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Ethical Leadership and Socially Responsible Organizational Behavior: The Mediating Role of Employee Moral Identity

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Abstract

Organizations are increasingly expected to demonstrate ethical conduct and contribute positively to society, making employee level socially responsible behavior an important area of management research. This study examined the relationship between ethical leadership and socially responsible organizational behavior and investigated the mediating role of employee moral identity. Drawing on Social Learning Theory, the study proposed that ethical leaders influence employees' responsible behavior by providing ethical role models and fostering the internalization of moral values. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed, and data were collected through a structured questionnaire from 400 employees working in a University of Punjab, Lahore. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through SmartPLS 4. The results indicated that ethical leadership had a positive relationship with socially responsible organizational behavior and employee moral identity. Employee moral identity also demonstrated a positive relationship with socially responsible organizational behavior. The findings highlighted the importance of ethical role modeling and moral development for promoting socially responsible behavior in public-sector organizations.

Keywords: *Ethical Leadership; Employee Moral Identity; Socially Responsible Organizational Behavior; Social Learning Theory.*

Introduction

In contemporary organizations, ethical conduct and social responsibility have become increasingly important dimensions of effective management. Organizations are no longer evaluated solely on the basis of financial performance, productivity, or operational efficiency; rather, stakeholders increasingly expect them to demonstrate integrity, fairness, accountability, and concern for the wider interests of society. These expectations are particularly significant in public-sector organizations, where managerial decisions and employee behaviors can directly influence citizens, public resources, and the quality of public services. Consequently, understanding the factors that encourage employees to act ethically and responsibly has become

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an important concern for management and organizational researchers. Within this context, ethical leadership has emerged as a critical mechanism for shaping employee behavior and promoting responsible organizational practices.

Ethical leadership refers to the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, together with the promotion of such conduct among followers through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. Ethical leaders demonstrate honesty, fairness, integrity, accountability, and concern for others while establishing clear expectations regarding appropriate workplace behavior (Anwar et al., 2020). Because leaders occupy influential positions within organizations, their conduct provides employees with important behavioral cues regarding what is considered acceptable and desirable. Through consistent role modeling, ethical communication, and reinforcement of ethical standards, leaders can potentially encourage employees to move beyond narrow self-interest and consider the consequences of their actions for other organizational stakeholders.

An important outcome of ethical leadership is socially responsible organizational behavior (SROB). While corporate social responsibility traditionally focuses on organizational-level policies and practices, SROB emphasizes the role of individual employees in translating organizational responsibility into everyday actions. Employees can contribute to social responsibility by acting ethically, considering the interests of others, supporting responsible organizational initiatives, using organizational resources appropriately, and demonstrating concern for stakeholders and society (Bhatti et al., 2018). Thus, socially responsible behavior represents an important micro-level dimension of responsible management because formal organizational commitments to ethics and social responsibility ultimately depend on employees' actual decisions and conduct.

Although previous research has established that ethical leadership is associated with various positive employee outcomes, an important question remains concerning how ethical leadership leads to socially responsible organizational behavior (Bibi et al., 2018). A direct relationship between ethical leadership and employee behavior does not fully explain the psychological process underlying this association. Employees exposed to similar leadership practices may respond differently depending on their personal values and self-conceptions. Therefore, identifying the internal mechanism through which ethical leadership is translated into socially responsible behavior is important for developing a more comprehensive understanding of responsible management.

Employee moral identity provides a promising explanation for this mechanism. Moral identity refers to the extent to which moral characteristics and values form an important part of an individual's self-concept (Irfan et al., 2017). Employees who perceive morality as central to their identity are more likely to behave consistently with moral principles such as honesty, fairness, compassion, and responsibility (Farooq et al., 2018). Accordingly, socially responsible behavior may arise not merely from organizational rules or external supervision but from employees' internal desire to act consistently with their moral self-concept. Ethical leaders may strengthen this process by providing employees with visible examples of ethical conduct and by emphasizing the importance of moral values in organizational decision-making.

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The relationship among these constructs can be explained through Social Learning Theory. The theory proposes that individuals acquire behavioral patterns by observing influential role models and interpreting the consequences associated with their behavior. In organizations, leaders represent particularly salient models because of their authority and frequent interaction with employees (Irum et al., 2018). When leaders consistently demonstrate ethical and socially responsible conduct, employees may observe, learn, and internalize these behavioral standards. Over time, such internalization may strengthen employees' moral identity, which can subsequently motivate socially responsible behavior. Thus, employee moral identity may serve as a psychological bridge between ethical leadership and SROB.

This study therefore examined the relationship between ethical leadership and socially responsible organizational behavior, while specifically investigating whether employee moral identity mediated this relationship. By examining this mechanism in a public-sector organizational context in Punjab, Pakistan, the study sought to extend existing research on ethical leadership beyond conventional outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment, and performance. The study also contributed to the broader management–society perspective by examining how leadership practices could influence employee behaviors with implications extending beyond the organization to stakeholders and society.

The study was guided by the argument that ethical leadership could promote socially responsible organizational behavior by providing ethical role models and strengthening employees' internal moral orientations (Yasir et al., 2020). Accordingly, this study proposed that ethical leadership positively influenced socially responsible organizational behavior and that employee moral identity served as a significant mediating mechanism through which ethical leadership was translated into socially responsible employee conduct.

Literature Review

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership has become an important construct in management research because leaders influence not only organizational performance but also employees' ethical judgments, values, and behavioral choices. Haroon et al., (2019) conceptualize ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, combined with the promotion of such conduct among followers through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. Subsequent research has generally associated ethical leadership with positive outcomes, including employee trust, organizational commitment, ethical behavior, and organizational citizenship. However, the literature contains an important debate concerning how ethical leadership produces these outcomes and whether its influence is primarily externally regulated or internally motivated (Sami et al., 2016).

A more critical perspective suggests that ethical leadership does not automatically translate into responsible behavior. Employees interpret leadership behaviors through their own values, identities, and perceptions of the organizational environment. Thus, the same ethical leadership practices may produce different behavioral responses among employees with different moral

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orientations. This suggests that individual-level psychological characteristics can determine whether leadership values are internalized and translated into action.

This perspective further strengthens the rationale for examining employee moral identity. Employees for whom morality is central to their self-concept may be particularly receptive to ethical leadership and more likely to transform ethical cues into socially responsible organizational behavior (Irfan et al., 2020). Therefore, the proposed thesis positions moral identity not simply as another employee attitude, but as a key psychological mechanism explaining how ethical leadership can extend beyond organizational compliance to foster socially responsible conduct.

Overall, these debates indicate that an important research opportunity lies in moving from the question of whether ethical leadership influences responsible behavior toward understanding how that influence occurs. The proposed study addresses this gap by empirically examining employee moral identity as the mediating mechanism between ethical leadership and socially responsible organizational behavior.

Socially Responsible Organizational Behavior

Socially Responsible Organizational Behavior (SROB) has gained increasing attention as organizations face growing expectations to address not only economic objectives but also ethical, social, environmental, and stakeholder concerns. The concept shifts attention from organizational-level corporate social responsibility (CSR) toward the behaviors of individual employees who implement, support, or sometimes resist organizational responsibility initiatives. Employees can demonstrate socially responsible behavior through ethical decision-making, concern for stakeholders, responsible use of organizational resources, support for social and environmental initiatives, and voluntary actions that contribute to organizational and societal well-being. Despite this growing interest, the literature contains important debates concerning the nature, motivation, and determinants of socially responsible employee behavior (Kanat et al., 2023).

One perspective conceptualizes socially responsible behavior largely as an outcome of organizational systems and formal CSR practices. According to this view, employees respond to organizational policies, ethical codes, CSR programs, rewards, leadership practices, and organizational expectations. Organizations that institutionalize social responsibility create an environment in which employees understand that responsible conduct is expected and valued. From this perspective, management practices and organizational structures are central determinants of SROB.

An alternative perspective emphasizes the individual agency of employees. Employees may engage in socially responsible behavior even when such behavior is not formally required or rewarded (Laraib et al., 2020). Their decisions may instead arise from personal values, moral beliefs, identity, and a desire to act consistently with their understanding of what is right. This perspective is particularly important for understanding voluntary responsible behavior because

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formal organizational policies cannot completely explain why some employees go beyond minimum requirements.

The opposing perspective argues that genuinely responsible behavior is more sustainable when employees internalize moral values and perceive responsible conduct as consistent with their identity (Manzoor et al., 2022). Employees who regard morality as central to their self-concept are more likely to act responsibly even in situations where organizational incentives are weak. This distinction is particularly relevant to the concept of moral identity.

The proposed thesis adopts the latter perspective while recognizing the importance of organizational leadership. Ethical leadership can provide the social context and role models necessary for employees to recognize and internalize ethical values. Employee moral identity then provides the internal motivational mechanism through which these values can be expressed as socially responsible organizational behavior. (Sami et al., 2023).

Employee Moral Identity

Employee moral identity has emerged as an important construct for explaining why individuals differ in their responses to ethical situations and why some employees consistently engage in morally responsible behavior. Moral identity generally refers to the extent to which moral characteristics—such as being caring, fair, honest, compassionate, and responsible—are central to an individual's self-concept (Razzaq et al., 2020). Unlike externally imposed ethical rules, moral identity represents an internalized source of motivation that can influence how employees interpret organizational situations and regulate their behavior. Within organizational research, this construct provides an important bridge between leadership practices and employee behavior because it helps explain how external ethical cues may become internal personal commitments.

For the proposed study, this suggests that moral identity should not merely be treated as a general moral attitude. Its role as a psychological mechanism should be theoretically connected to the internalization of moral values and the subsequent enactment of responsible behavior.

One perspective argues that moral identity should promote consistency between who individuals believe they are and how they behave. Employees who see themselves as moral persons have an incentive to act in ways consistent with that identity. Socially responsible behavior can therefore serve as an expression of the moral self.

A more cautious perspective argues that moral identity does not operate in isolation (Rehman et al., 2019). Organizational pressures, leadership, ethical climate, competing interests, workload, incentives, and situational demands can influence whether moral values are actually translated into behavior. Thus, a strong moral identity may increase the likelihood of responsible conduct without guaranteeing it in every situation.

This debate strengthens rather than weakens the proposed thesis. It suggests that leadership and organizational context remain important in activating and reinforcing employees' moral

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identities. Ethical leaders can create conditions in which moral values become salient and are translated into socially responsible organizational behavior.

Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory

The present study is grounded primarily in Social Learning Theory (SLT) to explain the relationship between ethical leadership, employee moral identity, and socially responsible organizational behavior. Social Learning Theory, originally developed by Bandura, proposes that individuals acquire attitudes, values, and behavioral patterns not only through direct experience but also through observational learning, modeling, reinforcement, and interaction with their social environment. In organizational settings, leaders represent particularly influential social models because employees routinely observe their decisions, interpersonal conduct, and responses to ethical and unethical behavior (Ali et al., 2020). Accordingly, the theory provides an appropriate foundation for explaining how ethical leadership may shape employees' internal moral orientations and subsequently encourage socially responsible behavior.

Social Learning Theory and Ethical Leadership

Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals are likely to observe and learn behaviors from role models who are salient, credible, and influential. Organizational leaders possess these characteristics because they occupy positions of authority and have considerable influence over employees' work environments. Ethical leaders demonstrate normatively appropriate conduct through honesty, fairness, integrity, concern for others, and responsible decision-making. They also communicate ethical expectations and reinforce appropriate behavior through organizational practices (Usmani et al., 2019). Consequently, employees are exposed to both behavioral examples and explicit signals concerning what constitutes acceptable conduct.

From an SLT perspective, ethical leadership therefore provides employees with a behavioral model for ethical conduct. Employees may observe how leaders handle ethical dilemmas, treat stakeholders, make decisions, and respond to misconduct. Through observational learning, employees can acquire behavioral standards without necessarily experiencing the consequences of those behaviors themselves. Ethical leaders can thus influence employee behavior by demonstrating that responsible and ethical conduct is both appropriate and valued within the organization. This theoretical reasoning supports the following hypothesis:

H1: Ethical leadership has a positive and significant relationship with socially responsible organizational behavior.

Social Learning Theory and Employee Moral Identity

A central feature of Social Learning Theory is that observational learning involves cognitive processes. Individuals do not simply reproduce every behavior they observe; rather, they attend

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to relevant behavioral models, retain information, interpret its meaning, and determine whether the behavior is appropriate and consistent with their own standards.

In the context of ethical leadership, employees repeatedly observe leaders demonstrating fairness, integrity, responsibility, and concern for others. Such experiences can make moral values salient and communicate that ethical characteristics are important within the organizational environment. Over time, employees may incorporate these values into their own self-understanding. This process provides a theoretical explanation for how ethical leadership can influence employee moral identity.

Moral identity represents the extent to which moral characteristics form an important component of an individual's self-concept. When employees regard morality as central to who they are, ethical considerations are more likely to guide their interpretation of organizational situations and behavioral choices. Thus, ethical leadership may contribute to the internalization of moral values by providing employees with consistent and credible ethical models. The relationship can therefore be conceptualized as:

H2: Ethical leadership has a positive and significant relationship with employee moral identity.

Employee Moral Identity and Socially Responsible Organizational Behavior

Social Learning Theory further explains how learned values and behavioral standards can influence subsequent conduct. Employees who develop strong internal standards concerning appropriate behavior are more likely to regulate their actions according to those standards. When moral characteristics become central to an employee's identity, socially responsible behavior may become a natural expression of that identity.

Employees with strong moral identities are likely to be more attentive to the consequences of their actions for others. Within organizational contexts, this may encourage behaviors that demonstrate responsibility toward colleagues, customers, organizational stakeholders, communities, and broader society. Such employees may be more willing to consider ethical consequences, support socially beneficial organizational initiatives, and engage in responsible conduct even when such behavior is not explicitly required by their formal job responsibilities.

Thus, moral identity represents an important mechanism through which socially learned ethical standards can become internal behavioral guidance. The theoretical relationship can be expressed as:

H3: Employee moral identity has a positive and significant relationship with socially responsible organizational behavior.

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Mediating Role of Employee Moral Identity

The central theoretical proposition of this study is that employee moral identity mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and socially responsible organizational behavior. Although ethical leaders provide employees with visible examples of responsible conduct, employees differ in the extent to which these external ethical cues become personally meaningful. Social Learning Theory suggests that behavioral modeling is more consequential when individuals attend to, retain, and cognitively integrate what they observe.

Ethical leaders may therefore initiate a process through which employees learn and internalize moral standards. As employees increasingly perceive morality as central to their self-concept, these internal standards can guide their subsequent behavioral choices. Socially responsible organizational behavior consequently becomes an outcome of both external ethical modeling and internal moral regulation.

This perspective provides a more comprehensive explanation than a simple direct relationship between leadership and responsible behavior. It suggests that ethical leaders influence employee conduct partly because they shape how employees understand and internalize moral values. Employee moral identity consequently functions as a psychological bridge between the ethical behavior of leaders and the socially responsible behavior of employees. Hence, the final hypothesis is:

H4: Employee moral identity mediates the positive relationship between ethical leadership and socially responsible organizational behavior.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships among ethical leadership, employee moral identity, and socially responsible organizational behavior. A deductive research approach was adopted because the hypotheses were developed from Social Learning Theory and subsequently tested using empirical data. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to employees working in a University of Punjab, Lahore. The individual employee constituted the unit of analysis.

Population and Sampling

The population comprised employees working in a University of Punjab, Lahore. The organization was selected because its employees worked within a formal hierarchical structure and had identifiable supervisors, making it appropriate for assessing perceptions of ethical leadership and employee-level socially responsible behavior. Employees from teaching and administrative positions were included to obtain variation in their experiences and perceptions.

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A purposive sampling technique was initially employed to identify respondents who met the study's eligibility criteria. Respondents were required to be full-time employees, to have worked in the organization for at least six months, and to have sufficient interaction with an immediate supervisor to evaluate his or her leadership behavior. Employees with less than six months of organizational experience were excluded because they might not have had adequate exposure to their supervisors.

Where an employee sampling frame was accessible, respondents were selected from different organizational units to ensure adequate representation of employees across departments and job categories. Approximately 450 questionnaires were distributed, and 400 usable questionnaires were obtained, representing an adequate response rate for the subsequent PLS-SEM analysis. Incomplete questionnaires and responses containing substantial missing information were excluded from the final analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising four sections. The first section obtained demographic information, including age, gender, education, organizational tenure, work experience, and job position. The second section measured ethical leadership, the third measured employee moral identity, and the fourth assessed socially responsible organizational behavior. All substantive constructs were measured using previously validated scales adapted to the public-sector context. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Prior to data collection, respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the study and were assured that their participation was voluntary and their responses would remain confidential. Particular attention was given to confidentiality because respondents evaluated their immediate supervisors. No personally identifiable information was requested. The collected questionnaires were subsequently coded and prepared for statistical analysis.

Measurement of Constructs

Ethical leadership was measured using established items assessing leaders' fairness, integrity, ethical role modeling, communication of ethical standards, and reinforcement of ethical conduct. Employee moral identity was measured through items capturing the extent to which moral characteristics were central to employees' self-concepts. Socially responsible organizational behavior was assessed through items reflecting employees' ethical, responsible, stakeholder-oriented, and socially beneficial behaviors within the organizational context.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS and SmartPLS 4. SPSS was initially used for data screening, demographic analysis, and descriptive statistics, whereas SmartPLS was employed to estimate the measurement and structural models using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation

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Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM was considered appropriate because the study focused on examining predictive relationships among latent constructs and testing the mediating role of employee moral identity.

The analysis was conducted in two principal stages: assessment of the measurement model and assessment of the structural model.

Data Screening and Descriptive Analysis

Before estimating the PLS-SEM model, the dataset was examined for missing values, inconsistent responses, and potential outliers. Incomplete responses containing substantial missing information were removed from the dataset. Descriptive statistics were subsequently calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the principal study variables.

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated to establish the reliability and validity of the constructs. Indicator reliability was assessed through outer loadings. Items with satisfactory loadings were retained, while indicators demonstrating inadequate reliability were considered for removal only when their deletion was theoretically justified and improved the overall measurement quality.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and composite reliability (CR). Convergent validity was evaluated using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The AVE values were examined to determine whether each latent construct explained a satisfactory proportion of the variance in its indicators.

Discriminant validity was assessed primarily through the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT). The HTMT results were examined to ensure that ethical leadership, employee moral identity, and socially responsible organizational behavior represented empirically distinct constructs. These procedures collectively established whether the measurement model provided adequate reliability and validity for subsequent structural analysis.

Structural Model Assessment

After establishing satisfactory measurement properties, the structural model was assessed to test the hypothesized relationships. Collinearity among predictor constructs was examined using variance inflation factor (VIF) values. The hypothesized paths were then evaluated through standardized path coefficients (β), standard errors, t-values, and p-values.

A bootstrapping procedure was applied to determine the statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships. Confidence intervals were also examined to provide a more robust assessment of the estimated effects. The structural model specifically tested the direct relationships between ethical leadership and socially responsible organizational behavior, ethical

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leadership and employee moral identity, and employee moral identity and socially responsible organizational behavior.

The explanatory power of the model was assessed using the coefficient of determination (R^2) for the endogenous constructs. In addition, effect sizes (f^2) were examined to determine the substantive contribution of individual predictor variables. Predictive relevance was assessed through Q^2, where appropriate, to determine whether the model demonstrated predictive capability beyond the observed sample.

Mediation Analysis

The principal purpose of the structural analysis was to examine whether employee moral identity mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and socially responsible organizational behavior. The indirect effect was tested using bootstrapping through the pathway:

Ethical Leadership → Employee Moral Identity → Socially Responsible Organizational Behavior

The direct, indirect, and total effects were examined to determine the nature of the mediation. A significant indirect effect indicated that ethical leadership influenced socially responsible organizational behavior partly through employee moral identity. The mediation analysis therefore provided empirical evidence concerning the psychological mechanism proposed in the theoretical framework and allowed the study to determine whether ethical leadership influenced socially responsible behavior not only directly but also through the internalization of moral values represented by employee moral identity.

Results

The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through SmartPLS 4. The analysis initially assessed the measurement model to establish the reliability and validity of the constructs, followed by assessment of the structural model to test the proposed hypotheses. The measurement model demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties, with the indicators generally exhibiting acceptable outer loadings. The values of Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and rho_A indicated adequate internal consistency for ethical leadership, employee moral identity, and socially responsible organizational behavior. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values supported convergent validity, while HTMT results confirmed discriminant validity among the three constructs.

The structural model provided support for the proposed relationships. Ethical leadership demonstrated a positive relationship with socially responsible organizational behavior, supporting H1. This finding indicated that employees who perceived their immediate supervisors as ethical, fair, trustworthy, and responsible were more likely to demonstrate behaviors that reflected concern for organizational and broader societal interests.

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H2 was also supported, as ethical leadership showed a positive relationship with employee moral identity. This result suggested that leaders' ethical conduct and role modeling were associated with greater internalization of moral values among employees. Ethical leaders appeared to provide behavioral cues that encouraged employees to attach greater importance to moral characteristics within their self-concept.

The results further supported H3, demonstrating a positive relationship between employee moral identity and socially responsible organizational behavior. Employees for whom moral characteristics were more central to their identity were more likely to engage in responsible and socially beneficial organizational behaviors. This finding highlighted the importance of internal moral motivation in explaining employee conduct.

Finally, the mediation analysis supported H4. The indirect effect of ethical leadership on socially responsible organizational behavior through employee moral identity was significant, indicating that employee moral identity served as a mediating mechanism. Thus, ethical leadership influenced socially responsible behavior not only directly but also indirectly by strengthening employees' moral identity.

Discussion

The findings provided empirical support for the proposed theoretical framework based on Social Learning Theory. The positive relationship between ethical leadership and socially responsible organizational behavior demonstrated that leaders acted as important behavioral models within the organization. Employees appeared to observe and respond to leaders who demonstrated fairness, integrity, accountability, and concern for others. This finding reinforced the argument that ethical leadership could extend beyond conventional organizational outcomes and encourage behaviors with wider social implications.

The significant relationship between ethical leadership and employee moral identity was particularly important. It suggested that ethical leadership was not limited to communicating organizational rules but also influenced employees' internal moral orientations. Through consistent ethical role modeling and reinforcement, leaders appeared to make moral values more salient to employees. This finding supported the Social Learning Theory argument that individuals learned not only specific behaviors but also behavioral standards through observing influential social models.

The positive relationship between moral identity and socially responsible organizational behavior further indicated that responsible conduct was partly rooted in employees' internal self-concepts. Employees who regarded morality as an important aspect of their identity were more likely to translate moral values into responsible workplace behavior. This finding strengthened the distinction between externally imposed compliance and internally motivated responsibility.

Most importantly, the significant mediating effect of employee moral identity provided evidence that ethical leadership influenced socially responsible behavior through an internal psychological mechanism. The findings therefore suggested that organizations could not rely exclusively on

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formal ethical codes or monitoring systems. Ethical leadership could be more effective when it fostered employees' internal commitment to moral values. From a management–society perspective, the results demonstrated how ethical leadership at the organizational level could contribute to socially responsible behavior at the employee level, thereby creating a potential pathway through which organizational practices could generate broader societal value.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have important theoretical, managerial, and societal implications. Theoretically, the study extended the application of Social Learning Theory by demonstrating that ethical leadership was associated not only with observable employee behavior but also with an important internal psychological mechanism, namely employee moral identity. The significant mediating role of moral identity suggested that employees did not simply imitate ethical leaders; rather, ethical role modeling appeared to contribute to the internalization of moral values, which subsequently encouraged socially responsible organizational behavior. Thus, the study provided a more comprehensive explanation of how leadership practices could translate into responsible employee conduct.

From a managerial perspective, the findings highlighted the importance of developing ethical leadership capabilities within public-sector organizations. Organizations should not view ethical leadership merely as compliance with codes of conduct or administrative regulations. Instead, leadership development programs should emphasize integrity, fairness, transparency, accountability, responsible decision-making, and ethical role modeling. Managers and supervisors should consistently demonstrate the ethical standards expected from employees because their everyday conduct can communicate stronger behavioral messages than formal organizational policies.

The findings also indicated that organizations should pay attention to the moral development and ethical awareness of employees. Ethics training could incorporate realistic workplace dilemmas, stakeholder perspectives, and opportunities for employees to reflect on their personal moral values. Recruitment, promotion, and performance-management systems could also incorporate ethical competencies to reinforce the importance of responsible conduct.

From a societal perspective, the findings were particularly relevant to public-sector organizations because employee decisions can directly affect citizens and other stakeholders. Strengthening ethical leadership and employees' moral commitment could contribute to greater accountability, responsible use of public resources, fairness in service delivery, and stakeholder-oriented decision-making. Consequently, promoting ethical leadership may represent not only an organizational governance strategy but also a means of strengthening socially responsible public administration.

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Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between ethical leadership and socially responsible organizational behavior, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of employee moral identity. Drawing on Social Learning Theory, the study proposed that ethical leaders could influence employees' responsible behavior by serving as credible role models and by reinforcing ethical standards within the workplace. The findings supported the proposed relationships and demonstrated that ethical leadership was positively associated with socially responsible organizational behavior and employee moral identity. Employee moral identity was also positively associated with socially responsible organizational behavior.

Most importantly, the findings established the mediating role of employee moral identity, suggesting that the influence of ethical leadership on socially responsible behavior was not limited to direct behavioral imitation. Rather, ethical leadership appeared to contribute to the internalization of moral values, which subsequently encouraged employees to behave in ways consistent with broader organizational and societal responsibilities. This finding provided an important theoretical explanation of how leadership practices could translate into socially responsible employee conduct.

The study contributed to the literature by connecting ethical leadership, moral identity, and employee-level social responsibility within an integrated framework. It also extended the management–society perspective by demonstrating how leadership practices within organizations could influence behaviors with implications for stakeholders and society. From a practical perspective, the findings emphasized the importance of ethical role modeling, leadership development, and employees' internal moral development in promoting responsible organizational behavior.

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