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IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER? GENDERED PERCEPTION OF CEOS' ETHICAL AND UNETHICAL LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT. Over the last decade, enabled by the ever-faster dissemination of information, customers have increasingly begun to scrutinize CEOs' ethical leadership behavior. Although potentially hazardous for companies, this development also poses opportunities, with some CEOs managing to create a positive image of their organizations through ethical leadership. Extensive literature also suggests that perception of leadership is not only influenced by CEOs' behavior but also by gender stereotypes. The present study seeks to accentuate the relevance of gender in the public perception of ethical and unethical leadership. In a survey experiment using a nationally representative sample (N=1055) from Iceland, one of the most egalitarian countries in the world, we find that male CEOs suffer more severe negative consequences for unethical behavior then female CEOs do. Additionally, our results suggest that female members of the public are more appreciative of ethical leadership than their male counterparts. These results underscore the importance of gender stereotypes and perceiver's gender when examining ethical leadership perceptions and indicate that ethical leadership might possess some unique characteristics that set it apart from other leadership concepts. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for theory and practice and suggest avenues for further research.

JEL Classification: J16, L82

Keywords: ethical leadership, unethical leadership, public perception, role congruity theory, social media.

Introduction

Ethical leadership has received increased public attention following the ramifications of unethical leadership scandals in large organizations, with CEOs such as Elizabeth Holmes of Theranos and Martin Shkreli of Turing Pharmaceuticals becoming the personification of unethical leaders guiding companies astray. At the same time, people point to CEOs of other companies, such as Jostein Solheim of Ben and Jerry's and Anita Roddick of The Body Shop, as positive examples of ethical leadership that have attracted public attention and are considered valuable marketing assets (Lyall, 2007). With the widespread use of social media, organizations need to be even more careful about their reputation among internal and external stakeholders

such as employees, consumers, and investors. Therefore, it is not surprising that Forbes has emphasized the necessity of modern CEOs being activists that always do the right thing for the society and not just focus on financial results (Valet, 2018).

Corresponding with these anecdotes, empirical research has established that leaders must be aware that they model the behavior expected from their employees (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Researchers have, for example, found that ethical leadership promotes productive employee work behavior (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes & Salvador, 2009) and reduces counterproductive work behavior (Brown & Trevino, 2006). Unethical leadership, on the other hand, has been shown to negatively influence employees' psychological well-being (Tepper, Moss, Lockhart & Carr, 2007), attitudes (Tepper, 2000), and personal lives (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). It is therefore vitally important that organizations ensure that they hire and promote leaders with high ethical standards.

However, in all the extensive consideration given to ethical leadership and its effects on internal stakeholders (for an outline, see Den Hartog, 2015), research has done little to explore its impact on stakeholders outside of organizations. This is true despite anecdotal evidence suggesting that many CEOs shape the public image of their companies and the fact that researchers have conceptually suggested links between ethical leadership and consumer outcomes such as trust and long-term loyalty (Eisenbeiss, 2012; Eisenbeiss et al., 2015). Additionally, more recent empirical research has found links between ethical leadership and purchase intentions (Quaquebeke, Becker, Goretzky & Barrot, 2017). The perception of ethical leadership and its link to the public's purchase intentions, trust, and long term loyalty is even more important in a time when news regarding ethical or unethical leadership of CEOs can easily and quickly spread beyond the boundaries of the organization. In the public relations literature, the CEOs' critical role in shaping public opinion has been widely recognized (Tsai & Men, 2017). Researchers argue that CEOs represent the organization as the highest level spokesperson, responsible for conveying the organization's vision to the public (Park & Berger, 2004; Ranft et al., 2006). Therefore, an outstanding CEO does not only focus on internal stakeholders but also makes sure to nurture the relationship with the public (Ranft et al., 2006). With rising demand for corporate responsibility and authenticity, driven by social media, CEOs are generally expected to be more accessible and willing to engage with the public (Park & Berger, 2004; Vidgen, Sims & Powell, 2013). The public perception of their CEOs' ethical leadership or unethical leadership thus becomes a critical issue for organizations.

Although leaders' moral behavior will certainly influence the public perception, researchers have found that other factors, besides behavior, come into play in the evaluation process. Leader categorization theory (Lord et al., 1982, 1984) has proposed that people use categories to simplify their environment. These categories are then defined by the most representative member of that category (Rosch & Lloyd, 1978). Hence, when evaluated for certain roles, the more characteristics a person has in common with the representative members of that category, the more favorably he or she will be evaluated by others (Phillips, 1984; Phillips & Lord, 1981). An example of this might be an Asian basketball player, who most likely will be judged more strictly solely because he does not fit well with people's preconceived notion of what a basketball player should look like (Kim, 2014). Such research examples illustrate that judgement of leadership is based partly on our expectations of what a leader "should" be like. Physical characteristics such as race, height, and age may thus play an important part in our judgement of leaders. This is especially true for gender, as a long line of research has found that women face different evaluation standards as leaders than men (Heilman, Block & Martell, 1995; Heilman, 2001). It is therefore not unlikely that a leader's gender is one of the influencing factors when individuals make judgements about their ethical leadership. However, the relationship between ethical leadership perceptions and leader's

gender has received limited attention from researchers so far, albeit being a topical question (Marquardt et al., 2016).

This paper seeks to contribute to the organizational science literature in three primary ways. Firstly, by building on role congruity theory we propose that a leader's gender will have impacts on the public perception of the leader's ethical behavior. We test the hypotheses by carrying out an experimental study on a nationally representative sample, where we manipulate the leader's gender and their ethical behavior. Secondly, we provide even more fine-grained insight into the interaction between gender and leadership perceptions. Specifically, with our focus on the ethical part of leadership, we contribute to the literature on stereotypes and prejudice, where being female is usually found to be disadvantageous for leadership roles (Scott & Brown, 2006; Vecchio & Boatwright, 2002). Thirdly, we help extend the focus of ethical leadership research to individuals outside of the organization – an important extension called for by other researchers (Quaquebeke, Becker, Goretzky & Barrot, 2017). This focus is especially important as information on leadership behavior can easily and quickly spread beyond the organization through social media.

In the following section, we review the existing literature on ethical leadership perception and role congruity theory, and develop our hypotheses. This is followed by a description of the experimental setup and methodology. Finally, we present our results, discuss theoretical and practical implications, and offer suggestions for future research.

1. Literature review

Research in organizational science as well as psychology has for a long time pointed out that leaders in organizations are role models (e.g. Kark, Shamir & Chen, 2003; Morgenroth, Ryan & Peters, 2015). Their actions thus provide information on what behavior is acceptable and valued in that organization (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Loi et al., 2009). Ethical leadership theory suggests that there is congruence between behavior and perceptions of leaders. That is, individuals will be perceived as ethical or unethical on the basis of their past behavior. However, research on the leader prototype and role congruity theory has shown that the relationship between behavior and perception is not so simple. Although a leader's behavior will certainly influence the perceptions of his ethical leadership abilities, this research indicates that our evaluation of leaders is also based on our expectations of what we think leaders should be like (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Marquardt et al., 2016). Both leader categorization theory (Lord et al., 1982, 1984) and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) have highlighted that people use comparisons to simplify their evaluations of leaders. Thus, when evaluating people for certain roles, the more characteristics a person has in common with what people consider to be a typical member of that category, the more favorably he or she will be evaluated by others (Phillips, 1984; Lord et al., 1982; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Perceptions of effective leadership are therefore influenced by how well a person fits our stereotypical ideas of a leader. The characteristics commonly associated with men, women and leaders can therefore hinder women in gaining leadership positions, and color the perceptions of their performance. These stereotypes can create a mismatch, or role incongruity, between women and attributes perceived as necessary for success in leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). If there is a mismatch between stereotypes of women (Spence & Buckner, 2000) and stereotypes of leaders (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004), this mismatch can produce biased evaluations of male and female leaders.

1.1. The (in)congruence between ethical leadership and gender roles

Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) indicates that prejudice toward female leaders can be a consequence of incongruence between the female gender role and the leader role. Gender stereotypes are both descriptive and prescriptive. Descriptive gender stereotypes label men and women in terms of what they are like, while prescriptive gender stereotypes denote what they should be like (Heilman, 2001; 2012). Gender stereotypes can have a powerful effect on impressions formed of men and women, as stereotypes are automatically activated and widely shared, even across cultures (Heilman, 2012). Consequently, people can be treated on the basis of their gender rather than their accomplishments.

Literature on ethical leadership and the female gender role reveals convergence between the ethical leader role and the female gender role. Marquardt et al. (2016) suggest that while the typical leader prototype is based on male attributes and characteristics, female leaders may be expected to behave more ethically, based on the female stereotype of women as 'nicer and kinder' than men. Ethical leaders are concerned with the welfare of subordinates, and focus on protecting, helping, developing, and empowering them; they value altruism, honesty, empowerment, fairness, and justice. Subsequently, they desire to develop and maintain cooperative subordinate relationships characterized by kindness and concern. They avoid behaviors that are deceiving, exploitative, or abusive, and instead focus on relations-oriented behaviors (Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010). Other attributes of ethical leaders include having a community- and people-orientation, whereby the leader focuses on the collective, greater good and the rights and needs of others, and emphasizes encouragement and empowerment (Resick et al., 2006). The aforementioned characteristics of ethical leaders are similar to the characteristics that constitute the female gender role. This role is typically associated with communal characteristics focused on the welfare of others, including appearing kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, affectionate, gentle, and helpful (Eagly & Karau, 2002). It also encompasses warmth and niceness (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). A recent meta-analysis supports the claim that women tend to be stereotyped as the nicer and kinder gender (Koenig et al., 2011).

The male gender role, on the other hand, is associated with agentic attributes, such as appearing assertive, controlling, aggressive, self-sufficient, forceful, independent, daring, competitive, and self-confident (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These agentic attributes of the male gender role have become congruent with the traditional role of a leader (Eagly & Karau, 2002), with men often being viewed as more appropriate leaders than women (Koenig et al., 2011). Such a perception may be pervasive to a degree of opening up avenues for unethical leadership, like in the case of Enron which is linked with the beautification of toxic masculinity (Edwards, Hawkins, & Schedlitzki, 2018). Indeed, recent studies demonstrate linkages between 'masculinity contest cultures' (Berdahl, Cooper, Glick, Livingston, & Williams, 2018) and toxic leadership (Matos, O'Neill, & Lei, 2018). In summary, although literature on leadership may be implicitly focused on males due to the dearth of females in leadership positions, there is less congruence observed between the male gender role and ethical leadership.

The perspectives summed up above suggest that the female gender role is largely congruent – while the male gender role is largely incongruent with the ethical leadership role. The female gender role is predominantly associated with communal qualities, while the male gender role is associated with agentic qualities. This overlap between the female gender role and the ethical leadership role suggests that female leaders who engage in ethical leadership are likely to be more favorably evaluated than male leaders who engage in such leadership. In this vein, female leaders are also at risk of two types of prejudice: as leaders, they may be evaluated less favorably than men because they are stereotypically perceived to be lacking of the agentic

qualities appropriate for the leadership role. Also, their agentic behavior may be less favorably evaluated than the same behavior of male leaders because this type of behavior is considered to be inappropriate for women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Thus, a 'masculine' type of behavior, that is both associated with traditional leadership manifestation and can also be borderline in terms of unethical behavior, is unfavorable for female leaders. Conversely, female leaders who engage in unethical leadership are likely to be less favorably evaluated than male leaders who engage in such leadership.

Therefore, we expect that a leader's gender will significantly influence the public perception of unethical and ethical leadership:

H1: Female leaders face a larger negative impact from unethical leadership than male leaders

H2: Female leaders face a larger positive impact from ethical leadership than male leaders

1.2. Male and female perceptions of unethical and ethical leadership

Perception of leadership is not only based on the gender stereotypes and the leader's behavior, but also on perceiver characteristics. A long line of research in social psychology and personality psychology has solidified this understanding (Dornbusch, Hastorf, Richardson, Muzzy, & Vreeland, 1965; Uleman & Saribay, 2018). Even though individual factors and gender differences in ethical issues have received considerable attention (Ruegger & King, 1992; Serwinek, 1992; Ford & Richardson, 2013), empirical research has yielded mixed results (Roxas & Stoneback, 2004). Two schools of thought offer diverging arguments when considering the ethical differences between the genders. First, the structural approach (Betz et al., 1989; Markham et al., 1985) claims that early socialization is overcome by socialization into occupational roles and that gender differences in views on ethical situations should not be expected. Second, the gender socialization approach (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1984) tends to attribute the identified gender difference to different gender orientations that occurs through early socialization. We will look at each of these in turn.

Supporting the structural approach, a considerable body of research has found no evidence of differences between women and men in 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 approach provides an explanation for this result, arguing that early socialization is overcome by socialization into occupational roles (Roxas & Stoneback, 2004). This approach predicts that women and men in the same occupational environment will respond similarly, as a result of people being shaped by the same reward structure under similar occupational conditions (Markham et al., 1985; Betz, et al., 1989; Collins, 1975). This is partially supported by research overviews which find mixed results on gender differences in ethical situations (Roxas & Stoneback, 2004; Ford & Richardson, 2013), which altogether indicate that gender interacts with other variables such as occupation, education and other background variables when determining ethical views. Recent research has also suggested that merely denoting the differences between genders is of little value and a more nuanced approach should be employed when investigating gender differences in terms of ethical beliefs, values and behavior (Schminke et al., 2003; Suar & Gochhayat, 2016). Therefore, when investigating people with similar backgrounds, researchers should not expect to identify gender differences in views on ethical situations, including employees in the same occupations or those training for those occupations (Betz et al., 1989), such as students of a certain discipline. This view is supported by studies that do not find gender differences in ethical evaluations between students

studying the same subjects or employees within the same occupation (Serwinek, 1992; Rest, 1986; Browning & Zabriskie, 1983; Callan, 1992; Dubinsky & Levy, 1985).

The gender socialization approach tends to attribute differences between females and males to the early socialization process (Peterson, Rhoads & Vaught, 2001), based on an assumption that different perspectives on ethical issues are a result of the personalities formed through a socialization process that is different for both genders (Gilligan, 1982). Women are assumed to view ethical dilemmas in terms of understanding relationships, responsibilities, and compassion for others. On the other hand, it is assumed that men learn to resolve ethical problems in terms of rules, rights, fairness, and justice (Peterson, Rhoads & Vaught, 2001). Results from several studies support this view, with females tending to exhibit a higher level of ethical behavior (Tyson, 1990; Arlow, 1991; White, 1992; Ameen, Guffey, & McMillan, 1996; Dawson, 1997; Cohen, Pant, & Sharp, 1998; Singhapakdi, 1999; O'Fallon, & Butterfield, 2005, Lund, 2008). Dawson (1997) found significant differences between women and men in situations that involve relational issues, but not in non-relational situations. Ethical behavior is a central theme in female perceptions of leadership (Fine, 2009). Females have been found to exhibit a more strict ethical stance than males (Weeks, Moore, McKinney, & Longenecker, 1999) and are less tolerant of unethical behavior (Vermeir & Van Kenhove 2008; Hoffman, 1998). A meta-analysis of research on gender differences in perceptions of ethical decision-making, with data from more than 20.000 respondents in 66 samples, indicated that women are more likely than men to perceive specific hypothetical business practices as unethical (Franke, Crown & Spake, 1997). In the light of increased public intolerance for unethical behavior and the empirical results, we hypothesize the following:

H3: Public perception of unethical leadership is different between females and males

H4: Public perception of ethical leadership is different between females and males

2. Methodological approach

The main purpose of this study is to investigate whether ethical leadership perceptions are different based on a leader's gender. Following Marquardt et al. (2016), we conducted a 2x2 randomized between-subject experiment manipulating gender (female versus male leader) and ethical behavior (unethical versus ethical leadership). To extend the generalization of our results, we used a survey experiment with a national representative sample. We purposefully conducted a study among participants from a context characterized by high gender equality, where perceptions concerning leadership in professional settings are also partially affected by the examples from Western culture. As evaluations of less unethical scenarios can provide mixed results among male and female participants (Vermeir & Van Kenhove, 2008), we selected an explicitly unethical scenario for our experimental setup.

2.1. Participants and design

To extend the generalization of our results, we used a national representative sample of Icelanders gathered by the Social Science Institute (SSI) at the University of Iceland. The SSI panel consists of people aged 18 years old or older in Iceland that have agreed to participate in internet surveys. The panel is formed using a random sample from the National Register of Iceland. Participation in the panel is carefully monitored, with the SSI ensuring that the distribution of gender, age, residence, education and income of participants resembles the general adult population. By randomly sampling the whole population and continually ensuring

that the participants represent the population, it is possible to generalize about research findings that are based on the panel. The response rate was 45% with a final sample of *N*=1055. Descriptive statistics did not indicate response bias.

2.2. Procedure

The survey experiment was carried out as an internet-based survey. The participants provided their informed consent and were also informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time. The participants were first introduced to a scenario and then asked to answer the survey. Similarly to Marquardt et al. (2016), the scenario was that prior to leaving for work, the participants had read an article about a CEO. Participants were randomly assigned to read either an article describing (1) an ethical scandal involving the CEO, or (2) an ethical award that the CEO won. A picture of the CEO as well as his/her name was included as part of the scenario. Both the picture and the name were manipulated to be either (3) female or (4) male. Participants then answered questions about the leader's ethics as well as socio-demographic questions. To avoid inattentive responding, two screening questions were used to exclude participants that had not read or understood the scenario fully (Meade & Bartholomew, 2012; Berinsky, Margolis & Sances, 2014).

2.3. Measurement

For leader gender we manipulated the CEO's gender with both a picture and a name in the scenario that the participant read. The names were chosen to sound similarly (Michael Smith and Megan Smith) and the pictures were chosen to reflect similarity in attractiveness, age, and dress. To ensure picture similarity, a pilot study was conducted with 56 participants comparing the two pictures. A paired-samples t-test did not show significant differences in the perceptions of attractiveness ($t(55) = .000$, $p > 0.05$) or age ($t(55) = .574$, $p > 0.05$).

To measure ethical leadership, we used the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) developed by Brown, Trevino and Harrison (2005). This scale is the most commonly used measurement tool for ethical leadership perceptions and has been used in several fields of research (for overview see Brown and Trevino, 2006). The ELS is measured with items such as "Conducts his personal life in an ethical manner" and "Sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics". Cronbach's alpha was 0.93.

3. Results

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a 2 (unethical versus ethical leadership) x 2 (female versus male) between-subjects experiment. The descriptive statistics for our participants are reported in Table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

	Mean/%	SD	1	2	3
1. Male participants	50%				
2. Ethical condition	1.48	0.50	0.01		
3. Male leaders	49%		0.05	-0.02	
4. Ethical leadership	4.12	1.68	0.03	-0.72**	0.03

n = 1055, ** p < 0.01 level (two-tailed)

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

We first examined whether the unethical condition would lead to lower ethical leadership perceptions. For both male and female CEOs, we found that a CEO in the unethical condition was perceived as being significantly less ethical than a CEO in the ethical leadership condition. The participants perceived a male CEO in the unethical leadership condition as being less ethical (*Mdn* = 2.65, *n* = 242) than in the ethical leadership condition (*Mdn* = 5.50, *n* = 257), (*U* = 3953, *p* < 0.01, r_{pb} = .87). This was also true for a female CEO, where participants perceived a female CEO as being less ethical in the unethical leadership condition (*Mdn* = 2.70, *n* = 236) than in the ethical leadership condition (*Mdn* = 5.50, *n* = 256), (*U* = 6311, *p* < 0.01, r_{pb} = .79). We are therefore satisfied that our experimental intervention was successful.

To better understand the public perception of unethical leadership, we start by examining hypotheses 1 and 3. As can be seen in Figure 1, we find that male and female CEOs are perceived differently by the public in the unethical condition (*U* = 24696, *p* < 0.05, r_{pb} = .14). However, our result is in stark contrast to our hypothesis, as on average, male leaders (*Mdn* = 2.65, *n* = 242) faced a larger negative judgement of unethical leadership than female leaders (*M*dn = 2.70, *n* = 1.12).

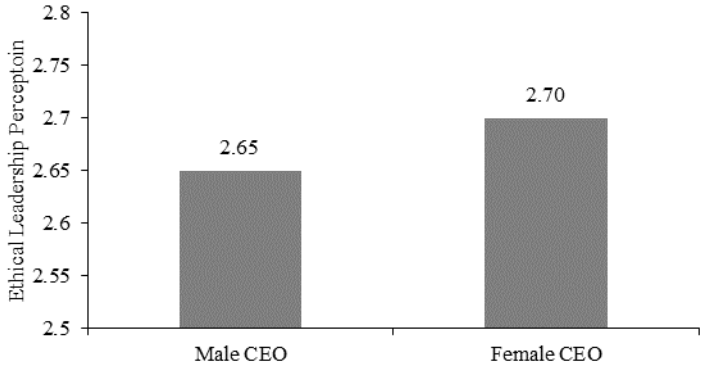

Figure 1. Ethical leadership and leader gender in the unethical condition

When analyzing the unethical leadership perceptions of male and female members of the public, we find no difference in how genders view unethical leadership. As can be seen in Figure 2, the participants did not perceive unethical leadership differently, with male participants (*Mdn* = 2.80, *n* = 237) having similar perceptions of unethical leadership to female participants (*Mdn* = 2.70, *n* = 241), (*U* = 26753, *p* > 0.05, r_{pb}= .06).

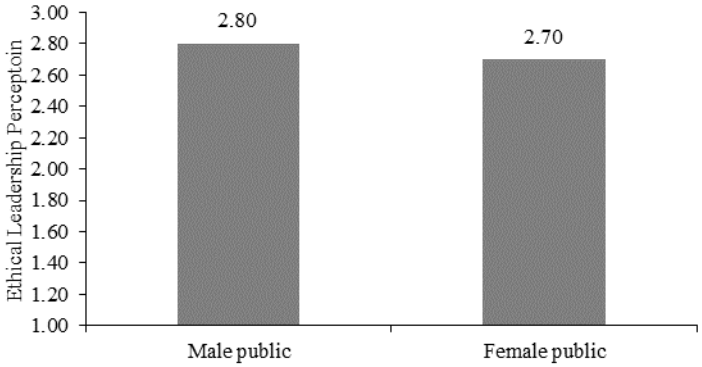

Figure 2. Unethical leadership and gender differences in public perception

We therefore reject hypothesis 3, which stated that gender differences come into play in the public perception of unethical leadership.

We now move on to hypotheses 2 and 4 on ethical leadership. In the ethical leadership condition, the participants did not perceive the male and female CEOs differently. The female CEO was not perceived as more ethical (*Mdn* = 5.50, *n* = 256) than the male CEO in the same condition (*Mdn* = 5.50, *n* = 257), (*U* = 32114, *p* > 0.05, r_{pb}= .02). As can be seen in Figure 3, this result does not support hypothesis 2 that female CEOs face a larger positive impact in public perception for ethical behavior than male CEOs.

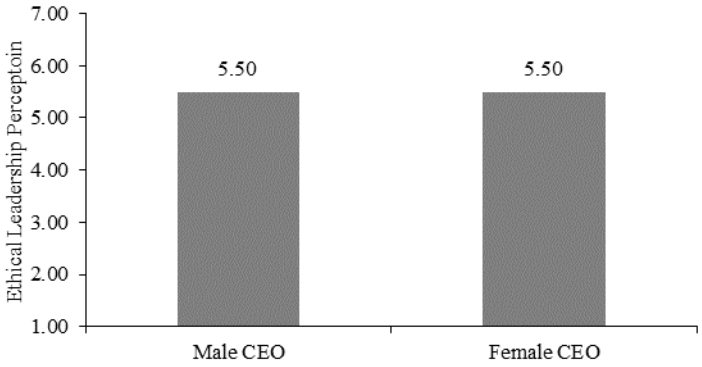

Figure 3. Ethical leadership and leader gender in the ethical condition

When analyzing the ethical leadership perceptions of male and female members of the public, we find gender difference in the perception of ethical leadership. As can be seen in Figure 4, we find that female participants (*Mdn* = 5.60, n = 253) perceive ethical leadership differently than male participants (*Mdn* = 5.30, *n* = 260), (*U* = 27734, *p* < 0.05, r_{pb}= .16), with females being more generous concerning what is considered ethical behavior.

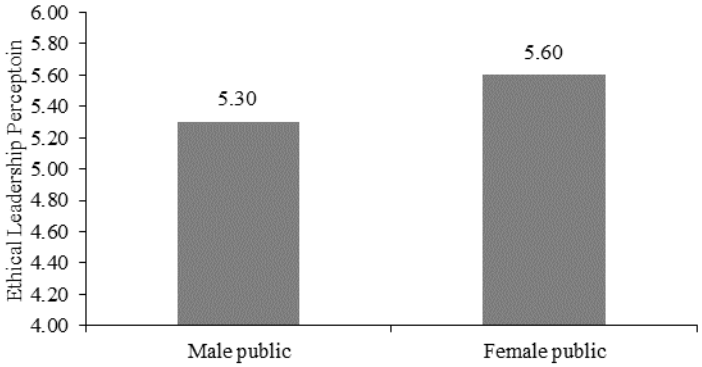

Figure 4. Ethical leadership and gender differences in public perception

Overall, the results of this study indicate that male CEOs face a larger negative impact for unethical behavior then female CEOs. We also find that female members of the public value ethical leadership better than their male counterparts. However, in contrast to our hypothesis, we do not find that female CEOs face a larger positive impact in public perception for ethical behavior than male CEOs.

4. Conclusion

This research had two main goals. First, we examined the role the leader's gender plays in the public perception of ethical and unethical leadership. Second, we investigated the influence of the perceiver's gender on ethical and unethical leadership perceptions. Using a survey experimental setup and collecting representative data from the general public, this research provides empirical evidence that a CEO's gender does indeed matter for the public perception of unethical leadership. All other things being equal, when presented with an act of unethical leadership behavior, the public perceived male CEOs as being less ethical than female CEOs. We also find that female members of the public are more appreciative of ethical leadership behavior than their male counterparts, a finding that supports the gender socialization approach (Peterson, Rhoads & Vaught, 2001; Gilligan, 1982).

By integrating a gender perspective, we extend the ethical leadership literature into the domain of stereotypes and biases. Our study therefore opens up several avenues of research at the intersection of ethical leadership perception and gender. It also adds new perspectives to the well-established literature on role congruity theory, which points at male leaders being associated with agentic attributes such as being forceful and dominant, and female leaders demonstrating communal attributes such as being kind and helpful (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Our research results suggest that perceptions of ethical leadership substantially differ from other attributes typically associated with 'good' leadership. At the same time, we contribute to the public relations literature by highlighting the importance of the public perception of CEOs ethical behavior. By providing the first empirical evidence that gender is a key variable in the public perception of ethical and unethical leadership, our study offers several implications for both research and organizational practice.

4.1. Theoretical and managerial implications

Our study addresses the call for a better understanding of the conditions under which gender differences may play a role in the perception of leadership effectiveness (Vecchio, 2003). Thus far, research on role congruity theory has primarily focused on the stereotypes that female leaders face due to incongruity between the roles associated with female gender and leadership. Our study contributes to this theory by demonstrating its extension for the male gender role in unethical leadership situations. Our findings problematize the gender-role perceptions: while women are typically believed to be on the receiving end of prejudice and discrimination in leadership situations, our study suggests that men may also be subjected.

Firstly, hypothesis 1, which stated that female leaders face a larger negative impact from unethical leadership than male leaders, was rejected, with results demonstrating that male leaders are subjected to more negative judgements in unethical behavior scenarios than their female counterparts. Hence, in the case of unethical leadership, male leaders are evaluated more negatively than their female counterparts, highlighting the leniency towards unethical leadership by female CEOs.

Secondly, we found that female CEOs do not face larger positive impacts in public perception for ethical behavior than male CEOs. These results indicate that gender is a key component in perceptions of ethical leadership, as it is in leadership in general, but also distinct with its more communal nature (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Eagly, Mladinic & Otto, 1991). The abovementioned finding that female leaders behaving unethically are not perceived as negatively as men is especially interesting given the prior literature on leadership and gender. This result partly contradicts the finding that female leaders may face greater resistance from followers in the cases of deviant leader behavior (Pandey, DeHart-Davis & Pandey, 2017). It also suggests that within the domain of ethical leadership, female leaders have more leeway to display behaviors of different valences than when it comes to the traditional leader role, where the extant research indicates that they, to a larger degree, are punished for not conforming to the female gender role. This has important implications for organizations focused on minimizing gender bias within the realm of leadership in general, and ethical leadership in particular, while simultaneously encouraging ethical leadership behavior.

Our results echo the discussion on the gender gap and unequal position of women in terms of promotion and pay framed as 'female penalty' and 'female premium' (Leslie, Manchester, & Dahm, 2017). Our findings seem to point at a 'female premium' when it comes to unethical behavior, in line with the confirmation bias. However, no significant differences in evaluation exist when female leaders behave ethically. This is also important given that women, overall, are more likely to behave unethically when representing others (other-advocating in contrast to self-advocating) than men (Kouchaki & Kray, 2018). While unethical leadership scandals are often related to self-interest driven behavior, female leadership has its pitfalls if the scenario involves advocating others. Hence, ethical leadership by females should be credited and reinforced not less than by males, in pursuit of ethical practices.

Our findings yield practical implications for both organizations and society in general. The finding that a leader's gender is an influencing factor on ethical leadership perceptions can directly affect human resource management practices. For example, if uneven evaluations arise during a hiring deliberation between a male and female candidate who both demonstrate unethical behavior, a female candidate may be more likely to be selected. As ethical behavior is becoming one of the key criteria when organizations hire and promote leaders (Beeson, 2009), and if gender stereotypes generate bias in ethical leadership perceptions, selection procedures should be designed to limit the effects of such bias. Thus, mitigating the effects of

gender bias on ethical leadership perceptions may be an important step in fostering gender equality in the workplace.

4.2. Limitations and further research

As with any research, our study has its limitations and leaves unanswered questions that warrant further research. One of those limitations is that ethical leadership perceptions may be influenced by national culture. Our data is from one Nordic country and represents a single cultural context. However, perceptions of ethical and unethical leadership may be linked to national differences. In line with role congruity theory, social norms may create 'typical' behavior and thereby influence what is considered ethical and unethical leadership. Our study results are derived from data collected in one of the most gender equal nations in the world, which hints that the uneven ratings associated with gender may be far greater in contexts with less-established equality standards. Along with the literature on cultural norms and values (Lord et al., 2001; Jones, 1991), several opportunities for further research open up. Role congruity theory suggests that organizational context is an important part of gender perceptions (Brescoll, Dawson & Uhlman, 2010). This applies both to management levels (e.g. higher management versus lower management) as well as industry (e.g. health care versus technology). With that in mind, several options open up for moving from national level samples to organizational samples.

Another line of inquiry is looking beyond gender for ethical leadership perceptions. Due to demographic changes and globalization, the labor market has become more diverse. For example, immigrants, mature employees and LGBT employees make up an increasingly large part of the workforce. This, in turn, gives rise to possible prejudice against these groups (Carlsson & Rooth, 2007; Bendick, Brown & Wall, 1999; Haslam & Levy, 2006). Although prejudice and bias against traditionally underrepresented groups is a serious problem for those individuals, it is also an often-overlooked problem for the organizations involved. Organizations that allow prejudice and bias to persist within their ranks also limit effective hiring, flexibility and diversity in knowledge and opinions, which can have a negative effect on productivity and innovation (Petersen & Krings, 2009; Dietz and Petersen, 2006; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Kristinsson, Candi & Saemundsson, 2016). As previously mentioned, Marquardt, Brown and Casper (2016) have investigated racial differences in ethical leadership perceptions, but many questions still remain regarding how underrepresented groups are perceived as ethical leaders. It is our hope that this study inspires more work in this area.

In a time of social media, where CEOs engage with the public, ethical and unethical behavior can quickly circulate into public knowledge. As such, CEOs should take care to acknowledge that their leadership behavior may ultimately impact not only employees of their companies but also outside stakeholders such as customers and potential investors. However, our study also suggests that ethical leadership perceptions are not only influenced by behavior but also by gender bias. Indeed, our study suggests that the public's perception of ethical and unethical leadership is in part based on a leader's gender. Ethical leadership is thus not only an issue of moral consideration of the leader, but also an imperative pertaining to public perception.

As the role of female leaders in organizations continues to grow, research on gender issues in management continues to expand. Considerable progress has been made in conceptual and empirical research on gender stereotypes and bias over the past couple of decades, but prejudice based on gender is still a concern for organizations. Despite this increased focus, the influence of gender on ethical leadership perceptions has so far remained an unexplored area of research. The importance of looking at gender in relation to ethical perceptions is important, as

ethical attributes are often considered a soft or communal (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Although, in general, leadership is associated with agentic characteristics such as assertiveness, self-confidence and ambition, this assumption seems to breaks down when examining ethical leadership, a characteristic more in line with communal attributes.

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