguments, Vianello et al. (2010) found that employee elevation is significantly positively correlated with organizational citizenship behavior. In summary, we propose that ethical leadership' s moral behaviors can trigger employee elevation, which in turn motivates employees to achieve task performance and exhibit more organizational citizenship behavior. Based on this, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Controlling for positive affect, ethical leadership positively influences employee elevation.

Hypothesis 2: Controlling for positive affect, employee elevation mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and task performance (H2a) and organizational citizenship behavior (H2b).

1.2 The Moderating Role of Employee Ethical Leadership Prototype

Employee ethical leadership prototype refers to the cognitive schema that employees develop through socialization about the prototypical moral traits or behaviors that ethical leaders should possess. It provides employees with a cognitive foundation for understanding ethical leadership behavior and serves as an "internal tag" for judging whether a leader is ethical (Lord et al., 1984). Employees' cognitive evaluation of leader behavior depends on their moral foundations. According to moral foundations theory (Graham et al., 2013), human morality comprises a set of moral foundations encompassing different values, intuitions, and social practices. The theory divides human morality into six groups: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, and liberty/oppression. As a broad theory of morality, moral foundations theory has special significance for ethical leadership (Weaver et al., 2014). Fehr et al. (2015) argue that the six moral foundations are associated with different leadership styles, with care/harm and fairness/cheating corresponding to ethical leadership. Accordingly, in this study, employees with high ELP define morality using care/harm and fairness/cheating, believing that fair treatment and care for employees are essential behavioral traits of ethical leaders. Conversely, employees with low ELP are more likely to use loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, and liberty/oppression to define morality, viewing organizational loyalty, providing guidance to employees, and empowerment as essential traits of ethical leaders.

Fehr et al. (2015) propose that when employees use a particular moral foun-

dation to define morality, they perceive leader behaviors consistent with that foundation as ethical. Following this logic, for employees with high ELP who expect leaders to treat employees fairly and care for their welfare, when leaders exhibit these prototypical moral behaviors, they identify the leader as ethical. In this case, employees form a favorable impression of the leader (Lord, 1985) and are more likely to view the leader as a role model, thereby triggering elevation toward the leader. However, for employees with low ELP who may consider loyalty as an essential leader trait, when faced with a leader whose primary style is fairness or care for employees, they are unlikely to cognitively categorize the leader as ethical, which reduces the leader' s influence (Lord et al., 1984) and makes it difficult to evoke elevation.

Previous research also indicates that employees prefer leaders who are similar to themselves (Keller, 1999). Based on this, we propose:

Hypothesis 3: Employee ethical leadership prototype moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee elevation, such that the positive relationship is stronger for employees with high ELP than for those with low ELP.

In summary, leaders can evoke employee elevation and subsequently enhance task performance and organizational citizenship behavior by exhibiting prototypical moral behaviors and traits that align with high-ELP employees' expectations. However, this process is less pronounced for low-ELP employees because the leader's prototypical moral behaviors do not match their expectations, which weakens the positive effect of ethical leadership on elevation and inhibits employee task performance and organizational citizenship behavior. Based on this, we propose:

Hypothesis 4: Controlling for positive affect, employee elevation mediates the interactive effect of ethical leadership and employee ethical leadership prototype on task performance (H4a) and organizational citizenship behavior (H4b).

2.1 Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of MBA students from a Chinese university and their employees. The data collection procedure was as follows: First, we recruited 248 MBA students and asked each to select one employee to participate in the survey. We then created an online questionnaire using Wenjuanxing and distributed the link to the MBA students and their employees. To avoid common method bias, we employed a multi-wave, multi-source data collection method. In Wave 1, employees reported their demographic information and rated their perceived ethical leadership behavior and their own ethical leadership prototype, yielding 207 questionnaires. In Wave 2, employees rated their elevation, gratitude, and positive affect over the past month, while their supervisors provided demographic information and rated employees' task performance and organizational citizenship behavior. After matching the two waves of data, we obtained 193 leader-employee dyads. Among the final employee sample, 49.50% were male,

57.61% were under 30 years old, 85.16% had a bachelor' s degree or higher, 36.97% had worked with their supervisor for more than three years, and 57.14% had more than three years of work experience. Among the supervisor sample, 68.10% were male, 48.90% were over 40 years old, 93.37% were married, 27.78% had a bachelor' s degree or higher, and 79.56% had more than three years of work experience.

2.2 Measurement Scales

We adopted established scales developed by foreign scholars. To ensure equivalence with the original scales, we employed a rigorous translation-backtranslation procedure (Brislin, 1980).

Ethical leadership was measured using Brown et al.' s (2005) 10-item scale. Employees rated the extent to which their supervisor' s actual behavior matched descriptions of their department/team leader' s behavior (e.g., "My leader sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics"). The scale used a 5-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach' s was 0.86.

Ethical leadership prototype was measured using the same items as ethical leadership but with different instructions. Rather than rating their supervisor' s actual behavior, employees were asked to rate, based on their own understanding of ethical leadership without being given an explicit definition, the extent to which the described behavioral characteristics matched their ideal ethical leader. This approach has been used in previous implicit leadership theory research (e.g., Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). A sample item was "In terms of ethics, an ethical leader sets an example of how to do things the right way." The scale used a 7-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach' s was 0.90.

Elevation was measured using a single item based on Watson et al.' s (1988) approach to measuring positive and negative affect. Employees rated the extent to which they felt elevation toward their leader during interactions over the past month (1 = not at all, 5 = very much).

Task performance was measured using Bachrach et al.' s (2007) 5-item scale (e.g., "This employee always completes tasks within the scope of his/her job responsibilities"). Supervisors rated employees using a 7-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach' s was 0.84.

Organizational citizenship behavior was measured using Lee and Allen' s (2002) 16-item scale, which includes two subdimensions: OCB directed at individuals and OCB directed at the organization (8 items each). Sample items include "Willing to spend time helping colleagues who have work difficulties" and "Defends the organization when others criticize it." The scale used a 7-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach' s was 0.91.

Control variables. Although elevation is our core mediating variable, previous

research has found that positive affect is an important explanatory mechanism in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee behavior (Velez & Neves, 2018). Therefore, we controlled for employee positive affect using Watson et al.' s (1988) PANAS scale, which includes 10 positive affect items (1 = not at all, 5 = very much; = 0.89). As noted, both gratitude and elevation are other-praising moral emotions triggered by others' good deeds. Thus, we also controlled for employee gratitude as a parallel mediator, measured with a single item asking employees to rate the extent to which they felt gratitude toward their leader during interactions over the past month (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). Additionally, we controlled for employee gender, age, education, leader-employee tenure, and work experience, as these variables have been found to correlate significantly with leadership styles and employee behavior (Chen et al., 2014; Mao et al., 2020).

2.3 Analytical Strategy

We conducted statistical analyses using SPSS 20.0 and Mplus 7.0. First, we used confirmatory factor analysis to examine the discriminant validity among ethical leadership, ethical leadership prototype, positive affect, task performance, and organizational citizenship behavior. Second, we used hierarchical regression analysis to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 and path analysis with bootstrapping to test Hypotheses 3 and 4.

2.4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis We conducted confirmatory factor analysis to assess discriminant validity by comparing the fit of competing models. Given that our five latent variables contained numerous items relative to our sample size, we followed Mathieu and Farr' s (1991) parceling procedure to improve model fit. Specifically, we first conducted exploratory factor analysis for each variable to obtain factor loadings for each item. We then paired the item with the highest factor loading with the item with the lowest loading, the second-highest with the second-lowest, and so on, with remaining items forming a final parcel. After parceling, ethical leadership, ethical leadership prototype, and positive affect were each represented by three parcels. For organizational citizenship behavior, we used its two dimensions as parcels. As shown in Table 1, the five-factor model demonstrated the best fit (2 = 159.96, df = 94, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.06) compared to four alternative models, indicating good discriminant validity among ethical leadership, ethical leadership prototype, positive affect, task performance, and organizational citizenship behavior.

2.4.2 Hypothesis Testing Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations among variables. Ethical leadership was significantly positively correlated with employee elevation (r = 0.46, p < 0.001), and employee elevation was significantly positively correlated with task performance (r = 0.20, p = 0.007) and organizational citizenship behavior (r = 0.30, p < 0.001).

For Hypothesis 1, we predicted that ethical leadership would positively influence employee elevation after controlling for positive affect. As shown in Model 1 of Table 3, ethical leadership had a significant positive effect on employee elevation (B = 0.80, p < 0.001). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

For Hypothesis 2, we predicted that employee elevation would mediate the positive effects of ethical leadership on task performance and organizational citizenship behavior after controlling for positive affect. Following Edwards and Lambert' s (2007) recommendations, we first used path analysis to examine the mediating effect of elevation. Building on the results for Hypothesis 1, Models 5 and 7 in Table 3 show that employee elevation did not significantly affect task performance (B = 0.01, n.s.) but did significantly influence organizational citizenship behavior (B = 0.20, p = 0.037). We then used bootstrapping to test the significance of the indirect effects. The results indicated that the indirect effect on task performance was not significant (indirect effect = 0.01, 95% CI = [−0.161, 0.189]), thus failing to support Hypothesis 2a. However, the indirect effect on organizational citizenship behavior was significant (indirect effect = 0.16, 95% CI = [0.010, 0.338]), supporting Hypothesis 2b.

For Hypothesis 3, we predicted that employee ethical leadership prototype would moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and elevation after controlling for positive affect. As shown in Model 2 of Table 3, the interaction term between ethical leadership and employee ethical leadership prototype was not statistically significant (B = 0.14, n.s.). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was not supported. Consequently, Hypothesis 4, which predicted that elevation would mediate the interactive effect of ethical leadership and employee ethical leadership prototype on performance, was also not supported.

2.5 Discussion (Study 1)

The above results did not confirm the moderating effect of employee ethical leadership prototype. According to our theoretical analysis, moral foundations comprise six groups, and ethical leadership prototype should primarily involve two of them: care/harm and fairness/cheating. Because no established scale exists for measuring individual ethical leadership prototype, we adapted Brown et al.' s (2005) 10-item ethical leadership scale. However, not all items in Brown et al.' s scale relate to the care/harm and fairness/cheating foundations, which may explain why the moderating effect was not supported. To verify this, we examined the association between ethical leadership behaviors and the six moral foundations. We designed a relevance rating scale and invited ten organizational behavior scholars (four assistant professors and six doctoral students) to rate the degree of association between each ethical leadership behavior and the six moral foundations (1 = very small, 2 = small, 3 = moderate, 4 = large, 5 = very large). Using a mean relevance score greater than 3 (moderate) as the criterion, seven items reflected the care/harm and fairness/cheating foundations (= 0.87). Using these seven items to measure ethical leadership prototype, the moderating effect remained non-significant (B = 0.23, n.s.). Using a stricter criterion of

mean relevance greater than 4 (large), four items met the requirement (= 0.73). Using these four items, ethical leadership prototype showed a marginally significant moderating effect (B = 0.28, p = 0.091), and elevation marginally mediated the interactive effect on organizational citizenship behavior (indirect effect = 0.06, 90% CI = [0.001, 0.150], 95% CI = [−0.007, 0.168]), though not on task performance (indirect effect = −0.003, 90% CI = [−0.068, 0.045], 95% CI = [−0.083, 0.058]). These results provide marginal support for Hypotheses 3 and 4.

Another possible reason for the non-significant moderating effect may be our use of a single-item measure for elevation. Additionally, given that the survey is essentially cross-sectional, the findings cannot establish causal relationships. To address these limitations, we designed a scenario experiment and conducted Study 2.

3. Study 2 (Scenario Experiment)

To address the limitations of Study 1 regarding scale selection and research design, we conducted Study 2 with two primary objectives: first, to use multi-item scales to measure employee elevation and gratitude, and second, to replicate our findings.

3.1 Sample and Procedure

We recruited participants from two online survey platforms (Sojump and Credamo). Previous research has shown that this data collection method provides high-quality data and reliable conclusions (Baer et al., 2020; Gerpott et al., 2019). Specifically, we designed a questionnaire that the platforms distributed to participants aged 18 or older who were currently employed. We included three screening questions to exclude careless respondents, and participants received monetary compensation. We collected 200 questionnaires through Sojump (37.50% male, mean age = 29.60, SD = 5.13; 86.50% with bachelor' s degree or higher; mean work experience = 6.20 years, SD = 4.46) and 200 through Credamo (43.00% male, mean age = 30.06, SD = 5.37; 92.00% with bachelor' s degree or higher; mean work experience = 6.62 years, SD = 5.20). Tests revealed no significant demographic differences between the two samples, so we combined them for analysis.

3.2 Experimental Design, Materials, and Procedure

This study employed a between-subjects vignette experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (high ethical leadership vs. low ethical leadership) and read a scenario in which they were asked to imagine themselves as the protagonist. The scenario was adapted from Gils et al. (2015).

After reading the scenario, participants completed a questionnaire measuring the manipulated variable (ethical leadership), core variables (ethical leadership

prototype, elevation, task performance, and organizational citizenship behavior), control variables (positive affect and gratitude), and demographic variables (gender, age, education, work experience). To rule out order effects, half of the participants in each platform rated their ethical leadership prototype before rating ethical leadership, while the other half rated them in reverse order.

3.3 Experimental Manipulation and Variable Measurement

We manipulated ethical leadership by adapting Gils et al.' s (2015) approach, using short vignettes to describe high versus low ethical leadership scenarios composed of items from Brown et al.' s (2005) scale (e.g., "In daily life, Manager Liu's behavior [does not] conform to moral norms"). Study 2 used the same scales as Study 1 for ethical leadership prototype (= 0.83), positive affect (= 0.94), task performance (= 0.92), and the manipulation check for ethical leadership (= 0.98). Elevation was measured using the emotional dimension of Aquino et al.' s (2011) 11-item scale, which includes three adjectives: inspired, awed, and admiring (= 0.95). Organizational citizenship behavior was measured using Liden et al.' s (2004) 3-item scale (e.g., "Under Manager Liu' s leadership, I would voluntarily do things beyond job requirements" ; = 0.91). Gratitude was measured using Sun et al.' s (2019) approach with three adjectives: grateful, thankful, and appreciative (= 0.94). We also controlled for participant gender, age, education, work experience, and rating order. All scales in Study 2 used a 5-point Likert format. Experimental materials and all measurement items are available in the OSF repository.

3.4 Manipulation Check

We used ANOVA to assess the success of the ethical leadership manipulation. The results showed a significant difference between the two conditions, $F(1, 398) = 3888.68$, $p < 0.001$. Ratings of Manager Liu' s ethical leadership behavior were significantly higher in the high ethical leadership condition ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.28$) than in the low ethical leadership condition ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 0.57$), confirming successful manipulation.

3.5 Results

We used Hayes' s (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS to test all hypotheses. The results showed that ethical leadership had a significant positive effect on employee elevation ($B = 2.45$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1.

For Hypothesis 2, we used the same path analysis and bootstrapping approach as in Study 1. The results indicated that elevation did not significantly mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and task performance (indirect effect = −0.15, 95% CI = [−0.465, 0.149]) but did significantly mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behavior (indirect effect = 0.72, 95% CI = [0.406, 1.048]). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported.

For Hypothesis 3, the results showed that the interaction between ethical leadership and employee ethical leadership prototype significantly predicted elevation (B = 0.42, p = 0.003), supporting Hypothesis 3. Simple slopes analysis (Figure 1) revealed that ethical leadership had a stronger positive effect on elevation for employees with high ELP (simple slope = 2.57, $p < 0.001$) than for those with low ELP (simple slope = 2.31, $p < 0.001$). For Hypothesis 4, the results indicated that the interactive effect of ethical leadership and employee ELP on organizational citizenship behavior was mediated by elevation (indirect effect = 0.12, 95% CI = [0.040, 0.231]), but the indirect effect on task performance was not significant (indirect effect = −0.04, 95% CI = [−0.109, 0.016]). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was partially supported.

Study 2' s results demonstrate that ethical leadership can elicit employee elevation, which indirectly influences organizational citizenship behavior but not task performance, consistent with Study 1. Additionally, Study 2 confirmed that employee ethical leadership prototype moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and elevation, showing that ethical leadership more strongly evokes elevation in high-ELP employees, thereby promoting organizational citizenship behavior rather than task performance. Moreover, elevation explained variance beyond positive affect and gratitude, confirming its distinctiveness as a specific emotion.

4.1 Sample and Experimental Design

Consistent with Study 2, we recruited participants through Credamo for Study 3, collecting 200 questionnaires (40.50% male, mean age = 31.60, SD = 5.81; 87.00% with bachelor' s degree or higher). Study 3 modified the manipulation of ethical leadership by changing the negative description in Study 2' s low ethical leadership condition from "does not conform to moral norms" to "sometimes conforms to moral norms," with the high ethical leadership condition described as "always conforms to moral norms." This created "high ethical leadership" versus "low ethical leadership" conditions rather than "ethical" versus "unethical" conditions. The remainder of the experimental design mirrored Study 2. Study 3 used the same scales as Study 2 for ethical leadership (= 0.92), ethical leadership prototype (= 0.71), elevation (= 0.70), task performance (= 0.70), organizational citizenship behavior (= 0.73), and gratitude (= 0.78). Positive affect was measured using Aquino et al.' s (2011) approach with three positive but non-moral emotions: happy, cheerful, and enthusiastic (= 0.79). All scales used a 5-point Likert format. Experimental materials and measurement items are available in the OSF repository.

4.2 Manipulation Check

Study 3 also used ANOVA to test the manipulation. The results showed a significant difference between conditions, $F(1, 198) = 101.39$, $p < 0.001$. Ratings were significantly higher in the high ethical leadership condition (M = 4.33, SD

= 0.34) than in the low ethical leadership condition (M = 3.41, SD = 0.85), confirming successful manipulation.

4.3 Results

Study 3 used the same analytical approach as Study 2. The results replicated Study 2' s findings: ethical leadership positively predicted elevation (B = 0.60, $p < 0.001$); elevation significantly mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behavior (indirect effect = 0.17, 95% CI = [0.053, 0.317]) but not task performance (indirect effect = 0.06, 95% CI = [−0.003, 0.141]); the interaction between ethical leadership and employee ELP significantly predicted elevation (B = 0.74, p = 0.006). Simple slopes analysis (Figure 2) showed that ethical leadership had a stronger effect on elevation for high-ELP employees (simple slope = 0.80, $p < 0.001$) than for low-ELP employees (simple slope = 0.31, p = 0.012). Furthermore, the interactive effect on organizational citizenship behavior was mediated by elevation (indirect effect = 0.17, 95% CI = [0.025, 0.424]), but the indirect effect on task performance was not significant (indirect effect = 0.04, 95% CI = [−0.041, 0.153]). These results partially supported our hypotheses.

By adjusting the experimental manipulation, Study 3 replicated Study 2' s results. Compared to Study 2, Study 3 showed smaller correlations among variables because Study 2' s low ethical leadership condition used negative wording ("does not conform"), creating an "ethical versus unethical" contrast, whereas Study 3' s use of "always" versus "sometimes" created a "high versus low ethical leadership" contrast, yielding more rigorous and reliable results.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

First, our findings contribute to ethical leadership theory. Since its introduction, ethical leadership has attracted considerable scholarly attention, yet most research has examined its effects and antecedents based on Brown et al.' s (2005) original definition, with few studies discussing its connotation. Brown and Treviño (2006) describe ethical leaders as fair, trustworthy, honest, altruistic, and principled decision-makers. However, from a moral perspective, these traits do not encompass all moral qualities. Given individual differences, employees hold varying views on what moral content ethical leadership should include and what behaviors best represent it, leading to differences in judgments about leader moral behavior (Fehr et al., 2015). Therefore, we argue that employee cognitive differences must be considered when evaluating ethical leadership effectiveness. By introducing the concept of employee ethical leadership prototype to capture individual moral values and expectations for ideal ethical leadership, our findings demonstrate that leaders' prototypical moral behaviors enhance employee elevation only when they align with employees' ethical leadership prototypes. This result corroborates Fehr et al.' s (2015) perspective and provides a new theoretical lens for future ethical leadership effectiveness research.

Second, our results show that ethical leadership can promote organizational citizenship behavior by eliciting employee elevation, consistent with Mao et al. (2020), who examined the mediating role of other-praising moral emotions (comprising gratitude and elevation) in the relationship between ethical leadership and prosocial behavior. As noted, while both gratitude and elevation are triggered by others' good deeds, gratitude focuses on whether the individual is a direct beneficiary, whereas elevation focuses on the observed virtuous moral behavior (Greenbaum et al., 2020). According to Brown and Treviño (2006), ethical leaders' virtuous moral behavior evokes employee emulation and learning, a process that elevation captures well. Our two studies confirm that ethical leadership influences employee prosocial behavior more through elevation than gratitude. Additionally, while some studies have found that general emotions (e.g., positive affect) can mediate the ethical leadership-employee behavior relationship, scholars argue that specific discrete emotions (e.g., elevation) have more precise antecedents and cognitive content, producing more specific, identifiable effects beyond higher-order factors (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Cropanzano et al., 2003; Vianello et al., 2010; Watson & Clark, 1992). Our findings support this view: after controlling for positive affect, elevation still produced additional mediating effects, demonstrating its unique effect beyond general positive affect, manifested in specific action tendencies such as emulating moral exemplars and exhibiting prosocial behavior.

Third, previous research has identified various antecedents of elevation, but most have focused on macro-level organizational factors such as corporate social responsibility activities (Romani & Grappi, 2014), morally meaningful advertisements (Wu & Dodoo, 2017), and individual traits (Aquino et al., 2011). Only a few researchers (e.g., Vianello et al., 2010) have examined how leaders' moral behavior triggers employee elevation. However, these studies have not considered employees' cognitive evaluation of leader moral behavior. From employees' perspective, not all leader moral behaviors are perceived as moral; only behaviors that match employees' expectations are viewed as effective leadership and more likely to trigger elevation. In this regard, our study complements previous research.

Finally, this study is the first to examine the moderating effect of employee ethical leadership prototype on the relationship between ethical leadership and elevation, revealing boundary conditions for ethical leadership effectiveness from an implicit leadership prototype perspective. Implicit leadership theory' s general leadership prototype includes four traits (sensitivity, intelligence, dedication, and vitality) derived from general leadership without specifying particular behaviors, giving it broad applicability (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). However, these traits cannot specifically reflect employees' expectations for particular leadership styles. By applying implicit leadership theory to the specific domain of ethical leadership to examine how employees' cognitive schemas of ethical leadership influence their perceptions of actual ethical leadership behavior, we extend the application scope of implicit leadership theory.

5.2 Practical Implications

Our findings offer practical guidance for organizational management. Specifically, the results show that ethical leadership promotes employee elevation and organizational citizenship behavior, suggesting that organizations should strengthen leaders' ethical development and management by encouraging managers to lead by example (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Additionally, our findings indicate that employee ethical leadership prototype influences ethical leadership effectiveness. Therefore, organizations should foster ethical culture and climate to shape employees' (especially new employees') moral values and help them understand what moral behaviors the organization endorses while guiding managers to display more moral behavior. Moreover, under such a climate, leaders and subordinates will share greater moral value similarity, which can enhance leadership effectiveness.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Because no existing scale was available, we adapted the ethical leadership scale to measure employee ethical leadership prototype. A limitation of this approach is that it does not directly reflect individuals' moral foundation beliefs. As noted, ethical leadership behaviors relate to the care/harm and fairness/cheating foundations, yet no scholars have explicitly identified which moral foundations are reflected in Brown et al.' s (2005) ethical leadership behaviors. Our analysis of the associations between ethical leadership behaviors and the six moral foundations revealed that not all items reflect these two foundations. By gradually raising the relevance criterion to select items most strongly associated with care/harm and fairness/cheating, we found the moderating effect of ethical leadership prototype changed from non-significant to marginally significant. Therefore, future research should further validate whether our four-item measure can assess employee ethical leadership prototype and, more importantly, develop an independent scale that effectively captures individual ethical leadership prototype to test and extend our theoretical model.

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