



Reconceptualizing ethical leadership for the global south: An institutional logics perspective

Truc Ha-Thanh Nguyen^{a,*}, Mahmoud Zakarneh^b, Matthew McDonald^c, Joseph Amankwah-Amoah^d

^a Executive Business Centre, Greenwich Business School, University of Greenwich, Old Royal Naval College, Park Row, London SE10 9LS, United Kingdom

^b Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Dubai International Academic City, United Arab Emirates

^c Psychology Program, Fulbright University Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam

^d Durham University Business School, Durham University, Mill Hill Lane, Durham DH1, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Research on ethical leadership from an institutional perspective in countries in the Global North has now been established. However, the topic has garnered less attention in regions of the world with markedly different institutional arrangements that are less stable and less predictable, where leaders face a host of ethical problems. The purpose of this study is to address this imbalance by analyzing ethical leadership in the more fluid environment in the Global South, where it is argued that there is a need to move beyond mainstream intrapsychic perspectives, positivist research designs, and binary orientations that have gained widespread currency in the Global North. To this end, the study problematizes the current ethical leadership literature by drawing on the theory of institutional logics. The theory of institutional logics provides a macro- and micro-level perspective, where the interplay of multiple competing institutions shapes ethical leadership. The analysis aims to clarify and intensify the problems of ethical decision-making in the Global South by offering a set of counterpoints that extend on the mainstream literature. The theoretical and practice-based implications of our analysis are discussed, offering insights for organizations and leaders seeking to navigate the ethical challenges in diverse institutional settings.

Introduction

The concept of ethical leadership (EL) emerged in the leadership, applied psychology, and organization studies literature, in part as a response to high-profile business scandals in the first decade of the 2000s (Enron, WorldCom, Lehman Brothers, Parmalat, Royal Ahold, Vivendi Universal) (e.g., Banks et al., 2021; Den Hartog, 2015). Brown et al. (2005, p.120) offer the most widely accepted definition of EL, “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.” According to this perspective, EL consists of two main components: the ‘moral person’ and the ‘moral manager’. The ‘moral person’ refers to leaders who exhibit key moral traits such as trustworthiness, fairness, and integrity. The ‘moral manager’ a distinctive aspect of EL, emphasizes the leader’s role in modeling ethical

behavior, communicating ethical values to followers and providing resources for strategic decision-making, all the while adhering to universal norms and standards (Lemoine et al., 2019; Quade et al., 2019).

Since the conceptualization of EL by Brown et al. (2005), significant advancements have been made in the field. Most studies focus on a utilitarian, norm-based approach (Banks et al., 2021) with key EL traits rooted in virtue ethics (Riggio et al., 2010). However, this perspective has been criticized for its narrow focus on a white Western masculine perspective, which bears little resemblance to the diverse subjective experiences and contexts found worldwide (Corpuz et al., 2020; Liu, 2017a, 2017b; Nguyen et al., 2024). Much of the empirical evidence reported in the mainstream EL literature draws on WEIRD (Western Educated Industrialized Rich Democratic) samples that represent less than 5 % of the global population neglecting differences in history, culture, and institutions from around the world and how they shape leadership thinking and practice (Arnett, 2008; Corpuz et al., 2020

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: truc.nguyen@gre.ac.uk (T.H.-T. Nguyen), m.s.a.a.zakarneh@bham.ac.uk (M. Zakarneh), matthew.mcdonald@fulbright.edu.vn (M. McDonald), joseph.amankwah-amoaah@durham.ac.uk (J. Amankwah-Amoah).

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Henrich et al., 2010). The taken-for-granted assumptions of rationalist, individualist, and positivist perspectives overlook viewpoints from other regions, such as the Global South, which are shaped by the legacies of colonialism, neo-imperialism, conflict, and wars, as well as economic and social disparities that lead to significant differences in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources (Dados & Connell, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2024). Non-Western contexts are characterized by differences in social institutions (e.g., family, religion, education, political economy) and institutional deficiencies such as weak or variable law enforcement (Chung & Luo, 2008). These can weaken or strengthen the incentives for EL or deprive leaders of access to resources and support systems.

For analytical clarity, the term 'Global South' in this study refers to nations and regions that have been historically marginalized economically, including, but not limited to, parts of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. These areas are generally marked by lower incomes and a lack of access to resources and are often subject to political or cultural marginalization (Dados & Connell, 2012). While our analysis occasionally references economies like China and Japan, these examples illustrate the varied applicability of EL concepts across different stages of economic development rather than strictly categorizing these nations within the Global South.

These issues within mainstream EL mirror broader leadership research, where most major theories reflect North American and Western European discourses and institutions, overlooking crucial historical, cultural, and institutional factors from other parts of the world (Nguyen et al., 2022; Sekiguchi and De Cuyper, 2023). Most EL literature focuses on Western viewpoints in which researchers assume their findings are universal, stable over time, and homogeneous (Johns, 2024). This perspective fails to acknowledge that leadership in Western countries occurs within an ideal institutional context where there are "strong governments, respect for the rule of law, efficient and reliable judicial systems, vibrant civil societies, sophisticated markets with strong competition, and well-informed investors and consumers" (Adeleye et al., 2020, pp. 720-721). Johns (2024, p. 1) argues that few studies in EL has so far theorized this diversity, writing that "theories dealing with context guide only a small proportion of leadership research".

In addition, much mainstream research focuses on the dyadic leader-follower relationship, idealizing the ethical leader as a role model who displays masculine Western-centric traits such as competitiveness, decisiveness, mastery, heroism, efficiency, and dominance (Ciulla et al., 2018; Edwards et al., 2019; Liu, 2017a; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). In this view, ethical leaders are portrayed as exemplars who foster an organizational culture in which followers emulate ethical conduct rooted in traditionally masculine values (Bavik et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2005). It assumes that leaders have the required knowledge, resources, and authority to exert their influence (power) in ways their followers accept, inspiring them to behave more ethically while simultaneously achieving organizational goals. This assumption neglects the complex interactions between organizational actors and multilevel institutional arrangements of the country and region of the world where the organization operates (Durand et al., 2013; Kimura & Nishikawa, 2018). Nite and Bopp (2018) argue that institutionalized values, frameworks, and discourses shape perceptions of what is considered ethical or unethical, and these logics frequently conflict with one another. To this end, Clegg et al. (2007, p. 118) state that research on EL needs to recognize "the complex heterogeneous web that makes organizations work: the institutions, discourses, and agencies/agents".

Given these oversights, research needs to better capture EL in a non-Western cultural context. Our analysis of EL is guided by the 'problematicization' method set out by Alvesson and Sandberg (2011). Problematicization is a dialectical interrogation of familiar positions applied to an existing body of literature (in this case, EL). The aim is to challenge the assumptions underlying existing theories by illuminating and challenging some of their familiar, unquestioned positions. Our analysis indicates that the dominant assumption underlying EL is social learning

and social exchange theory (social cognition) and that ethical norms can be applied in a prescriptive manner. We problematize this assumption by arguing for an alternative approach based on institutional logics (ILs). ILs are defined as "the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values, and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their daily activity, organize time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences" (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 101). ILs is a valuable approach because it has the potential to articulate the unquestioned assumptions upon which ethical decision-making is guided, as well as provide a foundation for interpreting these based on context-specific elements such as religion, markets, family, the state, etc. It is argued that ILs can capture the complexity and messy reality of organizational life that goes beyond the individualistic approach standard in most mainstream studies of leadership (Islam, 2020). It provides a basis for expanding the familiar positions in EL research by interrogating some of its unquestioned aspects (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Johns, 2024; Islam, 2020). For example, positivist (mainstream) approaches view EL as influenced by objective cultural values and individual sensemaking by taking an intrapsychic social-cognitive (theoretical) approach where EL scales are standard. In its place, we offer an alternative by uncovering some of the underlying power dynamics of social institutions and cultural differences and how these shape leaders' and followers' thinking, emotions, and behavior (Romani et al., 2020; Thornton et al., 2012).

It is important to note that our study does not repudiate mainstream social cognitive approaches to EL. Instead, we offer an alternative perspective that builds on social cognitive approaches, where multiple organizational actors shape EL, and leaders must navigate the interplay of multiple ILs. In this framework, agency is exercised by interpreting and fostering morally sound decisions. We argue that this provides a more incisive framework for capturing EL outside the Global North by considering the diversity of local cultures, history, sociocultural conditions, and countries' post-colonial challenges. To begin with, and in line with Alvesson and Sandberg (2011), the study identifies and takes stock of the mainstream literature on EL. It then investigates the problems that arise when applying it to the context of the Global South. We then propose an alternative set of assumptions – called 'counterpoints' – that offers a globally inclusive perspective on EL by drawing on ILs. The final section evaluates these alternative assumptions (counterpoints) by discussing their theoretical and practical contributions, as well as offering a set of future recommendations.

Mainstream approaches to ethical leadership

Brown et al. (2005) define EL as a combination of characteristics, including considerate behavior, honesty, trust-building, interactional fairness, socialized charisma, and the absence of abusive supervision. Building on the work of Trevino et al. (2003) and Trevino et al. (2000), Brown et al. (2005, p. 120) underscore the dual necessity for leaders to act as moral individuals (moral person) as well as actively managing ethics within their organizations (moral manager), highlighting the role of leaders in fostering an ethical organizational environment. Brown et al.'s definition is rooted in transformational and transactional leadership and incorporates behaviors considered 'good' (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999) and 'normatively appropriate' (Brown & Trevino, 2006). Leaders are perceived as ethical when viewed as moral by their followers. Ethical leaders are expected to model ethical traits and uphold an organization's ethical values to their followers, even without a formal request from the organization (Kuenzi et al., 2018). Although some leadership styles are composed of ethical aspects (e.g., authentic leadership), EL "explicitly emphasizes the moral aspects of leadership" rather than "ethics as an auxiliary or secondary dimension" (Mostafa et al., 2021, p. 357).

Since the path-defining studies in EL were published (Brown et al., 2005; Trevino et al., 2000, 2003), a growing body of literature in the field has emerged, advocating a normative approach. It investigates how

followers perceive ethical behaviors in their leaders (Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2014). These studies gather ‘objective’ facts from participants’ experiences and practices, resulting in empirical-descriptive studies that explore the relationship of EL with other variables, such as employee knowledge sharing (Sun et al., 2024), employee success (Dust et al., 2018), and person-organization fit (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). They capture the experiences and responses of participants using experiments and surveys such as pre-existing scales (and, in a smaller number, case studies) to demonstrate the characteristics and behaviors of EL (Keck et al., 2018). These prescriptive approaches construct a version of EL using a specific set of ethical leader behaviors and normative values that determine what is considered ‘good’ or ‘positive’ (Flanigan, 2018; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2014). These assumptions are a starting point for most knowledge production on the topic. It develops and answers research questions such as: “What are ethical leader behaviors?” and “What should an ethical leader do?” by examining moral truths and principles using positivist quantitative research designs that rely on “measuring virtue or other ethics variables through standardized ethics scales.” However, the philosophical basis underlying these virtues ethics go largely unexamined. They also neglect to inquire into how “ethical decisions, values, and agency are often activated by particular contexts” (Islam, 2020, p. 3). In the next section, we analyze the underlying assumptions in the mainstream EL literature produced in the Global North.

Assumption #1: Ethical Leadership is Universal and Prescriptive.

The mainstream approach to EL emphasizes objective, observable facts and reasoning through an empirical-descriptive approach (Eisenbeiß, 2012). It is assumed that EL is based on universally agreed-upon meanings derived from empirical data and, to a lesser degree, a reading of the philosophical literature on virtue ethics (Meckler & Baillie, 2003). This positivist perspective prioritizes observable phenomena as the foundation of knowledge. It assumes that ethical leaders exhibit universally accepted moral behaviors based on presumed moral truths (Bedi et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2019). According to Eisenbeiß and Brodbeck (2014), the existing literature on EL mirrors a Western-centric view, primarily focused on the private sector, where compliance-oriented thinking and practice are promoted. By incorporating normative models from Western moral philosophies, this approach prescribes a leader’s duties and responsibilities, leaning towards deontological ethics, prioritizing obligation and duty as the guiding principles for resolving ethical issues (Flanigan, 2018).

Seeking to go beyond the empirical-descriptive Western-based perspective while simultaneously avoiding ethical relativism, Eisenbeiß (2012) developed an interdisciplinary normative approach to EL. The underlying assumption of Eisenbeiß’s approach is to establish a foundation of specific and relevant norms for EL that draw on principles from Western and Eastern world religions. Eisenbeiß (2012) proposes four key orientations incorporating these principles: ‘humane orientation’, ‘justice orientation’, ‘responsibility and sustainability orientation’, and ‘moderation orientation’. Although this approach acknowledges contexts beyond the Global North, it reinforces the assumption that EL can be prescribed based on Western and Eastern moral philosophies without considering how these are understood and applied in contemporary society. This perspective essentializes EL by relying on generic benchmarks to evaluate it, including prescriptive and normative ethics and codes of ethical behavior (Jeanes, 2017). Banks et al. (2021) state that the current understanding of EL definitions and measurement assumes a universal perspective, like utilitarianism or virtue-based ethics, when defining normative behavior.

In addition, EL is often viewed from a cause-and-effect perspective by rendering its complex interplay into simplified variables categorized as antecedents, moderators, mediators, and outcomes. Brown et al.’s (2005) Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) is a good example. Others include studies where EL is causally related to employee service innovation behavior (Rasheed et al., 2024), employee moral behavior (Al Halbusi et al., 2023), or organizational culture/climate (Al Halbusi et al., 2021;

Kuenzi et al., 2020). This type of research primarily examines perceptions of EL using positivist research designs that prioritize researcher-designated ethical belief systems, assuming these can be measured numerically (quantitatively) (see Table 1). Most measurements of EL have been developed in the Western context. For instance, the ELS was developed and tested on participants in large, multi-location financial services firms in the US. Other EL scales, such as the Ethical Leadership at Work (ELW), were created in the Dutch context (Kalshoven et al., 2011). The ELW assesses fairness, role clarification, ethical guidance, people orientation, power sharing, integrity, and concern for sustainability. The Ethical Leadership Measure (ELM), developed by Zhu et al. (2019), incorporates elements that aim to capture EL across Chinese and American contexts. Despite its cross-cultural credentials, it presents a similar cause-and-effect model in which complex cultural dynamics are foreclosed by rendering them into discrete variables to facilitate ease of measurement.

These scaled questionnaires assume a fixed set of ethical traits that typically overlook the context-specific nuances of EL. They reduce complex moral decision-making to standardized items, which can obscure power dynamics, historical and cultural differences, or contradictions in practice. The measures imply what constitutes rational and ethical behavior, and that leaders (as opposed to followers) are best positioned to determine the most effective ethical course of action. As noted above, these scaled questionnaires assume that ethical leaders are ‘moral managers’ who communicate ethical values and assess ethical problems using logic, evidence, and clear standards, distinguishing EL from other leadership styles. These assumptions have also been applied in other cultural contexts without a thorough philosophical examination of their applicability. Zhu et al. (2019, p. 547) theorized EL in their cross-cultural validation of the ELW in China and the United States, drawing on the Global North concepts of the ‘moral person’ and ‘moral manager’.

Effectively communicating ethical guidelines as part of the ‘moral manager’ concept is viewed as essential for leadership effectiveness, as it enhances followers’ awareness of ethical issues in their work decisions (Hassan et al., 2020). EL is said to have positive effects on perceptions of leader effectiveness (Hassan et al., 2013), team effectiveness (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008), and firm performance (Eisenbeiß et al., 2015). Ethical leaders are assumed to be imbued with the knowledge, power, and resources to create, maintain, and enforce organizational strategies, goals, and ethical climate, displaying mastery through masculine traits to boost morale and effectiveness. They prioritize values that enhance their effectiveness and organizational performance by encouraging employee engagement and reducing turnover costs (Lam et al., 2016). A good example is Yukl et al. (2013), who emphasize the importance of effectiveness in evaluating EL. These include (1) task-oriented behaviors such as clear goals, rules, and efficient use of resources, (2) relation-oriented behaviors such as empowerment, praise, and recognition, and (3) change-oriented behaviors such as strategy and planning.

These authors’ research suggests that leadership effectiveness is based on an empirically validated set of criteria that have been found to positively influence followers’ ethical behaviors and work performance. Being ethical is insufficient. To be effective, leaders must also display ethical behaviors that, in turn, lead to changes in followers’ ethical behavior. Therefore, they are expected to be responsible for their decisions and work outcomes (Ciulla et al., 2018). The findings from Voegtlin’s (2016) in-depth interviews with international leaders working in the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) department of two Swiss multinational banks and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives revealed that ethical leaders need to make judgments based on the prevailing norms and rules, communicate and engage effectively with stakeholders in both short- and long-term processes; and display positive thinking. Voegtlin’s (2016) study, and others like it, assume that EL comprises a universally desirable set of traits. Leaders express a strong sense of moral conviction that unproblematically translates into ethical decisions and outcomes that appeal to followers.

Leaders are evaluated based on their ethical credentials, which are determined by their adherence to prescribed moral principles deemed appropriate and acceptable by their followers (Banks et al., 2021). Here, we can see how Brown et al.'s (2005) popular definition of EL links with transformational and transactional leadership styles, with the former being expressed through the leader's powerful sense of moral conviction translated into an ethical vision (transformational) and the latter (transactional) satisfying the needs of followers. These findings have been supported by surveys and scale-based research designed to test what are, in effect, masculine attributes that obscure the leadership experiences of diverse populations, which are frequently ambiguous, contingent, and uncertain (Corpuz et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2022; Rees & Garnsey, 2003).

Assumption #2: Ethical Leadership is Deterministic and Binary.

The mainstream orientation is rooted in social psychology's theories of social cognition, including social learning, social exchange, and social influence (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Bandura, 1989; Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). Social learning theory posits that individuals acquire acceptable norms of conduct by observing leaders they perceive as role models, owing to their organizational status and power (Bai et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2019). Social exchange theory elucidates how followers respond in a leader–follower relationship, expressing reciprocity based on whether they perceive their leaders' ethical practices as positive or negative (Ng et al., 2021). Social cognitive theory emphasizes an information process-based model of vicarious learning, where followers draw on stored information to perceive and judge whether leaders act in their best interests (Babalola et al., 2019). As leadership inherently involves influence, the essential element of EL is assumed to be ethical influence (Pircher-Verdorfer & Peus, 2019). These theories originally stemmed from experimental approaches to social psychology guided by an individualistic ontology and positivist epistemology that have gone largely unquestioned in the EL literature. Furthermore, the theories used to explain it portray the practice of EL as linear and step-by-step based on the cognitive psychological model of information processing (Ciulla et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2024). For instance, research indicates that when leaders perceive their authority will be scrutinized by their followers, they are more likely to act ethically. However, in cases where they can maintain their authority and status through alternative means, they are less likely to consult their followers and so more likely to act unethically (Zhang et al., 2020). This aligns with Brown et al. (2005, p. 599), who write that leaders must “influence followers' ethical conduct by explicitly setting ethical standards and holding followers accountable to those standards by using rewards and discipline”.

As Fehr et al. (2015) write, maintaining order and direction is considered one of the moral foundations of EL. This is rooted in a concept that views power as a causal relation, so social influence is exerted through authority, control over resources, and hierarchical linear relationships established by an organization's reporting lines. For instance, scholars have adopted a virtue ethics approach to clarify the ‘normatively appropriate’ characteristics of a ‘moral person’ in EL. A virtuous organizational character helps prevent the dangers of excessively pursuing external rewards, avoids extremes in behavior, and supports the well-being of its members (Neubert et al., 2009). This approach highlights the inherent moral qualities that ethical leaders should embody to function as role models (Wright & Quick, 2011), drawing on virtues set out by historical luminaries like Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas (Riggio et al., 2010), or Confucius (Yuan et al., 2023). Ethical leaders can discern right from wrong, understand moral obligations, and identify the most morally appropriate course of action (Bai & Morris, 2014). These deterministic characteristics of EL reflect broader trends in the leadership literature, where conventional research upholds a leader-centric viewpoint that emphasizes a leader's personality, style, and behavior as the primary, if not sole, factors influencing followers' thoughts and actions (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Within this framework, leaders are viewed as guiding agents, while followers are

perceived as relinquishing their ability to derive meaning from their employment contracts with the organization. As a result, mainstream research views EL through an either/or binary approach, categorizing it as ‘good’, ‘effective’, and ‘normatively appropriate’, while labeling unethical leadership as ‘dark’, ‘destructive’, ‘narcissistic’, ‘toxic’, ‘bad’, ‘dysfunctional’, ‘Machiavellian’, and ‘self-protective’ (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Lašáková & Remišová, 2015).

Grint (2005) notes that leadership theories favor these structural approaches. These prescribed assumptions are also evident in cross-cultural EL that employ Hofstede's (2011) (e.g., high/low power distance; individualism/collectivism) and the GLOBE National Cultural Dimensions (House et al., 2004). The National Cultural Dimensions employ a comparative, etic approach. They offer insights into EL by outlining shared cultural values and how these shape differing ethical behaviors across nations and regions. The GLOBE model, which builds upon Hofstede's approach, examines how societal culture influences leadership ideals across cultures, providing insights into culturally contingent leadership practices. These cultural values and influences help predict some elements of EL behaviors, revealing how they are commonly understood within differing national cultures, yet vary across them. For instance, Southeast Asian cultures prioritize ‘leader altruism’, while Middle Eastern societies place less emphasis on ‘collective motivation’ and ‘encouragement’ (Resick et al., 2006). Participants from China, Hong Kong, and Germany ranked ‘consideration and respect for others and a collective orientation’ as the second most important attribute, while leaders from Ireland, the USA, and Taiwan prioritized ‘accountability’ (Resick et al., 2011, p. 445).

Table 1 below provides examples of the foregoing analysis. It includes a set of representative studies on EL summarizing their dominant assumptions, epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and limitations.

Alternative assumptions: Ethical leadership is shaped by social institutions

Counterpoint #1: Ethical Leadership is Institutionally Dynamic.

The preceding analysis took stock of what has become the mainstream (most popular, most common) methods for conceptualizing EL and its underlying assumptions. We counter these assumptions by drawing on the critical literature, which adopts a reflexive approach to EL, aligning it with the problematization method (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Kaufmann (2022) provides a good starting point by arguing that scientific rationality applied to business leads to epistemological dysfunction, characterized by an objectivist direction-of-fit, which is insufficient for capturing the complexity of organizational practice. He argues that there is a need to focus on social institutions and social interactions to understand organizational dynamics better. We can see that positivist approaches in mainstream EL use post-hoc explanations for leaders' ethical decision-making, which is assumed to be unambiguous (Nguyen et al., 2022; Thiel et al., 2012). “The focus on a self-interested organizational ethics is limited precisely because of its privileging of reason over emotion, rules over relationships, a priori judgement over contextualized experience and the mind over the body” (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015, p.160). These conventional normative assumptions fail to capture the social psychological differences outside the Global North context (Garfield et al., 2020), where the meaning and content of ethical problems differ based on individual perceptions, organizational systems, interactions within these systems, and social institutions. There is a need to acknowledge that contextual factors from the Global South are often overlooked, leading to biases that disregard crucial aspects of the history of emerging economies, such as regulatory constraints, inadequate infrastructure, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and a volatile, unpredictable business environment.

Mainstream EL research employs a functionalist philosophy of mind, which views organizational actors as rational agents and that leadership theory can be generalized to other institutional contexts, which can be

Table 1
Key Assumptions in Ethical Leadership Literature.

Dominant Assumptions}	Representative Citations}	Epistemology}	Theoretical Perspective/ Methodology}	Limitations}
Assumption #1: Ethical Leadership is Universal and Prescriptive				
Ethical leaders demonstrate normatively appropriate behavior, encompassing two core dimensions: the moral person, who embodies ethical traits, and the moral manager, who promotes and reinforces ethical conduct.	Brown & Trevino (2006), Brown et al. (2005), Den Hartog (2015), Trevino et al. (2000), Trevino et al. (2003)	Universalist	Social learning theory	Over-simplification Institutional deficit Prescriptive/Static conception
EL is examined as a dependent and independent variable.	Al Halbusi et al. (2023), Bavik et al. (2018), Dust et al. (2018), Mayer et al. (2012), Sun et al. (2024)	Positivist Functionalist	Social learning theory Self-determination theory Social cognitive theory Moral identity theory	Oversimplified causality Positivist research design
Ethical leaders are role models who exhibit masculine characteristics such as confidence, assertiveness, decisiveness, authoritative influence (power), and value-based.	Hassan et al. (2020) Mayer et al. (2009) Newman et al. (2014) Riggio et al. (2010) Zhang et al. (2020)	Objectivist Universalist	Social exchange theory Social learning theory Self-determination theory Characterological perspective Power dependence theory Role theory	Objectivist direction-of-fit Essentialism (fixed set of positive traits) Lack of reflexivity Idealized ethical influence. Exclusion of diverse ethical voices
Quantification scales measure/assess several researcher-based variables of EL.	Brown et al. (2005), Chikoleze & Baehrend (2017), Kalshoven et al. (2011), Riggio et al. (2010), Wang et al. (2017), Yukl et al. (2013), Zhu et al. (2019)	Universalist	Ethical Leadership Scale: US context Ethical Leadership Style Questionnaire: North American/ Canadian contexts Ethical Leadership at Work: Dutch context Leadership Virtues Questionnaire: multiple industries Chinese Ethical Leadership Scale: Chinese context Ethical Leadership Questionnaire: US context New Ethical Leadership Measurement: added new Chinese dimensions (<i>xinji</i> – cultivating oneself and <i>anren</i> – bringing the good to others)	Reductionism Positivist research design
Assumption #2: Ethical leadership is Deterministic and Binary				
There is a dyadic relationship between leaders and followers, which is rooted in a social scientific approach.	Babalola et al. (2019), Bai et al. (2019), Eva et al. (2020), Kalshoven et al. (2016), Moore et al. (2019), Ng et al. (2021)	Positivist	Social learning theory Social cognitive theory Social exchange theory Social identity theory	Binary simplifications Neglect of multilevel institutional arrangements
EL is a top-down approach and acts as an explanatory mechanism for superior leadership performance.	Kuenzi et al. (2018), Kuenzi et al. (2020), Pucic (2015)	Positivist Objectivist Functionalist	Social cognitive theory Social identity theory Leadership categorization theory	Lack of relational ontology Hierarchical bias Oversimplified causality
The National Cultural Dimensions shed light on the similarities and differences across cultures that endorse different ethical values.	Ahmad (2018), Keating et al. (2007), Martin et al. (2009), Martin et al. (2013), Resick et al. (2011)	Comparative Descriptive	GLOBE studies Hofstede's National Cultural Dimensions	Cultural determinism Lack of relational ontology Institutional deficit (Overgeneralization)

empirically validated using positivist methodologies. It assumes leaders work within clear boundaries, with little ambiguity and uncertainty between right and wrong. This assumption compels leaders to prioritize one ethical end over another (Amiridis, 2018) while neglecting that ethical problems, by their nature, are often complex owing to the need to balance competing value systems. Table 2 reviews empirical studies highlighting ethical tensions in countries from the Global South, including Brazil, Colombia, India, Lebanon, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. These studies reveal the institutional challenges that shape EL in non-Western contexts. In addition, leadership theory is categorized into typologies (path-goal, situational, transactional, etc.) that prescribe its history and its standard forms of practice in the contemporary world (e.g., Northouse, 2021), rather than exploring inductively the perceptions of leadership outside the Global North and the potential possibilities of what it could be in these alternative contexts (Nguyen et al., 2022). We argue that a predefined set of factors derived from EL scales, underpinned by social cognitive theories, fail to interpret its complexities in a global context. In line with Liu (2017a), EL emerges through leaders'

interpretation and application of moral principles within their unique social and institutional contexts.

There has been a burgeoning stream of research on EL, much of which perpetuates a rationalist and masculine approach. These studies focus on an idealized set of leadership characteristics, such as personality traits and skills, that are implicitly aligned with patriarchal, white, Western, middle-class male experiences and values (Corpuz et al., 2020). To illustrate, Liu (2017a) analyzed media articles covering two CEOs from two of Australia's 'Big Four' banks, John Stewart of National Australia Bank (NAB) and Ralph Norris of Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA), before and during the Global Financial Crisis. The study revealed that visual representations of EL portrayed masculinized attributes (e.g., confidence, assertiveness, competitiveness, certainty, independence, self-reliance, and strength). Effective leaders are strong and dominant; they possess the capacity to communicate ethical guidelines in an appealing manner (aided by their charisma), thereby increasing followers' awareness of ethical issues in decision-making (Hassan et al., 2020). Similarly, the Enron case highlights a masculinized approach to

EL, where the organization's tendency to avoid unwelcome news reflects an authoritarian culture shaped by discourses that downplay collaboration, participation, reflection, and circumspection (Edwards et al., 2019). This results in an EL framework that is individualized, decontextualized, and power-neutral, overlooking alternative perspectives from critical, feminist, communitarian, and corporeal ethics (Liu, 2017b). These perspectives emphasize that leadership emerges through social interactions, relationships, moral expectations, engagement, and negotiation among competing IIs. Hence, leadership and followership are more accurately interpreted as a 'process of becoming' (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Further, the lack of reflexivity in mainstream theorizing has unintentionally led to the view of an effective leader as highly rational and instrumental as they work to implement idealized models of EL. The outcome of this is the creation of leaders with a "toxic masculinized persona" (Edwards et al., 2019, p. 733) and a set of destructive dynamics owing to the reality that EL is rarely this straightforward and, as noted before, requires working through complex trade-offs between competing values. The problem here stems from the idea that the idealized models presented in the literature fail to capture "the messy reality of organizational life" (Scade & Spoelstra, 2024, p. 48). Therefore, a more sophisticated approach is needed. One that can interpret shifts in power relations, social interactions, and institutional dynamics, which requires an analysis of broader social systems that impinge on organizations and their actors (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2024). Taking a reflexive approach opens opportunities for a culture and gender-inclusive interpretation of leadership that transcends the discourse of the dominant moral manager who communicates a clear and unproblematic ethical vision that followers agree with and positively respond to (Corpuz et al., 2020; Gooty et al., 2023).

Counterpoint #2: Ethical Leadership is Multidimensional and Encompasses Diverse Experiences.

Much of the EL literature employs a dualistic leader-centric approach, in which ethical behaviors and attributes are set out by leaders who are then evaluated by their followers (Keck et al., 2018). EL is interpreted from a leader-follower dyad and a prescriptive set of moral characteristics that form a baseline. However, this binary approach creates a simplistic dichotomy that neglects the dynamic nature of power, institutions, discourses, and various organizational agents. As Ladkin and Probert (2021) write, power (defined as a leader's social influence) is emergent and relational; it is produced through discourse, social norms, and institutional practices. As Liu (2017b) argues, there is a need to move beyond leader-centric and leader-follower dyad models by acknowledging the complexity and multidimensional nature of EL by challenging the Western discourses on which they are based, and that EL involves more than just following a code of conduct and enforcing rules associated with it. Similarly, White et al. (2014) state that leadership studies should recognize the interdependence among organizational actors, which extends beyond dyadic relations. These studies investigate the inter-relationship between individuals, groups, organizational, and socio-historical contexts, providing a more sophisticated understanding that better captures the challenges of EL (e.g., Nite & Bopp, 2017).

The field has significantly evolved since Brown et al.'s (2005) conceptualization of EL. For example, EL has been examined from a contextually contingent perspective using the National Cultural Dimensions. However, these dimensions have been critiqued for their essentialist approach, which relies on an etic perspective and focuses primarily on national (geographic) categorizations, potentially obscuring substantial within-country variation (Schedlitzki et al., 2017). These essentialist interpretations can hinder more nuanced, critical analyses of cultural identity, power relations, and resistance. They oversimplify the complexities of cultural differences by relying on a taxonomic model that uses descriptive explanations. One of the benefits of these dimensions is that they provide a foundational vocabulary for comparing national cultures. However, this vocabulary is often

restricted to the English language only. Dimensions like 'gender egalitarianism' and 'power distance', for example, have neither translational nor conceptual equivalence in other languages. They overlook social norms, the history of national cultures, geographical features, social institutions, cultural variations within countries, and social change, focusing instead on values at the individual level (Gelfand et al., 2011; Romani et al., 2020). They fail to consider the complex contingencies of time, space, individual followers, organizations, and societal institutions that shape ethical decision-making. They imply that once a country or society is identified with particular cultural dimensions (e.g., high uncertainty avoidance and low human orientation) that EL will align accordingly. As Taras et al. (2016, p. 455) write, "the terms 'country' and 'culture' are often used interchangeably". EL becomes a fixed outcome of the country and the cultural dimension used to explain it. So, differences across cultures are "presented as something to deal with in line with established managerial order" and so become a form of instrumental rationality (Romani et al., 2020, p. 53).

The National Cultural Dimensions are prescriptive, geographically focused, and predominantly etic in the way they assign certain forms of thinking and behaviors to a broadly conceived set of cultural categories, such as individualism/collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Den Hartog, 2015; McSweeney, 2002; Schedlitzki et al., 2017). This cross-cultural approach to EL oversimplifies real-world complexity by treating culture as fixed within geographic boundaries, overlooking culture's dynamic and evolving nature, especially in the Global South (Fang, 2010; Venaik & Brewer, 2016). Further, it views culture:

as stable, persistent and pervasive. Cultural dimensions and constructs that emphasize unity (e.g., of binary oppositions such as individual-collectivism) across all cultures in the world. Cultural differences are presented as something to deal with in line with the established managerial order of, for example, expatriates representing the interests of the headquarters. (Romani et al., 2020, p. 53).

Despite these criticisms, it is necessary to acknowledge that the National Cultural Dimensions remain an influential approach, especially as heuristic devices—they provide a 'rule of thumb' or mental shortcut—helping to simplify complex situations. They prove to be most valuable when used reflexively and in conjunction with more context-sensitive methods.

Another similar approach, the Integrative Interdisciplinary Approach proposed by Eisenbeiss (2012), is considered more theoretically sophisticated than the National Cultural Dimensions. However, it remains constrained by dominant Western and Eastern normative moral philosophies (Dale & Latham, 2015; Kenny & Fotaki, 2015). In addition, while the virtue ethics approach offers culturally relevant qualities for EL, it ultimately simplifies the concept by assuming individual leaders embody ethical ideals. For instance, in the Chinese context, it is predicted that leaders are expected to be guided by the virtues of *ren* (benevolence), *li* (righteousness), and *yi* (ritual propriety) and that these will direct their organizations' aspirations, strategies, and structures (Yuan et al., 2023). From this mainstream orientation, cross-cultural contexts are seen to be "influenced by objective cultural values and cultural dimensions". In contrast, a critical approach argues that the concept of culture must be "approached with attention to political and economic institutions, structures and processes" (Romani et al., 2020, p. 51). In this respect, the mainstream orientation fails to capture, in-depth, leaders' lived experiences and challenges in navigating ethical problems and ambiguities that arise from multilevel institutional discrepancies, discourses, and power relations (Constandt et al., 2020; Dashtipour et al., 2024; Islam, 2020; Schminke & Priesemuth, 2012).

EL encompasses numerous relationships with diverse stakeholders in a constantly evolving local and global landscape, particularly during crises that necessitate non-programmed, unprecedented decisions in uncertain and unfamiliar situations (Dionne et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2024). Based on this and the previous studies cited in this section, we

argue that EL is not a stable, static phenomenon that can be solved (resolved) by straightforwardly applying empirically tested best practices. Instead, research needs to consider the differences in ontology across cultures. That practice needs to be evaluated within the dynamic institutional context by capturing leaders' and followers' lived experiences of these conditions. In turbulent times, leaders need to adapt to the specificities of the local dilemmas that arise, knowing that global conditions will play a role. For example, Nguyen et al. (2024) analyzed the upheavals caused by the COVID-19 crisis in Vietnam and how this compelled organizational leaders to make a series of non-programmed and unenviable moral decisions to lead their companies and workforces. The type of deterministic best practice EL presented in the literature bore no resemblance to the ethical issues that Vietnamese leaders faced during this period. Similarly, Gümüşay et al. (2019) highlight a case involving an Islamic bank (the KT Bank) operating in Germany. The bank's adherence to Sharia law conflicts with the country's conventional banking practices and institutions, such as the 'religious logics' (moral principles, spiritual concerns, altruism) and 'state logics' (the law, regulation, equity). At the time of the study, the KT Bank was struggling to establish its structures and operations due to its lack of alignment with the prevailing banking institutions in the country. For example, Sharia prohibits *riba*, or *usury*, defined as interest paid on loans, which has become the *sin qua non* of the banking system in the Global North. Instead, banks guided by Sharia make modest profits through complex profit-sharing arrangements aligned with complementary logics, such as 'community logics' (values, trust, collective wellbeing, social norms) and 'family logics' (loyalty, care, relationships). While brief in detail, these examples illustrate how the theory of ILs extends beyond the leader-follower dyad and the prescriptive moral characteristics often assumed by mainstream approaches to EL.

The EL literature tends to adopt oppositional 'either/or' perspectives that categorize leadership practice as either 'good' or 'bad', positioning it along a spectrum between the two extremes (Edwards et al., 2019). This approach implies that leaders can progress towards being 'better' or 'worse' by embracing or rejecting certain moral norms. As Liu (2017b, p. 346) argues, "these assumptions are often unable to account for the complex and unpredictable ways in which social actors, from all levels of an organizational system, shape one another's perceptions and behaviors". The failure to countenance a relational ontology and, further, the process of social change leads to an instrumental approach to leadership where ethics is "translated into a technical problem that has a possible solution" (Amiridis, 2018, p. 19). Critical theorists advocate for an approach to ethics that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions, focusing on the exercise of power (both productive and unproductive) and how it creates situations characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, and social and organizational change (Wray-Bliss, 2009; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015). Ethical problems are rarely resolved by calculating costs and benefits, following rules and codes of conduct, or adhering to predetermined virtues. Instead, ethical decision-making occurs in a context of conflict, where different actors, groups, and institutions vie for legitimacy (Dashtipour et al., 2024). Munro and Thanem (2018, p. 51) add: "Ethical leadership can neither be reduced to a question of imposing ethical standards and moral rule systems, nor to a matter of cultivating the virtuous conduct of individual leaders nor recast in terms of leaders' unlimited obligation to take full responsibility for the 'other'". Hence, there is a need to better understand how leaders subjectively interpret the pressures imposed by organizational actors and institutions, and how these shape cognitive processes related to ethical decision-making (Bévert & Suddaby, 2016; Islam, 2020). To this end, we will now analyze the lived experience of EL and the complex organizational and social institutional contexts from which they emerge.

Table 2 below provides empirical examples of the foregoing analysis. It outlines studies conducted in Global South countries, noting the ethical tensions, competing ILs, and their challenge to the assumptions underpinning mainstream studies on EL (problematization).

Institutional logics

Mainstream approaches to EL idealize moral strength, courage, independence, dominance, and assertiveness. Ethical leaders model behaviors for their followers, promoting a hierarchical, top-down approach. This approach is often suitable for ethical practice in the Global North, characterized by stable institutions that support ethical conduct and compliance. Research indicates that organizational leaders in the Global South must contend with fluid institutional arrangements characterized by weak business regulation and legal enforcement. Consequently, leaders struggle in this context to gain a sense of legitimacy and decision-making (Braga et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2024). Banks et al. (2021) and Morin and Talbot (2023) have observed that few studies have sought to analyze how social institutions shape thinking and practice in EL. There is a need for interdisciplinary perspectives and research that can capture the multilevel factors that shape EL thinking and practice, such as "level spanning, temporal extension, the use of alternative methods, and the borrowing of theories from fields that are traditionally more context-sensitive" (Johns, 2024, p. 9). Therefore, an alternative set of assumptions needs to be developed for organizational actors in the Global South to navigate the fluid and contested institutional environment in which they work.

It is argued that ILs can address some aspects of the multidimensional nature of EL by linking social cognition (sense-making) with broader social forces. To capture this dynamic phenomenon, ILs offer a "systematic approach to studying cultural heterogeneity" (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 170). ILs encompass organizational norms, cultural values, and social codes, providing a more sophisticated understanding of the ethical decision-making processes (Johansen & Waldorff, 2017). ILs is a branch of institutional theory that became prominent in the 1970s (Alford & Friedland, 1985; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Jackall, 1988). Institutional theory has been applied in political science and organizational studies. In the latter, it has been used to understand how organizations maintain themselves over time. However, institutional theory has been criticized for its overemphasis on institutional isomorphism (the process of homogenization in organizations), neglecting the constantly changing environment in which organizations and their leaders operate (Lounsbury, 2008).

Several studies have adopted an institutional approach to investigate EL. Kimura and Nishikawa (2018) demonstrate that Japanese culture is shaped by a blend of Confucian, Buddhist, and Shinto traditions, future-oriented thinking, and institutional collectivism, influencing ethical business practices. For example, initiatives like the Keidanren policy promote compliance and deter bribery, influencing Japanese leaders' perceptions of EL by instituting a degree of accountability. Tan and Wang (2011, p. 373) used ILs to "interpret how multinational corporations (MNCs) balance ethical pressures from both the home and host countries". They justified their study by observing that several countries in the Global South (e.g., Argentina, India, China, South Africa, Thailand) have experienced rapid economic growth and that ethical thinking and practice in these jurisdictions "generate additional complexities for the global business ethics landscape". The authors concluded that MNCs with well-established logics and principles in their home country face a tricky balancing act when it comes to aligning their ethical strategies with the values and norms of the host (subsidiary) country in the Global South. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach; instead, MNCs need to carefully configure core values and peripheral components that harmonize with the institutional environment of the host country.

To make sense of the additional complexities that Tan and Wang refer to requires that EL be viewed as multilevel, starting with institutional arrangements, how these shape individuals' thinking and behaviors, and social interactions and relations in organizations. In short, IL elucidates the connection between macro-level constructs, such as multiple logics and organizational practices, and micro-level constructs,

Table 2
Review of Empirical Studies on Ethical Leadership in the Global South Employing an Institutional Perspective.

Study}	Context}	Ethical Tensions}	Competing Logics}	Problematization}
Braga et al. (2021)	BrazilColombia	HR professionals, despite wanting to act ethically and comply with the law, feel powerless due to their limited authority and the lack of consequences for non-compliance. HR professionals often use cultural tactics like <i>jeitinho</i> (Brazil, social navigation) and <i>malicia indígena</i> (Colombia, native cunning) to navigate legal and ethical constraints.	Legal logic vs Professional logic Hierarchical logic vs Professional logic Personalism logic vs Professional logic	In weak rule-of-law contexts like Brazil and Colombia, a binary and deterministic assumption proves impractical. HR professionals sometimes comply with unethical or illegal actions (e.g., releasing confidential records or enabling favoritism) to satisfy senior management. This underscores the need to consider informal, culturally rooted institutions. This challenges EL's universalist view, which assumes leaders are role models.
Chan and Ananthram (2020)	India	Indian executives in MNCs struggle to uphold ethics amid weak governance, corruption, and limited regulatory frameworks.	Legal logic vs Religious logic	Indian executives advocate integrating religious values and spirituality into organizational practices to foster humane and ethical conduct. In Global South contexts like India, EL should be reconceptualized as multidimensional, reflecting diverse experiences embedded in local institutional realities.
Fathallah et al. (2019)	Lebanon	Muslim family business firms use a rule-based religious logic to guide ethical decisions, often foregoing profit to avoid <i>haram</i> practices like commission-based pricing or interest-bearing loans.	Market (Profit-driven) logic vs Religious logic	Religious logic shapes ethical behavior in family firms, often taking precedence over market logics. This challenges the view of ethical leaders as independent moral agents and calls for a rethinking of what constitutes legitimacy and moral authority in EL across different institutional contexts.
Huq and Stevenson (2020)	Bangladesh	In the apparel industry, buyers demand social compliance from suppliers but are unwilling to raise prices to cover the associated costs. This puts pressure on suppliers, who struggle to invest in compliance without financial support, highlighting a disconnect between buyers' sustainability goals and their pricing practices.	Economic logic vs Social logic	EL is shaped by structural tensions and conflicting institutional demands. Supplier leaders express willingness to invest in compliance if buyers support them—this shows ethical intent constrained by economic reality. This calls for a rethink of EL as a context-bound, negotiated, and relational process, especially in unequal global supply chains.
Nguyen et al. (2024)	Vietnam	During the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnamese managerial leaders in the manufacturing sector faced complex ethical dilemmas: they had to consider laying off staff due to a sharp decline in orders, while also feeling compassion for workers who would suffer financially with little support from the government/employers.	Market logic vs Personal logic of <i>tâm</i> (heart, inner-moral self)	EL must reflect the contextual realities of the Global South, where decisions often involve difficult trade-offs under pressure. Rather than fixed principles, EL relies on practical judgment in complex and fluid environments, highlighting the need to examine the actor agency and value plurality of ILs.
Pureza & Lee (2020)	Brazil	The core issue is a compliance gap in CSR practices in Brazil, where environmental licenses are granted without due diligence and exploitative labor conditions persist. A power struggle between local, regional, and federal authorities creates overlapping and conflicting laws, making full compliance nearly impossible.	Legal/State logic vs Community/Social logic	In Brazil's context of legal fragmentation, power struggles, and compliance gaps, leaders are constrained by institutional inconsistency. EL should instead reflect diverse institutional realities and lived experiences.

such as individual cognitions, behaviors, and social interactions (Thornton et al., 2012). Fig. 1 below outlines how ILs can address the alternative assumptions put forward. It considers four main elements: (1) the inter-institutional system, (2) value plurality and temporality, (3) the interplay of ILs, and (4) actor agency.

Inter-Institutional system

Society comprises complex inter-institutional systems comprising various normative structures (Skelcher & Smith, 2015). Each of these structures is guided by its own set of principles, which in turn shape the behavior of organizations and their actors. The inter-institutional system (i.e., connected system) includes connected multilevel subsystems in which culture informs society's practices, vocabularies, and norms. According to Thornton et al. (2012), an inter-institutional system comprises seven major ideal-typed ILs: (1) family, (2) community, (3) religion, (4) profession, (5) market, (6) state, and (7) corporation. These logics prescribe institutional orders (e.g., cultural rules, beliefs, and norms) that guide behavior in organizations and have the potential to influence ethical decision-making.

The inter-institutional system incorporates the macro-level positioning dimension (Gümüşay et al., 2020), which allows us to understand how the macro-level institutional orders and their associated principles are integrated into the system. To date, empirical research has examined EL through multiple-level factors, including societal, industry, and intra-organizational contexts (Eisenbeiß & Giessner, 2012). However, the inter-institutional system of ILs offers an integrated and more concise framework for understanding how organizational actors,

particularly leaders, are influenced by multiple factors across diverse levels. The value of the ILs perspective is that it theorizes actor agency and value plurality, which reveal the meanings and values that shape the assumptions, perceptions, and practices of EL in a more comprehensive and multidimensional manner (Nielsen & Lockwood, 2018). This extends beyond the traditional view of a dual (binary) process, where the leader influences followers in a hierarchical system according to a set of prescribed ethical norms. The ILs approach opens the way for comprehending the complex situations and environments faced by leaders in Global South countries, where institutional frameworks differ markedly from those in the Global North.

Value plurality and temporality

ILs were initially theorized as “a set of material practices and symbolic constructions” (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 248). Current studies have primarily focused on the ideal types of ILs (e.g., Thornton et al., 2012) to explain the cause-and-effect relationship between these and behavior. Currie and Spyridonidis (2015) argue that the ideal types of ILs serve as a formal analytical framework for comparing empirical observations across institutions. However, it is vital that institutions are not regarded as static, unchanging entities characterized by rigid structures, norms, and beliefs (Zilber, 2016). Rooted in phenomenology, individuals can also enact institutions, leading to inhabited institutions (Bévort & Suddaby, 2016). This gives rise to the next element of ILs, which is the dimension of value plurality and temporality (Gümüşay et al., 2020). The value plurality of ILs is based on the idea that “logics not only provide meaning but they are also created through meaning –

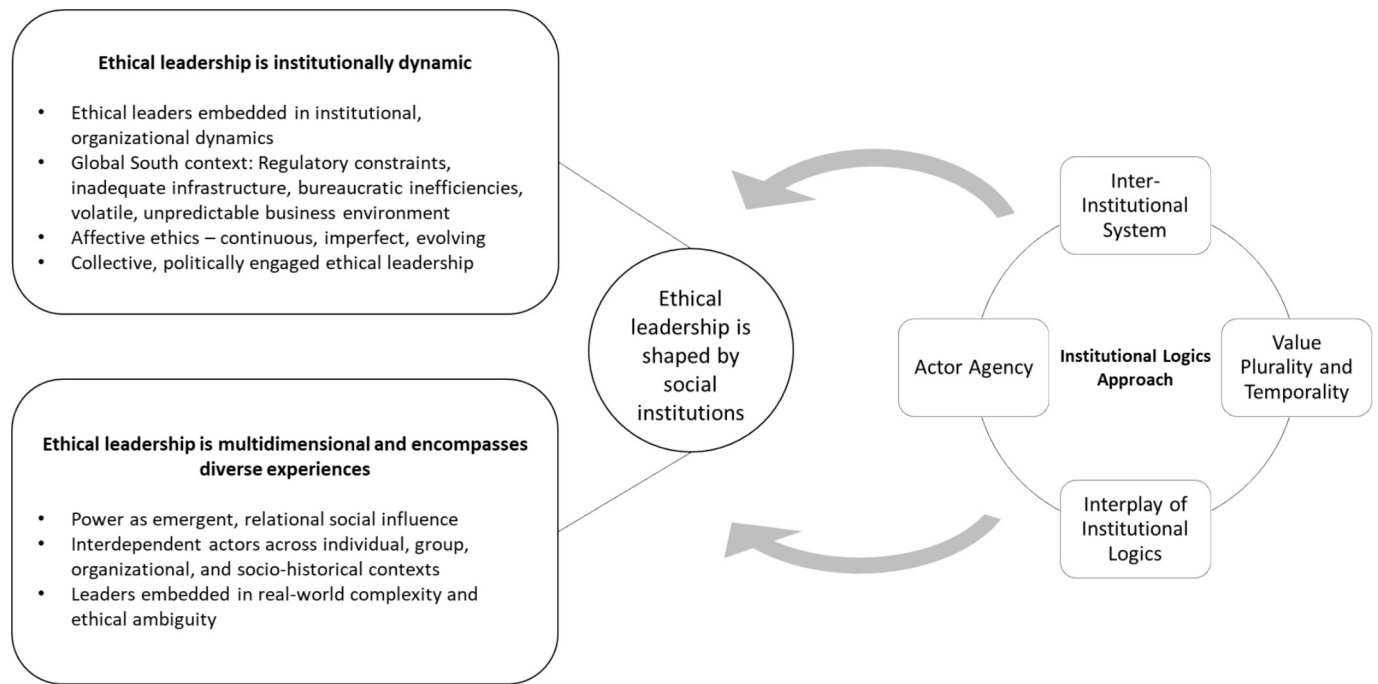


Fig. 1. Integrating Institutional Logics to Capture Multilevel Ethical Leadership.

and understood and enacted differently because they are differently understood and believed in” (p. 8). Temporality highlights that logics evolve over time (Skelcher & Smith, 2015).

Koning and Waistell (2012) write that EL is a process of “becoming in context” (p. 75), shaping a leader’s identity and, vice versa, how they respond to ethical/unethical practices. The authors argue that EL is “not as an ‘either-or’ but as a non-dual synthesis; ethical leadership can be, and often is experienced as, both individual and relational, past, present and future, continuous and discontinuous, internal and external, and ethical and unethical” (p. 75). Value plurality and temporality extend beyond the seven ideal types of ILs outlined by Thornton et al. (2012) (see Fig. 2) to analyze the existence of context-specific ILs in which EL is embedded. These principles provide the basis for transcending the mainstream orientation, which often idealizes and romanticizes ethical leaders, portraying them as exemplifying masculine traits such as competitiveness, dominance, mastery, and heroics. The ‘romance of leadership’ provides a comforting yet oversimplified approach (Collinson et al., 2018).

The interplay of institutional logics

As organizations and their actors are embedded in an inter-institutional system, the ILs approach helps to interpret the relationship and interaction between organizational form, normative frames, and individual agency, which constitutes a “substantial social theory” for investigating EL (Skelcher & Smith, 2015, p. 436). For example, religious logics emphasize modesty and personal sharing for a better society (generally speaking). In contrast, market logics favor achieving personal wealth and materialistic values. At the same time, corporate logics focus on the hierarchy and bureaucratic roles of senior leaders and boards of directors. Nite and Bopp (2017), in their challenge of the mainstream definition of EL, argue that institutional complexity is critical to understanding the conflicting perspectives that leaders face (e. g., religious, market, and professional logic). The authors demonstrate that the prevailing institutional norms and ideologies often clash, leading to divergent views on ethical or unethical behavior. Misangyi et al. (2008) report that two aspects have dominated thinking on corruption. The first emphasizes the economic perspective, from which

corruption is explained through the state logic of formal regulative structures and the market logic of rational self-interest, success, and efficiency. The second highlights the role of normative and cognitive aspects of corrupt behaviors through explanations of culture and structure at the organizational level. Misangyi et al. argue that to address corruption effectively, it is necessary to investigate the interplay of ILs and the thinking invoked to nurture and sustain it. We argue that the thinking, emotions, and behaviors of leaders are shaped by several intersecting logics that vie for legitimacy and that these come into conflict with each other and so confound the EL decision-making process (Durand & Thornton, 2018; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2014; Reay & Hinings, 2009). The concept of ‘institutional complexity’ highlights the irreconcilable, conflicting, and contradictory institutional orders that arise from multiple logics that occur to either a greater or lesser extent, subject to organizational cultures and the actors within them (Greenwood et al., 2011; Vermeulen et al., 2016; Zilber, 2002).

According to Van den Broek et al. (2014) and Demers and Gond (2020), logics can be ‘conflicting yet complementary’ as in the example of the KT Bank in Germany (Gümüşay et al., 2019) acting as a constraint or enabler for organizational actors. Multiple ILs are “competitive, but their relationship may also be cooperative, orthogonal, or blurred” (Currie & Spyridonidis, 2015, p. 78). For example, the market logic (efficiency, profitability, competition) can influence the family logic in the way that family businesses may shift to enhance the competency of their hiring processes, focusing more on firm-centric incentives rather than family-centric priorities (Miller et al., 2017).

In summary, EL can be understood as an interplay of ILs that compete or complement one another, guiding individual perceptions and moral reasoning. Viewing institutions as pluralistic interacting entities helps us to move away from a deterministic binary analysis (Skelcher & Smith, 2015). It shifts the focus toward understanding the complex dynamics that shape organizations, leadership, and follower behavior. Further, it allows for the accounting of changing social realities and enhances our understanding of how logics are constructed, aiding in assessing and resolving ethical issues (Gümüşay et al., 2020). Viewing EL through the prism of multiple ILs provides a more sophisticated analysis that transcends the National Cultural Dimensions approach, where culture is treated as an independent variable, neglecting its interdependencies and

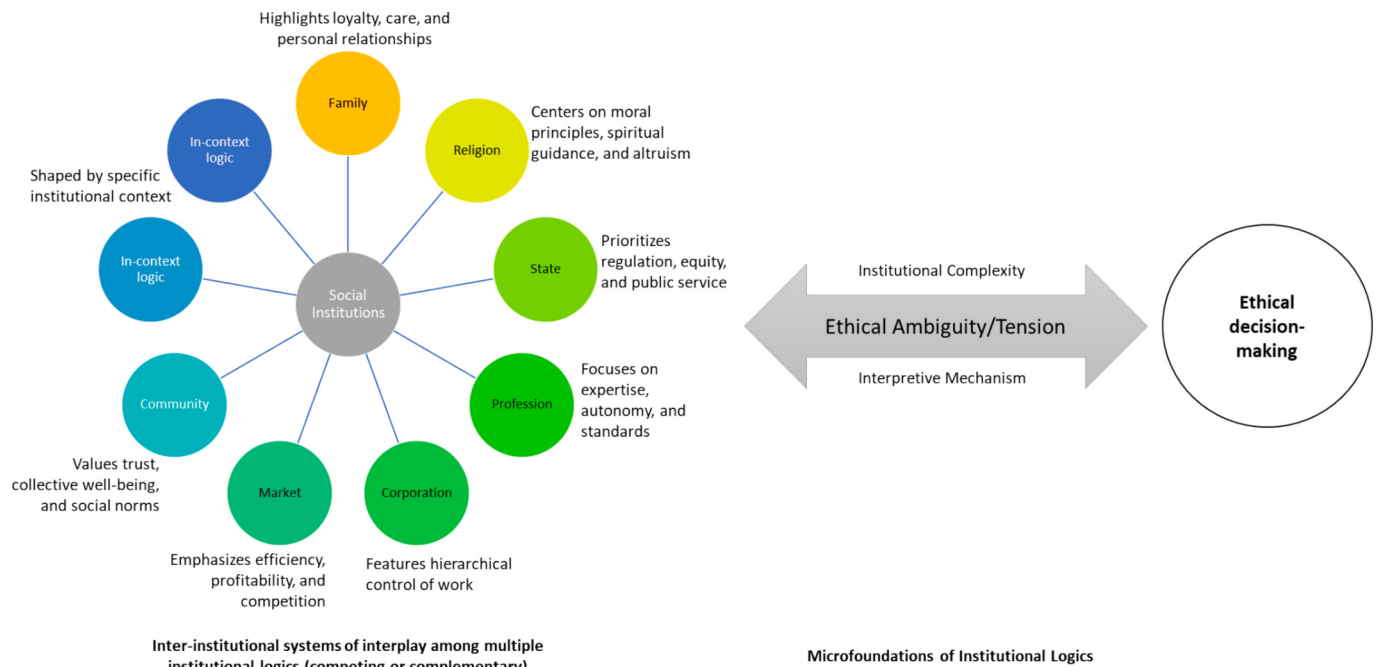


Fig. 2. A Multilevel Model for Investigating Ethical Leadership (. adapted from Thornton et al., 2012)

interactions with a country's history, institutions, geography, politics, and economy. The IL perspective goes beyond the 'static' Integrative Interdisciplinary Approach (underpinned by dominant Western and Eastern moral philosophies) by highlighting the 'dynamic' interplay of other key institutions. The ILs perspective enhances our understanding of EL in the Global South by employing a practice-theoretic approach to culture (Lounsbury et al., 2021) by challenging the isomorphic concept of EL, where leaders are thought to conform to a hierarchical relationship with universal ethical frameworks. It highlights how tensions and conflicts between various logics drive the interplay of symbolic beliefs, practices, and material arrangements, offering a more nuanced perspective.

Actor agency

Organizational actors are immersed in a dynamic interplay of competing or complementary ILs. While these give rise to constraints, they also provide the basis for theorizing agency. Cloutier and Langley (2013) argue that institutions are not merely constraining. They also have the potential to enhance autonomy; actors negotiate with inter-institutional systems and the conflicts that arise from them. This complexity confounds and opens the organizational field for actors to exercise agency by drawing on or confronting the normative (pre-defined) institutional arrangements. Dacin et al. (2002), Zilber (2016), and Lok (2010) highlight the importance of agency and heterogeneity of ILs by focusing on the micro-levels. They point to the diversity and divergences of multiple ILs through the perceptions and interpretations of leaders who give meaning to institutions in various relational contexts. Behaviors are not automatically subject to specific or prescribed institutional pressures and institutional orders; instead, they are interpreted and meanings ascribed to them that inform a degree of autonomy when it comes to EL thinking and practice.

To focus on the micro-level ILs, scholars have adopted the micro-foundations of ILs, which emphasize how organizational actors negotiate, interpret, and translate macro-level logics into individual behaviors. Thornton et al. (2012, p.80) view organizational actors "as embedded in social, cultural, and political structures and as guided by

cognitively bounded identities and goals". Kyriatsis et al. (2017) argue that ILs provide vocabularies, values, and beliefs in the field-level process as options for individual-level actions in a specific sociocultural context. Similarly, Johansen and Waldorff (2017) state that this aspect (level) of ILs helps uncover the micro-activity negotiations within and between logics as they manifest in everyday organizational dynamics and, therefore, the basis for theorizing agency. In these and other respects, the inter-institutional element provides macro-level factors that influence EL. In contrast, the microfoundations of ILs offer an analytical framework that helps to comprehend the micro-level cognitive processes and how actors make sense of and interpret situations, leading to ethical behaviors that are time and space appropriate (Cloutier & Langley, 2013; Greenwood et al., 2010). The framework conceptualizes individuals as social actors strategically utilizing cultural-cognitive and material resources. The microfoundations of ILs also aid in understanding how organizational leaders navigate the affective (emotional) aspects that inform ethical decision-making. This aspect of ILs assists in transcending the masculine bias (Assumption #1) inherent in the 'rational' perspective of EL, which is sustained by classification, qualification, and normative ethical beliefs reflecting self-evident truths (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Friedland, 2018).

By integrating the microfoundations of ILs into the concept of EL, we can gain a deeper understanding of the agency of individuals in different contexts. This integration allows us to examine how specific logics manifest within these contexts and how leaders and followers make sense of them and negotiate and construct meaning. It enables us to comprehend how particular situations trigger various psychological mechanisms that affect decision-making and sense-making, such as leaders' self-identities (Glaser et al., 2016; Thornton et al., 2012). For instance, Lok (2010, p. 1305) investigated how organizational "actors, through everyday identity work, can paradoxically accommodate and resist the practice and identity implications of new institutional logics at the same time". Glaser et al. (2016) propose the need to understand individual behaviors by connecting the internalization of macro-level cultural insights to the associated network of self-schemas (e.g., entity and event schemas).

Evaluating institutional logics in ethical leadership: Discussion and future recommendations

We acknowledge the value of mainstream research in EL, particularly for audiences seeking a general understanding of its conceptualization. It provides well-defined measurements of EL and identifies the key variables and the nature of the causal relationships between them. Nevertheless, the alternative assumptions offered here challenge the conventional positivist and deterministic perspectives prevalent in the Global North literature on EL, where ethics and morals are assumed to be universal, where power is treated as a causal mechanism, and ethical decision-making is individualized through social cognitive theories. It is argued that the counterpoints offered in our analysis provide a more sophisticated perspective based on the assumption that institutional arrangements, which differ from country to country and region to region, shape intra-psychic processes such as ethical decision-making in organizations. Our analysis sheds light on the current bias in EL rooted in cultural and societal norms that attribute EL qualities to masculine traits such as assertiveness, dominance, competitiveness, and mastery. Problematising the assumptions that underpin the EL literature and its application to a cross-cultural context has highlighted its limitations concerning countries and regions in the Global South, revealing an ‘institutional deficit’ in understanding EL. By proposing ILs as a theory that better captures the complex multilevel aspects of EL, we argue that grounding the phenomenon in lived experiences provides a more authentic and sophisticated account while giving voice to leaders and followers in marginalized regions of the world. ILs offer a more comprehensive understanding of EL, focusing on the relationship between the macro and micro levels and conceptualizing it as a dynamic process rather than a fixed and stable phenomenon.

Recommendation 1: Capturing ethical leadership through an inclusive multilevel model

Although several empirical papers (see Table 2) have highlighted the ethical tensions arising from conflicting logics, few have examined EL by employing IL, which provides a more inclusive multilevel model for capturing cultural context (Fig. 2).

To begin with, investigating leaders as part of a complex inter-institutional system with competing and complementary logics articulates ethical dilemmas and ambiguities. Table 2 illustrates the ethical tensions and dilemmas that leaders face, which require that they be addressed by undertaking a multilevel analysis of the macro (e.g., government, law, regulations) and meso levels (e.g., field, industry, organization) and how these shape leader decision-making. According to Weber et al. (2013), research should clearly define the boundaries of a field by setting a well-defined scope for its research questions, guided by the researcher’s contextual knowledge. Once the research context has been established and an initial analysis of it has been collected (e.g., secondary data sources), logics can be qualitatively identified through a ‘pattern-deducing’, ‘pattern-matching’, or ‘pattern-inducing’ process (Reay & Jones, 2016).

The ‘pattern-deducing’ process guides researchers to systematically study EL by converting large volumes of collected qualitative data into quantifiable patterns using methods like qualitative content analysis. This enables the identification of recurring ILs over time. By tracing these patterns, researchers can uncover ethical tensions, hybrid practices, and emerging EL norms grounded in local realities and practices. ‘Pattern-matching’ involves identifying ‘ideal types’ of ILs as outlined by Thornton et al. (2012), who identify associated ethical structures within a given context (e.g., a field or societal sector). Empirical data (e.g., interviews or case studies) will then be collected and compared to these predefined types to assess how closely real-world practices align with or diverge from them (see Fathallah et al., 2019). In contrast, the ‘pattern-

inducing’ approach adopts a bottom-up analysis, exploring EL by examining raw empirical data (e.g., interviews, observations, or documents) without relying on predefined categories. Methods such as ethnography or grounded theory are used to identify patterns of ILs that emerge from leaders’ lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to these (Zilber, 2016). This inductive approach is especially useful for studying EL in non-Western or under-researched settings in the Global South.

Second, our model reveals that examining how ILs interact across multiple levels reveals the ethical tensions and ambiguities that inevitably arise. Beyond mapping macro-level forces, there is a need to examine how leaders interpret and enact those logics in local, micro-level contexts. To do so, researchers focus on the microfoundations of ILs by capturing actor agency and employing qualitative methods to illuminate leaders’ lived experiences (Lok, 2010).

Since EL is not a static or one-time response to ethical challenges but an ongoing, evolving process shaped by the interplay of multiple ILs, it is recommended that future research adopt a longitudinal approach to explore how and why EL practices emerge and develop (Wu et al., 2023). For example, narrative-based methods are one approach whereby leaders are asked to narrate stories of their leadership experiences over a period of time (Nguyen et al., 2023; O’Toole, 2018). Future studies can also develop and test the logic defined in the above-mentioned steps using a hypothetical-deductive approach, such as mixed methods. For instance, identification techniques such as instrumental variables and matched sampling can be used to investigate causal relationships between factors. When examining individuals’ capacities to comprehend categories and elements of ILs, randomized controlled trials, experimental designs, and text mining techniques can also be used (Durand & Thornton, 2018). Research questions might include: How does EL emerge and evolve within the banking sector?; How do leaders maintain, adapt, or abandon ethical commitments during periods of organizational change or crisis?

Recommendation 2: A practice-based framework for practitioners and policymakers

Practice-based frameworks for practitioners and policymakers need to begin with the assumption that organizational leaders operate within an evolving and fluid environment. Ethical problems need to be understood and addressed in a processual manner, instead of applying a set of predetermined moral values or specific behaviors. Therefore, a critical skill in leadership development programs is self-reflection (how does the institutional environment shape one’s leadership thinking), carefully evaluating the business environment and situation, and learning to trace the exercise of power by identifying the links between competing institutions and how these might be reconciled in practice. Training should encourage participants to reflect on their past leadership experiences, considering the specific institutional context and the complexities of their ILs. This approach empowers individuals by helping them better navigate the complex domain of leader decision-making by identifying the conflicts that occur at the micro-level of ethical practices while considering the influence of macro institutions.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Truc Ha-Thanh Nguyen: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mahmoud Zakarneh:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Project administration. **Matthew McDonald:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Project administration. **Joseph Amankwah-Amoah:** Resources, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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