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Ethical Leadership and Prohibitive Voice

The Role of Leadership and Organisational Identification

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Abstract

This article extends previous research on ethical leadership and voice behavior, by investigating the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice. Prohibitive voice is defined as speaking up with concerns or worries regarding factors that may harm organisational functioning. The article reports on a cross-sectional study of Norwegian employees, investigating the relationship between ethical leadership, leadership identification, organisational identification and prohibitive voice. In the article leadership identification is understood as a process where the employee incorporates the leader's values and goals into his or her self- concept. Organisational identification on the other hand is when the employee starts seeing the organisational values, norms and goals as his or her own. Testing our results in a dual-process model, we find that ethical leadership is positively and significantly related to prohibitive voice. Moreover, we find that this effect is mediated by organizational identification. We find no significant mediation effect of leadership identification. Implication for theory and research are discussed.

Introduction

Recent decades have seen a range of organisational scandals involving fraud, bribery, security hazards, and money laundering in companies like Siemens, Yara, Vimpelcom, General Motors, and Volkswagen. Although these scandals have generated a great deal of attention, a PwC survey from 2018 showed that 49 per cent of 7228 organisations reported that they had experienced crime and fraud in the past year, which is an increase of 30 per cent from the 2009 PwC survey. Investigations into these scandals show that the root of these problems was not ineffective regulations or compliance systems. Instead, the main cause was weak leadership and a flawed corporate culture that led employees to remain silent with their worries or concerns regarding the unethical and dysfunctional practises in the organisation (Healy & Serfaeim, 2019). In addition to the billions of dollars lost because of these scandals, the reputation of these companies has been severely damaged. Moreover, the scandals in Siemens, Yara, Vimpelcom, General Motors, and Volkswagen are examples of seriously damaging incidents that could have been reduced or avoided if employees had felt empowered to communicate to their supervisors their concerns and worries regarding these unethical and damaging practices.

Considering the previously-mentioned scandals in Siemens, Yara, Vimpelcom, General Motors, and Volkswagen researchers have recognised the importance of receiving the employee's concerns, worries, suggestions, and ideas for improvement regarding

organisational functioning in order to secure organisational functioning and effectiveness (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). Accordingly, the attention devoted to studying *voice behaviour* – defined as employees' discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, and concerns at work with the purpose of improving organisational functioning (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Morrison, 2011) – has been increasing steadily (Chamberlain, Newton & LePine, 2017). Although the definition of voice includes speaking up with concerns and worries, the main focus in the voice literature has been on *promotive voice*, which means the future-oriented communication of ideas and suggestion that may improve organisational functioning (Liang et al., 2012). However, as exemplified by the white-collar scandals mentioned above, the communication of *prohibitive voice* – defined as the employees' communication of concerns and factors that may harm the organisation – may be of even greater value to the organisation (Liang et al., 2012; Morrison, 2011; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Nevertheless, speaking up with concerns and worries to prevent harm in the organisation (prohibitive voice) is found to be a higher risk endeavour for an employee than speaking up with ideas and suggestions, as pointing out factors that are not working in the organisations also may involve suggesting someone who is responsible someone for the situation (Liang et al., 2012). Accordingly, both the antecedents and consequences of prohibitive voice are found to be different than for promotive voice. For example, studies by Liang et al. (2012) and Svendsen, Jønsson and Unterrainer (2016) found that self-protective motives such as psychological safety are more important for prohibitive voice than promotive voice. Moreover, studies have shown that speaking up with prohibitive concerns puts a larger strain on the employee, leads to lower performance ratings, and reduces promotion opportunities (Lin & Johnson, 2015).

Due to the inherent risk when expressing prohibitive concerns in an organisation, many employees choose not to express themselves because they fear negative response or retaliations from their superiors (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). Therefore, leadership is underlined as an important antecedent of voice, as employees will "read the wind" to establish whether it is safe and worthwhile to speak up (Detert & Burris, 2007). The past two decades have seen a large number of studies regarding the relationship between leadership and voice behaviour (cf. Detert & Burris, 2007; Duan, Li, Xu, & Wu, 2017; Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002; Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010; McClean, Burris, & Detert, 2013; Svendsen & Jønsson, 2016; Svendsen, Jønsson, & Unterrainer, 2016; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012). A leadership style that has been highlighted theoretically and empirically as an antecedent that may be especially effective in eliciting employees' ideas and concerns is *ethical leadership* -defined as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Ethical leaders create a trusting and safe environment when they behave consistent with their principals, which in turn motivates employees to speak up (Chamberlain et al., 2017). Moreover, ethical leaders highlight the importance of ethical conduct, which may stimulate prohibitive voice. The relationship between ethical leadership and promotive voice has been established by Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009), for example, who found ethical leadership to be positively related to voice.

Nevertheless, we argue that the research on ethical leadership and voice can be improved in two specific ways. First, the literature on ethical leadership and voice behaviour has largely focused on promotive voice. Keeping in mind how antecedents are found to predict promotive and prohibitive voice differently, this is unfortunate because we lack an understanding of how ethical leadership relates to prohibitive voice. In our study we argue that ethical leadership may be especially important to stimulate prohibitive voice because of the previous established strong relationship with trust and safety (Walumbwa &

Shaubroeck, 2009), but also because deciding to raise prohibitive concerns entails a process of ethical consideration that the ethical leader stimulates positively. Thus, we need research that looks at the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice. Second, there is a lack of understanding about the specific mechanisms through which ethical leadership exerts its influence on prohibitive voice. This lack of understanding is unfortunate, as a more nuanced understanding would specify further what leaders can do in order to stimulate prohibitive voice from their employees. Accordingly, the main goal of the present article is to investigate the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice, and the mediating mechanisms involved in this relationship.

In order to accomplish this goal, we develop and test a model in which we propose that ethical leadership will be positively related to prohibitive voice. Moreover, drawing on social identity theory and relational identity theory (Haslam, 2001; Pratt, 1998) we propose a dual-path model in which *leader identification* - defined as an employee's belief about the leader as self-referential or self-defining- and *organisational identification* - defined as the employees belief about the organisation as self-referential and self-defining; (Pratt, 1998) will mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice. Identity processes may be especially relevant when investigating the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice. For example, an ethical leader creates an organisation that the employee wants to identify with through the communication of shared organisational values and ethical conduct (Brown & Trvinio, 2005). Accordingly, the employee is more likely to both incorporate the organisation as a part of his/her self-concept, and therefore work and make sacrifices in order to help the organisation thrive, through discretionary behaviour such as prohibitive voice. The relationship between organisational identity and promotive voice was established by Liu et al. (2010) and the relationship among ethical leadership, organisational identity and promotive voice was established by Zhu et al. (2015). However, the relationship between organisational identification and prohibitive voice has not been explored, to the best of our knowledge.

We further argue the leadership identification will be stimulated by the ethical leader. The ethical leaders' consistent and value-based actions stimulate relational identification as the employee comes to see the leader as someone they want to emulate and include as a part of one's self-concept (Bandura, 1994; Liu et al. 2010). Leadership identification may stimulate prohibitive voice as the employee is motivated to exert an extra influence in order to help the leader succeed, but also as the leadership identification may help the employee experience the leader as trustworthy and approachable (Zhu et al. 2015). The positive relationship between leadership identification and promotive voice was established by Liu et a. (2010) and the relationship between ethical leadership, leadership identification and promotive voice was established by Zhu et al. (2015). Nevertheless, the relationship among ethical leadership, leadership identification and prohibitive voice has never been explored to the best of our knowledge.

The exploration of the dual process model outlined in the present study will make several contributions to our understanding of both ethical leadership and prohibitive voice. First, we extend previous research on voice by investigating how ethical leadership is directly related to prohibitive voice. By focusing on prohibitive voice, we meet the call for a more thorough understanding of how leadership is related to prohibitive voice and not only promotive voice (Morrison, 2011). This understanding is pivotal considering the importance of obtaining the employees concerns and worries regarding organisational functioning. Second, we will also contribute to the understanding of how identity processes may play an important role in the leadership–voice relationship. Our focus on organisational and leadership identification provides a theoretically coherent framework

for studying mediators, based on social identity theory. In so doing, we meet the call for a more nuanced understanding of how identity processes play a role in the relationship between leadership and prohibitive voice. It is important to explore these processes in order to gain theoretical and practical insights into how leaders can behave in order to elicit prohibitive voice from their employees. Lastly, our study contributes to the understanding of the mechanisms of which ethical leadership exerts its influence in general, something which has been underlined as an important research gap in the leadership literature (Yukl, 2012). Thus, our study will also play a vital role in our conceptual understanding and development of ethical leadership.

Theory and Hypotheses

Prohibitive Voice

The concept of employee voice behaviour was originally introduced by Hirschman (1970) as a strategy the employee could use to respond to organisational dissatisfaction. Thus, the concept of voice behaviour originally entailed expressing dissatisfaction such as worries or concerns that may cause harm to the organisation (Hirschman, 1970). Voice behaviour attracted renewed interest in the mid-1990s after the conceptual development and scale refinement made by Le Pine and Van Dyne (1998), in which they defined employee voice as a form of organisational citizenship behaviour that involved "constructive, change-oriented communication intended to improve the situation" (p. 326). Accordingly, the focus of the next decade changed from expressing worries, concerns and dissatisfaction to the improvement-oriented part of the voice concept, such as making ideas for new products or improvement of logistics in order for the employee to contribute to the internal innovation process in the organisation. In order to integrate the two different conceptualisations of the voice concept, Liang et al. (2012), inspired by Le Pine, Ang and Botero (2003) among others, established a scale and a theoretical distinction between promotive and prohibitive voice. Prohibitive voice shares some similarities with the whistle-blower concept.

However, prohibitive voice differs from whistle-blowing in that it is motivated by a desire to help the organisation by preventing harm, rather than a perceived violation of personal norms or legal principles (Liang et al. 2012). Moreover, prohibitive voice is always expressed internally in the company, whereas whistle- blowing may me both external or internal (Liang et al. 2012). Moreover, Liang et al. (2012) demonstrated that the antecedents and consequences of promotive and prohibitive voice were different. They found that when testing different antecedents of promotive and prohibitive voice simultaneously, psychological safety was important for electing prohibitive voice, but not promotive voice. This finding was later replicated by Svendsen et al. (2014), who found that psychological safety was the most important mediating variable in the participative leadership–prohibitive voice relationship. Felt obligation and being invited to speak up on the other hand was found to be more important for promotive voice (Liang et al., 2012; Svendsen et al. 2014). Later research has also confirmed that the consequences of prohibitive voice are different than those for promotive voice. For example, (Liang et al., 2012) found that managers rate employees who voice prohibitively lower than they rate promotive voicers, and Lin and Johnson (2015) find that prohibitive voicing causes more strain on the individual than promotive voicing. Accordingly, researchers called for more studies to explore the antecedents of prohibitive voice, and the mechanisms involved in this relationship (Chamberlain et al., 2017). Therefore, prohibitive voice is also the focus in our study.

Ethical Leadership and Prohibitive Voice

The concept of ethical leadership was developed by Brown and Treviño (2005) as a response to the heightened awareness, in both the business world and society at large, of the need for leaders to have a strong moral compass. Ethical leadership is often conceptualized within the values – based leadership approach. However, as Schwartz (1992) theory of values suggest, values of profit or achievement often conflict with ethical values within the organization. Thus, conveying moral values is not enough to be defined in terms of an ethical leader, as specific and consistent moral action is theoretically and empirically found to be pivotal for the effectivity of the ethical leader (Brown & Treviño, 2003). Accordingly, ethical leadership includes both leaders' traits, such as being honest and caring, but also specific leader behaviours such as consulting with and involving employees in ethical dilemmas or decisions and rewarding moral behaviour (Brown & Treviño, 2005).

Ethical leaders may stimulate prohibitive voice from their employees in different ways. According to Walumbwa, Morrison and Christensen (2012), there are two overall theoretical perceptives that are applied when explaining the positive effects of ethical leadership: *social exchange theory* (Blau, 1964) and *social learning theory* (Bandura, 1994). We argue that these theoretical perspectives are relevant to understand the effect of ethical leadership on prohibitive voice as well. Firstly, according to social exchange theory, the employee's interaction with a fair and considerate leader will generate an obligation in the employee to reciprocate by exerting extra role behaviour such as prohibitive voice. This felt obligation may be an especially an important motivational factor for prohibitive voice, due to the risk associated with performing this type of action (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Walumbwa et al., 2012).

Second, according to social learning theory, ethical leaders exert their influence through emulation and role-modelling. According to Brown and Treviño (2006), an ethical leader will speak up against unethical organisational behaviours, and reward employees who conduct ethically appropriate actions. Employees who experience their leader behaving in this manner will be encouraged to behave in the same manner according to social learning theory (Bandura, 1994). Accordingly, an employee who observes his/her leader speaking up against unethical or harmful behaviours in the organisation will, arguably, be more likely to do so themselves. Moreover, the observation of other employees who speak up regarding harmful factors to the ethical leader without being subject to retaliation will also be an important observational learning that stimulates prohibitive voice.

Lastly, the ethical leader may also stimulate prohibitive voice by showing authentic care and interest in their employees. Through these actions the employee experiences the leader as approachable and considerate, and the ethical leader creates a room and space for the employee to speak up.

Overall, the preceding argument leads to the first hypothesis of our study:

Hypothesis 1: *Ethical leadership is positively related to prohibitive voice behaviour.*

The Mediating Effect of Leader Identification

Leadership identification is proposed as an important outcome of ethical leadership that creates positive organisational and motivational outcomes (Zhu et al., 2015). Leadership identification is a process by which the employee comes to admire and emulate the leader and incorporate the leader's goals and values as part of the employee's self-concept (Pratt, 1998). In turn, the leader's goals and values becomes self-referential for the employee (Shamir, 1993; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Pratt, 1998; Ashfort et al., 2008). Ethical

leadership stimulates leadership identification through different processes. For example, the employees observe the ethical leader's consistent and morally appropriate behaviour and finds this of value to identify with, in order to maintain a positive view of their own self-concept. The motivation to obtain a positive view of one's own self- concept is a central motivational process pertaining to identity theory (Haslam, 2001), and ethical leaders may be an important source to stimulate this need. Moreover, ethical leaders treat their employees fairly and are considerate of the employees' needs. This creates a feeling among the employees that the leader has a genuine interest in their well-being, which stimulates the employees' identification with the leader. Lee (2016) supported the above-mentioned theoretical arguments by showing that ethical leadership is positively and significantly related to leader identification.

We further hypothesize that leader identification may be related to prohibitive voice. As the leader's goals and values become a part of the employees' self-concept, the employees will be motivated to "go the extra mile" and therefore exert extra role behaviour such as prohibitive voice (Lee, 2016) to champion these goals and values. The positive relationship between leadership identification and promotive voice has been established previously by Lui et al. (2010), who found that leadership identification was positively related to promotive voice behaviour. Moreover, Zhu et al. (2015) found that ethical leadership is related to promotive voice, where leadership identification is found to be a partial mediator. However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have investigated the relationship among ethical leadership, leader identification, and prohibitive voice.

Therefore, we argue that ethical leadership is related to leadership identification, and that leadership identification is positively related to prohibitive voice. This leads to the second hypothesis of our study:

Hypothesis 2: *The relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice will be partially mediated by leadership identification.*

The Mediating Effect of Organisational Identification

Although we argue that ethical leadership is positively related to *leadership identification*, we further argue that ethical leadership stimulates employees' *organisational identification*. The concept of leadership and organisational identification share similarities, but theoretical work by Sluss and Ashfort (2007) and research by, for example, Sluss, Ployhart, Cobb, and Ashfort (2012) and Zhu et al. (2015) illustrate the conceptual and empirical distinctiveness between the concepts.

Organisational identification is a form of social identification, where the organisation is the relevant social group the employee identifies with. An employee identifies with an organisation when the organisational values, norms, and goals becomes part of the employee's self-concept (Ashfort & Mael, 1992). Ethical leadership stimulates organisational identification by appealing to the greater good and the common norms and values within the organisation. Moreover, an ethical leader presents these values and ethical standards as attractive and worthwhile, which motivates employees to make them part of the self-concept (Brown et al., 2005). An ethical leader also shows that he or she is willing to sacrifice and stand up for these collective values and norms. Showing that one is willing to stand up as a prototypical representative of the group's values and norms has been found to be strongly and positively related to social identification (Van Knippenberg, 2011). The positive relationship between ethical leadership and organisational identification was established by Walumbwa et al. (2011) who found that ethical leadership

is positively related to organisational identification, which in turn is positively related to job performance.

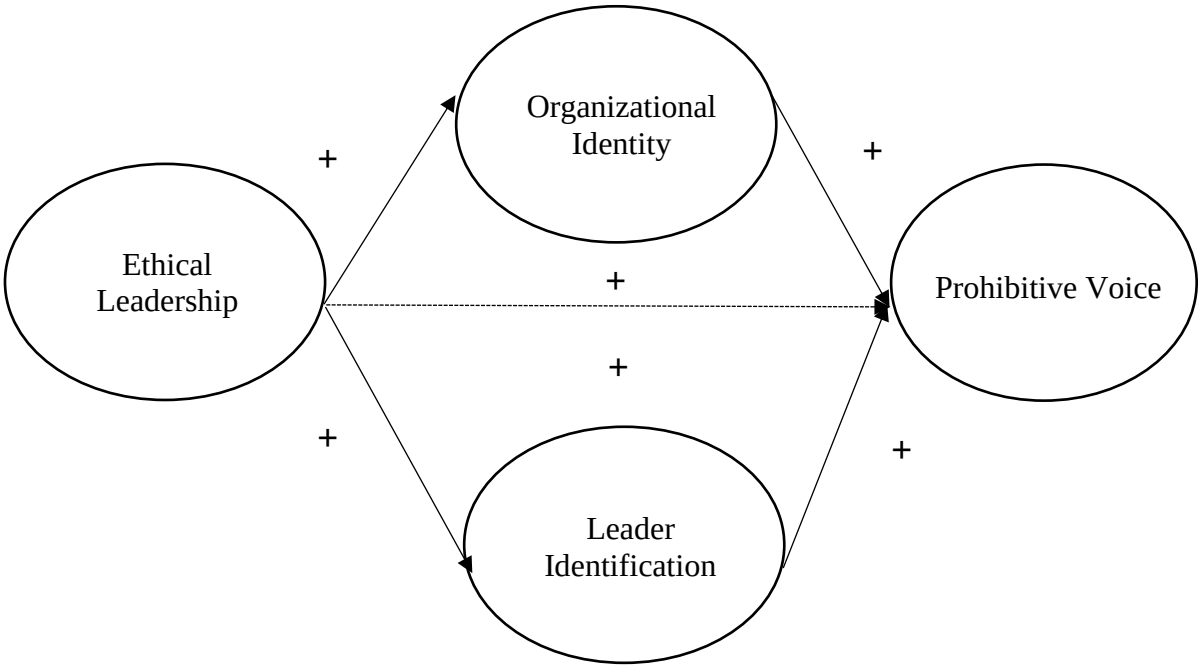
We further argue that organisational identification will be positively related to prohibitive voice. Employees who have incorporated the organisational values, norms, and goals as part of their self-concept are more likely to exert discretionary behaviour, such as prohibitive voice, to prevent harm to the organisation in order to maintain a positive view of one's own self-concept (Zhu et al., 2015). The importance of organisational identification may be especially important for prohibitive voice, as factors that may harm the organisation may cause a serious threat to the employees' self- concept. The relationship between organisational identity and promotive voice has been established by Liu et al. (2010), Qui and Lui (2014) and Zhu et al. (2015). However, the link between organisational identity and prohibitive voice has, to the best of our knowledge, not been investigated.

In summary, we argue that ethical leadership will be positively related to organisational identification, which will be positively related to prohibitive voice. Thus, we posit the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: *The relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice will be partially mediated by organisational identification.*

The proposed hypotheses are shown in an overall model (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1: **Theoretical Dual-Process Model**



Methods

Sample and Procedure

Two hundred and six individuals (103 men) participated in the survey; 22.3 per cent were aged 18–30, 14.1 per cent were aged 31–40, 28.6 per cent were aged 41–50, 17 per cent were aged 51–60, and 18 per cent were aged over 60. All respondents worked a 50 per cent position or more and 76.2 per cent of the sample had a bachelor's degree or higher education. The individuals came from different industries and organisations in Norway. The survey was obtained from a professional company with extensive experience in providing data to research institutions. Previous research has shown that similar data

collection methods provide better external and internal validity than traditional data collection methods (Berinsky, Huber & Lenz, 2012). In our sample, every participant had a different leader, so our sample did not violate the independence assumption that may result in spuriousness due to data clustering (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

Measures

All the applied scales in this study had been previously published and validated. Scales that were originally formulated in English were translated to Norwegian and then back to English (Brislin, 1980). All continuous measures were assessed on a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Prohibitive Voice. We measured prohibitive voice behaviour using a five-item scale developed by Liang et al. (2012). The wording was changed slightly to make it suitable for self-reporting. Sample items include "I speak up honestly with problems that might cause serious loss to the work unit, even when/though dissenting opinions exist." The estimated reliability was α = .83.

Ethical Leadership. Ethical leadership was measured using the 10-item scale developed by Brown et al. (2005). An example item is "My supervisor discusses business ethics or values with employees." The estimated reliability was α = .93.

Leader Identification. Leader identification was measured using a six-item scale developed by Mael and Ashfort (1992). An example item is "My leader's successes are my successes." The estimated reliability was α = .87.

Organisational Identification. Organisational identification was measured using the six-item scale developed by Mael and Ashfort (1992). An example item is "If a story in the media criticised my organisation, I would feel embarrassed." The estimated reliability was α = .86.

Statistical Approach

We posit there are two theoretically plausible mechanisms for why ethical leadership is positively related to the employee's prohibitive voice: through the employee's identification with the leader and/or through the employee's identification with the organisation. Because the two theoretically plausible mechanisms might operate simultaneously, and are not mutually exclusive, we included both in a dual-path model (see *Figure 1* for the hypothesised model).

Results

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables.

***Table 1*: Correlation and Descriptive Statistics**

Variables	Mean	*SD*	1	2	3
1. Ethical Leadership	3.88	.61			
2. Organizational Identity	3.48	.69	.50**		
3. Leadership Identity	2.72	.70	.48**	.60**	
4. Prohibitive Voice	3.71	.58	.38**	.40**	.36**

***Note*: *N* = 206, * p < .05, ** p < .01**

Consistent with our first hypothesis, ethical leadership was positively related to prohibitive voice (r = .38, p < .001). In line with our second hypothesis, ethical leadership was positively related to leader identification (r = .48, p < .001), which was positively related to prohibitive voice (r = .36, p < .001). Consistent with our third hypothesis, ethical leadership

was positively related to organisational identity (r = .50, p < .001), which was positively related to prohibitive voice (r = .40, p < .001).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis. We conducted a single-level confirmatory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood estimator in Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998−2017) to assess the factor structure (Byrne, 2013). The fit of the specified four-factor structure was evaluated using common guidelines, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) < .06, the comparative fit index (CFI) ≥ .95, the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) ≥ .95, and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) < .08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The proposed four-factor structure achieved a decent fit of the data (χ2(318) = 542.55, RMSEA = .059, CFI = .924, TLI = .916, SRMR = .055). All factor loadings were statistically significant, ranging from .65 to .82 for ethical leadership, from .55 to .82 for organisational identity, from .61 to .78 for leader identification, and from .62 to .79 for prohibitive voice. The hypothesised four-factor model fits the data better than all the alternative models do (see *Table 2*).

***Table 2*: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results Field Study (CFA)**

Model	χ^2	*df*	RMSEA	SRMR	*p*	CFI	TLI
Hypothesized Four-Factor Model	**542.55**	**318**	**.06**	**.06**	**.00**	**.92**	**.92**
Three-Factor Model (OI And LI Combined into One Factor)	**713.18**	**321**	**.08**	**.07**	**.00**	**.87**	**.86**
Two-Factor Model (OI and LI Combined into One Factor; EL And PV Combined Into One Factor)	**1020.82**	**323**	**.10**	**.09**	**.00**	**.76**	**.74**
One-Factor Model	**1446.75**	**324**	**.13**	**.11**	**.00**	**.62**	**.59**

***Note*: OI = Organizational identity; LI = Leader identification; EL = Ethical leadership; PV = Prohibitive Voice**

Hypothesis Testing. To directly test our hypotheses, we used percentile bootstrap procedures (Fritz, Taylor, & MacKinnon, 2012; Preacher & Hayes, 2008) in Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998−2017). The result of a 5000 resampled percentile bootstrap revealed that the leader's perception of ethical leadership was positively related to the prohibitive voice (β = .45, SE = .07, p < .001, 95% CI [.31, .59]), which is in line with Hypothesis 1.

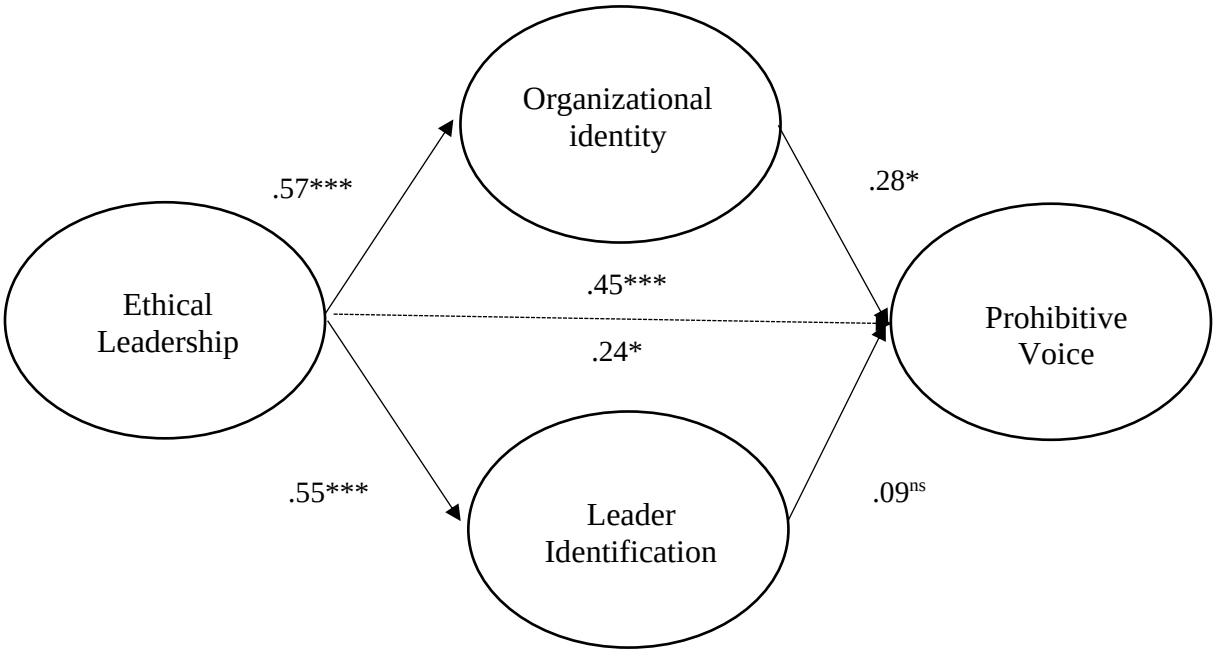
Further, we tested our two proposed indirect effects of leader identification (Hypothesis 2), and/or organisational identity (Hypothesis 3) as the mechanism(s) accounting for the effect of ethical leadership on prohibitive voice. Recapitulating, the zero-order correlations were in line with Hypotheses 2 and 3. However, to directly examine the two proposed indirect effects, we used structural equational modelling (SEM) employing a 5000 resampled percentile bootstrap procedure (Fritz et al., 2012; Preacher & Hayes, 2008) in Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998−2017).

Figure 2 shows the path coefficients yielded by SEM for the dual-process model. Because the confidence interval did contain zero, our second hypothesis was not supported (β = .05, SE = .05, 95% CI [-.07, .16]),[1] suggesting that leader identification is not the process by which ethical leadership relates to prohibitive voice. The alternative indirect path

[1] For exploratory purposes we decided to test hypothesis 2 in a single mediation model. The confidence interval did not contain zero (β = .11, SE = .05, 95% CI [.02, .21]), thus in line with hypothesis 2. However, given that a dual-model is a more sophisticated statistical model where the indirect effect of one mediator is assessed while controlling for the other mediators in the model (Hayes, 2017) we rejected hypothesis 2.

through organisational identity was supported as the confidence interval did not contain zero (β = .16, SE = .07, 95% CI [.03, .30]). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

***Figure 2*: Standardized Path Coefficients of the Hypothesized Relationships**



***Note*: * = *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001**

Overall, the results from the field survey suggest that ethical leadership is positively related to prohibitive voice through the indirect effect of organisational identity.

Discussion

The aim of our study was to test a dual-path model to explore the direct effect of ethical leadership on prohibitive voice and to disentangle the relative importance of the proposed mediating effects of organisational and leadership identification. The results indicated that ethical leadership has a significant direct effect on prohibitive voice, in line with Hypothesis 1. Regarding Hypothesis 2, our results showed that ethical leadership was related to leadership identification. However, when testing the mediating effect of leadership identity simultaneously with organisational identity, the relationship between leadership identity and prohibitive voice became insignificant. Accordingly, Hypothesis 2, which suggested a significant indirect effect of leadership identity on the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice, was not supported. Lastly, our results showed that when controlling for the indirect effect of leadership identity on prohibitive voice, organisational identity significantly mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice. Thus, hypothesis 3, suggesting that organisational identity mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice, was supported.

Theoretical Contribution

The current study offers four key implications that contribute to both theory and research on ethical leadership, identity and prohibitive voice. We believe our study is the first that examines the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice. Accordingly, our study aligns with and extends research that shows how ethical leadership is effective in stimulating promotive voice form the employees (Zhu et al., 2015; Walumbwa et al., 2011). This is logical, keeping in mind the stronger moral salience that may be at stake

when voicing prohibitive concerns regarding factors that should be stopped or can create harm in the organisation (Liang et al., 2012). Thus, it may be that ethical leadership is indeed especially well-suited to stimulate prohibitive voice from employees.

Second, our study underscores the importance of identity processes when studying the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice. Previous research has found that both leadership identity and organisational identity are important when trying to elicit promotive voice from the employee (Zhu et al., 2015). However, when testing these to mediating variables simultaneously, we found that only organisational identity significantly mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and voice. Although our results are different, they show a similar pattern to the only likely extant study that has tested the mediating effect among ethical leadership, leadership identification, and organisational identification on promotive voice (Zhu et al.,2015). Zhu also showed a considerably stronger effect size of organisational identity, compared to leader identification. A possible explanation for this finding is provided in Kark, Chen, and Shamir (2003), who found that leadership identification is significantly related to the perception of dependency on the leader, whereas organisational identification is related to the experience of empowerment. Due to the higher inherent risk when speaking up with prohibitive concerns, it may be that the experience of dependency that results from strong personal identification with the leader may be inhibiting the positive effect of ethical leadership on prohibitive voice. The voicing of concerns that may potentially involve the leader as responsible may threaten this emotional bond between the ethical leader and the employee, thus lowering the effect of leadership identification. However, the empowerment that may result from the organisational identification can positively stimulate the employee to speak up with their worries or concerns and give the employee confidence to speak up.

Third, our study also shed light on Liu et al.'s (2010) investigation of the target sensitivity of voice. They found that leadership identification has a stronger effect when speaking up promotively to a supervisor, whereas social identity has a stronger effect when speaking up promotively to co- workers. We focused on speaking up to the supervisor. However, unlike Liu et al. (2010), we found that the effect of organisational identity predicted the strongest effect on prohibitive voice when testing the mediational mechanisms simultaneously. One explanation for this may be the prohibitive content of the employee's voice in our study, compared to the promotive voice, which was the focus in the study by Liu et al. (2010). Due to the stronger interpersonal risk associated with speaking up with concerns or worries that may harm the organisation (Liang et al., 2012), the identification with common goals, norms and values may be especially important, as employees with a strong organisational identity wish to protect themselves in order to sustain a positive self-image. Thus, our study lends support to the notion that the leadership–voice relationship is not only target-specific, but also content-specific, as previous research has suggested (Svendsen et al., 2016). Accordingly, our study supports the notion of understanding voice as a dual construct (Morisson, 2011; Chamberlain et al., 2017).

Lastly, our results demonstrate the importance of testing potential mediating effects on voice simultaneously in a dual-path model. When testing the models separately, we find that both leadership identity and organisational identity mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and voice. However, when we account for the relative importance of each construct, we find how organisational identification is the only significant mediator in the relationship. Accordingly, testing mediational models simultaneously when investigating leadership, identity processes, and voice may prove to be fruitful in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the relative relationship between the constructs.

Practical Implications

Our study has several practical implications that are notable. We have shown that if leaders want to gain insights into crucial concerns, worries, and factors that may cause harm to the organisation, the highlighting and valuing of ethical behaviour, being a role model regarding ethical behaviour, and showing concern for the employees may all be important. However, our study also points to the fact that the leader should stress the shared organisational values, goals and norms in their leadership behaviours, rather than factors that invoke leadership identification, as this may invoke a stronger effect than focusing on the relational bond between the leader and employee. In sum, our results point to that organisations should train the employees at all levels to be, first and foremost, loyal to the institution. More importantly, they should also strive to, by for example stimulating and rewarding ethical leadership among the leaders, to create a safe and protective environment, that supports prohibitive voice, and rewards courageous employees instead of punishing them.

Limitations and Further Research

Although our study has several strengths, such as an original theoretical contribution, a sample representing diverse industries, ages and gender and the testing of mediators in a dual process model, it also has certain limitations. First, the data come from only one source − the employees − so the study may be subject to common method bias. However, Spector (2006) and Podsakoff et al. (2012) found that common method bias may be an overrated problem in general. Moreover, a meta-analysis by Tornau and Frese (2013) found that egocentric bias or observational bias may distort ratings by peers or supervisors rating of proactivity constructs such as voice. This suggests that leader or supervisor ratings of voice may also be problematic. A second limitation of the study is the possibility of reversed causality in our data. For example, it may be that employees who voice their concerns and perceive that they are listened to come to experience a higher sense of social identity, which in turn may lead to the experience of a more ethical leader. Therefore, further studies should aim to explore the causality between the constructs further by using, for example, experimental methods that are better suited to establish causality. A final limitation worth noting is that we only measured the individual effect of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership may also exist as a group-level construct (Walumbwa et al., 2011). However, our study was not equipped to disentangle the potential group-level effect of ethical leadership on voice. Therefore, further studies should conduct multilevel research to explore the potential differential effect of ethical leadership on a group level.

In general, a potential fruitful avenue for further research could be to explore the identity process involved in the ethical leadership–voice relationship by combining the study of both target-specific voice (voicing to co-workers or supervisor) together with content-specific voice (promotive or prohibitive voice) to explore the potential differential effects stemming from this relationship. Furthermore, it may be useful to explore whether the personal identification resulting from ethical leadership does result in follower dependency, and if this dependency may negatively affect the relationship between ethical leadership and prohibitive voice.

Conclusion

In this study we explored the effect of ethical leadership on prohibitive voice, and how identity processes are involved as important mechanisms in this relationship. Importantly, we found that ethical leadership is effective in predicting prohibitive voice behaviour. However, the main factor in this relationship proved to be the employee's identification with the organisation, not the personal identification with the leader. Thus, ethical

leadership may be an especially important factor when predicting prohibitive voice, due to the inherent moral dimension of prohibitive voice, which aligns with the actions and values of the ethical leader. We encourage further research to compare the effects of ethical leadership on promotive and prohibitive voice and to investigate how identity processes are affected by the target the employee speaks up to. Ultimately, this knowledge can be an important step in understanding how to elicit prohibitive voice from employees. Increased prohibitive voice may contribute to a decrease in unethical or harmful organisational practices that may cause serious threat to safety and ethics in companies, as exemplified by the scandals in Siemens, Yara, Vimpelcom, General Motors, and Volkswagen.

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