

Rebecca Risbjerg Nørgaard,
Denmark
rebecca.risbjerg@hotmail.com

Abstract

Some scholars have incorporated specific ethical values such as altruism and compassion and fairness toward employees into generic conceptualisations of ethical leadership. It is important to consider whether these concepts including specific values characterise notions of ethical leadership in all contexts. Based on theoretical arguments and by means of 41 interviews with managers and employees at Danish public hospitals, this article theoretically discusses and empirically illustrates what organisational context can mean for ethical leadership understandings. The empirical case represents a public organisational context characterised by strong professional leaders and employees. The theoretical and empirical insights suggest that overall, the existing theoretical concept of ethical leadership seems useful to characterise ethical leadership understandings in Danish public hospitals, while individuals' social group identification in this organisational context informs which specific ethical values an ethical leader should demonstrate and promote.

Introduction

Ethical leadership has received increasing attention in public administration research (e.g. Heres and Lasthuizen 2011; Hassan, Wright and Yukl 2014; Hassan 2015; Bellé and Cantarelli 2018; Thaler and Helmig 2016; Van der Wal and Demircioglu 2020). The concept covers a leader's demonstration and promotion of normative appropriate conduct. A common understanding in the descriptive conceptualisations is that normative appropriate conduct is a context-dependent phenomenon that may vary across organisations and societies (Brown, Trevino and Harrison 2005; Kalshoven, Den Hartog and De Hoogh 2011; Yukl et al. 2013). Despite a shared understanding of ethical leadership conduct as context-dependent, descriptive conceptualisations have incorporated particular ethical values into the generic conceptualisations such as altruism, as well as compassion and fairness toward employees (Brown, Trevino and Harrison 2005; Kalshoven, Den Hartog and De Hoogh 2011; Yukl et al. 2013; Belle and Cantarelli 2019). However, some scholars have been questioning the context sensibility of the generic conceptualisations (Van den Akker et al. 2009; Den Hartog and De Hoogh 2009; Heres and Lasthuizen 2011; Heres 2014). Heres and Lasthuizen (2011), for instance, illustrate how managers' understanding of ethical leadership vary depending on the publicness of their organisation.

This article is based on the idea that notions of ethical leadership are context dependent. The aim of this article is to theoretically discuss and empirically illustrate what organisational context can mean for ethical leadership understandings. This is illustrated through interviews with managers and employees at Danish public hospitals. This context represents public organisations with highly professionalised employees.

Keywords:
ethical leadership,
professionalism,
public organisations,
social identity theory,
values,
qualitative methods

The article proceeds as follows. After presenting the literature on conceptualisations of ethical leadership, the article presents a theoretical argument based on social identity theory for the organisational context dependency of ethical leadership understandings. There follows a presentation of the qualitative research design, with a subsequent display of the empirical illustrations presenting (1) a comparison between understandings from generic ethical leadership concepts and the interviews, and (2) the interviewees' understandings of ethical conduct. Finally, the article discusses the empirical insights, the transferability of universal ethical leadership concepts, and the normative implications of a more context sensitive approach to ethical leadership understandings.

The Ethical Leadership Concept

Brown, Trevino and Harrison (2005) were the first to conceptualise ethical leadership as a descriptive concept, although scholars had been highlighting the importance of leadership for the management of ethical values for quite some time (e.g. Barnard 1938; Bass 1990; Antonakis, Cianciolo and Sternberg 2004). The definition by Brown and colleagues is the most used in public administration studies to date. They define ethical leadership as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown, Trevino and Harrison 2005, 120). According to their generic definition, ethical leadership is aimed at demonstrating and promoting normative appropriate conduct (what we might also term “ethical conduct”), understood as “individual behaviour that is subject to or judged according to generally accepted moral norms of behaviour” (Trevino, Weaver and Reynolds 2006, 952). The concept of normatively appropriate behaviour is intentionally vague and suggests that the generally accepted moral norms of behaviour may vary depending on the societal context (Brown, Trevino and Harrison 2005). This is in line with empirical research on work-related ethical values showing both differences and similarities across organisational and cultural contexts (see for instance Hofstede 1980; Van der Wal and Huberts 2008; Van der Wal 2011).

The definition of ethics and morality is a contested matter (Lasthuizen, Huberts, and Heres 2011). There are several interpretations of the terms in studies of ethics, although there is agreement that both ethics and morality concern right and wrong as well as good and bad. Several authors use the terms interchangeable (e.g. Banks and Gallagher 2009; Heres 2014), and this is also the case here. Inspired by others (Lasthuizen, Huberts and Heres 2011, 387; Lawton, Rayner and Lasthuizen 2013, 2), in this paper, ethics is defined as a collection of values that are used as standards or framework to assess right and wrong of one's decision and behaviour. While many values exist, they are not all ethical values (Van Wart 1998). A value is a conception of the desirable, which “influences the selection from available modes, means, and end of actions” (Kluckhohn 1951, 395). Ethical values are the subset of values relating to right or wrong. Effectiveness and robustness, for example, are not ethical values; they are both desirable but do not necessarily relate to right or wrong. Conversely,

respect and honesty are ethical values, because they concern what is right (respect and honesty) and what is wrong (disrespect and dishonesty).

Brown, Trevino and Harrison's (2005) seminal work distinguishes between two core components in ethical leadership: the moral person and the moral manager. The former refers to a leader's personal character and behaviour, such as demonstrating integrity, being a role model, acting altruistically, and treating followers fairly and with care. The latter refers to a leader's efforts to influence ethical conduct among followers. More specifically, this includes clear, two-way communication about ethical expectations and guidance and the use of reinforcement tools, such as rewards and sanctions, to hold followers accountable for their ethical conduct. The moral person component is also essential for other types of leadership concepts. This component overlaps somewhat with existing leadership concepts such as authentic and transformational leadership (Brown and Trevino 2006; Bedi, Alpaslan and Green 2015; Den Hartog 2015). However, it is the focus on ethical values and the moral manager component that makes ethical leadership different from other leadership concepts (Brown, Trevino and Harrison 2005; Lawton, Rayner and Lasthuizen 2013). Ethical conduct can be learned by observing others (Kohlberg 1976), and scholars therefore mainly use social learning theory (Bandura 1977) to explain the link between ethical leadership and follower conduct (Brown, Trevino and Harrison 2005; Brown and Trevino 2006). Social learning theory suggests that everything can be learned by observing significant role models (Bandura 1977). Leaders often have high levels of power due to their prestigious position in the organisational hierarchy (Bass and Steidlmeier 1999; Trevino and Brown 2004). Followers therefore look to their leader(s) for ethical guidance. Since the publication of Brown, Trevino and Harrison's (2005) influential work, scholars in the descriptive ethical leadership literature have worked on improving the ethical leadership concept by either including or excluding specific behaviours or characteristics. Some conceptual scholars have included additional behaviours, such as caring about sustainability (Kalshoven, Den Hartog and De Hoogh 2011) and taking responsibility for mistakes (Yukl et al. 2013). Others have excluded behaviours such as listening to what employees have to say (Yukl et al. 2013). However, most conceptual scholars agree on some core elements that constitute ethical leadership (Brown, Trevino and Harrison 2005; Kalshoven, Den Hartog and De Hoogh 2011; Yukl et al. 2013; Bellé and Cantarelli 2019). More specifically, generic ethical leadership conceptualisations include (1) demonstrating integrity and high ethical standards, (2) basing conduct on altruistic rather than selfish motives, (3) caring about followers and treating them fairly, (4) engaging in explicit, ethics-related communication with followers, and (5) using reinforcement tools to hold followers ethically accountable (Bellé and Cantarelli 2019, 352). Thus, despite an understanding of ethical conduct being context-dependent, scholars have incorporated some specific values into the moral person component. In their conceptual paper, Yukl and colleagues (2013) encourage future studies to assess the fit of their ethical leadership scale with perceptions of ethical leadership in different contexts.

Subsequently, a group of scholars has been questioning the context sensibility of generic conceptualisations (e.g. Van den Akker et al. 2009; Den

Hartog and De Hoogh 2009; Heres and Lasthuizen 2011; Heres 2014). For instance, Van den Akker et al. (2009) show how ethical leadership only affects employees if there is congruence between the observed and desired ethical leadership behaviour. A study by Den Hartog and De Hoogh (2009) also indicates that different elements of ethical leadership have various effects on employee behaviour. Another study by Heres and Lasthuizen (2011) finds differences among Dutch managers in private, hybrid, and public organisations. More specifically, this is the case when it comes to their understanding of honesty as an important value, their societal focus, and their emphasis on the importance of explicit ethics-related communication. These scholars suggest that the moral person and moral manager components are universally relevant, while the enactment of these components varies across contexts. In the following, this article presents theoretical arguments for why understandings of ethical conduct and hence ethical leadership may depend on the organisational context.

Ethical Leadership and Social Identity

There are several ethics theories that give different answers to which ethical values an ethical leader should demonstrate and promote. On either side of a continuum, we find ethical objectivism and ethical subjectivism, while normative ethics theories can be placed somewhere in the middle.

Ethical objectivism argues that there exist universally stable values (e.g. Pojman 2011). This theoretical stance is to some extent in line with the normative views on ethical leadership focusing on what ethical leadership more generally should look like across organisations (Eisenbeiss 2012; Ciulla et al. 2018; Price 2018). Such an approach may explain why we can find similar understandings of what constitutes ethical leadership conduct. However, it does not resonate well with several studies suggesting different understandings of organisational ethics and ethical leadership (e.g. Hofstede 1980; Van der Wal and Huberts 2008; Van der Wal 2011; Heres and Lasthuizen 2011). As Rokeach (1973, 5-6) stresses: “If values were completely stable, individual and social change would be impossible.”

Normative ethics theories define what ethical conduct is based on specific principles. For example, consequentialist theories such as utilitarianism argue that an action is ethically right if it leads to greater good for the greatest number. In contrast, deontological theories argue that ethical conduct is independent of the consequences. From this theoretical point of view, ethical conduct can be keeping a promise and repay a debt (because it is right in itself), and some actions are similarly wrong in themselves despite their consequences. Virtue-based theories focus on the person rather than the action. More specifically, focus is on being a good person because a good person performs good actions (Lawton, Rayner and Lasthuizen 2013, 18-21).

Ethical subjectivism argues that no ethical values are more right or more wrong and that different understandings can all coexist (Lawton, Rayner and Lasthuizen 2013). An ethical subjective approach can explain differences in ethical leadership understanding. At the same time, it has difficulties in explaining why we do find similar understandings within and across

organisations. As Rokeach (1973, 5-6) also stresses: “If values were completely unstable, continuity of human personality and society would be impossible.”

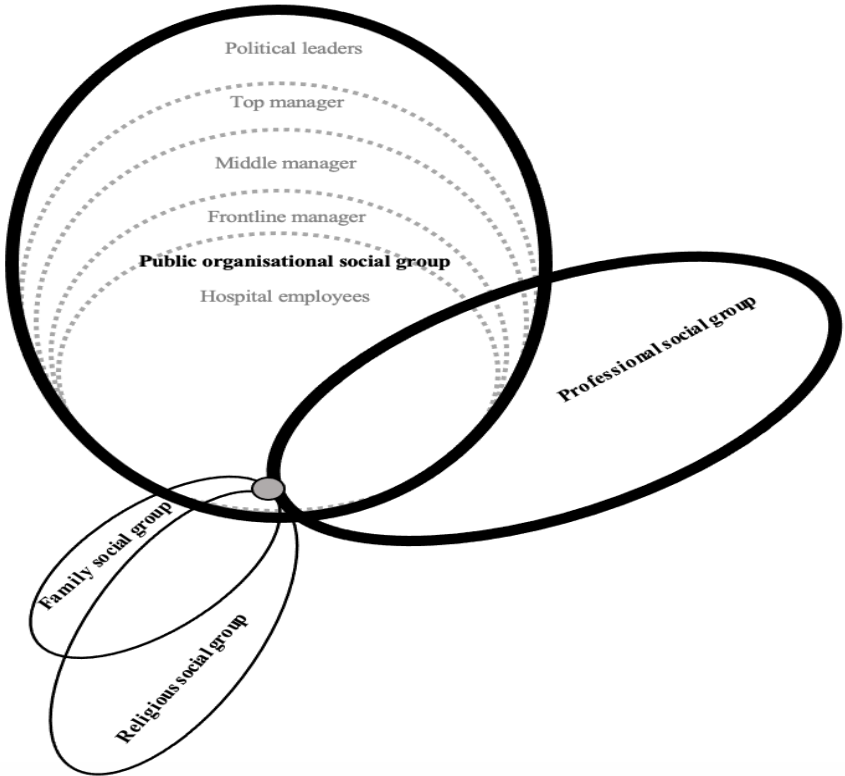
This article theoretically discusses and empirically illustrates how ethical leadership concepts (including general and specific ethical values) do not always resonate with ethical leadership understandings in specific contexts. At the same time, the ethical values are neither entirely subjective. Social identity theory (Turner et al. 1979, Ashforth and Mael 1989) is the point of departure for the theoretical discussion of variations and similarities in ethical leadership understandings across organisational contexts.

According to social identity theory, individuals identify themselves with certain social groups (Ashforth and Mael 1989). A social group can be defined by prototypical characteristics of its members such as gender, professional and organisational membership. An individual uses her social group identity to systematically distinguish herself from others in a social environment. Although individuals can identify themselves with several social group categories at the same time (For instance, “I am a woman, but I am also a mother and a social scientist”), the identification with one group is often stronger than others depending on the context. An individual’s organisation, department and profession are all relevant social groups in the workplace, and Rabbie and Wilkens (1971) find that social interaction - for instance with similar professionals in the workplace - increases social in-group attractiveness. Thus, the more interaction an individual has with a specific social group, the more likely it is that the individual identifies with the group and its specific characteristics. Typically, certain values are associated with members of a given social group, and public value scholars stress that individual value creation happens through interaction with other individuals in social groups (Van Wart 1998; Paarlberg and Perry 2007). Relating social group identification to ethical leadership understandings, this may imply that individuals, who all identify with the same social group, to a larger extent hold similar ethical leadership understandings than individuals identifying with other social groups.

Figure 1 illustrates the general logics behind this argument. More specifically, it illustrates what social group identification means for a hospital employee’s (grey dot) understanding of the organisational ethical conduct that an ethical leader should demonstrate and promote. The four circles illustrate a hospital employee’s four different social groups: A public organisational social group, a professional social group, a family social group, and a religious social group. The size of the circle illustrates the number of individuals in each social group, and the thickness of the circle’s outline explains how much the social group identification means for understandings of organisational ethical conduct. In this example, a hospital employee identifies with the four social groups: a public organisational, a professional, a family, and a religious social group. As illustrated, the employee and his managers both identify themselves with the public organisational social group. Moreover, the overlap between the professional and the public organisational social group illustrates how the employee and some of the managers identify themselves with the same professional social groups. There is no overlap of individuals in the two social groups related to religion and family. The figure also illustrates that the employee’s identification with the professional and organisational social groups

is expected to inform the employee's understanding of organisational ethical conduct to the largest extent as illustrated with thickness of the circles. These social groups seem to be the most relevant groups in the organisational context.

Figure 1. Illustrating example of what different social groups mean for a hospital employee's (grey dot) understanding of organisational ethical conduct



In the following, the article illustrates what social group identity can mean for ethical leadership understandings with the case of Danish public hospitals. The article uses interviews conducted at Danish public hospitals as an illustration.

Ethical Leadership Understandings in Danish Public Hospitals

Danish public hospitals are examples of high-publicness organisations with highly professionalized employees. Organisational publicness reflects the degree to which an organisation is influenced by (1) political control, (2) public funding, and (3) public ownership (Bozeman 1987). Danish public hospitals are fully government owned and funded and are controlled by the national government together with regionally elected politicians (Pedersen, Christiansen and Bech 2005). Moreover, and maybe more importantly, employees and managers at Danish public hospitals are mainly professionalised employees such

as physicians and nurses. One top leader at each of the interviewed hospitals is educated as a political scientist.

Members of such occupations have a specialised, theoretical knowledge obtained through higher education and firm intra-occupational norms (Freidson 2001; Kjeldsen 2012, 60). The norms are prescriptions for normative appropriate conduct within the field of work and are commonly known and used by the members of a certain occupation (Andersen 2005, 71–73). The case of Danish public hospitals thus represents an organisational setting with healthcare professional social groups having very strong professional norms, which may have implications for ethical leadership understandings. In the following, this case is used to illustrate what context means to ethical leadership understandings.

Research Design

To illustrate ethical leadership understandings in a highly professional context, the research design must make it possible to explore ethical leadership understandings. I therefore conducted 41 individual, in-depth interviews with managers and employees in two mid-sized (4000-5000 members of staff) Danish public hospitals in two different regions. Both regions have *the patient in focus* as their political vision. Choosing two hospitals instead of one increases the robustness of the findings.

The interviews

The study has an exploratory focus to probe understandings of ethical leadership conduct in an organisational context with highly professionalized employees. A flexible interview guide is required to be able to follow interesting paths of inquiry in the interviews. At the same time, well-defined questions related to the existing generic conceptual understandings of ethical leadership are also necessary to validate or refute the usefulness of existing conceptual elements. Semi-structured interviews are therefore the most appropriate method, as they make it possible to follow structured questions while deviating from the guide to follow interesting paths when needed (Brinkman and Kvale 2009). The interview guide has open-ended questions about understandings of ethical conduct and ethical leadership, such as “What does ‘acting ethically’ mean at your workplace?”, “How would you describe what ethical leadership entails?”, “What characterises an ethical leader?”, “What does an ethical leader do to support conduct among followers?”, “What does an ethical leader do if employees act unethically?”, and “Where do your thoughts about ethical conduct come from?” A vignette was also included, which provided a written example of a fictional manager enacting generic ethical leadership (see Figure 2). Vignettes are “short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond” (Finch 1987, 105). The use of vignettes in qualitative research enables us to get close to interviewees’ reasoning and reactions to hypothetical descriptions (Harrits 2019). As mentioned, Bellé and Cantarelli (2019, 352) emphasise that the generic conceptualisations of ethical leadership entail some of the same core elements, all of which are included in the vignette: (1) demonstration of integrity and high ethical standards, (2) basing conduct on altruistic rather than selfish motives, (3)

caring about followers and treating them fairly, (4) engaging in explicit ethics-related communication, and (5) using reinforcement tools to hold followers accountable for their ethical conduct. To make the vignette as realistic as possible, the most common Danish names (Statistics Denmark 2019) were chosen for the manager: “Peter” and “Anne.” As some studies on leadership evaluations have revealed a positive gender-match bias (e.g., Jackson, Engstrom and Emmers-Sommer 2007), “Peter” was the manager when conducting interviews with male managers and employees, whereas “Anne” was used when interviewing females. The managerial position was also modified to fit the managerial position of the manager themselves or the employee’s direct manager for the vignette to be as relatable as possible. The department description was changed for the same reason, to fit the department of each interviewee (surgery or medical). After presenting the vignette to the interviewee, I opened with: “What do you think about Anne/Peter? Is (s)he enacting ethical leadership? Why (not)?”

Figure 2. Generic ethical leadership vignette

Imagine *Peter/Anne*, who is part of the management team at a *surgery/medical* department at a medium-sized hospital.

Peter/Anne always considers what is the right thing to do before making decisions. *He/She* acts in accordance with high ethical standards—also in situations where other considerations point in the opposite direction.

Peter/Anne always puts the needs of others and the organisation over *his/her* own.

Peter/Anne cares about the well-being of *his/her* employees and treats them fairly.

Peter/Anne communicates clearly to the employees about the organisational expectations to ethical conduct. *He/she* sheds light on the ethical aspects of *his/her* own and *his/her* employees' decisions and behaviour. In addition, *he/she* makes it possible to discuss ethical issues and dilemmas together with *his/her* employees.

If some employees act unethically, *Peter/Anne* holds them responsible. At the same time, *Peter/Anne* also acknowledges employees who act in accordance with what is considered ethical conduct.

Pilot interviews were first conducted to assess the interview guide. The final interviews were conducted with employees and managers at all hierarchical levels in two public hospitals to investigate the ethical leadership understandings and experiences of employees and managers alike across managerial levels. Two departments (one medical, one surgical) were chosen for each hospital. The managers were all selected as interviewees based on their formal management positions in the respective hospitals, resulting in three top managers, one department nurse (except at H2.D), two frontline managers (one ward nurse, one leading head physician), and six employees (three physicians, three nurses). The frontline managers were asked to randomly select six employees from their department based on who had the most recent birthday, but one department (H2.D) was unable to meet the random selection criterion due to work schedule logistics. In total, 41 interviews were conducted with the following 41 individuals.

Table 1. Interviewees

Hospital	Top managers	Department	Middle managers	Frontline managers	Employees
1	3 top managers	A	1 department nurse	1 head physician 1 ward nurse	3 physicians 3 nurses
		B	1 department nurse	1 head physician 1 ward nurse	3 physicians 3 nurses
		C	1 department nurse	1 head physician 1 ward nurse	3 physicians 3 nurses
2	3 top managers	D	No department nurse*	1 head physician 1 ward nurse	3 physicians 3 nurses
In total	6 top managers		3 middle managers	8 frontline managers	24 employees

*The department was in a recruitment process. Therefore, no department nurse was employed during data collection.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected by the author in the period January–August 2019, and each interview was conducted at the interviewee’s workplace to make the setting as natural as possible. One interview (Nurse H1.B2) was interrupted and the last part of the interview was conducted over the telephone. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. A few interviews were shorter due to emergency calls or other sudden obligations of the interviewees. Empirical insights were used to inform the coding strategy. After the data collection, four student assistants transcribed the interview data following a transcription guide to ensure uniformity. The author then used the NVIVO data management program to code the data continuously as it was collected and transcribed. The unit of analysis is the statement of the interviewee (rather than the individual persons). To increase the reliability of the coding process, a student assistant and the author coded and compared the coding of 10 interviews using a coding scheme based on the theory and findings from the initial coding. The coding strategy thus integrates both theoretical codes (deductive codes) focused on the generic ethical leadership understanding as well as codes evolved from the empirical data (inductive codes), such as different understandings of organisational ethical conduct. Additional material such as the interview guide, coding scheme, characteristics of interviewees as well as analytical working displays are available from the author on request.

Analysis

The analysis is structured as follows. First, a short introduction to the immediate understandings of ethical leadership is given. Second, a comparison of ethical leadership understandings among the interviewees and the five common elements in the existing conceptualisations of ethical leadership is presented. Third, the section includes an analysis of understandings of ethical conduct among the interviewees.

Ethical leadership understandings

What is ethical leadership? There are several immediate responses to this question. The interviewees emphasise that ethical leadership is about being authentic and leading with integrity, being a role model, communicating about ethics, reinforcing ethics, and supporting employees in handling ethical questions and dilemmas. It is about being aware of the organisation's reason d'être, ensuring rightful patient treatment, and following rules. It is about being trustful, fair, caring, and listening to what employees say. It is also about ensuring a flat organisational hierarchy, a good work environment, and work-life balance. Some emphasise that it is a complicated concept, while one interviewee mentioned that an ethical leader is a leader you wish you had. This illustrates a variety of immediate understandings of the concept. To structure the empirical insights, this article compares the elements in the generic ethical leadership concepts to the understandings of the interviewees in the following.

Moral person

The first component in the generic ethical leadership concepts is the moral person, who refers to a leader's demonstration of ethical conduct. This component relates to the leader's personal characteristics and behaviour.

One generic element related to the moral person component is that an ethical leader (1) demonstrates integrity and high ethical standards (Bellé and Cantarelli 2019). This means that an ethical leader as a person consistently behaves in accordance with high ethical standards, thereby functioning as an ethical role model for followers. Almost all interviewees emphasise the importance of acting consistently in accordance with personal ethical values. One of the top managers (H1.1) explains how:

I want to be able to look at myself in the mirror in the morning. Can I vouch for the direction of the organisation? Is it a hospital where we do our very best for the patients? Or are we doing something else? (Top manager H1.1)

By consistently behaving ethically, the manager functions as an ethical role model, which is particularly important to being able to promote ethical conduct among followers, as one of the ward nurses (H1.A) illustrates:

As a leader, you're a role model. If my employees don't find I'm acting ethically or responsibly, they'll think, 'Well, obviously you don't need to do that here.' (Ward nurse H1.A)

While some agree that being an ethical role model entails following ethical standards, several interviewees across job positions and professions argue that it is not always possible to set ethical standards nor to follow them. Instead, ethical leaders must engage themselves in ethical reflection, where the ethical conduct is considered in context. One nurse (H2.C1) emphasises that:

You don't act ethically correct if you can't deviate from the path you're walking on. (Ward nurse H2.C1)

This also mirrors a shared understanding of ethics as something less clear-cut; something that is up for discussion. One of the department nurses (H1.A) explains how:

I think that ethics can be discussed. So, it isn't always (...) that ethics can be made from high ethical standards. The situation also matters. So maybe you have to act differently in the situation than as prescribed by the high ethical standards. And it can still be ethical. (Department nurse H1.A)

Thus, according to the interviews, being an ethical role model acting in accordance with one's personal understanding of what constitutes ethical conduct is an important element in ethical leadership, but this might entail ethical reflection and actions based on such reflection rather than actions following firm ethical standards.

A second common element related to the moral person in the generic conceptualisations is that ethical leaders (2) base their conduct on altruistic rather than selfish motives (Bellé and Cantarelli 2019). In the interviews, there were disagreements within and across job positions regarding whether such conduct is understood as a fixed part of ethical leadership. Some of the top managers and some employees emphasise that an ethical leader's selfish motives should be aligned with altruistic motives; otherwise, the manager should not be working in a public organisation delivering public services. However, one top manager, as well as most employees, middle managers, and frontline managers, are more sceptical of including altruism as an ethical value. Many emphasise that a public manager who only acts on altruistic motives will burn out in organisations characterised by cross-pressures between unlimited public service demands on one side, and limited resources on the other. Thus, the interviewees see always acting on altruistic rather than selfish motives as unethical conduct toward oneself as a person, but also toward the organisation. A ward nurse (H1.B) explains how:

[i]t's important to put your own oxygen mask on before you can help others. (Ward nurse H1.B)

Instead of acting on altruistic rather than selfish motives, an ethical leader must find the right balance between these motives, as illustrated by a quote from one top manager (H2.1):

It may be a myth, but I've heard that in the old days, when the sailors sailed on the oceans and were sent up the rigging, they said that when you climb in the rigging, then you should only use one hand to set the sail and the other to hold on to the ship (...) We must never give more than one hand to the ship, because otherwise we burn out. Especially when we work in the healthcare sector because there are so many patients and so many needs. (Top manager H2.1)

Thus, most interviewees do not understand “acting on altruism rather than selfish motives” as a general ethical value that ethical leaders should demonstrate and promote in a Danish hospital setting.

A third element commonly understood as part of the moral person’s behaviour is that an ethical leader (3) cares about followers and treats them fairly (Bellé and Cantarelli 2019). The importance of an ethical leader demonstrating such conduct was mentioned in several interviews:

If you don't care about the well-being of your staff (...) you lose your feeling with them. And they lose their trust in you. And then they choose something else if there's nothing else keeping them there. (Nurse H1.B1).

Additionally, fairness toward employees, understood as equal distributions of goods and tasks, is important. Others understand fairness toward employees as treating employees according to personal needs and thereby treating people unequally. However, most top managers emphasise that it is even more important to care about patients:

We're here for a reason. And if the patients weren't here, then we wouldn't be here either (...) They're the core task, and that's what we must focus on. Of course, we must be a healthy workplace where employees thrive. But the patients need to come first. (Top manager H2.3).

Thus, the interviews reveal a disagreement about whether “caring about employees and treating them fairly” is a part of ethical leadership. This difference is particularly present when comparing the top managers, who are closer to the political level, and the lower-level managers and employees, who are closer to public service delivery.

Moral manager

In addition to the moral person component, generic ethical leadership concepts also consist of a moral manager component. This component entails what the manager does to promote ethical conduct in the organisation, which includes the use of communication and reinforcement tools.

The first common element related to the moral manager is that managers (4) engage in ethics-related, two-way communication with their followers (Bellé and Cantarelli 2019). This includes (a) clear communication about expectations regarding ethical conduct as well as (b) discussions of ethics, ethical issues, and dilemmas with employees. All interviews emphasise the importance of communications in the promotion of ethical conduct. Some employees and managers highlight the importance of clear communication of organisational expectations regarding ethical conduct to employees. As one top manager (H2.1) puts it:

[o]ur basic values must guide our behaviour (...) Again, dialogue is necessary to lead, and if you're not willing to say, 'Here, we do it like this, because...' then it's difficult for our managers and employees to decode what the top management wants. (Top manager H2.1)

Others emphasise that a leader's personal ethical values are not necessarily the golden ethical standards. Instead, it is important to discuss ethical values with employees to agree on a shared understanding within the organisation. The argument is that employee ownership of the ethical values of the organisation is important for ethical leadership to influence the conduct of followers. One of the ward nurses (H1.A) illustrates this point:

[I]t's of no use for the management to chart the organisational values (...) The employees need to own them. Otherwise, I don't think you can live up to them. (Ward nurse H1.A)

Additionally, most interviewees emphasise the importance of allowing employees to discuss ethical issues and dilemmas with each other and the leader. By doing so, employees learn ethical reflection practices, which creates a more shared organisational understanding of ethical conduct. As a physician (H1.B3) explains:

You're obligated to get better at your job. And that includes reflecting and conferring with colleagues (...) And then—through the inputs you get—you can try to navigate the treacherous waters and find a safe route. (Physician H1.B3)

In addition to discussing ethics with followers, some managers and one employee argue that it is also important as an ethical public leader to engage in ethics-related two-way communication with politicians or organisational superiors, as the following quote from top manager (H1.2) illustrates:

When I was hired, I accepted that it's a politically controlled organisation. I shouldn't undermine it or speak poorly about my political leaders. If they make a decision I don't agree with—well, that's how a political organisation is led. If it's a wrong decision in my eyes, then I must do what I can to change it, influence, and draw attention to it. If not, then those are the conditions and that's the job. (Top manager H1.2)

In sum, all interviews emphasise the importance of discussing ethics, ethical issues, and dilemmas with employees. Some managers and one employee emphasise that this also includes two-way communication between lower-level managers and the politicians or superior managers.

Lastly, according to the generic conceptualisations, a moral manager also promotes ethical conduct by (5) using reinforcement tools to hold employees accountable for ethical conduct (Belle and Cantarelli 2019). This includes praise of ethical conduct as well as discipline of unethical conduct. Turning to the interviews, several employees and managers emphasise that this is an important element in ethical leadership:

We recognise and give compliments when something is within the lines. If you do something here that isn't decent and doesn't conform to our values and norms, then we call it

out. Because otherwise you don't know what's inside and what's outside. (Top manager H1.3).

However, some middle managers and employees also emphasise that although some behaviour might appear unethical, it can in fact be the result of structures or procedures rather than employees with poor morals. In such situations, an ethical leader must change the procedures leading to the unethical conduct rather than disciplining employees:

An ethical leader must somehow look at what the course of events has been like (...) And then the leader has to look at what (...) did the system offer here? (Physician H1.A2).

Overall, reinforcement through praise and discipline is also understood as part of ethical leadership in high-publicness organisations.

In sum, the interviews illustrate that generic understandings of ethical leadership as including a moral person and a moral manager component are useful to describe ethical leadership understandings in a high-publicness and professional context such as Danish public hospitals. Yet the analysis also indicates that ethical leadership concepts that include altruism, compassion and fairness toward employees as general and stable ethical values are not necessarily comparable to what all managers and employees at Danish public hospitals understand as ethical leadership conduct in their organisational setting. The results are summarized in Display 1.

Display 1. Generic understanding of ethical leadership (EL) vs. interviewees' understandings

Generic EL components	Generic EL	Understandings of EL among employees and managers
Moral person	Demonstrate integrity and high ethical standards	<p><i>Demonstrate personal integrity by acting on ethical reflection rather than ethical standards</i></p> <p>According to most interviewees, an ethical leader is a role model who acts in accordance with personal ethical values. Some mention that this does not mean acting according to ethical standards, but rather engaging oneself in ethical reflection. Others argue that it is not always functional for a leader to think about ethics in every situation.</p>
	Acting on altruistic rather than selfish motives	<p><i>Finding the right balance between acting on altruistic–selfish motives</i></p> <p>Some emphasise that selfish motives should be altruistic per se while others emphasise that an ethical leader acts in accordance with altruistic rather than selfish motives. Most interviewees emphasise this is not the case; instead, an ethical leader needs to find the right balance between altruistic–selfish motives. Otherwise, they will burn out due to high demands for public services and limited public resources. A few employees also emphasises that it is not always ideal to act altruistically rather than selfishly if doing so entails sacrificing oneself for an organisation's idea of ethics if that contradicts one's own understanding or for a society that promotes unethical values. One emphasises that it has nothing to do with ethics.</p>

Display 1. Continued

Generic EL components	Generic EL	Understandings of EL among employees and managers
Moral person	Care about followers and treat them fairly	<p><i>Care about followers and (even more about) welfare recipients and treat them fairly</i></p> <p>Several interviewees emphasise caring about followers and treating them fairly as an element of ethical leadership. Others argue that fairness is a subjective concept; even though an employee does not think a decision is fair, it can still be the ethically right thing to do for the employees as a group or for the patients. Several interviewees highlight how “caring behaviour” and “fair treatment” not only apply to the ethical conduct toward employees but also how you treat patients. Some top managers argue, however, that it is even <i>more</i> important to care about the patients and treat them fairly than the employees, because patient treatment is the core task of the organisation.</p>
Moral manager	Engage in ethics-related, two-way communication with followers	<p><i>Engage in ethics-related, two-way communication with followers and superior levels</i></p> <p>Several interviewees emphasise that an ethical leader communicates organisational expectations to ethical conduct. However, some interviewees emphasise that can be problematic, as ethics may vary from person to person and require reflection. Instead, ethical leaders must include employees in the formulation of organisational ethical values. Most interviewees emphasise the importance of engaging employees in ethics-related discussions of issues and dilemmas, but some emphasise that an ethical leader does not necessarily point out explicitly that this is an ethical issue, as the ethical dimension lies more implicit. Some interviewees also highlight that it is also important to engage in ethics-related communication with superiors.</p>
	Use reinforcement tools to hold followers ethically accountable	<p><i>Use reinforcement tools to hold followers accountable. However, ethical conduct is relative. Important not to sanction if unethical conduct occurs due to organisational procedures.</i></p> <p>Several interviewees emphasise the importance of reinforcing organisational expectations to ethical conduct by holding employees responsible for unethical conduct and then with positive feedback for ethical conduct. Some are more sceptical regarding the use of sanctions, as the leader should not always be judging ethical conduct (as it can be an individual matter). Some employees and a manager argue that an ethical leader investigates the reasons for unethical conduct thoroughly before disciplining employees, while one employee argues that an ethical leader backs employees up rather than disciplines them – no matter what.</p>

Organisational ethical conduct understandings

In addition to the moral person and moral manager components, organisational ethical conduct is an important element in the ethical leadership concept. An ethical leader should demonstrate and promote organisational ethical conduct, but what entails organisational ethical conduct understandings in Danish public hospitals? According to the interviewees, ethical conduct is almost unanimously understood as conduct that is in accordance with what one personally understands as the right ethical values. In that sense, understandings of what constitutes ethical conduct may vary between persons. However, there seem to be many similarities within the Danish public hospital context. This may illustrate the strong value congruency of the social groups represented here.

When asked about what constitutes organisational ethical conduct, the interviewees mention conduct that focuses on patients, colleagues, and the public sector. For instance, several managers and employees understand organisational ethical conduct as acting decently, honestly, or compassionately toward patients, whereas others emphasise equal treatment of patients. Some understand organisational ethical conduct as behaviour toward colleagues including being decent, loyal, fair, honest, and caring. Additionally, top managers and a few lower-level managers and employees emphasise loyalty to the political level, compliance with the law, and being objective when taking decisions as examples of public servant obligations. These results are summarized in Display 2.

Display 2. Understanding of organisational ethical conduct

Patient-oriented	Colleague-oriented	Public sector-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acting decently toward patients Treating patients equally Prioritising patients above anything else Treating patients according to individual needs and wishes Reflecting on ethics before acting toward patients Caring about the patients Honesty with patients and their relatives Following standards and regulations for patient treatment procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acting decently toward colleagues Being loyal with colleagues Treating employees fairly Caring about colleagues Honesty with colleagues Reflecting on ethics before acting toward colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being loyal to the political level Complying with the law Being objective when taking work-related decisions by avoiding private interests to affect decisions Reflecting on ethics before acting towards the society

Concluding Discussion

The aim of this article has been to theoretically discuss and empirically illustrate what organisational context can mean for ethical leadership understandings. More specifically, the theoretical argument in this article is that social identities

in an organisational context inform understandings of ethical leadership, which can explain why an ethical leadership concept with particular and stable ethical values may not resonate in all organisational contexts. The interviews illustrate that the overall moral person and the moral manager components fit understandings in Danish public hospitals, while the general and stable values inherent in some generic ethical leadership concepts do not necessarily fit understandings of organisational ethical conduct within this setting. Perhaps the most interesting finding is the relativity of the altruism norm in the Danish public hospital setting. Although the political vision in both regions is *the patient in focus*, several interviewees find it necessary for an ethical leader to find the right balance between altruistic and selfish motives in his or her work life. This might illustrate that Danish healthcare professionals have to cope with high demands from patients for treatment and care while also taking care of themselves.

The article illustrates that ethical leadership understandings can differ depending on the context. Does this also mean that there are qualitatively and substantial different ethical values in different organisational contexts? As mentioned earlier, scholars both find variation and similarities in ethical values across contexts (see for instance Hofstede 1980; Van der Wal and Huberts 2008; Van der Wal 2011; Lawton, Rayner and Lasthuizen 2013, 84). We need more research on this topic, but perhaps a moderate answer to the question is that it is often possible to find many similar ethical values across organisational context, although they are given unequal weight depending on the context. In line with the argument of this article, an explanation could be that the particular weight depends on the specific social groups in the organisation, who decide which ethical values are the most important and relevant in the specific organisation. Among other interesting findings, a qualitative study by Heres and Lasthuizen (2011) of leaders in the Netherlands shows that private leaders find honesty more important for ethical leadership than hybrid and public sector leaders. This study shows that the importance of a certain value for ethical leadership can vary across organisations even within the same national culture.

This leads us to another interesting question concerning the transferability of general and universal ethical leadership scales to different organisational or cultural contexts. Organisations in similar cultural settings are perhaps more likely to have similar understandings of ethical leadership than organisations in different cultural settings (Lawton, Rayner and Lasthuizen 2013). Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the importance and relevance of certain ethical values for ethical leadership can also vary across organisations even within the same national culture (Heres and Lasthuizen 2011). Does this mean that we cannot make meaningful comparative research by using common measures of ethical leadership? Maybe it can be meaningful to use such measures in research where organisations in similar national or organisational cultures are compared. Although the importance and relevance of specific ethical values for ethical leadership can differ across the organisations, a common measure can be used to gain interesting knowledge about degrees of difference. On the other hand, common scales might not be meaningful in research where organisations in very different national cultures (such as Denmark and China) or organisational cultures (such as hospitals and Hells Angels Motorcycle Club) are compared. In

these cases, understandings of the importance and relevance of specific ethical values for ethical leadership may differ too much to make meaningful comparisons. As mentioned, a study by Van den Akker et al (2009) investigates the effectiveness of ethical leadership in a multinational enterprise. Van den Akker and colleagues find that for an ethical leader to be effective, the leader must fulfil her employees' expectations to what ethical leadership is. The underlying theory here is implicit leadership theory suggesting that leadership is in the eyes of the beholder (Lawton, Rayner and Lasthuizen 2013). Thus, if understandings of ethical leadership differ to a large extent across national or organisational contexts, it might be necessary to use different scales adapted to the differences to make meaningful research.

It is then important to consider the normative implications of a more context sensitive approach to ethical leadership. Context determined conduct is not necessarily ethical in itself. One very extreme example is the case of Nazi Germany. Here, discrimination and the execution of Jews was seen as rightful behaviour by the Nazi Party, and their political leader demonstrated and promoted such behaviour. Was he then an ethical leader? Virtually all people would answer this question with a clear no. One might therefore ask whether a more context sensitive approach to ethical leadership is even useful for saying anything about *ethical* leadership in public organisations. This article argues that it is because of the political structures. As Box (2014, 103) emphasises: "However harsh or simplistic it may seem, for public professionals, accountability unavoidably includes demonstrating that they have followed the policy leadership provided by the representative democracy structure". Public servants in democratic states work within public organisations, which means that they are accountable to the values of national politicians. In democratic states, the public value preferences represented by national politicians must adhere to the ethical value framework provided by the international political community, represented by international political organisations such as the UN. Through policies the international political community formulates an overall ethical value framework for what the community understands as right and wrong behaviour of states. Thus, what was understood as rightful behaviour among the Nazi Party members during the time of Nazi Germany is not compatible with what was and is understood as rightful behaviour in the international political community. Therefore, a more context sensitive approach to ethical leadership can still say something meaningful about ethical leadership in public organisations in democratic states.

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