ONE STYLE FITS ALL?  
DISCUSSION AND 
CONCLUSIONS

9.1 Ethical Leadership Research:  
Taking A Follower-Centered Perspective

Moral transgressions in organizations are as old as organizations themselves, and yet 
with every transgression, every failure, and every scandal, the public outrage seems 
to grow and with it our expectations of leadership increase (e.g., Gini, 2004a; Sims 
& Brinkmann, 2003). We expect our managers to be not only effective, but ethical 
leaders as well (cf. Lasthuizen, 2008; Treviño et al., 2003): they must demonstrate the 
character, decision-making, and behavior that will motivate their followers to make 
decisions and behave in accordance with relevant moral values and norms. This 
seems a valid expectation of leadership, considering that research consistently shows 
it to be a key factor in shaping the ethical decision-making, behavior, and culture in 
organizations (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Huberts et al., 2007; Lasthuizen, 2008; 
Mayer et al., 2009; Mayer, Kuenzi, & Greenbaum, forthcoming; Treviño et al., 1999).

Our expectations of ethical leadership however, focus on only one side of the 
equation - the leader’s character and behaviors. Thereby, in both research and 
practice, we neglect the role of followers in the process and overlook the variability 
and biases inherent in followers’ perceptions of a leader (see also Riggio et al., 2008). 
Indeed, in our calls for more ethical leadership we rarely account for the ascribed 
and subjective nature of such leadership (cf. Bryman, 1992), nor do we sufficiently 
acknowledge the fact that in the end it is the followers who provide the terms and 
conditions for effective and ethical leadership (cf. Gini, 2004b; Hogg, 2008; Riggio et

83 An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the 4th Biennial Workshop of the Public Values Consortium 
(Heres, 2014).
al., 2008). Moreover, we approach ethical leadership as if it has a universal meaning and as if one style of ethical leadership necessarily fits all (Brown et al., 2005; Kalshoven et al., 2011; Yuki et al., 2013). Yet to truly understand how and under what conditions ethical leadership works it is imperative that we understand how and why followers differ in their perceptions and interpretations of what it means to be an ethical leader (see Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Hence the main focus of the present dissertation was not on the character and behaviors of ethical leadership per se, but rather on the expectations that followers have of such leadership (cf. Resick et al., 2009).

Leader categorization research (Lord et al., 2001; Lord et al., 1984; Lord & Maher, 1991) suggests followers’ own assumptions, beliefs, and expectations of ethical leadership are likely to serve as a cognitive framework that guides their subsequent perceptions of the behavior a leader demonstrates and determines their acceptance of an ethical leader’s influence (Hannah & Jennings, 2013; Resick et al., 2006; Resick et al., 2009). Differences in their assumptions, beliefs, and expectations therefore may be an important explanation for the variability in followers’ perceptions of ethical leadership. To the extent that such differences are systematically related to characteristics of followers’ work environment, they also provide an alternative explanation for the varying effects of ethical leadership across different contexts (cf. Detert et al., 2007; Kacmar et al., 2013; Kalshoven et al., 2013b); perhaps followers who operate in different work environments have different expectations of ethical leadership and hence differ in their responsiveness and acceptance of the ‘textbook’ approach to the subject. To date however, empirical research to support these assertions is scarce.

In light of the above, the aim of the dissertation was to gain a better understanding of the role of followers in the constitution and development of ethical leadership. More specifically, the dissertation employed a mixed-methods research design to answer the following question:

What do followers expect of ethical leadership, how are these expectations related to the structural characteristics of their work environment and to what extent do they affect followers’ subsequent perception of the ethical leadership behaviors they observe?

In Part I of the dissertation, the exploratory research showed that on a general level, follower expectations of ethical leadership are consistent with most academic conceptualizations. Similar to academic conceptualizations of ethical leadership, followers expect the ethical leader to be a moral person, role model ethical behavior, reinforce ethical behavior, and engage in some form of communication about ethics (Brown et al., 2005; Kalshoven et al., 2011; Yuki et al., 2013). The research thereby supports the notion that both social learning (Bandura, 1977, 1986) and social exchange mechanisms (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960) play a vital role in ethical leadership (see, e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2009).

Under the general agreements however, there is notable variation in what specific characteristics and behaviors followers expect of ethical leaders and in the relative importance they attribute to them. Rather than a simple universal construct then, the research suggests ethical leadership is a variform universal construct: while the main components of ethical leadership constitute a strong, generalizable foundation, there is subtle yet important variation in how those components are understood and enacted in practice (cf. Bass, 1997; Den Hartog et al., 1999). Drawing on quasi-qualitative data collected among working adults from a diverse range of public and private sector organizations, functions, and backgrounds in the Netherlands, the research identified five ideal-typical views on ethical leadership, each indicating different assumptions, beliefs, and expectations that individuals have of ethical leadership (see also Figure 4.2 in Chapter 4):

- **The Safe Haven Creator**: an ethical leader is a leader who creates an environment in which there is room to make mistakes and followers feel safe to speak up if necessary. The leader is open and honest about his or her decisions and actions, but explicit discussions about ethics and values are limited and ethical behavior is expected to be more or less self-evident.
- **The Practicing Preacher**: an ethical leader is a leader who not only role models high ethical standards but also engages in frequent two-way communication about ethics and dilemmas. The leader emphasizes values and principles over rules and procedures.
- **The Moral Motivator**: an ethical leader is a charismatic leader who role models strong moral character, authenticity, self-reflection, and openness to criticism. The leader does not make ethics a priority within the organization and leaves it up to followers to decide for themselves what is and what is not morally appropriate behavior.
- **The Social Builder**: an ethical leader is a leader who emphasizes shared values and norms within the group and creates and maintains a good relationship with followers. The leader always looks at situations from different perspectives, takes account of stakeholder and societal interests in decision-making and shows moral courage, even if that comes at a cost to the organization.
- **The Boundaries Setter**: an ethical leader is a leader who sets clear boundaries and rules to prevent unethical behavior, and maintains these boundaries in strict but just way. The leader is loyal and fair to followers, but does not tolerate unethical behavior.
An individual’s expectation of ethical leadership is typically a weighed mix of the five ideal-typical views, although in most cases one or two of the views are more predominant. In Part II of the dissertation, survey data from three different samples of working adults in the Netherlands (total N = 1,265) suggests that, in general, the Safe Haven Creator is most widely endorsed, followed by the Practicing Preacher. Attributes described in the Moral Motivator and Social Builder view are somewhat less popular as the main focus of ethical leadership. However, the popularity of these two views differed between the three samples and their mean endorsement scores indicate that respondents did consider some of the attributes of the respective views as relevant ‘add-ons’ to their preferred ethical leadership approach. Finally, the Boundaries Setter received considerably lower endorsement in all three samples and was the least supported view overall.

The apparent differences in their expectations of ethical leadership suggest followers maintain their own standards to distinguish ethical leaders from non-ethical leaders. Indeed, the analyses in Part II of the dissertation are consistent with the idea that followers’ expectations of ethical leadership shape their subsequent perceptions of the leadership behaviors they observe. Specifically, for two of the three studied samples, the analyses supported the notion that a discrepancy between follower expectations and the characteristics and behaviors observed in the leader negatively affects the follower’s perception of ethical leadership beyond what can be explained by the observed characteristics and behavior itself. In line with research on more general implicit leadership theories (e.g., Bresnen, 1995; Den Hartog et al., 1999; Engle & Lord, 1997; Hunt et al., 1990; Kenney et al., 1994; Lord et al., 2001), followers’ a priori assumptions, beliefs, and hence expectations of ethical leadership seem to serve as cognitive frameworks that bias perceptions of ethical leadership. This means that for leaders to be perceived as ethical leaders it is important that they are aware of their followers’ expectations of ethical leadership and that they align expectations and practices as much as possible. Moreover, it suggests that the type of leadership that scholars typically denote as ‘ethically neutral’ (cf. Treviño et al., 2003) or ‘morally mute’ leadership (Bird & Waters, 1989; Menzel, 2007) may actually have an important impact on follower ethical behavior, while the effects of ‘textbook’ proactive and explicit ethical leadership may be limited, and in some cases even be counterproductive if they do not match followers’ expectations.

To achieve alignment between ethical leadership expectations and practice, it is important to understand how such expectations are shaped in the first place. Are followers’ expectations merely individual and idiosyncratic perspectives on what ethical leadership should entail, or are the similarities and differences among followers more systematically related to the context in which they operate and, more specifically, to the work that they do? Consistent with the findings of the exploratory research in Part I of the dissertation, the analyses in Part II revealed that followers’ hierarchical position, the public nature of their work (task publicness), and the impact that their work has within the organization (task significance), are associated with an increase in the frequency and severity of the moral dilemmas with which they are confronted. This moral task complexity in turn seems to raise followers’ expectations for ethical leadership: as evidenced by the increased endorsement of the Practicing Preacher and, to a lesser extent, the Social Builder, followers with higher moral task complexity expect a more proactive and explicit approach to ethical leadership than those who have relatively lower moral task complexity (see Figure 9.1). At the same time, followers’ endorsement of the Safe Haven Creator, Moral Motivator, and Boundaries Setter remained consistent irrespective of both their demographic and structural work characteristics. This implies that when moral task complexity increases it is likely to change follower expectations of ethical leadership, but only in the sense that followers come to expect additional leadership attributes: follower expectations regarding safety, strong moral character, and reinforcement remain the same regardless of the type of work that they do.

Figure 9.1 Empirical model of the research (simplified)

9.2 A Model of Follower Expectations of Ethical Leadership

Taken together, the results of the research add important insights for the discussion on the characteristic, distinctive, and contributing aspects of ethical leadership (see Brown et al., 2005; Kalshoven et al., 2011; Yukl et al., 2013). Derived from these insights, Figure 9.2 presents the Follower Expectations of Ethical Leadership (FEEL) model.84

84 While originally inspired by and modeled after Maslow’s (1943) motivational needs hierarchy, it does not assume that satisfaction of lower-level expectations is needed for higher-order expectations to exist. Rather, followers may expect attributes included in the top part of the model irrespective of the extent to which they feel their leaders actually meet expectations concerning attributes at the lower level.
The FEEL model proposes a baseline of minimum ethical leadership requirements that followers set for their leaders, regardless of their personal characteristics or the structural characteristics of their work: if these baseline requirements are not met, it is unlikely that followers will attribute a reputation for ethical leadership to a leader. Above the baseline, however, the model suggests follower expectations of ethical leadership will be more context-dependent. Specifically, the extent to which higher-order attributes of ethical leadership are expected from leaders is at least in part a function of the moral complexity of the tasks that followers perform.

First, at the bottom of the model and as the most fundamental and distinctive basis of ethical leadership, are the attributes associated with the Safe Haven Creator. In their original conceptualization of ethical leadership, Brown, Treviño, and colleagues (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño et al., 2003; Treviño et al., 2000) emphasized communication about ethics and transactional reinforcement behaviors as necessary and distinctive aspects of ethical leadership. The results of the present study however, suggest that followers themselves consider aspects of safety, approachability, learning from mistakes, and personal accountability far more important to distinguish ethical leaders from ethically neutral leaders (cf. Treviño et al., 2003). Along with the leader’s ethical decision-making and role modeling, more emphasis on the personal accountability of the leader (cf. Yukl et al., 2013), safety and approachability, and hence allowing followers to learn from their mistakes (Driscoll & McKee, 2007; Neubert et al., 2009; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009) as distinctive aspects of ethical leadership seems warranted.

The second level of the model includes attributes reflected mostly, albeit not exclusively, in the Moral Motivator view. While research on ethical leadership generally focuses on aspects of moral management as those most distinctive of ethical leadership (e.g., Mayer et al., 2012), the results indicate that the moral person still plays a key role in nearly all views on ethical leadership. Moreover, mean endorsement scores for the Moral Motivator, in which moral person attributes are most salient, were relatively high and unaffected by followers’ structural work characteristics. Key aspects associated with the moral person therefore should not be overlooked as necessary aspects of ethical leadership and form an important part of followers’ baseline expectations of ethical leadership. Authenticity, an aspect characteristic of the Moral Motivator perspective, deserves special mention in this respect. Brown and Treviño (2006) argued that authenticity is neither distinctive nor particularly characteristic of academic conceptualizations of ethical leadership. For a substantial number of respondents however, authenticity in fact was a critical and defining aspect of ethical leadership. This supports both Kaptein’s (2003) and Treviño et al.’s (2003) earlier assertions that leaders who exhibit moral management without being a true moral person run the risk of being perceived as a ‘hypocritical leader’. It is furthermore consistent with findings by Den Hartog and Belschak (2012) that show that ethical leaders who are not authentic moral persons are less effective in fostering prosocial behavior among followers.

At the second level of the model we also see attributes that relate to, though not fully represent, the Boundaries Setter approach to ethical leadership. The relatively low endorsement of aspects related to rules, procedures, discipline, and rewards (e.g., as included in the Boundaries Setter view) indicate that, contrary to academic conceptualizations (e.g., Brown & Treviño, 2006), few respondents actually recognize such transactional aspects as particularly distinctive features of ethical leadership (see also Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014). The qualitative data reveal that respondents find rewards to be superficial and view discipline as a mere safety net – a last resort that leaders should employ only if and when all else fails and moral transgressions are of a more serious nature. In general, followers expect leaders to focus on trust and teaching followers how to make moral decisions rather than on establishing rules and compliance.

These results caution against a strong compliance-based approach to ethical leadership, as such an approach is likely to encounter strong resistance from the majority of followers who expect their leader to create a safe environment in which openness, making mistakes, and learning are central. In addition, the results suggest that followers are especially concerned with how ethical leaders apply discipline, how they inform followers of mistakes and transgressions that occurred, how they explain and justify the measures taken (cf. Ball et al., 1994; Treviño, 1992), and how they foster the rehabilitation of both violator(s) and the group as a whole in the aftermath of integrity violations. To better capture ethical leaders’ ability to adequately balance compliance and integrity (Cooper, 2006; Maesschalck, 2004; Paine, 1994) academic conceptualizations should focus more on such applications of discipline and compliance, rather than the use of discipline per se.

Finally, the top part of the model reflects the finding that expectations of ethical leadership are raised when followers experience more frequent and more serious moral dilemmas. That is, what followers expect of ethical leadership at least in part depends on what it is that they need from such leadership. One point is that followers who experience more moral task complexity have a slightly stronger preference for a Social Builder approach to ethical leadership. This proactive approach includes efforts to build a solid leader-follower relationship based on loyalty, respect, and caring, and empowerment of followers, by actively involving them in group-based ethical decision-making processes that focus on the development of a set of shared moral norms and values (cf. Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2009; Kalshoven et al., 2011).
One style fits all? Discussion and conclusions

Chapter 9

One style fits all? Discussion and conclusions

The present dissertation indicates the value of broadening ethical leadership research with studies that explicitly approach it from a follower rather than a leader perspective. It shifts the focus from how leaders develop a reputation for ethical leadership (Treviño et al., 2000) to how ethical leaders are granted an ethical leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). More specifically, the results remind us that ethical leadership is not a one-sided act on behalf of the leader and that followers’ assumptions, beliefs, and expectations of ethical leadership (i.e., their implicit ethical leadership theories) should be taken into account when trying to understand how, when, and under which conditions ethical leadership is more or less effective. While this call for more research on followers’ perspectives and perceptions is certainly not a new one (e.g., Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Hannah & Jennings, 2013; Resick et al., 2006) it does signify the many interesting venues for ethical leadership research that have yet to be explored.

One avenue of research concerns the further specification of the collective versus idiosyncratic nature of followers’ implicit ethical leadership theories (IELT). The present research makes an important contribution by showing that followers’ expectations of ethical leadership are associated with their moral task complexity, which in turn relates to their hierarchical position, task significance, and task publicness. Yet the fact that the effect sizes for these structural work characteristics are only small to moderate suggests a substantial portion of the variation in IELT still remains unexplained (cf. Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Offermann et al., 1994). Follow-up research that examines other antecedents of IELT is hence needed to gain a better understanding of the origins of followers’ implicit ethical leadership theories and the extent to which they are a function of the context in which followers operate. Moreover, to the extent that IELT are in fact idiosyncratic, research should examine if and how managers are able to remain responsive to their employees’ varying expectations on the one hand, while

Figure 9.2 The Follower Expectations of Ethical Leadership (FEEL) Model

Note: attributes below the dashed line indicate the baseline expectations that followers typically have of ethical leadership, irrespective of their personal characteristics or characteristics of their work. The extent to which followers also expect attributes above the dashed line is more context-dependent and in part a function of the moral task complexity of their work.

As moral task complexity increases even further, the results suggest, followers come to expect even more explicit and frequent communication about ethics. More than those who have relatively more straightforward tasks, followers with high moral task complexity expect open discussions about the dilemmas they are confronted with in their work and the principles and values that should guide their decisions and actions. It is here that differences between academic and practitioner conceptualizations of ethical leadership become most apparent: where scholars typically consider explicit

communication about values and ethics to be a standard, distinctive component of ethical leadership (e.g., Brown et al., 2005), practitioners expect such proactive, explicit communication only to the extent that they actually experience moral complexity in their everyday work situations. This implies that in emphasizing explicit and frequent communication about ethics and values as an essential feature of ethical leadership (cf. Bird & Waters, 1989; Brown et al., 2003; Menzel, 2007; Treviño et al., 2003), we must be alert to the fact that such communication may not necessarily be received well by followers performing less morally complex jobs. As the research in this dissertation suggests, one style of ethical leadership does not fit all.

9.3 An Agenda for Future Research

The present dissertation indicates the value of broadening ethical leadership research with studies that explicitly approach it from a follower rather than a leader perspective. It shifts the focus from how leaders develop a reputation for ethical leadership (Treviño et al., 2000) to how ethical leaders are granted an ethical leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). More specifically, the results remind us that ethical leadership is not a one-sided act on behalf of the leader and that followers’ assumptions, beliefs, and expectations of ethical leadership (i.e., their implicit ethical leadership theories) should be taken into account when trying to understand how, when, and under which conditions ethical leadership is more or less effective. While this call for more research on followers’ perspectives and perceptions is certainly not a new one (e.g., Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Hannah & Jennings, 2013; Resick et al., 2006) it does signify the many interesting venues for ethical leadership research that have yet to be explored.

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also maintaining their authenticity and credibility as ethical leaders on the other.

Another interesting avenue of future research also follows up on the association between structural work characteristics and followers’ implicit theories of ethical leadership. In the dissertation the emphasis of the analysis was on establishing variation in relation to features of followers’ tasks as more or less stable characteristics of the work context. However, the nature of followers’ tasks and thus their moral task complexity may differ with time and per situation. It would be interesting to study implicit ethical leadership theories using latent growth models that can follow the development and changes in IELT over longer periods of time and separate short and long term effects of different work characteristics (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). Doing so can also shed light on the situational nature of ethical leadership itself, as it provides insight into the need for ethical leaders to adjust their approach to the changing circumstances of their followers. In addition, latent growth models can throw light on the extent to which IELT are influenced by feedback information from the leadership itself and whether they are, as Keller and colleagues suggested (2000), more collectively shared in strong situations (e.g., the military) and more idiosyncratic in weak situations (cf. Mischel, 1977).

Additional research is also needed to answer the question how implicit the implicit ethical leadership theories of both followers and leaders truly are and, subsequently, how IELT can be activated, altered, and aligned. Consistent with research on the application of Q-methodology in participatory processes (Donner, 2001), the study reported in Chapter 4 suggests Q-sorting exercises are a useful tool in helping individuals reflect on their assumptions about ethical leadership and formulate and structure their implicit theories. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of Q-sorts in activating and aligning expectations and practices of leadership remains to be seen. Longitudinal or experimental research that assesses the impact of training, focused discussion, Q sorts, and other such interventions to bring together leaders’ and followers’ perspectives on ethical leadership hence seems a worthwhile endeavor.

Chapter 7 indicates that followers’ implicit theories can play an important role in shaping their subsequent perceptions of observed ethical leadership. It suggests that, depending on their a priori schemas of what ethical leaders and leadership entail, individuals may respond rather differently to ethical leadership. However, Engle and Lord (1997) note that individuals differ not only in their implicit theories, but also in the effect that implicit theories have on their perceptions of leadership. Questions of when and why ethical leadership categorization occurs automatically based on a priori schemas, and when and why it is the result of a more controlled and thoughtful process (cf. Cronshaw & Lord, 1987), remain largely unanswered at this point in time. It is therefore important to conduct more systematic group comparisons of the measurement models that underlie existing ethical leadership scales. Such research can help us gain additional insights into the individual, organizational, and societal factors that shape respondents’ implicit ethical leadership theories and thus the conditions under which IELT are likely to be more or less influential.

To illustrate this last point, implicit theories of ethical leadership may be less influential among individuals who are themselves aschematic thinkers (Cronshaw & Lord, 1987), more intrinsically motivated (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Shaw, 1990), or who identify more with the organization (Martin & Epitropaki, 2001) as such individuals will be more inclined to make careful, conscious observations of their leaders’ characteristics and behaviors. Alternatively, implicit theories may have a greater effect on perceptions of observed ethical leadership when the observers in question are under pressure to process information quickly and/or have little cognitive resources to process all the available information (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Shaw, 1990). Especially when job demands are high, Epitropaki and Martin (2005) argued, individuals are likely to make stereotypical judgments based on their a priori (ethical) leadership schemas. While Epitropaki and Martin’s could not confirm their hypothesis empirically, the suggestion is consistent with the results of Chapter 7 of this dissertation.

In addition to studying the varying effects that implicit theories may have on follower perceptions of ethical leadership, future research should also examine the consequences of discrepancies between follower IELT and observed ethical leadership on the subsequent prosocial and ethical behavior of followers themselves. The dissertation research showed that discrepancies are associated with lower scores for perceived ethical leadership, thereby implying that discrepancies are also likely to indirectly lower the leader’s influence on follower behavior. However, given that the relation between ethical leadership and follower behavior is likely to be bounded by many other individual and situational factors (e.g., Kalshoven et al., 2013a; Mayer et al., 2012), this mediating effect of discrepancy might be limited or even ‘crowded out’ completely by other relevant factors and thus deserves further empirical scrutiny. On the other hand, the mere presence of a discrepancy between expectations and observed ethical leadership could also have a more direct negative effect on follower behavior: both from a social exchange (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960) and a social identity perspective (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg, 2001; Tajfel, 1982), one might argue that followers who feel that their expectations for ethical leadership are not sufficiently met, are also less inclined to identify with the leader and less likely to reciprocate by conforming to the leader’s expectation of follower ethical behavior.

Finally, the research points to managers’ own assumptions, beliefs, and expectations of ethical leadership as a potentially relevant area of research. In showing the indirect effect of an individual’s hierarchical level on their implicit theories of ethical leadership,
the research suggests managers may be confronted with a structural discrepancy between their own implicit theories and those of their employees. Such discrepancy poses a potential barrier for optimizing managers’ ethical leadership performance. In light of this it would be interesting to explore how managers deal with differences between their own and their employees’ implicit theories of ethical leadership. To what extent do managers anticipate the (variation in) employees’ IELT and how do they seek and achieve alignment between employees’ IELT and their own ethical leadership practices? In addition, managers’ IELT may have important implications for employees as well. Research by Keller (2003; see also Shondrick & Lord, 2010; Sy, 2010) suggests managers’ IELT may bias their perceptions of employee behavior and performance. Recognizing that IELT thus may work both ways, research on the effects of managerial IELT on evaluations of employee ethical followership and more general performance is therefore of key importance.

9.4 Methodological Implications and Limitations

The results of the dissertation fit in a long line of research on leader categorization and implicit leadership theories that show how implicit theories of ethical leadership bias perceptual measures of ethical leadership (e.g., Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Engle & Lord, 1997; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Foti & Lord, 1987; Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Rush et al., 1977). Specifically, the results suggest that when filling out questionnaires, respondents in fact may be (partly) regenerating their implicit theories of ethical leadership rather than critically reviewing their leader’s actual behavior and traits (Rush & Russell, 1988). Even more so, processes of pattern-completion may be at play, in which respondents come to associate characteristics and behaviors with their leader that they did not actually observe but which are prototypical of their implicit ethical leadership theory (Lord & Emrich, 2000; Shondrick et al., 2010). These findings have important implications for the use of perceptual measures of ethical leadership.

Three methodological recommendations are in order to improve future measurement of ethical leadership. First, while Chapter 6 confirmed the usefulness and validity of Brown et al.’s Ethical Leadership Scale as an overall measure of ethical leadership, inclusion of more detailed, behavior-specific items as suggested by, for instance Yukl et al. (2013) seems necessary. Not only will this make perceptual measures less susceptible to IELT bias (see Gioia & Sims, 1985; Larson, 1982), it also makes them more sensitive to the variation of ways in which managers exert ethical leadership in practice. Given that attributes of the Safe Haven Creator seem both characteristic and distinctive of ethical leadership, at least in the eyes of most followers, inclusion of behavior-specific items such as the leader’s personal accountability, willingness to learn from mistakes, and providing followers with a fair second chance is especially recommended. Second, the study’s result support the use of multidimensional measures of ethical leadership (e.g., Kalshoven et al., 2011; Lasthuizen, 2008), as these enable scholars to study in greater depth the underlying measurement model and thereby provide important information on respondents’ implicit ethical leadership theories (see, e.g., Den Hartog et al., 1999). Furthermore, multidimensional measures allow for a better assessment of those attributes of ethical leadership that are more or less effective – or perhaps even counterproductive - in a particular work context as a result of their (lack of) fit with followers’ IELT. As a third and last recommendation, scholars should consider employing a wider range of measurement instruments. As Shondrick and colleagues suggest, contextually specific measures using visualizations, critical incident techniques, embodied cognition and affective event parsing may all help to improve the accuracy in ethical leadership ratings (Naidoo, Kohari, Lord, & DuBois, 2010; Shondrick et al., 2010; Shondrick & Lord, 2010).

In addition to highlighting the perceptual biases in ethical leadership measures, the research in this dissertation points to some of the advantages and limitations of using Q-methodology in research on implicit leadership theories. The dissertation shows Q-methodology to be a valuable method to explore respondents’ idealized and to some extent implicit expectations of (ethical) leadership, while keeping sight of both their individual idiosyncrasies and allowing for the emergence of multiple, rather than one, collective implicit theories (cf. Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Offtermann et al., 1994). Q-methodology is thus a promising means to (1) identify views on (ethical) leadership that do not fit neatly within existing theoretical frameworks or are more marginalized, and hence may not have been identified otherwise (cf. Kenney et al., 1994; see also Van Exel & De Graaf, 2005), and (2) understanding aspects of (ethical) leadership in mutual coherence, i.e. within the context of their relative importance to the respondents (Brouwer, 1999).

In the dissertation the results of the Q-study were used to develop empirically based vignettes on (expectations of) ethical leadership. Developing quantitative survey measures from Q-study results is relatively uncharted territory and there are few specific guidelines for researchers (see, however, Baker et al., 2010). In most respects however, developing measures from Q-study results is no different from developing measures based on mere qualitative interview data. Moreover, the vignettes appeared to capture the essence of each of the five ideal-typical implicit ethical leadership theories identified in the Q-study quite well. Still, the translation from the rich, in-depth Q-results to much shorter and more general descriptions that could be applied in survey research proved challenging, and much of the richness of the original perspectives did get lost
in translation. Moreover, the survey results indicated that the use of Q-based vignettes in surveys is especially taxing for respondents when it concerns abstract topics such as ethics and leadership. Finally, the space needed to include various different IELT measures and the complexity already associated with the survey task precluded the use of a multi-item scale to assess respondents’ agreement with the vignette. Instead, a single item was used, making the measure prone to measurement error and hence to biased estimates of structural relations, standard errors, and explained variance (see Chapter 5). In developing research that combines Q-methodology with survey research, and to lower the complexity of the survey task special attention should be paid to formulating simple, accessible statements and vignettes. In addition, future studies should allow for sufficient space in the survey to include multi-item scales that assess respondents’ agreement with the vignettes.

Lastly, it is important to stress the importance of more diversity in research methods and triangulation of data in the study of ethical leadership, as evinced by the present dissertation. In describing the multiple, socially constructed meanings that individuals attribute to ethical leadership, the dissertation points out the inherent limitations in, as Bresnen states, “mapping on an externally imposed and, in all respects, two-dimensional framework to assess leaders’ or followers’ behavior” (Bresnen, 1995: 509; see also Phillips, 1984). Furthermore, the dissertation illustrates the value of qualitative and quasi-qualitative research in further validating, refining, and enriching grander, more general theories on ethical leadership and findings derived from quantitative research. At present, an overwhelming majority of research on ethical leadership remains quantitative. Yet interviews and Q-methodology, but also participant observation, focus groups, and critical research approaches, may open up very new and promising avenues of future research. Among other things, such methods may improve our understanding of how communication about ethics manifests itself - both implicitly and explicitly - or how managers can make use of symbols and critical incidents to support their ethical leadership. Likewise, these methods can help us understand what approach to ethical leadership is needed to re-establish and perhaps repair leader-follower relationships after incidents of moral wrongdoing within the group (cf. O’Connell & Bligh, 2009). As such, employing a wider range of research methods can provide a more complete, in-depth perspective on the complex interactions between ethical leaders and their followers, and thus help us to better grasp the meaning of ethical leadership in organizations.

While the research has important methodological implications, of course it also has its limitations. The specific limitations of each of the empirical studies have been discussed in the respective chapters. Chapter 5 discussed the overall validity and reliability of the survey data, noting some important limitations in the survey design, the representativeness and non-random selection of the samples, and the IELT measures used. The following reflects more on the broader challenges and limitations of the research as a whole.

One important limitation of the research is the cross-sectional nature of its data, which prohibits conclusions about the exact causal order of the structural relations found. The assumption in the dissertation is that expectations of ethical leadership shape subsequent observations of ethical leadership, and that these expectations themselves are affected by structural characteristics of the work environment and especially moral task complexity. While previous longitudinal research supports the notion that assumptions, beliefs, and expectations of leadership shape the future interpretation of actual behavior (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005), a more recent study suggests the relation between IELT and ethical leadership may actually be reciprocal, as successful ethical leadership may feed back into followers’ beliefs about what such ethical leadership should entail (Nichols & Erakovich, 2013). Furthermore, ethical leadership could affect followers’ perceptions of their work characteristics and especially their moral task complexity, hence feeding back into followers’ assumptions, beliefs, and expectations as well. Therefore we need more, and more robust, longitudinal studies to examine the continuous changes that occur in cognitive matching of implicit theories with observed ethical leader behavior. For the time being, however, the present cross-sectional research shows that congruence between IELT, ethical leadership, and characteristics of the work environment is important and worth further inquiry (Engle & Lord, 1997).

Another limitation of the research is that expectations of ethical leadership are presumably not always consciously thought-out, structured frameworks, but rather implicit theories of ethical leadership (IELT) that are made up of intricate, tacit, unorganized ideas that respondents may find difficult to verbalize more explicitly. This tacit nature of expectations makes it difficult to establish with certainty the adequacy of both the qualitative and quantitative IELT measurement in the study and thus poses a potential threat to the internal validity of the overall research. During the Q-study, and especially the survey research, some respondents did indeed experience difficulties explicating their assumptions, beliefs, and expectations of ethical leadership, indicating the relative importance of specific ethical leadership characteristics and behaviors, and (in the survey) relating general descriptions to observations of their managers’ actual behavior. These respondents found the Q-sorting exercise and survey to be cognitively demanding and their responses may have been compromised as a result. At the same time, other respondents noted that the research actually helped them to better reflect on and structure their thoughts on ethical leadership. Moreover, triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative data collected from different samples...
shows quite consistent results and thus gives confidence that the five implicit ethical leadership theories are a fair ideal-typical representation of the vast number of views on ethical leadership.

It should also be noted that the methods used in the research deliberately placed a spotlight on the differences and nuances in expectations and perceptions of ethical leadership. As shown throughout the dissertation, understanding subtle variations in expectations and perceptions of ethical leadership helps us gain more insight into the precarious balance between the different characteristics and behaviors needed for successful execution of ethical leadership. However, for sake of internal validity it is important not to overemphasize differences and nuances: the overall variance in the IELT Endorsement measures was relatively low, while mean endorsement scores for four of the five IELT were rather high. In addition to comments made by a number of respondents in the interviews, these findings show that we should not lose sight of the broader picture: while their emphasis and exact manifestation may differ, ethical role modeling, reinforcement, and communication about ethics remain of unabated importance as the basis for ethical leadership.

A final limitation of the research is that it does not account for cross-cultural differences, as all data was collected in the Netherlands. In light of socio-cultural variations found in the endorsement of specific ethical leadership characteristics and behaviors (e.g., Martin et al., 2009; Resick et al., 2006; Resick et al., 2009), potential threats to the external validity of the research thus occur at three levels: (1) the content and demarcation of the ideal-typical ethical leadership expectations (i.e., implicit ethical leadership theories or IELT) identified in this dissertation, (2) the relative endorsement of these five views on what ethical leadership should entail, and (3) the structural relations between follower expectations of ethical leadership and their antecedents and consequences. For instance, the compliance-oriented Boundaries Setter may be more appealing in Asian and Latin-American countries where power distance between figures in authority and their subordinates tends to be higher and the need for uncertainty avoidance is greater (Hofstede, 1980). Likewise, key aspects of the four other views such as group-based decision-making (Social Builder) or showing accountability and openly admitting to one’s mistakes (Safe Haven Creator) that fit relatively well with the Dutch cultural context may not be considered desirable in other contexts. Even more so, additional or even rather different IELT might emerge in different cultural contexts. Hence, it is in part by virtue of the fit between followers’ own expectations of ethical leadership on the one hand and the behavior of the leader on the other – rather than the mere behavior of the leader him or herself - that followers grant that leader an ethical leader identity (cf. DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The research thereby helps us understand why managers’ ethical leadership efforts are not always recognized and accepted as such by their employees and when and why resistance to (ethical) leadership may arise. Moreover, it highlights the limitations of trying to ‘manage’ follower ethics from a purely instrumental, leader-centered perspective: as ethical leadership requires interaction between human beings it is important to recognize the cognitive and emotional processes that affect it and to acknowledge the complexity, ambiguity, and subjectivity it thus involves (cf. Doorewaard & Benschop, 2003; Schyns, Tymon, Kiefer, & Kerschreiter, 2013).

To improve ethical leadership in organizations, it is important that managers are aware of and anticipate their employees’ implicit theories of ethical leadership. First and foremost, this requires explicit efforts from both managers and employees to explore and discuss the similarities and differences in their respective implicit ethical leadership theories (Schyns et al., 2011); engaging in open discussions about mutual expectations in fact is best considered an integral aspect of ethical leadership itself. In addition, leader and follower implicit ethical leadership theories may be included in organizational (ethical) leadership development programs (Schyns et al., 2011; Schyns et al., 2013), as a supplement to the manager’s more informal socialization into the organization’s leadership (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004) and to improve their understanding of manager-employee interactions. Organization-specific training and characteristics of the work environment is a perennial question that requires additional international comparative research as well.

9.5 Lessons for Practice

Alongside its scientific contribution, the ambition of this dissertation was to aid managers in their attempts to become better ethical leaders for their employees and thereby help organizations achieve their goals in a more effective, efficient, and ethical manner. Becoming an ethical leader, however, is not something a manager does on his or her own. As the research points out, ethical leadership is the result of a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers. In this relationship, followers co-construct ethical leadership as their a priori assumptions, beliefs, and expectations of ethical leaders may guide their subsequent perception and interpretation of the character, decisions, and behavior a leader demonstrates. Hence, it is in part by virtue of the fit between followers’ own expectations of ethical leadership on the one hand and the behavior of the leader on the other – rather than the mere behavior of the leader him or herself - that followers grant that leader an ethical leader identity (cf. DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The research thereby helps us understand why managers’ ethical leadership efforts are not always recognized and accepted as such by their employees and when and why resistance to (ethical) leadership may arise. Moreover, it highlights the limitations of trying to ‘manage’ follower ethics from a purely instrumental, leader-centered perspective: as ethical leadership requires interaction between human beings it is important to recognize the cognitive and emotional processes that affect it and to acknowledge the complexity, ambiguity, and subjectivity it thus involves (cf. Doorewaard & Benschop, 2003; Schyns, Tymon, Kiefer, & Kerschreiter, 2013).

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in the assumptions, beliefs, and expectations that people hold regarding ethical leadership is especially important when taking on a new leadership position in the organization: it provides critical information for the manager’s initial interactions with employees, which to a large extent determine whether the manager will be recognized and accepted as an ethical leader and shape how employees perceive, interpret, and evaluate the manager’s subsequent behavior (Engle & Lord, 1997; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; see also Giessner et al., 2009). Depending on the circumstances on hand, this information can be used to either adjust the manager’s ethical leadership approach to employees’ expectations or instead to manage the group’s expectations more deliberately by explaining why a certain approach to ethical leadership is considered necessary.

The results also suggest a different approach to ethical leadership training may be useful. At present, most ethical leadership training programs promote a proactive and explicit approach that focuses on communication about ethics in everyday, ‘normal’ circumstances. The results of the present study however, suggest that ethical leadership is first and foremost about safety, learning, and personal accountability. As such, the research suggests, true ethical leaders prove themselves when more difficult situations arise, for instance during extensive reorganizations, when there are suspicions of integrity violations, or the leader has made a mistake himself. Such circumstances are difficult to simulate in an off-site training setting. Action learning in which leaders practice with real-life cases from their own organization, or the use of role-play with peers and/or professional actors, is thus recommended (see Hartley & Hinksman, 2003). Even more, organizations may consider more direct on-the-job training in ethical leadership, using mentoring or coaching. Not only can on-the-job-training enable more in-depth learning of how to apply different aspects of ethical leadership both in calmer and more trying times, it also enables the trainer to give tailor-made recommendations on how to deal with the specific expectations of the individual employees involved.

As a general rule, managers are advised to at least maintain a ‘baseline’ of ethical leadership practices at all times. While the current research suggests that a proactive, explicit approach to ethical leadership may not always be necessary, it provides ample evidence that followers strongly endorse and expect certain ethical leadership attributes, regardless of their work context. Specifically, the research suggests it is important that leaders create an environment in which followers feel they can safely express their concerns and report suspicions of wrongdoing. It is also crucial that followers be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them; given the grey area surrounding ethical decisions and dilemmas, too stringent reinforcement and immediate penalizing are likely to be counterproductive and damaging to perceptions of ethical leadership. Furthermore, managers who are open and honest, show accountability for their actions, and acknowledge their own mistakes strengthen their reputation for ethical leadership and probably lower the threshold for employees to come forward with their own dilemmas, mistakes, and concerns.

At the same time, managers and ethics trainers should beware of oversimplified ‘best practices’ and ‘one style fits all’ approaches to ethical leadership that claim effectiveness regardless of context: such best practices do little justice to the everyday complexity inherent in managerial leadership and neglects the active role of followers in the process (Schyns et al., 2013). Components such as role modeling, reinforcement, and communication, are and always will be crucial to ethical leadership. However, the present dissertation shows that the meaning and relative endorsement of such components may vary according to context. The expectations that followers have of ethical leadership are, at least in part, a function of the work that they do and the moral dilemmas that the work evokes. As expectations may subsequently shape employees’ perceptions of the ethical leadership behavior they observe in managers, it is important that managers consider carefully the fit between their ethical leadership and followers’ actual work. Even more so, as part of their ethical leadership, managers are advised to always remain attentive to both the actual tasks on hand and followers’ expectations of ethical leadership. Managers may subsequently ask themselves which approach to ethical leadership best fits the circumstances at hand, and allow for a more flexible adjustment in their approach if the situation requires it.

More specifically, when employees deal with morally complex tasks, managers would do well to engage them in more explicit discussions about moral dilemmas and involve them in more collective moral decision-making processes. The data for the present study suggest that, especially compared to the level of moral task complexity reported by respondents, only a small number of managers actually engage in such ethical leadership behaviors: it seems that most employees perceive their managers as employing a somewhat more passive, implicit, and/or reactive form of ethical leadership. Thus there remains ample room for improvement in this respect. On the other hand, and contrary to what the ‘ethics industry’ often suggests, more abstract moral awareness training may be neither necessary nor particularly effective when employees’ work involves rather straightforward tasks and evokes few real moral dilemmas. As the present research shows, in such circumstances the use of textbook, explicit approaches to ethical leadership may not fit well with employees’ own expectations and as such could actually have a negative effect on how the manager’s behavior is perceived and interpreted. When dealing with employees whose work evokes few moral dilemmas or temptations, managers should be careful not to overemphasize ethics and integrity and instead focus primarily on creating an open and safe atmosphere. To the extent
that followers themselves actually underestimate the moral task complexity of their work, leadership may first need to focus on raising employees’ awareness of the moral dimension of the tasks at hand before engaging in more general discussions about the underlying moral values, principles, and norms.

In addition to identifying, anticipating, and managing their employees’ assumptions, beliefs, and expectations of ethical leadership, managers are also advised to examine critically those that they hold themselves. Just as employees’ assumptions, beliefs, and expectations influence their subsequent perceptions of observed ethical leadership, managers’ implicit theories are likely to shape their ethical leadership behavior (Lord & Maher, 1991). Even more so, managers’ assumptions, beliefs, and expectations of ethical leadership are likely to affect their perceptions of their employees’ ethical followership as well (cf. Keller, 2003; see also Shondrick & Lord, 2010; Sy, 2010). For instance, managers may evaluate employees who exhibit attributes similar to their own implicit theories as higher in leadership or ethical decision-making capabilities, and more favorably overall. Awareness of their own implicit theories on ethical leadership can thus help managers to reflect on their assumptions and caution against undue perceptual biases in performance evaluations (cf. Keller, 2003).

Finally, it is important to stress the need for managers to remain realistic and critical towards their actual ethical leadership. The results of this dissertation show that aligning followers’ expectations of ethical leadership and managers’ ethical leadership practices can help managers obtain a reputation for ethical leadership. Yet as Van Gils and colleagues argue (2010: 344-345), there are many possible factors that influence followers’ and leaders’ implicit theories and managers should accept that perfect congruence between IELT and leadership behavior is probably unattainable: but perhaps more importantly, alignment between followers’ expectations of ethical leadership and manager’s ethical leadership practices may have a dark side as well. Research on leader prototypicality indicates that congruence between expectations and practices also creates a danger that the manager is endorsed even when he or she fails to perform or is the cause of organizational failure (Giessner et al., 2009). In terms of ethical leadership, this could mean that due to the initial alignment between followers’ expectations and managers’ ethical leadership practices, employees develop a blind spot for their manager’s actual behavior: even managers who at some point, perhaps unknowingly, role model inconsistent behavior and violate employees’ moral standards, may thus be able to maintain their employees’ trust and endorsement as ethical leaders due to their initial categorization as such. Managers are therefore advised to organize and welcome feedback on their leadership from an outsider perspective as well.

9.6 General Conclusion

In our calls for ethical leadership in organizations, we often look at those in formal leadership positions to do the right thing, to make the first move, to set the right tone, and to provide moral guidance. The present research however, indicates that ethical leadership involves more than a one-directional effort on the part of leaders. To understand how and under which conditions ethical leadership works we must recognize that followers are not mere passive receptors of influence but instead are key players in the constitution of ethical leadership: their implicit assumptions, beliefs, and expectations play an integral role in how ethical leadership is perceived and received in the organization. As a result, it is unlikely that one best practice for ethical leadership will satisfy all or be effective under all conditions. Hence this dissertation is a reminder that awareness of and critical reflection on assumptions and expectations - both of others and our own - is important for further improvement of research on and practice of ethical leadership.