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DOES GENDER MATTER IN ETHICAL LEADERSHIP PERCEPTIONS? CROSS-NATIONAL EVIDENCE

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ABSTRACT. Last decade's ethical leadership failures in business across the globe had severe ramifications, including bankruptcy for corporations that had previously been viewed as exemplary. Hence, ethical leadership has gained increased attention from both practitioners and researchers. In particular, the increased focus has been placed on ethical leadership perceptions in management settings. This paper presents empirical findings from a three-country experiment (N = 538) on the perceptions of ethical and unethical leadership, and how they interact with gender. Building on role congruity theory, we posit that female leaders encounter more severe criticism for unethical leadership compared to male leaders, but they also garner greater positive reactions for ethical leadership. We also hypothesize the existence of national differences in ethical leadership perceptions. Our results indicate that the rater's perceptions are influenced by the gender of the leader they are rating and by ethical leadership. The rater's gender, however, does not affect the evaluation of male and female leaders in the cultures examined. We have also found national differences among perceptions of ethical leadership, in line with the Corruption Perception Index. We further explore the consequences of these results for theoretical and practical applications in this paper and propose directions for future research.

Introduction

The importance of ethical issues in business leadership has received increased attention following several public scandals in large organizations, including Enron and WorldCom decades ago and Uber and Volkswagen more recently. Given the extensive influence of social media, organizations must exercise increased caution regarding their reputation among external stakeholders, including consumers and investors. Leaders should also recognize that their behavior sets an example for what is expected from their employees (see, for example, Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Lord et al., 2016). A substantial body of research indicates that ethical leadership can enhance productive work behavior among employees (Mayer et al., 2009), while reducing counterproductivity (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Conversely, unethical leadership negatively impacts the psychological well-being of employees (Tepper et al., 2007; Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Cialdini et al., 2021) and their attitudes (Tepper, 2000).

Above-mentioned evidence substantiates the need for leaders' moral behavior, should the companies wish to reap the benefits of ethical leadership. However, followers' perceptions of leaders' behavior have been found to stem from factors other than behavior itself. Leader categorization theory suggests that people use certain categories, which are characterized by the member most emblematic of that category, to simplify the environment (Lord et al., 1984; Rosch & Lloyd, 1978). Hence, the more the evaluated person matches the a priori held image of representative member of the category, the more favourably that person will be evaluated (Phillips, 1984; Phillips & Lord, 1981). For example, when a caring parent is considered, most often the emerging image will be that of a nurturing female (Lee et al., 2020). Similar patterns of thinking apply in leadership settings where followers have a priori category description of how an effective or good leader 'should' look or behave (Heilman et al.,1995; Heilman, 2001), what is particularly noticeable in cross-cultural settings (Warner-Soderholm et al., 2019). One characteristic in leadership research – gender – is particularly prominent in leadership research (Northouse, 2007). Previous research unveils gendered perceptions of a good or effective leader (Eagley et al., 1995; Littrell & Nkomo, 2005; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014; Minelgaitė et al., 2018). Therefore, it is likely that gender may also become at play when (un)ethical leadership is considered, even though this sub-field of research has received limited attention, particularly in cross-cultural settings (Kristinsson et al., 2022).

In an attempt to bridge the above-mentioned gap, this paper investigates perceptions of ethical and unethical leader behavior in three countries, contributing to cross-cultural leadership literature, by providing a more nuanced picture of cultural differences in ethical leader perceptions.

Our results have relevance for several parties: researchers, organizations and the people within them, and the wider society. Our research paves the way for multiple research paths at the juncture of ethical leadership perception and gender, introducing fresh viewpoints to the established body of work on role congruity theory. The results indicate that when it comes to ethical leadership perceptions, the tables are turned for the genders: the male leaders are the disadvantaged group, in that female leaders receive better evaluations than male leaders when displaying ethical behaviors. To summarize, role congruity theory depicts male leaders as embodying agentic qualities like forcefulness and dominance, while female leaders are linked with communal traits like kindness and helpfulness (Eagly & Karau, 2002), suggests that ethical leadership perceptions in many ways are different from other characteristics commonly linked to leadership. The discovery that a leader's gender impacts perceptions of ethical leadership also holds significance for organizations. Ethical conduct is increasingly becoming a crucial factor for organizations in the hiring and promotion of leaders (Beeson, 2009). This suggests that if gender stereotypes create bias in ethical leadership perceptions, organizations may need

to take steps to minimize the effects of such bias or prevent it in the first place. Male leaders would otherwise have few incentives for displaying ethical leadership behaviors that presumably benefit the organization. Therefore, addressing the impact of gender bias on perceptions of ethical leadership could be a vital step towards achieving gender equality in the workplace and in society at large.

1. Literature review

Ethical leadership perceptions

Studies in both organizational science and psychology have long established that organizational leaders serve as examples for their subordinates (e.g., Kark et al., 2003; Morgenroth et al., 2015). These leaders' actions convey the underlying values and dedication to the organization, thereby setting the standard for what is considered to be acceptable and expected behaviour among employees (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Loi et al., 2009; Lord et al., 2016). Given the critical role of leaders in shaping organizational culture, and in the context of recent ethical lapses in the corporate arena, the subject of ethical leadership has increasingly become a focus of academic inquiry in recent years.

Starting in the 1980s, the strand of research (e.g., Carroll, 1987, 2000; Treviño et al., 2000) on classifying managers according to their moral characteristics resulted in categories of moral, immoral and amoral managers. Moral managers were those that considered ethics in all their behavior and actions, amoral were those that did not consider ethics in their decision making, and immoral were those who explicitly worked against what most people would call ethical behavior. The importance of personal characteristics, such as integrity and honesty, was confirmed to be a key part of ethical leadership, but importantly, leadership effectiveness and inspiration to followers also appeared as key attributes of ethical leaders (Treviño et al., 2000, 2003). It is therefore important that managers make ethics an explicit part of their leadership, including communicating clearly to their followers what kind of behavior is expected of them, building a reward system for ethical conduct and role modelling ethical behavior (Grojean et al., 2004; Huang & Paterson, 2017; Lemoine et al., 2019). Ethical leaders, therefore, do not only focus on their own behavior but also make sure their employees follow their lead and behave in an ethical manner (Brown & Treviño, 2006a; De Roeck & Farooq, 2018). Following their qualitative work Brown et al. (2005) developed a ten-item instrument for measuring ethical leadership that has become the standard measurement tool in research on ethical leadership. Ethical leadership theory has thus emerged to investigate several aspects of leadership as well as investigating its interaction with related concepts such as spiritual, authentic, and transformational leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006a).

Theoretical insights on of ethical leadership posits a correlation between a leader's actions and how they are perceived. In essence, individuals are judged as ethical or unethical based on their historical actions. However, studies on leader prototypes and role congruity theory reveal that the link between actions and perception is more complex. A leader's actions definitely shape perceptions of their ethical leadership, but evaluations are also influenced by preconceived notions of ideal leadership qualities (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Marquardt et al., 2016). Theories like leader categorization (Lord et al., 1982, 1984) and role congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002) emphasize that people often use comparisons to simplify their assessment of leaders. Therefore, in assessing individuals for specific roles, the more a person aligns with the typical traits expected in that role, the more positively they are likely to be judged by others (Phillips, 1984; Lord et al., 1982; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The way we perceive effective leadership is shaped by how closely an individual aligns with our stereotypical notions of a

leader. The traits typically linked to men, women, and leaders can thus impede women's progress into leadership roles and influence how their performance is viewed. These stereotypes can lead to a discord or role incongruity between the attributes associated with women and those deemed essential for successful leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). If there is a disparity between the stereotypes of women (Spence & Buckner, 2000) and those of leaders (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004), it can result in biased assessments of female leaders. We will next explore how perceptions of ethical leadership are affected by the incongruity between the stereotypical images of women and leaders.

The congruence between the ethical leadership role and the female gender role

In a recent article on the influence of race on ethical leadership perceptions, Marquardt et al. (2016) call for research that investigates the effect of a leader's gender on follower's ethical leadership perception. The rationale behind this call builds on the apparent congruity between the female gender role and ethical leadership.

Marquardt et al. (2016) propose that although conventional leadership models are often skewed towards male traits, societal stereotypes of women being nicer and kinder may lead to expectations that female leaders will act more ethically. Scholarly work on ethical leadership and the traditional roles associated with the female gender exhibits an overlap. Ethical leaders prioritize the well-being of their team members and aim to protect, assist, develop, and empower them. They emphasize values such as altruism, honesty, fairness, and justice, striving to foster a work environment based on kindness and care (Mahsud et al., 2010) being aligned with social justice principles (Mishchuk et al., 2019). Additional traits often attributed to ethical leaders include a focus on community and individual well-being, as well as fostering encouragement and empowerment (Resick et al., 2006).

Treviño et al. (2000, 2003) maintain that ethical leaders embody both moral character and managerial ethics. Being a moral individual entails openness, compassion, effective communication, approachability, and attentive listening. As a moral manager, one aims to make equitable decisions that take into consideration the welfare of others and societal needs. These attributes align closely with qualities traditionally ascribed to the female gender role, which is often characterized by communal traits focused on the well-being of others such as kindness, empathy, sensitivity, and helpfulness (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These roles are also associated with warmth and friendliness (Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Kuráth et al., 2023). A recent comprehensive review reaffirms the stereotype that portrays women as the more compassionate and kind gender (Koenig et al., 2011). In contrast, the male gender role is often linked with agentic qualities such as assertiveness, control, aggression, self-reliance, forcefulness, independence, daringness, competitiveness, and self-assurance (Eagly & Karau, 2002). To summarize, there is a notable alignment between the female gender role and the role of ethical leadership, whereas this alignment is less pronounced between the male gender role and ethical leadership.

Gender roles and ethical leadership

The central theoretical framework for our study is role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which proposes that bias against female leaders may stem from a mismatch between the typical female gender role and the leadership role. Gender stereotypes, which are both descriptive and prescriptive, play a significant role here. Descriptive stereotypes categorize men and women based on perceived characteristics, while prescriptive stereotypes dictate how they should behave (Heilman, 2001; 2012). These stereotypes, which are automatically triggered

and widely recognized, even across different cultures (Heilman, 2012), can significantly influence perceptions of men and women, often leading to judgments based on gender rather than achievements. As previously mentioned, the female gender role is commonly linked with communal traits, whereas the male gender role is associated with agentic traits. Given that leadership roles are generally viewed as requiring agentic qualities, the male gender role aligns more closely with the leadership role than the female gender role does (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Blahová et al., 2023). To summarize, role congruity theory posits that men are often seen as more suitable for leadership roles than women (Koenig et al., 2011). Female leaders face two kinds of biases: they may be judged more harshly than men for leadership roles due to the stereotype that they lack the necessary agentic traits. Additionally, their actual leadership actions might be viewed less favorably compared to those of men, as such behavior is deemed unsuitable for women (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Overall, the theories discussed imply that the female gender role aligns closely with the ethical leadership role, whereas the male gender role does not align as well. This congruence between the female gender role and ethical leadership suggests that female leaders practicing ethical leadership are apt to receive more positive evaluations than their male counterparts. On the other hand, female leaders exhibiting unethical leadership may face harsher judgments than male leaders who display similar behaviors. Thus, we anticipate that a leader's gender will have a notable impact on followers' perceptions of ethical leadership, leading us to propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Female leaders face a larger positive impact from ethical leadership than male leaders

H2: Female leaders face a larger negative impact from unethical leadership than male leaders

Perceptions of ethical leadership among males and females

While individual characteristics and gender variations in ethical matters have been extensively studied (Ruegger & King, 1992; Serwinek, 1992; Ford & Richardson, 2013), the findings from empirical research have been inconsistent (Roxas & Stoneback, 2004). Two distinct viewpoints present contrasting viewpoints when examining the ethical distinctions between genders. Initially, the perspective of gender socialization (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1984) attributes the observed gender differences to distinct gender orientations that develop during early socialization. Conversely, the structural perspective (Betz et al., 1989; Markham et al., 1985) argues that early socialization is eclipsed by the socialization into professional roles, making it unjustified to expect gender differences in viewpoints on ethical scenarios. We will now examine each of these stances sequentially. The approach of gender socialization commonly attributes disparities between males and females to the initial stages of the process of socialization (Peterson et al., 2001). This approach is grounded in the assumption that distinct perspectives on ethical matters stem from the personalities developed through separate socialization experiences for each gender (Gilligan, 1982). It is posited that women tend to interpret ethical quandaries by considering relationships, responsibilities, and empathy toward others. Conversely, men are believed to acquire a tendency to address ethical dilemmas through the perspective of rights, fairness, rules, and justice (Peterson et al., 2001). Numerous studies lend credence to this viewpoint, with women often displaying a higher degree of ethical conduct (Tyson, 1990; Arlow, 1991; White, 1992; Ameen et al., 1996; Dawson, 1997; Cohen et al., 1998; Singhapakdi, 1999; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). For example, a comprehensive meta-analysis that reviewed studies on gender differences in ethical decision-making perceptions, involving more than 20,000 participants across 66 datasets, found that women are more likely

than men to view certain hypothetical business practices as unethical (Franke et al., 1997). Dawson (1997) also noted substantial distinctions between women and men in scenarios involving relational matters, though not in non-relational situations. Despite the usual discovery that women express stronger ethical viewpoints, studies conducted on non-U.S. samples (Stevenson & Bodkin, 1998; Phau & Kea, 2007) have reported greater levels of ethical inclination among men as opposed to women. Supporting the structural perspective, a significant amount of research has found no evidence of differences between women and men in terms of ethical issues (Kidwell et al., 1987; Fritzche, 1988; Singhapakdi & Vitell, 1990; Stanga & Turpen, 1991; Davis & Welton, 1991; Jones & Kavanagh, 1996; Robin & Babin, 1997; Roxas & Stoneback, 2004; Kum-Lung & Teck-Chai, 2010). The structural standpoint offers an elucidation for these findings, positing that early socialization is overridden by the process of becoming accustomed to occupational roles (Roxas & Stoneback, 2004). This method anticipates that individuals of both genders functioning within the same occupational milieu will react comparably, as they are moulded by identical incentive structures within analogous occupational conditions (Markham et al., 1985; Betz et al., 1989; Collins, 1975). This notion is partly corroborated by comprehensive research syntheses that reveal mixed outcomes concerning gender disparities in ethical scenarios (Roxas & Stoneback, 2004; Ford & Richardson, 2013), suggesting collectively that gender interacts with other factors such as profession, education, and various background elements in influencing ethical viewpoints. Recent investigations also advocate for a more nuanced approach instead of merely highlighting gender distinctions, when exploring variations in ethical convictions, values, and conduct based on gender (Schminke et al., 2003; Suar & Gochhayat, 2016).

Therefore, when examining individuals with comparable backgrounds, researchers should not expect to find gender-based differences in attitudes towards ethical scenarios. This holds true for individuals in the same professions or those undergoing training in these fields (Betz et al., 1989), as well as for students specializing in a particular area of study. This standpoint is upheld by studies that fail to identify gender discrepancies in ethical assessments among students pursuing identical subjects or employees belonging to identical vocations (Serwinek, 1992; Rest, 1986; Browning & Zabriskie, 1983; Callan, 1992; Dubinsky & Levy, 1985). Consistent with this latter line of thought, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Females and males do not perceive unethical leadership differently

H4: Females and males do not perceive ethical leadership differently

National differences in ethical leadership perceptions

While the lack of cross-cultural empirical investigations of ethical leadership has been previously noted (Brown & Treviño, 2006), the scarce research that does exist suggests that there might be differences in ethical leadership perceptions across cultures. The variation in beliefs and expectations towards leaders has been previously linked with societal culture (Gerstner & Day, 1994; House et al., 2004), which in turn may have an effect on moral sensitivity and interpretations of ethics in a business setting (Kuntz et al., 2013; Brunton & Eweje, 2010). As a result, the acceptability or unacceptability of certain leadership behaviors is related to contextual factors, such as, societal values and norms (Lord et al., 2001). Unethical behaviors entail actions that, from the perspective of the larger society, are illegal and/or morally inappropriate (Jones, 1991). In our research, we gauge national-level differences in ethical leadership perceptions by using corruption as a proxy. Corruption belongs in the category of unethical behavior and constitutes one facet of unethical leadership (Pearce et al., 2008). On the basis of social norms that encourage either abstinence or participation in corruption, some countries appear to have more corruption than others (Barr & Serra, 2010).

This is captured by country rankings, such as in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), which is respected and widely cited in research (Barr & Serra, 2010). The CPI is based on data aggregated from several different sources that tap into the perceptions of businesspeople and country experts on public sector corruption . Norway is number three (out of 180) in the 2017 ranking, which indicates very low levels of corruption. At number 13, Iceland is reported to have somewhat higher levels of corruption, while Lithuania at number 38 is considered a moderately corrupt country . On the basis of this ranking, we expect perceptions of ethical leadership to be somewhat different in the three countries. We therefore anticipate that the rater's ethical leadership perceptions will be significantly influenced by the rater's nationality, and we put forth the following hypothesis:

H5: Ethical leadership perceptions will vary across countries on the basis of their corruption levels, with Norwegian raters having more negative perceptions of unethical leadership than raters from Iceland and Lithuania, and Icelandic raters having more negative perceptions of unethical leadership than raters from Lithuania.

2. Methodological approach

The central aim of this research is to explore potential disparities in perceptions of ethical leadership contingent upon the gender of the leaders. In line with the approach by Marquardt et al. (2016), we undertook a randomized between-subject experiment following a 2x2 design. This design involved manipulating two factors: the gender of the leader (female vs. male) and the ethical nature of their behavior (unethical vs. ethical leadership). To broaden the applicability of our findings and to test for national differences, we conducted our experiment in three different countries, Lithuania, Norway, and Iceland.

Participants and design

Graduate and undergraduate business students at three large universities in Lithuania, Norway and Iceland were recruited through in-class contact. Participation was voluntary with no course credit offered. A lottery with low denomination gift cards was used as an incentive to participate. International exchange students were excluded from the sample in all three countries as we planned to test for the perceptions in these three countries specifically. Of the 616 students who volunteered (178 Lithuania, 199 Norway and 239 Iceland), 538 completed the study for an average response rate of 87.3% (79.2% Lithuania, 94.5% Norway and 87.4% Iceland). The gender distribution was similar across the three countries with 63.9% of the participants being female (66.7% Lithuania, 60.3% Norway and 63.8% Iceland). Given the student sample, most of the respondents were 30 years or younger in age, with a similar age distribution for each country.

Procedure

The study was approved by the appropriate university boards in each country, and the participants provided their informed consent. The experiment was carried out as a paper-and-pencil survey in university auditoriums, where the participants were instructed to sit one seat apart and not talk with other participants or look at others' surveys. In each country, one of the authors oversaw the procedure to ensure that these instructions were followed. The participants initially encountered a scenario, followed by completing a survey. Following the method outlined by Marquardt et al. (2016), the scenario involved participants reading a newspaper article about the CEO of their employing organization before commencing work for the day.

Through random assignment, participants were then directed to read either (1) an article depicting an ethical transgression involving the CEO of their organization or (2) an article detailing an ethical accolade achieved by the CEO. Subsequently, participants were informed that upon their arrival at work, they had received an email from the CEO. This email conveyed the CEO's personal dedication to upholding ethical conduct and the corresponding expectation that their employees would also uphold similar ethical standards. The email's signature encompassed a photograph and the name of the CEO, both of which were altered to represent either (3) female or (4) male identities. The textual content and images for these manipulations are provided in Appendix 1. Following this, participants responded to queries concerning the ethical stance of the leader, alongside providing demographic information. To mitigate inattentive responses, two filtering questions were used to eliminate participants who had not thoroughly understood or interacted with the scenario (Meade & Bartholomew, 2012; Berinsky et al., 2014).

Measurements

Leader Gender

We manipulated the gender of the CEO using both a photograph and a name within the scenario presented to the participants. The selected names, "Michael Smith" and "Megan Smith," were intentionally chosen to bear a resemblance, and the accompanying images were meticulously selected to exhibit similarity in terms of attractiveness, age, and attire. To validate the likeness of the images, a preliminary study involving 56 participants was conducted to compare the two pictures. Analyzing the results using a paired-samples t-test revealed no noteworthy disparities in evaluations of attractiveness ($t(55) = .000$, $p > 0.05$) or age ($t(55) = .574$, $p > 0.05$). Moreover, considerable care was taken to ensure that both the names and images would evoke similar perceptions across all three countries.

Ethical Leadership Perceptions

For assessing ethical leadership, the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) devised by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) was employed. This scale stands as the prevailing gauge for gauging perceptions of ethical leadership and has been extensively applied across various research domains (for a comprehensive view, refer to Brown and Treviño, 2006). The ELS is evaluated through statements such as "Conducts their personal life ethically" and "Serves as a model for adhering to ethical standards in actions." The internal consistency of the scale, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha, was 0.92.

3. Conducting research and results

To examine our hypotheses, a between-subjects experiment was carried out employing a 2x2 design, which considered the factors of ethical leadership (unethical vs. ethical) and gender (female vs. male). Table 1 provides detailed descriptive statistics about our participants.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

	Mean/%	SD	1	2	3
1. Male participants	36%				
2. Ethical condition	1.49	0.50	-0.01		
3. Male leaders	51%		-0.02	-0.04	
4. Ethical leadership	4.29	1.32	-0.01	0.72**	0.04

n = 534, ** $p < 0.01$ level (one-tailed)

Ethical condition (1 = ethical, 2 = unethical); leader gender (1 = male, 2 = female)

Source: *own compilation*

We started by investigating whether the unethical scenario would result in decreased perceptions of ethical leadership. Across both male and female CEOs, we observed a significant decrease in perceived ethicality when a CEO was placed in the unethical condition, as compared to the ethical leadership condition. Specifically, participants evaluated a male CEO in the unethical leadership scenario as having lower ethical standards (Md = 3.30, n = 130) in contrast to the ethical leadership condition (Md = 5.30, n = 135), (U = 1958, p < 0.05, rrb = .78). Likewise, this trend was reflected in the case of a female CEO, with participants attributing lower ethicality to a female CEO in the unethical leadership condition (Md = 3.20, n = 146) compared to the ethical leadership condition (Md = 5.50, n = 127), (U = 1958, p < 0.05, rrb = .88). This solidifies our confidence in the successful execution of our experimental manipulation.
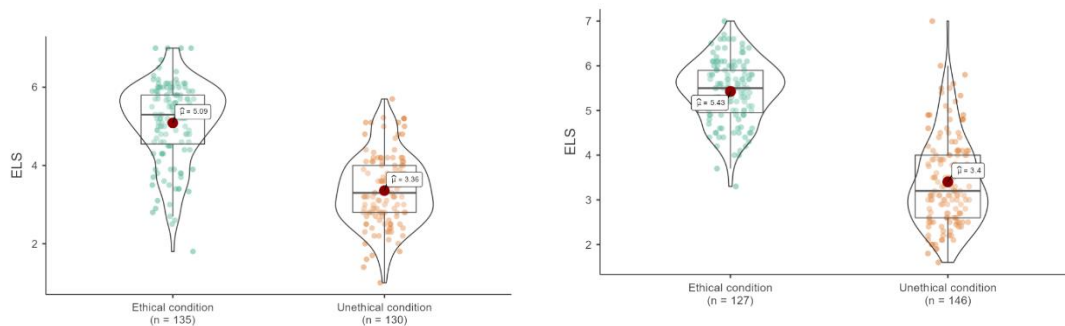

Figure 1. Experimental intervention with male (A) and female (B) leaders.
Source: *own data*

To better understand the perceptions of ethical leadership and whether our results were consistent with hypotheses 1 and 2 we next looked at the differences between how male and female CEOs are perceived. As the literature indicates that small to moderate effect sizes are hard to detect due to significant power constraints in three-way interactions (Aguinis & Stone-Romero, 1997), we set up a planned comparison a priori to test hypotheses 1 and 2. We therefore combined all countries and conducted a comparison between male and female leaders in the ethical leadership condition. The participants perceived the male CEO in the ethical leadership condition as less ethical (Md = 5.30, n = 135) than the female CEO in the same condition (Md = 5.50, n = 127), (U = 7143, p < 0.05, rrb = .17) supporting hypothesis 1 that female CEOs are perceived as more ethical than male CEOs under the ethical leadership condition. As can be seen in *Figure 2* the same could not be said for hypothesis 2, as we find no difference between male and female CEOs in the unethical leadership condition (U = 9379, p > 0.05, rrb = .01). On average, female leaders (Md = 3.20, n = 146) were not subject to a more significant negative effect from unethical leadership compared to male leaders (Md = 3.30, n = 130).
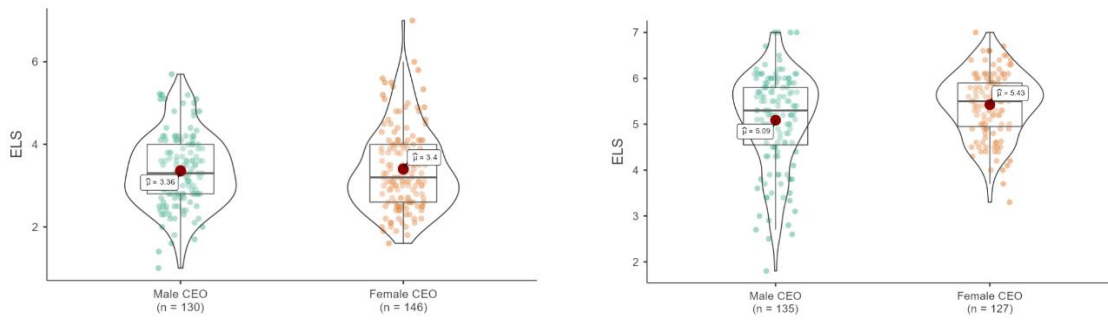
Figure 2. Ethical (A) and unethical (B) conditions and leader gender.
Source: *own data*

For hypotheses 3 and 4 we analyzed the perceptions of ethical leadership by male and female participants. According to the hypotheses we should not find any difference between male and female participants when examining their ethical leadership perceptions. As depicted in *Figure 3*, there was no discernible difference in the perception of ethical leadership among participants, with male participants ($Md = 5.30$, $n = 95$) holding ethical leadership perceptions very similar to those of female participants. ($Md = 5.50$, $n = 165$), ($U = 7692$, $p > 0.05$, $r_{rb} = .02$). We find the same result for unethical leadership, with male participants ($Md = 3.20$, $n = 99$) not perceiving unethical leadership differently than female participants ($Md = 3.30$, $n = 176$), ($U = 8045$, $p > 0.05$, $r_{rb} = .08$).
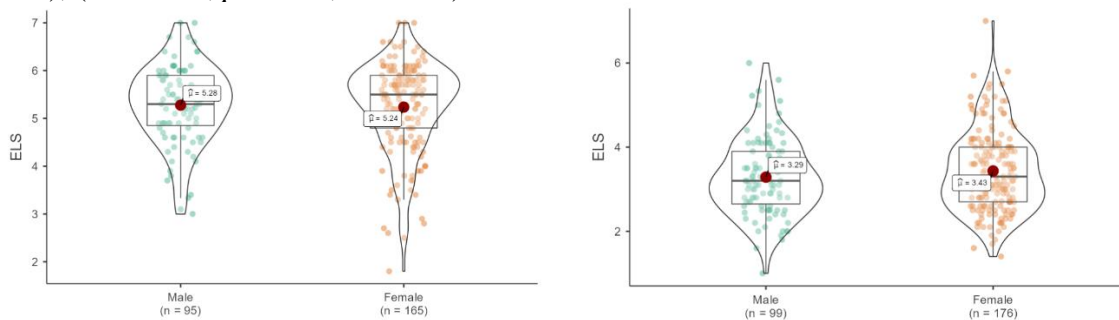

Figure 3. Ethical (A) and unethical (B) leadership perceptions for male and female participants.
Source: *own data*

Hypothesis 5 indicates that cultural differences might play a role in how unethical leadership is perceived. To test this prediction, we performed a Kruskal-Wallis Test between the three countries we collected data from. In line with our hypothesis, we find a significant difference between the countries in our sample, $\chi 2$ (2, n = 538) = 5.98, p < 0.05, $\varepsilon 2 = .01$). Although this is a small difference between the countries, this suggests that as the level of corruption increases, the tolerance for unethical behavior increases. Therefore, hypothesis 5 was supported by our data on cultural differences.
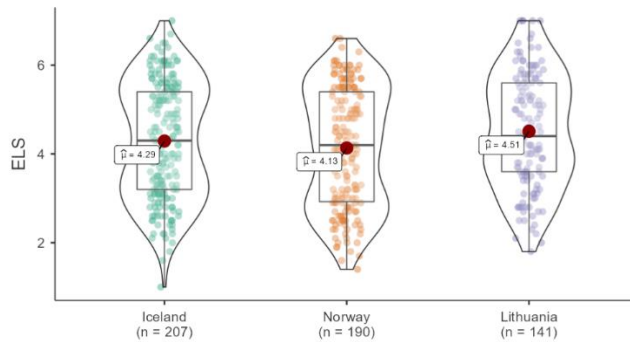
Figure 4. National differences in unethical leadership perceptions.
Source: *own data*

Discussion and conclusion

This study was driven by three primary objectives. Firstly, we delved into the impact of a leader's gender on the perceptions of ethical and unethical leadership. Secondly, we explored the potential influence of the rater's gender on perceptions of ethical leadership. Lastly, we examined the plausible impact of cross-national variations on perceptions of ethical leadership. Through the utilization of an experimental framework and the acquisition of data from three distinct countries, this study furnishes empirical substantiation that a leader's gender does indeed wield significance in shaping perceptions of ethical leadership. With all other factors held constant, evaluators were presented with instances of ethical leadership conduct, revealing that female leaders were perceived as exhibiting greater ethicality compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, our findings indicate that ethical leadership perceptions remain consistent irrespective of the gender of the evaluator. Furthermore, we find national differences in ethical leadership perceptions. Our results are in line with the Corruption Perception Index, with countries with reported higher levels of corruption being more lenient towards unethical behavior. Our findings contribute to the literature on ethical leadership literature, and also to the literature on gender stereotypes and biases. They also indicate some common ground for the ethical leadership literature and comparative, cross-national research on corruption.

Our investigation directly responds to the call for enhanced comprehension regarding the occasions when gender disparities might exert influence on perceptions of leadership effectiveness (Vecchio, 2003). Aligned with the precepts of role congruity theory, our study unearths a distinctive trend: male leaders garner less recognition than their female counterparts when displaying ethical behavior. Research on role congruity theory primarily examines the stereotypes that female leaders face as a result of the misalignment between societal expectations of femininity and the leadership roles. Our study augments this theory's scope by showcasing its applicability to the male gender role within contexts of ethical leadership. In essence, our findings offer an unconventional perspective on gender dynamics in leadership: a terrain where women are often perceived as encountering bias and prejudice. Remarkably, our study implies that similar dynamics might also apply to men. Given the importance ascribed to ethical leadership in today's business environment, it is arguably disconcerting if male leaders who display ethical leadership are not rewarded for this because such behaviors are perceived to be incongruent with the male gender role. It is possible that this result can be explained by the women-are-wonderful effect, which is a positive bias toward women, whereby women are reliably evaluated more positively than men (Eagly & MLadinic, 1989; Eagly et al., 1991). In other words, the "female advantage" (Helgesen, 1995; Eagly & Carli, 2003) is just one of the two sides of the coin and may turn into what we can call a "male disadvantage". The discovery that female leaders encountering unethical situations don't necessarily provoke negative

perceptions might vividly illustrate this phenomenon. To a certain extent, this discovery differs from the observation that female leaders may encounter increased resistance from followers when they exhibit unconventional leadership behaviors (Pandey et al., 2017). Furthermore, it suggests a unique aspect: in the context of ethical leadership, female leaders may have more flexibility in displaying behaviors with varying moral implications, a flexibility that is less evident in traditional leadership roles. The existing research strongly suggests that, in traditional leadership roles, women tend to face repercussions for straying from the expected female gender role. This revelation holds significant implications for organizations seeking to reduce gender bias in leadership contexts, both broadly and specifically in ethical leadership. Notably, it underscores the need to encourage ethical leadership behaviors while simultaneously addressing gender bias concerns. Male leaders arguably have few incentives for engaging in ethical behaviors if they are not perceived as doing so. That is bleak scenario for any organization encouraging their leaders and employees alike to act ethically. Organizations may be able to combat this "male disadvantage" by addressing organizational norms for appropriate ethical behavior and by whom such behavior should be displayed. Over time, such organization-level efforts may infuse the male leader stereotype with a greater tolerance of ethical leader behaviors. Finally, our findings uncover a possible contradiction in perceptions of effective leadership vis-à-vis ethical behavior. Effective leadership is pervasively characterized as masculine across cultures (Koenig et al., 2011). However, if the ethical behavior of male leaders is underappreciated, this finding points at the need to revisit the concepts of effective leadership and ethical leadership, and their interrelation.

Our findings reveal a connection between perceptions of ethical and unethical leadership and variations in corruption levels across nations. This implies that, consistent with role congruity theory, prevailing social norms shape "typical" conduct and, consequently, impact the definition of ethical and unethical leadership. This outcome aligns with existing research on cultural norms and values (Lord et al., 2001; Jones, 1991) and paves the way for numerous avenues of future investigation. Firstly, it calls for deeper investigation of the interplay between culture and ethical leadership, as dimensions of national culture, namely individualism/collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, can shape ethical decision-making among females (Beekun et al., 2010). Secondly, the relationship between national differences in corruption and unethical leadership can extend the previous findings on corruption in the leadership context, which contend that both the person and the situation are predictors of corruption (Bendahan et al., 2015).

Importantly, this result indicates a possible practical application for multi-national organizations. If national culture has an effect on ethical leadership perceptions, organizations can use information about this to their advantage. For example, this information may give an indication of where organizations need to focus their effort when educating their leaders on ethical practices. It may also help them foresee potential problem areas.

To conclude, with the progression of women's roles within organizations, the domain of gender-related studies in management continues its expansion. Notably, substantial strides have been achieved in both conceptual and empirical investigations into gender stereotypes and biases over recent decades. However, gender-based discrimination persists as a pressing concern for organizations. Despite the heightened scrutiny directed towards this aspect, the interplay between gender and perceptions of ethical leadership remains a terrain that remains largely unexplored within research circles.

Revealing the impact of gender on perceptions of ethical leadership holds notable significance. This significance is accentuated by the conventional categorization of ethical qualities as "soft" or communal (Eagly & Karau, 2002). While leadership in general is frequently associated with agentic traits like assertiveness, self-confidence, and ambition, this

perspective undergoes a transformation when directed toward ethical leadership—a dimension that aligns more closely with communal attributes. In this study we find that leaders' gender influences the perceptions of their ethical leadership. However, our results also indicate that these differences are not based on the raters' gender. National differences seem to indicate that overall corruption is an important issue to investigate in ethical leadership research. These results provide ample opportunity for further research into the role of gender in ethical leadership perceptions.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that gender is an important factor in ethical leadership perceptions. Our result applies to both male and female participant as well indicating national differences. Although our results are in line with role congruity theory, further research is needed for a more thorough understanding of how ethical leadership perception is shaped by stereotypes and biases.

Limitations and opportunities for future research

Like any research endeavor, our study possesses its set of constraints and raises unresolved inquiries that warrant further investigation.

Regarding our rationale that perceptions of ethical leadership may be impacted by national culture, one limitation is that the data is collected is from three Western countries that are relatively similar in terms of the most common culture categorization tool in cross-cultural leadership research, namely cultural dimensions. In this research we use corruption as a proxy for national-level differences in ethical leadership perceptions. Although the Corruption Perceptions Index is widely used in research, it is not the only way to compare countries. Since national differences in ethical leadership perceptions of gender are an obvious concern, future research could utilize other tools for country comparison. Single or multi-country samples are needed to examine how ethical leadership perceptions map into the various measurements of national differences.

In addition to looking at different countries, future research might also want to move beyond student samples. Although student samples are common in experimental research and are considered acceptable for testing relationships between constructs (Calder et al., 1981; Yoo & Donthu, 2001), it is generally acknowledged that the use of a student sample can affect the external validity of findings (Anderson, et al., 2013). Non-student samples could therefore provide valuable insights. Furthermore, role congruity theory posits that the organizational environment plays a significant role in shaping gender perceptions (Brescoll et al., 2010). This is applicable to various aspects, including management levels (e.g., higher management vs. lower management) and industries (e.g., nursing vs. engineering). Given this perspective, numerous possibilities for transitioning from student samples become available.

An alternative avenue of exploration entails delving beyond the confines of gender to probe the realms of ethical leadership perceptions. Owing to shifts in demographics and the sweeping wave of globalization, the labor market has witnessed a surge in diversity. Notably, immigrants, seasoned employees, and individuals from the LGBT community constitute a progressively larger portion of the workforce. This demographic evolution potentially lays the groundwork for bias and discrimination targeting these segments (Carlsson & Rooth, 2007; Bendick et al., 1999; Haslam & Levy, 2006). While the discrimination faced by historically marginalized groups is a serious concern for the individuals affected, it also poses a frequently overlooked dilemma for the organizations implicated.

In fact, organizations that allow the persistence of discriminatory practices within their structures inadvertently hinder effective recruitment, adaptability, and the inclusion of diverse viewpoints. This, in turn, has a negative impact on productivity and innovation (Petersen &

Krings, 2009; Dietz & Petersen, 2006; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Kristinsson et al., 2016) and vice versa, supporting the leadership, organizations achieve better results in advanced technologies implementation (Potjanajaruwit, 2023). As mentioned earlier, Marquardt, Brown, and Casper (2016) have explored the domain of racial disparities in perceptions of ethical leadership. However, numerous inquiries persist regarding how underrepresented groups are appraised in terms of ethical leadership. It is our aspiration that this study serves as a catalyst, spurring further exploration in this particular domain.

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