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**“Articulating cognizance about what to hide what not”: Insights into why and when ethical leadership regulates employee knowledge-hiding behaviors**

**ABSTRACT**

Given the dearth of research examining the distinctions across various facets of employee knowledge-hiding (KH) behaviors, there is little known about why and when leadership negatively influences playing dumb and evasive hiding but positively influences rationalized hiding. The present study fills this void by hypothesizing that employee justice orientation (JO) acts as a mediator of the associations of ethical leadership (EL) with different facets of employee KH behaviors. We also propose employee conscientiousness moderates the relationship of EL with JO and the indirect relationships of ethical leadership with distinct variants of employee KH behaviors. The results based on time-lagged data from 387 employees provide support for the hypothesized relationships. Together, our research provides a more nuanced account of the influence of leadership on employee KH behaviors that can facilitate the development of more appropriate interventions to deal with the intricate problems related to employee KH behaviors.

**Keywords.** Ethical leadership; justice orientation; conscientiousness; playing dumb; rationalized hiding; evasive hiding

Knowledge hiding (KH) – a person’s deliberate attempt to withhold information when asked – has received a great deal of scholarly attention (Connelly et al. 2012; Siachou et al. 2021; Men et al. 2020; Zhao et al. 2019). According to Connelly et al. (2012), KH has three dimensions – playing dumb, evasive hiding, and rationalized hiding. Evasive hiding involves the hider’s deceptive intent and is referred to as a person’s deliberate attempt to withhold the requested information or provide incomplete information while pretending that the requested knowledge has been provided (Connelly et al. 2012). Playing dumb, another form of deceitful KH behavior refers to an individual’s denial to provide the requested information by feigning ignorance of the requested information. On the contrary, “rationalized hiding does not involve deception” (Zhao et al. 2019, p. 834). In rationalized hiding, the hider offers “a justification for failing to provide requested knowledge by either suggesting he or she is unable to provide the knowledge requested” (Connelly and Zweig 2015, p. 480) to “protect the other party’s feelings, preserve confidentiality, or protect the interests of a third party” (Connelly et al. 2012, p. 65).

Existing empirical studies have made valuable contributions by revealing that positive leadership styles such as ethical leadership (EL) (Anser et al. 2021; Men et al. 2020) and servant leadership (Usman et al., 2022) can help organizations address employees’ KH behaviors and their negative repercussions. However, as rightly noted by Usman et al. (2022), a key limitation of the existing literature is that most of the studies have assumed KH as a uniformly deceptive behavior and treated KH as a unitary construct (e.g., Abdullah et al. 2019; Anser et al. 2021). These studies have ignored the unique aspects of employees’ KH behaviors and thus offered a restrictive view of KH, its outcomes, and antecedents (Anand et al. 2020; Siachou et al. 2021). This constitutes a serious omission because glossing over the uniqueness of different aspects of

KH can lead to inappropriate managerial interventions that can have severe consequences for organizations, such as impeding organizations' competitive advantage (Usman et al., 2022).

To address this critical omission, Usman et al. (2022) have taken into account the uniqueness of various facets of KH behaviors while studying the associations of servant leadership with employee KH behaviors. Usman et al. (2022) show that servant leadership negatively affects evasive hiding and playing dumb, but positively affects rationalized hiding both directly and indirectly, via employee perspective-taking. Given the scarcity of studies on the leadership-KH links that account for unique differences between different aspects of employee KH behaviors, our knowledge of the mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions of these associations of leadership and KH behaviors is still in its infancy. Thus, the key purpose of the present work is to extend this line of research by unfolding why and when leadership specifically EL is related to different aspects of employee KH behaviors.

Drawing on social learning theory, which posits that people learn from and imitate their role models, such as leaders (Bandura, 1977, 1986), we propose that employee justice orientation (JO) is a mechanism that explains why EL is related to employee KH behaviors. EL is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers” (Brown et al. 2005, p. 205). We consider EL because although the focus on ethical standards became widespread mainly because of several high-profile failure scandals (e.g., Enron and WorldCom) (Christensen-Salem et al. 2021; Brown and Treviño 2006), rules and formal control mechanisms alone are not sufficient to shape employees' ethical conduct (Downe et al. 2016). Importantly, as KH also includes behaviors that are covert in nature (Connelly and Zweig 2015), addressing such behaviors through formal controls becomes challenging (Barnes et al. 2012). The social learning

perspective suggests that individuals do not learn norms, attitudes, and values from organizations or the larger society, but from significant others (Ferrell and Gresham 1985), such as leaders. Since ethics is the central focus of EL (Babalola et al. 2018; Brown et al. 2005), and ethical leaders are “proactive role models for ethical conduct” and undertake proactive endeavors to deter their followers’ unethical behavior (Brown et al. 2005, p. 597), we, therefore, argue that EL can model employees’ behaviors as to what type of knowledge (e.g., confidential knowledge or knowledge for which a third party holds intellectual property rights) should be hidden and what type of knowledge (i.e., knowledge which is not confidential and does not compromise the third-party’s interest) needs to be shared with peers. Our focus on EL is in line with Usman et al. (2022), who have called for research on the relationship between different value-based leadership styles (e.g., EL and spiritual leadership) and different KH behaviors.

JO is defined as “the extent to which individuals internalize justice as a moral virtue and are attentive to fairness issues around them” (Sasaki and Hayashi 2014: p. 252). We examine JO, as Zhu et al. (2016) suggest that ethical leaders can positively shape and develop followers’ ethics-related personal characteristics and urge scholars to study the relationship of EL with followers’ ethics-related personal characteristics. Importantly, as rightly noted by Zheng et al. (2021), prior studies have mainly focused on the definitional constructs, such as social exchange processes, trust, and role modeling as the mechanisms underlying the EL-employee outcomes at work. Such a focus on the definitional constructs not only narrows the scope EL’s outcomes but also runs the risk of circular theorizing (Zheng et al. 2021). Moreover, JO helps employees regulate their behaviors at work in ways that concord with social justice values and therefore can encourage them to deal with their peers’ knowledge requests based on justice. We, therefore, consider JO as a possible explanatory mechanism of the EL-KH links. Our focus on JO also

concur with the calls (e.g., Anser et al. 2021) for studying JO as a mechanism underlying the EL-KH association.

Finally, to highlight the complexities of the EL-KH links, we propose employee conscientiousness as a first-stage moderator of the indirect EL-KH link. The term ‘conscientiousness’, one of the five personality traits of the Five-Factor Model of Personality, reflects an “individual who is generally ambitious, responsible, abides by ethical principles, and considers the consequences of his/her behavior before acting” (Bowling and Eschleman 2010: p. 92). To date, the literature on the leadership-KH association has overlooked the role of interaction between followers’ personality traits and leaders’ behaviors in understanding how leaders influence employees’ KH behavior. Followers’ personality plays an imperative role in translating the influence of leaders’ behaviors on followers’ work-related orientations and outcomes (Guay and Choi 2015). Thus, the lack of research runs the risk of ignoring the important role that the followers’ personality traits, such as conscientiousness in influencing the EL-KH relationship. Further, employees high on conscientiousness are likely to pay more attention to ethical leaders’ behaviors because, as compared with others, they exhibit higher levels of sense of responsibility toward others and demonstrate an enhanced tendency to follow ethical principles (Babalola et al. 2019; Bowling and Eschleman 2010). As such, we suggest that employee conscientiousness can significantly influence the level of effectiveness of EL role in shaping JO which, in turn, increases their ability to deal with the issue of KH.

Our work contributes to theory and practice in several ways. By establishing JO as a mediating mechanism explicating why EL affects employees’ KH behaviors, we foreground the value of EL for shaping employees’ ethics-related personal characteristics and respond to the calls on exploring non-definitional and followers’ ethics-related personal characteristics,

constructs as mediators (Anser et al. 2021; Zheng et al. 2021; Zhu et al. 2016). Given that past research has mainly considered the definitional constructs of EL as the mediating mechanisms of the links between EL and employee outcomes, this contribution is important. By doing so, we also advance the scarce literature on the nomological network of JO (Anser et al. 2021; Sekiguchi and Hayashi 2014). Additionally, by showing that employee conscientiousness strengthens the indirect relationships of EL with various facets of KH behaviors, we add to the personality research (Babalola et al. 2019; Colbert and Witt 2009; Guay et al. 2019) that has largely overlooked the role of personality traits in affecting the leadership-KH links. As such, our study also responds to the calls (e.g., Men et al. 2020) for examining the role of followers' conscientiousness as a moderator of the EL-KH association. By signifying the value of EL in dealing with both negative and positive aspects of employees' KH behaviors, the present work also adds to the literature that appreciates the distinctiveness of different dimensions of employees' KH behaviors (Usman et al. 2022; Zhao et al. 2019). Another key contribution of this study is to the literature on EL and its outcomes (Anser et al. 2021; Babalola et al. 2019; Brown et al. 2005). Our proposed model is presented in Figure 1.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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## Hypotheses Development

### Ethical leadership and employee KH behaviors

The conceptualization of EL suggests that ethics is the fundamental tenant of EL. The two building blocks of EL – ethical leader as a moral person and ethical leader as a moral manager – play an important role in modeling their followers’ ethical behaviors. For instance, as moral people, ethical leaders exhibit trustworthiness, honesty, and concern for others to guide employees as to how they are expected to behave and act (Babalola et al. 2019; Brown et al. 2005). Based on social learning theory, we understand that employees observe, learn, and demonstrate honesty, care for others, and integrity through their behaviors. Thus, it is expected that employees who are honest and care for others meet their colleagues’ knowledge requirements instead of engaging in deceptive behaviors. As such, it can be inferred that EL negatively influences playing dumb and evasive hiding – the aspects of KH that are unethical behavior and involve lying and deception.

We consider immediate supervisors as ethical leaders, as they play an influential role in propagating agenda from the top and implementing it (Davis and Rothstein 2006). Importantly, the physical proximity and unique relationship between subordinates and a supervisor that are characterized by frequent interaction and communication enhance the propensity of the supervisors’ influence on their subordinates’ work-related outcomes (Johnson et al. 2010). Thus, the following hypothesis:

*H1. EL has negative associations with (a) evasive hiding and (b) playing dumb.*

As we argued earlier, disclosing confidential knowledge or breaching third-party rights can hamper organizations’ long-term success (Dyer and Nobeoka 2000; Dufresne and Hoffstein



2008). As such, rationalized hiding behaviors that entail offering a justification for failures to provide the requested knowledge to “preserve confidentiality or protect the interests of a third party” (Connelly et al. 2012, p. 65) should be encouraged. We suggest that ethical leaders, by acting as moral managers and moral people, can enhance rationalized hiding. For example, as moral managers, ethical leaders may use their authority and normative control to set standards to protect third-party interests and hide confidential knowledge and then impress these standards on their followers using accountability systems. In other words, an ethical leader is likely to establish and communicate what type of knowledge needs to be concealed. Ethical leaders then can reinforce the established standards by punishing and disciplining those employees who violate and misuse the set standards for rationalized hiding (Brown et al. 2005; Kalyar et al. 2020; Shafique et al. 2020a; Usman and Hameed 2017; Usman et al. 2018). Through such normative control mechanisms, ethical leaders can accentuate rationalized hiding.

However, since formal controls are often deficient to ensure employees’ compliance with the standards aimed at protecting confidential knowledge or preserving third-party interests (Hannah 2006; Hannah and Robertson 2015), we posit that ethical leaders as moral people can address such issues in the organization. As moral people, ethical leaders exhibit fairness and honesty through their actions and interaction with followers (Ali et al. 2022a; Christensen-Salem et al. 2021; Khan et al. 2019; Shafique et al. 2020b). Based on social learning theory, we argue that followers imitate ethical leaders’ behaviors. We infer that those followers who learn and demonstrate ethical values, such as honesty and fairness are expected to fulfill their ethical and legal obligations and thus do not provide confidential knowledge to others who requested it. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

*H2. EL has a positive association with rationalized hiding.*

## **JO as a mediator**

JO is an ongoing process that motivates people to care for justice as a vital moral virtue (Sasaki and Hayashi 2014). Social learning theory posits (Bandura 1986), role models' behaviors shape employees' cognitive schemas of appropriate behaviors in the workplace (Bandura 1986). We draw on social learning theory to posit that EL shapes followers' JO. Two important aspects of EL (Greenbaum et al. 2015) – the visible exhibition of ethical values such as justice, fairness, and integrity through their behaviors and decisions and the utilization of two-way communication – can support followers' internalization of justice as a moral virtue. Ethical leaders demonstrate ethical values, such as justice, integrity, fairness, honesty, and concern for others, as well as responsively listen to followers' concerns regarding ethical violations at work (Abdullah et al. 2019). Ethical leaders' emphasis on ethical values in the workplace helps followers understand organizational values and managers' behavioral expectations and make them more attentive to the ethical aspects of their work, inspiring them to internalize organizational values (Zheng et al. 2021). Importantly, Zheng et al. (2021) argue that ethical leaders, through the visible demonstration and communication of ethical values, embody ethical values in the organization that stimulate followers' internalization of the organization's values. Thus, we argue that by demonstrating justice through their behaviors, ethical leaders embody social justice values in the organization that helps followers understand the consequential value of justice for employees and the organization and stimulate followers' internalization of justice as a moral virtue.

Additionally, ethical leaders' focus on ethical values makes them credible role models, worthy of emulation and learning (Zheng et al. 2021; Babalola et al. 2019). Indeed, Leaders' behaviors define desirable and appropriate workplace values for employees and provide “an

*ideal, a point of reference and focus for followers' emulation and vicarious learning*" (Shamir et al. 1993: p 585). We argue that the consistent observation and emulation of ethical leaders' behaviors can lead to followers' internalization of ethical values, including justice at work. Thus, seen through the lens of social learning theory, we infer that by the visible demonstration of ethical values through their behaviors and communication, ethical leaders positively shape followers' JO.

Proceeding further, JO develops people's moral motives and encourages them to sacrifice their interests to uphold justice and fairness at work (Lin and Loi 2021; Rupp et al. 2003). As playing dumb and evasive hiding involve deception and unethical intent (Connelly and Zweig 2015), employees with high JO may not engage in evasive hiding and playing dumb to ensure fairness. Moreover, employees with high JO possess a strong commitment to creating and preserving trust-based interpersonal relations (Holtz and Harold 2013; Sasaki and Hayashi 2014). Connelly et al. (2012) suggest that employees who intend to build strong interpersonal relationships do not get involved in deceptive behaviors, as such behaviors hamper interpersonal relationships. Building on these arguments, we hypothesize as follows.

*H3. JO mediates (a) the negative relationship between EL and evasive hiding and (b) the negative relationship between EL and playing dumb.*

Furthermore, JO regulates individuals' behaviors in ways that help them ensure justice in the workplace (Ali et al. 2020; Holtz and Harold 2013; Sekiguchi and Hayashi 2014). In rationalized hiding, the hider intends to fulfill his/her moral obligation to protect the confidential information (Connelly et al. 2012; Crossen 1993; Hannah and Robertson 2015), and employees with high JO fulfill their moral obligation with honesty and fairness (Holtz and Harold 2013). Importantly, as JO enables employees to build high-quality, trusted-based interpersonal

relationships (Holtz and Harold 2013; Sasaki and Hayashi 2014), it would place them in a better position to offer an explanation as to why the requested knowledge may not be forthcoming. With this in mind, we argue that employees' JO encourages them to hide confidential knowledge. Moreover, as we suggested above (H3), EL shapes employees' JO. Together, we predict that EL positively influences JO, which in turn positively affects rationalized hiding. Thus, the present study postulates the following hypothesis.

*H4. JO mediates the positive relationship between EL and rationalized hiding.*

### **The moderating role of conscientiousness**

Thus far, we have used social learning theory to theorize that EL negatively affects playing dumb and evasive hiding but positively affects rationalized hiding, both directly and indirectly, via JO. Another aspect of this theory is the idea that learning from role models tends to vary across individuals, with those high in certain personal characteristics are in a better position to learn from their role models (Bandura 1986). Specifically, social learning theory posits attention and assimilation as the necessary conditions for learning through role modeling (Bandura 1986), pointing out that individuals paying more attention to their leaders can demonstrate a higher propensity to learn from and imitate their leaders' behaviors.

In the present study, we consider conscientiousness as one of such personal characteristics capable of moderating the relationship between EL and employees' KH behaviors. The moderating role stems from the conscientious people's characteristics, such as being ambitious, exhibiting a sense of responsibility toward others around them, and their general tendency to follow ethical principles (Abbas and Raja 2019; Babalola et al. 2019; Bowling and Eschleman 2010; Donnellan et al. 2006; Witt and Ferris 2003). Conscientious

people are ambitious and intend to achieve high in their work roles (Guay et al. 2019; Ocampo et al. 2020). As such, we understand that conscientious people may consider EL's focus on employees' personal and professional development, frequent interactions, feedback, and the provision of other such resources helpful for the achievement of their work roles and ambitions. Likewise, both ethical leaders and conscientious people demonstrate a sense of responsibility for others and ethical principles through their behaviors and actions. According to Markus (1977), individuals are more attentive to and benefit more from, behaviors and actions that are in line with their personality orientation. This implies that employees high on conscientiousness would be more attentive to ethical leaders' actions and behaviors. Moreover, social learning theory posits that attention is one of the necessary conditions for learning through role modeling (Bandura 1986). As such, we argue that as compared to others, employees high on conscientiousness are likely to benefit more from EL in terms of internalizing justice as a moral virtue.

*H5. Employee conscientiousness moderates the positive relationship between EL and JO, such that this relationship is strong when conscientiousness is high (vs. low).*

Finally, as we postulated in H3, EL is negatively associated with playing dumb and evasive hiding indirectly, via JO. It was also proposed (H4) that EL has an indirect positive association with rationalized hiding via JO. Further, it was hypothesized in H5 that employee conscientiousness has a more pronounced impact on JO when employee conscientiousness is high (vs.) low. Based on these propositions, it is inferred that employee conscientiousness acts as a moderator on the indirect impacts of EL on different facets of employee KH behaviors – rationalized hiding, playing dumb, and evasive hiding. That is, the interaction of employee

conscientiousness and EL reinforces the indirect effects (via JO) of EL on employee KH behaviors.

*H6. Employee conscientiousness moderates the indirect negative associations (via JO) of EL with (a) evasive hiding and (b) playing dumb, such that the associations are strong when employee conscientiousness is high (vs. low).*

*H7. Employee conscientiousness moderates the indirect positive association (via JO) of EL with rationalized hiding, such that the association is strong when employee conscientiousness is high (vs. low).*

## **Method**

### **Sample and procedure**

The sample included 387 full-time employees in 43 different organizations operating in various manufacturing and service sectors in Pakistan. The purpose of collecting data from organizations belonging to different sectors was to enhance generalizability. Initially, we randomly selected 50 organizations listed on Pakistan Stock Exchange. To facilitate the data collection, eight Ph.D. students were hired, and using the research teams' personal and professional contacts (mainly the alumni of a large public sector university in Pakistan) with HR managers of different organizations, they managed access to 43 organizations. HR managers provided the list of employees that helped us to randomly choose 500 employees, who were furnished with consent forms containing knowledge about the general purpose of the study and ethical protocols (e.g., voluntary participation, confidentiality, data protection, and no risk of harm or discomfort), and a chance to win one of several gifts (5 smartphones, 10 USB devices,

and 10 Wi-Fi devices) through a raffle draw. Out of 500 initially contacted employees, 445 agreed to participate in the survey. Data were collected through a face-to-face survey.

We gathered data in three waves, with a two-month lag between two consecutive waves. In the first wave, we gathered data about EL, employee conscientiousness, and the control variables, including demographic controls. Data about JO were gathered in the second wave. Finally, data about employee KH behaviors were gathered in the third wave. We received 417, 402, and 393 filled responses in the three waves, respectively. We used unique codes to match the data from different waves. We retained 387 filled responses after screening the data for missing values and negligence.

Our final sample included 55% male respondents. The mean age of the respondents was 36.56 years and the mean tenure of the respondents was 3.12 years. Further, 32.3% had completed intermediate (12 years of schooling), 36.4% had held an undergraduate degree, 28.7% held a master's degree, and 2.6% had completed Mphil degrees. Data were analyzed by employing structural equation modeling (SEM) in Mplus (8.8).

## **Measures and variables**

All the items were assessed on a five-point Likert scale, anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*EL.* A ten-item scale ( $\alpha = .94$ ) by Brown et al. (2005) was used to assess EL. Sample items: “*My supervisor listens to what employees have to say*”.

*JO.* A 16-item scale ( $\alpha = .95$ ) by Rupp et al. (2003) was used to assess JO. Sample item: “*I am prone to notice people being treated unfairly in organization*”.

*Employee KH behaviors.* Evasive hiding was measured by adapting a four-item scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ) from Connelly et al. (2012). Sample item: “*I agreed to help him/her but never really intended to*”. Playing dumb was measured by adapting a four-item scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ) developed by Connelly et al. (2012). Sample item: “*I pretended that I did not know the information*”. Rationalized hiding was measured by adapting a four-item scale ( $\alpha = .90$ ) developed by Connelly et al. (2012). Sample item: “*I told him/her that my boss would not let anyone share this knowledge*” ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

*Conscientiousness.* A four-item scale ( $\alpha = .90$ ) by Donnellan et al. (2006) was used to assess conscientiousness. Sample item: “*I get chores done right away*”.

## **Control variables**

Gender, age, tenure, education, and experience can affect KH (Abdullah et al. 2019; Peng 2013) and JO (Anser et al. 2021), and thus were controlled. Furthermore, past research (e.g., Peng 2013) suggests that employees’ knowledge-based psychological ownership (KBPO) influences their KH behaviors and therefore can confound the results. Therefore, we controlled for KBPO. To measure KBPO, we followed Peng (2013) and adapted Van Dyne and Pierce’s (2004) three-item scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Sample item: “*I feel a very high degree of personal ownership of the knowledge*”.

## **Analysis and Results**

### **Analysis Level**

As 387 responses belonged to 43 organizations and thus following Bliese’s (2000) suggestion, data were assessed for non-independence. For this purpose, ICC (1) values for our dependent variables and the mediator were calculated. The ICC (1) values for these variables



ranged between 0.00 (ns) and 0.02 (ns). As such, it was concluded that non-independence was the issue. Moreover, we found significant within-group variance for all the variables. However, for all the variables, the between-group variance was not significant. Thus, the study variables were treated at the individual level.

### **Means and correlations**

Table 1 depicts means and correlations.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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### **Measurement model**

A series of confirmatory factor analyses were performed to assess the model fit and convergent and discriminant validities. The proposed six-factor model comprising of EL, JO, rationalized hiding, playing dumb, evasive hiding, and conscientiousness demonstrated a better fit –  $\chi^2(804) = 1357.64$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.68$ , SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .04, TLI = .94, and CFI = .95 – than the alternative models (see Table 2). All unrestricted factor loadings were statistically significant.

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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### **Hypotheses testing**

Significant negative associations of EL with deceptive facets of employee KH behaviors were found (Table 3). The negative impact of EL on evasive hiding was significant ( $B = -.24$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Likewise, the negative impact of EL on playing dumb was also significant ( $B$

= -.26,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Furthermore, the results demonstrated that the positive impact of EL on rationalized hiding was significant ( $B = .30$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Therefore, our results supported the first three hypotheses – 1a, 1b, and 2. Moreover, the negative indirect impact of EL on evasive hiding via JO was significant ( $B = -.09$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Likewise, the negative indirect impact of EL on playing dumb ( $B = -.08$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .01$ ) via JO was significant. The results also revealed that the positive indirect impact of EL on rationalized hiding via JO was significant ( $B = .10$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Therefore, our results also supported hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 4.

Additionally, the interaction of conscientiousness and EL was positively related to JO ( $B = .14$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The interaction plotted at +1/-1 SD from the mean of employee conscientiousness is shown in Figure 2. A simple slope test indicated that the positive relationship of EL with JO was significant ( $B = .47$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p < .01$ ) when employee conscientiousness was high, while the relationship was insignificant ( $B = .11$ ,  $ns$ ) when employee conscientiousness was low. Thus, hypothesis 5 was supported.

Finally, the index of moderated mediation for the negative indirect association between EL and evasive hiding via JO was significant ( $index = -.03$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $CI = [-.06, -.01]$ ). Likewise, the index of moderated mediation for the negative indirect association between EL and playing dumb via JO was significant ( $index = -.03$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $CI = [-.06, -.01]$ ). The index of moderated mediation for the positive indirect association between EL and rationalized hiding via JO was also significant ( $index = .04$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $CI = [.02, .08]$ ) via employees' JO. Therefore, our results also supported hypotheses 6a, 6b, and 7.

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Insert Table 3 and Figure 2 about here

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## Discussion

### Theoretical contributions

The work at hand makes several contributions to the literature. First, consistent with social learning theory, our findings suggest that ethical leaders' demonstration of ethical values in the workplace shape employees' JO. In turn, JO regulates employees' behaviors in ways that uphold justice and fairness in the workplace, thereby discouraging employees to involve in deception while responding to their peers' knowledge requests. In doing so, the present work explains why EL influences KH and responds to the call (Usman et al. 2022) for further research on the mechanisms that explain why leadership negatively influences playing dumb and evasive hiding but positively influences rationalized hiding.

Second, our findings enhance the network of antecedents and outcomes of JO. The literature on JO (e.g., Ali et al. 2020; Sekiguchi and Hayashi 2014) has been impressive by suggesting that JO encourages employees to forgo their personal interests in order to promote fairness at work, yet the literature has generally overlooked its impact on employee KH behaviors. Furthermore, existing literature (e.g., Abdullah et al. 2019; Men et al. 2020) on the EL-KH link has mainly focused on the definitional constructs of EL as the mechanisms explaining why EL is associated with KH that may run the risk of circular theorizing (Zheng et al. 2021). Thus, the present work departs from the existing studies and enhances our knowledge of the mechanisms underlying the EL-KH links. Due to the negative effects that KH behaviors have on the organization and its members and the lack of focus of prior research on the distinctiveness of different KH behaviors, our contributions are relevant.

Third, our findings suggest that compared to their counterparts, employees high on conscientiousness are more inclined to deal with their coworkers' knowledge requests with fairness and justice to fulfill their moral obligation. Such employees are more likely to learn from and imitate their supervisors' ethical behaviors and exhibit more fairness and moral conduct in their dealings with their co-workers and thus are less likely to involve in evasive hiding and playing dumb; yet more likely to hide confidential knowledge. Thus, another imperative contribution of our study is to the personality literature (e.g., Colbert and Witt 2009; Den Hartog and De Hoogh 2009), specifically the existing literature on employee conscientiousness (Babalola et al. 2019; Bowling and Eschleman 2010; Guay et al. 2019). Although existing personality literature (Babalola et al. 2019; Colbert and Witt 2009; De Hooghand Den Hartog 2009) has made valuable contributions by revealing several work-related outcomes of personality traits, the literature has largely ignored the role of personality traits in the leadership-KH link. We add to this stream of research (Guay et al. 2019; Ocampo et al. 2020) by examining the role of employee conscientiousness as a boundary condition of the EL-JO link and the indirect links of EL with KH behaviors and explicating why some employees, unlike their counterparts, benefit more from ethical leaders' behaviors in enhancing their JO and dealing with knowledge requests based on ethical values. Thus, we bring to the fore the consequences of an important, yet overlooked, personality trait, in strengthening the associations of EL with JO and different dimensions of KH.

Finally, we revealed that EL has negative associations with evasive hiding and playing dumb but a positive association with rationalized hiding. By doing so, we add to the scarce pool of empirical studies (e.g., Usman et al. 2022; Zhao et al. 2019) on employee KH behaviors that appreciate the conceptual distinctiveness between different facets of employee KH behaviors.

Therefore, we address the call (Usman et al. 2022) for further research on the role of value-based leadership styles and employee KH behaviors.

### **Practical implications**

By finding that EL is negatively associated with deceptive KH behaviors (playing dumb and evasive hiding) but EL is positively associated with rationalized hiding, our findings suggest that supervisors should demonstrate honesty, fairness, and integrity through their behaviors. Such supervisors' behaviors are likely to be imitated by employees and thus can discourage them to engage in unethical and deceptive KH behaviors that are the key hindrances in individual and organizational learning, creativity, and performance (Čerňe et al. 2014; Connelly and Zweig 2015). Importantly, supervisors, through the demonstration of ethical behaviors, can encourage employees to hide confidential knowledge.

Moreover, supervisors as leaders must recognize how crucial it is for them to serve as role models for their followers in order to deter their involvement in dishonest KH behaviors, as employees may not be forced to share knowledge. Supervisors as ethical leaders can instill honesty and integrity in employees that would also encourage them to hide confidential knowledge. Importantly, supervisors need to understand that their ethical behaviors can shape employees' JO, which, in turn, can encourage them to base their decisions to hide or provide requested knowledge on ethical norms and values. Therefore, supervisors should be encouraged by top management to demonstrate honesty, integrity, and other such traits in their behaviors and actions at work.

Finally, since employee conscientiousness can be imperative in strengthening the impact of EL on employee KH behaviors, supervisors need to understand and differentiate employees

with high conscientiousness from those with low conscientiousness. To gauge the differences in employees' levels of conscientiousness, managers should use psychometric tools like personality profiles. Managers can do so for existing, as well as potential new hires so that they can make customized interventions to encourage them to make fair decisions when addressing their colleagues' knowledge requests.

### **Limitations and future research**

The present work has a few limitations. For instance, regarding EL, we focused on supervisors. Future studies could collect data from top management and examine its trickle-down effects on different management layers. Moreover, we contextualized the theoretical interrelations between EL, JO, conscientiousness, and KH in Pakistan, a developing country with a collectivist culture. A sample from companies operating in developed countries with individualistic cultures could enhance the generalizability of our findings.

Furthermore, other leadership styles, such as spiritual leadership (Ali et al. 2022b; Pham et al. 2023) can help organizations address issues related to KH behaviors. Spiritual leaders demonstrate altruistic vision, empathy, compassion, and concern for employees' personal and professional development through their behavior, as well as focus on the spiritual development of employees (Ali et al. 2022c; Usman et al. 2021). Based on social learning theory (Bandura 1986), we argue that employees are likely to learn and imitate leaders' spiritual behaviors and can take care of the organization's and peers' knowledge-related needs. A comparison of the effects of different leadership styles can also offer valuable insights into the leadership-KH link. Moreover, KH behaviors can have several implications for employees' work-related attitudes and behaviors such as learning and creativity (Peng 2013). Future studies could examine the relationship of KH with employees' learning and creativity.

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**Table 1.** Means and correlations.

Construct	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Ethical leadership	2.86	1.16										
2. Justice orientation	2.88	1.07	.29**									
3. Evasive hiding	2.02	1.01	-.22**	-.28**								
4. Playing dumb	2.26	1.05	-.22**	-.29**	.23**							
5. Rationalized hiding	2.71	1.22	.24**	.30**	-.09	-.06						
6. Conscientiousness	3.35	1.28	-.03	-.04	.07	-.03	-.06					
7. Psychological Ownership	3.18	1.03	.14**	.14**	-.08	-.14**	.09*	-.09				
8. Age	36.56	7.74	.01	-.01	.09	-.05	-.04	-.03	.03			
9. Gender	1.45	.49	-.09	-.01	.01	-.09	-.03	-.04	.03	-.02		
10. Education	2.02	.84	-.04	-.01	-.08	.03	.02	-.05	.06	-.08	-.07	
11. Tenure	3.12	1.38	.03	.04	.01	.04	.02	.01	-.02	.03	-.05	.04

Note.  $N = 387$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$  level (2-tailed). SD = standard deviation. Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female.

**Table 2.** Confirmatory factor analysis of discriminate validity

Models	Factors	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	$\Delta\chi^2$	RMSE	SRMR	CFI	TLI
Model 1	6 Factors: EL, JO, EH, PD, RH, CN	1357.64	804	1.68	---	.04	.04	.95	.94
Model 2	4 Factors: EL+JO, EH+PD, RH, CN	4418.76	813	5.43	3061.12	.11	.13	.66	.64
Model 3	2 Factor: EL+JO+EH, PD+ RH+ CN	6245.41	818	7.63	1826.65	.13	.16	.48	.46
Model 4	1 Factor: SL+JO+EH+PD+ RH+ CN	6804.55	819	8.30	559.14	.14	.15	.44	.41

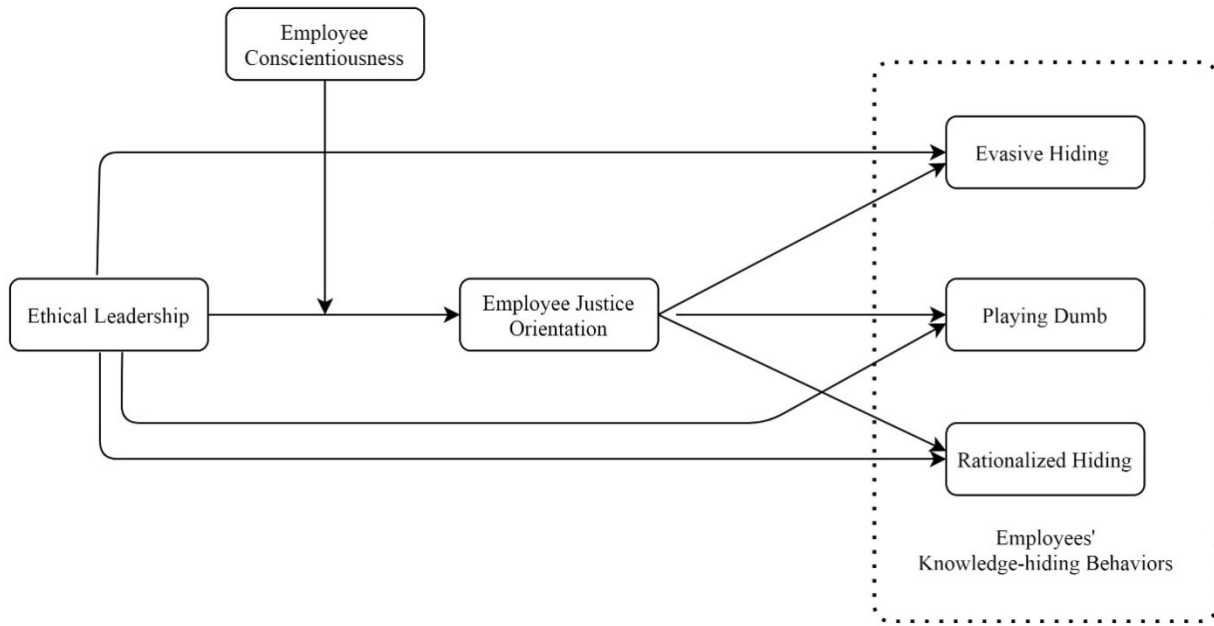
EL= Ethical leadership. JO =Justice orientation. EH = Evasive hiding. PD = Playing dumb. RH = Rationalized hiding. CN =Conscientiousness.



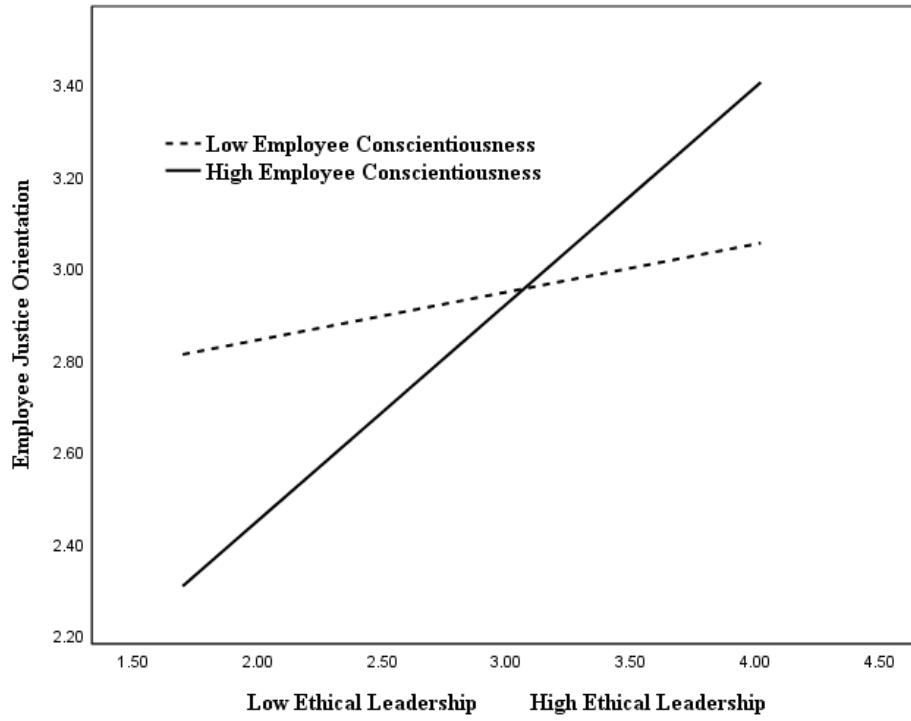
**Table 3.** Hypothesis testing results

<i>Direct Paths</i>	B	SE
Ethical leadership → Evasive hiding	-.24**	.06
Ethical leadership → Playing dumb	-.26**	.06
Ethical leadership → Rationalized hiding	.30**	.06
Ethical leadership → Justice orientation	.31**	.05
Justice orientation → Evasive hiding	-.27**	.06
Justice orientation → Playing dumb	-.25**	.06
Justice orientation → Rationalized hiding	.33**	.07
<i>Indirect Paths</i>	B	SE
Ethical leadership → Justice orientation → Evasive hiding	-.09**	.02
Ethical leadership → Justice orientation → Playing dumb	-.08**	.02
Ethical leadership → Justice orientation → Rationalized hiding	.10**	.03
<i>Moderated Paths</i>	B	SE
Ethical leadership * Conscientiousness → Justice orientation	.14**	.04
Ethical leadership * Conscientiousness → Justice orientation → Evasive hiding	-.03**	.01
Ethical leadership * Conscientiousness → Justice orientation → Playing dumb	-.03**	.01
Ethical leadership * Conscientiousness → Justice orientation → Rationalized hiding	.04**	.01

*Notes: N= 387, B = Unstandardized coefficient, SE = Standard error, Bootstrapping specified at 5000 with 95% confidence interval*



**Figure 1.** The proposed model



**Figure 2.** Conscientiousness as a moderator of the ethical leadership-justice orientation link