

Conscientiousness and perceived ethicality: Examining why hierarchy of authority diminishes this positive relationship

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Abstract

Human resource (HR) managers hire conscientious employees because they are both productive and are viewed as upholding high ethical standards due to their propensity to engage in voice. Organizations may strive to create a work context conducive to all employees acting ethically, not just conscientious ones, by centralizing decision-making authority and promoting formalization through a higher hierarchy of authority. Yet, we propose that from the social information processing perspective, in higher hierarchy of authority contexts, peers may view their highly conscientious colleagues as less ethical. We hypothesize these effects through the lens of trait activation theory, according to which in a higher hierarchy of authority context, others are less likely to notice the voice behaviors of conscientious employees. Problematically, when others fail to notice conscientious employees' voice, they may perceive these workers as being less ethical. We tested our hypothesized moderated mediation model in a matched sample of employees ($N = 820$), their supervisors ($N = 445$), and peers ($N = 529$). As predicted, hierarchy of authority moderated the positive relationship between conscientiousness and voice, which in turn explained others' perceptions of their ethicality. Conscientiousness was positively related to peer assessments of ethicality via promotive (not prohibitive) voice when hierarchy of authority was lower (but not higher), partially supporting our hypotheses. These results suggest HR practitioners should be cognizant of the differential evaluations of highly conscientious employees in contexts with different levels of hierarchy of authority, and continuing challenges associated with balancing flexibility and formalization.

KEYWORDS

centralized decision-making, conscientiousness, hierarchy of authority, perceived ethicality, prohibitive voice, promotive voice

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Ethicality involves behaving in ways that are “accepted as “good” and “right” as opposed to “bad” and “wrong” in a particular setting” (Sims, 1992, p. 506). Greater consideration of employees' ethicality is prudent given that 49% of employees report observing some form of ethical violation at work (Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2021). When considered cumulatively, even small unethical acts can amount to sizable personal, organizational, and societal costs (Ayal et al., 2021). It is for this reason that many human resource (HR) practitioners seek to create, promote, and sustain work environments that encourage ethicality (Pham et al., 2023), for example, by centralizing decision-making and through formalization of policies and practices (Aiken & Hage, 1966). Another way HR practitioners try to facilitate greater ethicality is by recruiting highly conscientious employees (Sackett et al., 2021)—those who are dependable, diligent, and prudent (Ashton & Lee, 2009). Not only are conscientious employees higher performers (Dudley et al., 2006; Park et al., 2020; Venkatesh et al., 2021), but they are perceived by others as being more ethical than their less conscientious peers (Babalola et al., 2017; Kalshoven et al., 2011).

In our research, we suggest one reason why others perceive conscientious employees as ethical role models (Cohen et al., 2014) is because of their propensity to engage in prosocial forms of voice, including proactively offering constructive change-oriented suggestions (promotive voice) and voicing concerns about questionable practices that impact their teams and coworkers (prohibitive voice; Chamberlin et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2012). Voice is a discretionary, change-oriented, and challenging work behavior that is highly visible to others and has important implications for peers (Bolino & Grant, 2016; Carpini et al., 2017). For example, during a team meeting a conscientious employee may suggest a novel way of streamlining work practices to enhance team effectiveness (e.g., better customer service), which is visible to their peers and has direct implications for how their peers complete their work. Given the visibility, change, and discretionary nature of voice, it is a strong cue for others to determine the extent to which initiators of voice value doing “the right thing,” hence informing perceptions of the initiators' ethicality. The visibility of voice in conjunction with the fact that conscientiousness is a readily observable personality trait (Lievens et al., 2006), may explain why perceptions of conscientious employees' voice informs the extent to which their peers view these workers as being more ethical.

Although meta-analytic research supports the notion that conscientious employees engage in more voice (Chamberlin et al., 2017), the extent to which their voice will inform perceptions of ethicality rests on the assumption that this voice is actually noticed and attended to by their peers. However, perceptions of ethicality are made in a social context (Brown et al., 2005), which “provides cues that individuals use to construct and interpret events” (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978, p. 226). Therefore, the social context gives meaning to work behaviors including voice. From a trait activation perspective, the demonstration of work behaviors also depends on trait-relevant contextual cues that either activate or attenuate the expression of personality traits (Tett

et al., 2021; Tett & Burnett, 2003). The expression of personality traits results in “observable responses [that] serve as the basis for behavioral ratings” of the focal employee (Lievens et al., 2006, p. 248). We propose one such social context is a higher hierarchy of authority, which refers to policy and practice formalization, supervisor direction and decision-control, and little freedom with respect to how tasks are completed (Aiken & Hage, 1966). Hierarchy of authority has become a topical HRM issue because many organizations strive to simultaneously enable greater flexibility, inclusion, and learning (Baumgartner et al., 2015; Boemelburg et al., 2022; Minbaeva & Navrbjerg, 2023) as well as minimize ethical transgressions through stringent chains of command and formalization (Snell et al., 2023). Although a higher hierarchy of authority may enhance organizational efficiency through centralized decision-making and formalization (Hage & Aiken, 1967; Monteiro & Adler, 2022), we suggest that in such a social context conscientious employees' voice will not be observed and noticed by their peers, which in turn will attenuate their perceived ethicality (Jiao et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2019; Ogunfowora et al., 2022). Indeed, from a social information processing perspective, the social context influences people's attitudes and behaviors by directing their attention, thereby making certain aspects of their environment more or less salient and facilitating the interpretation of the people and events around them (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Integrating this perspective with trait activation theory, we argue that when hierarchy of authority is higher, everyone is expected to seek approval for decisions before acting (Bandiera et al., 2021)—that is, even trivial matters require higher-ups' approval (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2015; Boemelburg et al., 2022). As such, we argue that voice from highly conscientious employees will not be attended to or recognized by peers, thereby voice will also not support peers' perceptions of employee ethicality.

In contrast, we propose that in work environments where employees can take action without supervisory approval (i.e., lower hierarchy of authority) and in which voice is welcomed and expected, peers will have more opportunities to observe behavioral variability of their coworkers. As such they will attend to and notice the higher promotive and prohibitive voice demonstrated by their highly conscientious coworkers (Chamberlin et al., 2017). Such voice is essential for the effectiveness of decentralized systems (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Morrison, 2023; Snell et al., 2023), and therefore is appropriate within this social context. Accordingly, the voice of highly conscientious workers in such work contexts will be noticed and will reinforce ethicality perceptions of these workers.

Taken together, we suggest that a higher hierarchy of authority may interfere with the inherent advantages of employee conscientiousness by suppressing the extent to which peers perceive the voice and subsequent ethicality of these employees. Additionally, although we propose that ethicality perceptions will be lower for employees who score lower on conscientiousness irrespective of the contextual levels, we argue the explanatory mechanisms for such effects will be different. First, a higher hierarchy of authority will mean that peers will be unlikely to attend to the lack of either promotive or prohibitive voice of those who score lower on conscientiousness (Yi et al., 2022). Yet a lower hierarchy of authority means that peers will notice the

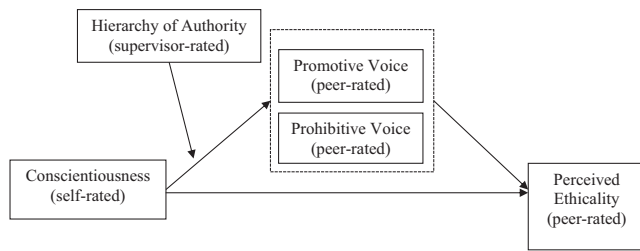


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

lack of voice from lower conscientious employees. Regardless of whether peers notice, or not, the lack of voice, they will perceive coworkers lower on conscientiousness as being less ethical. Figure 1 shows our proposed moderated mediation model, wherein hierarchy of authority moderates the indirect positive relationship between conscientiousness and perceived ethicality via both promotive and prohibitive voice. Practically, we propose that hierarchy of authority is a key characteristic of the organizational social context that is worthy of increased HR practitioners' attention. This is because HR practitioners may strive to minimize ethical transgressions through centralized decision-making and formalization (Snell et al., 2023). However, such a social context may have ramifications for selecting highly conscientious individuals. That is, this social context may weaken the extent to which the voice of conscientious employees is noticed, which in turn negatively influences perceptions of their ethicality—a key characteristic of employees many organizations strive to engender (Stone et al., 2023).

By unpacking the negative consequences of a higher hierarchy of authority for the ethicality perceptions (via not noticing voice) of conscientious employees, our research makes several theoretical contributions. First, our research contributes to trait activation theory (Tett et al., 2021; Tett & Guterman, 2000) by examining why others may view highly conscientious employees as less ethical in work contexts characterized by higher levels of hierarchy of authority compared to these employees in lower hierarchy of authority situations. The majority of scholarship using trait activation theory has examined how contextual cues bound the behavior of individuals as a function of their personalities (Tett et al., 2021). Surprisingly, less research has considered how such contextual cues influence others' perceptions of a focal employee's behavior (Lievens et al., 2006; Tett et al., 2021). Yet this theory posits that “trait evaluation is a convenient heuristic for the trait–behavior–performance chain,” suggesting that others use trait-relevant observable behavioral responses to evaluate focal employees (Tett et al., 2021, p. 206). Hence, our research responds to the call to “examine the role of trait activation in the mental models that assessors use to interpret candidate behavior” (Lievens et al., 2006, p. 256) by examining differential appraisals of highly conscientious employees' ethicality as a function of the social context in which others observe them. We integrated the social information processing perspective (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) with trait activation theory to propose that the extent to which peers notice voice behaviors of their highly conscientious coworkers will depend on the situational cues of

hierarchy of authority. In doing so, we “combine trait activation and trait perception models” (Lievens et al., 2006, p. 255) by examining how the accuracy of ethicality perceptions of conscientiousness may be bounded by a social context that signals the importance of attending to trait relevant cues such as voice (or lack thereof). Our research unpacks how even when the trait is activated (i.e., conscientious employees engage in voice), it may not be noticed due to the context (i.e., hierarchy of authority) that bounds the salience of specific actions and whether others attend to a conscientious individual's voice.

Further, the extent to which employees have leeway to execute their tasks is a key feature of work design that informs the overall work context (Parker, Van den Broeck, & Holman, 2017). As such, we further extend trait activation theory by integrating it with the work design literature (Parker, 2014) by suggesting that work design plays an integral role in influencing not just employees' behavior, but how others notice, appraise, and evaluate the behavior of others (Pichler, 2012). Through this integration, we advance our knowledge about the role of work design as a critical contextual feature in which others differentially evaluate employee ethicality with certain personalities (e.g., Ogunfowora et al., 2022). Scholars have discussed how rigid hierarchy of authority contributes to poor work design (Parker, Van den Broeck, & Holman, 2017), which may even inhibit employees' perceived ethicality (Parker, 2014), although few empirical tests exist. As such, we examine how hierarchy of authority, a work design feature that centralizes decision-making and limits individual control to increase efficiency and limit ethical transgressions (Parker, 2014), can assuage the positive relationship between conscientiousness and perceived ethicality (Kalshoven et al., 2011; Ogunfowora et al., 2022). Consequently, we answer calls to examine “the potential effects ... of authority structures and systems [that] remains underexplored” (Trevino et al., 2014, p. 653).

Second, our research extends scholarship on the antecedents of perceived ethicality (e.g., Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Ogunfowora et al., 2022) by unpacking why conscientious employees—often considered benchmarks of normatively appropriate behavior and “good apples”—may be perceived less favorably in certain work contexts (i.e., “bad barrels”). We build on the social information processing perspective (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), which suggests that the social context provides cues about norms and expectations that others use to evaluate events and people around them. Consistent with this perspective, our research sheds light on the contextual nature of ethicality perceptions of not just leaders, who are already highly visible and thus highly scrutinized due to their status (Babalola et al., 2017), but all employees. Research suggests some employees tend to behave less ethically such as those with activated positive mood (Umphress et al., 2020), and that the mere presence of a code of ethics—regardless of the content—enhanced perceptions of ethicality (Adams et al., 2001). Extending this research to ethicality appraisals, we examine hierarchy of authority as a salient social context that signals what is valued and expected. Through social learning, employees differentially judge the ethicality of their conscientious peers as a function of the social context. By examining such perceptions across social work

contexts, we respond to calls to explore “how individual [...] and environmental factors [...] promote or thwart (un)ethical behavior within organizations” (Mitchell et al., 2020, p. 6).

Finally, we also contribute to research on the potential perils of conscientiousness (Liu et al., 2022; Venkatesh et al., 2021) by examining hierarchy of authority as a social context that bounds the nearly universal positive appraisal of conscientiousness (Wilmot & Ones, 2019). By focusing on hierarchy of authority, we respond to the call to examine “those features [of the social context] that are either explicitly designed to improve employees' ethical behavior or that may contribute to unethical behavior” (Trevino et al., 2014, p. 633), by extending this to perceptions of ethicality. HR practitioners may strive to centralize decision-making to improve employees' ethical behaviors (Moore & Gino, 2013); however, as we demonstrate, such an approach might attenuate the positive relationship between conscientiousness and perceived ethicality (Babalola et al., 2017; Kalshoven et al., 2011). This inquiry is critical because it has implications for important HR-related outcomes of conscientious employees such as their performance appraisals and promotion. Indeed, ethicality perceptions have become integral part of overall performance evaluations (Morrisette et al., 2021). If, as our research demonstrates, such ethicality perceptions are significantly bounded by the work context, then conscientious employees may receive biased performance appraisals. This is a concerning issue for HR managers due to its potential negative effects on perceived fairness of and satisfaction with performance appraisals (Pichler et al., 2016), as well as undermining the opportunities available to highly conscientious employees. Accordingly, our research examines why efforts to create a social work context conducive to ethicality—that is a higher hierarchy of authority—may dampen the positive relationship between conscientiousness and perceived ethicality.

2 | THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Over the last several few decades, scholars have increasingly attended to issues of perceived ethicality within organizations (Trevino et al., 2014). Perceived ethicality is contextually bound because it is “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct” (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120) and recognizes that “most people are the product of the context they find themselves in; they tend to look up and look around...” (Trevino & Brown, 2004, p. 72). Deciding whether someone is more (less) ethical is a function of viewing the individual as behaving consistently with ethical expectations as well as refraining from wrongdoings (Hannah et al., 2011).¹ Ethicality is related, albeit distinct from morality, which generally refers to what is *societally* considered “right” and “wrong” such as treating everyone fairly and with respect as well as not stealing (Ellemers et al., 2019). Consistent with the social information processing perspective that emphasizes the role of context in making certain information more or less salient to perceivers (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), scholars have argued that ethicality is innately contextualized and organizations provide contextual cues

that shape employees' knowledge of ethically normative behavior (Hannah et al., 2011).

Perceptions of ethicality may be particularly important sources of information within organizations because they reflect contextually bound normative behavior. This is particularly true for peers' perceptions of focal employees' ethicality because “one important source of information is a person's immediate social environment” (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978, p. 226). Being in close contextual proximity, peers share the same status, and they are likely to send cues about (un)acceptable work behavior. Supporting this view, perceived peer ethicality has been positively related to one's own ethical behavior, suggesting a reciprocal feedback loop between peers (Deshpande et al., 2006; Joseph et al., 2009). Similarly, perceptions that peers lack ethicality are positively associated with one's own deviance from establish norms (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). These findings are consistent with the notion that “[m]ost adults are not ethically self-sufficient [...], they look outside themselves to peers and significant others for ethical guidance” and hence their perceptions of others' ethicality are likely to be moderated by the work context (Brown & Trevino, 2014, p. 588). Research supports the importance of peer voice in shaping perceptions of ethicality through the process of social influence (Kim et al., 2023). In our research, we examine perceived ethicality as a contextually bound and socially influenced phenomenon through the lens of trait activation theory to explain why conscientious employees may be viewed as more or less ethical depending on the context in which peers observe coworkers' voice (or lack thereof).

2.1 | The moderating role of hierarchy of authority in appraisal of conscientiousness

Trait activation theory (Tett et al., 2021) helps explain why in higher hierarchy of authority contexts others will perceive highly conscientious employees as less ethical than their counterparts who score lower on conscientiousness. This theory suggests that the work context provides trait-relevant cues that influence focal employees' behavior, and others use these behavioral responses to make assessments of the employee. It emphasizes the role of situational strength, which reflects “the clarity of a situational demand” (Lievens et al., 2015, p. 1171), in shaping the extent to which others notice and evaluate focal employees' behaviors. Strong situations “involve unambiguous behavioral demands where the outcomes of behavior are clearly understood and widely shared” (Lievens et al., 2006, p. 248). In weak situations, there exists more ambiguity regarding behavioral expectations and thus others have opportunities to observe greater behavioral variability arising from personality differences.

Building on trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), we argue that organizational contexts characterized by higher hierarchy of authority signal unambiguous behavioral demands. In contrast, we propose that lower hierarchy of authority allows greater ambiguity regarding behavioral expectations. Accordingly, we propose the level of hierarchy of authority will inform the extent to which others will either recognize or not notice the voice of their highly conscientious

colleagues. We also propose the level of hierarchy of authority will bound whether peers observe or do not notice the lack of voice from less conscientious coworkers. Our theorizing is consistent with increasing recognition that context plays a powerful role in shaping voice outcomes (Morrison, 2023). As such, we examine hierarchy of authority as a salient characteristic of the work context that reflects the social structure and the associated distribution of power in task-related decisions (Hage & Aiken, 1967). Integrating trait activation theory with theories of voice (Detert & Edmondson, 2011), we conceptualize both promotive and prohibitive voice as behavioral responses to trait-relevant cues of hierarchy of authority for conscientious employees. Building on research examining the antecedents of perceived ethicality (see Sotak et al., 2024; Trevino et al., 2014), we argue that others will evaluate the ethicality of conscientious employees using their perceptions of these employees' voice. We expect voice to be particularly important because voice is an explicit form of salient and informative communication that can be laden with ethically relevant cues (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Jordan et al., 2013). Voice captures going above and beyond normatively appropriate behavior to offer insights into work issues and hence has a greater effect on perceptions of ethicality amongst peers, relative to engaging in normatively expected behaviors that meet minimum ethical standards (Trevino et al., 2014).

We hypothesize that higher hierarchy of authority is likely to be an unambiguous work context in which everyone is expected to behave according to the behavioral demands of centralized decision-making and limited leeway for how work goals are accomplished (Schminke, 2001). In such contexts, decision-making is the purview of higher-ups who hold both the ultimate authority and ownership over decisions (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Consequently, in work contexts with a higher hierarchy of authority employees must seek approval even for small matters and they have limited opportunities to perform tasks as they think best (Baumgartner et al., 2015). Indeed, employees working in such contexts are likely to perceive a set "rule book" rife with policies and practices that create mechanistic decision-making and limit individual freedom to perform tasks (Schminke, 2001). At higher levels of hierarchy of authority others will be less likely to notice suggestion-focused promotive voice or problem-focused prohibitive voice of highly conscientious employees. It is expected that making suggestions on how to improve team functioning or raising concerns about how work is done should be referred to supervisors for their approval and little autonomous action is tolerated (Bandiera et al., 2021). Consequently, others will be less likely to notice how highly conscientious employees proactively voice improvement suggestions (promotive voice) or point out potential issues (prohibitive voice) because enactment of problem solutions are not expected in such a restrictive context (Liang et al., 2012).

Self-initiated, change-oriented, and challenging voice behaviors are not relevant in highly restrictive work environment and thus are less visible because "the opportunity to observe differences in trait-relevant behavior within a situation depends upon both the relevance and strength" (Lievens et al., 2006, p. 247). Trait activation theory posits that situation strength is "a continuum that refers to how much clarity there is with regard to how the situation is perceived" (Lievens

et al., 2006, p. 248). Building on this tenet, we argue that when hierarchy of authority is higher, peers receive unambiguous situational cues that the voice of their highly conscientious coworkers is not relevant, and that the lack of voice of peers lower on conscientiousness is not important. Due to the restrictive nature of a higher hierarchy of authority, peers will be less likely to observe, recognize and judge the lack of voice of those who score lower on conscientiousness. Under normal circumstances, low conscientiousness employees are not expected to voice suggestions or express concerns (Chamberlin et al., 2017); yet in situations of higher hierarchy of authority their lack of voice is likely to go unnoticed because the social context centralizes all the decisions even if they are questionable and need to be addressed.

In contrast to strong situations, weak situations (those characterized by lower hierarchy of authority) allow peers to observe greater variability of trait expressive behaviors (Lievens et al., 2006; Lievens et al., 2015), such as the voice of highly conscientious employees. In such contexts, situational cues are ambiguous and hence peers base their judgments of conscientious employees on situationally relevant trait expressive behaviors such as their promotive and prohibitive voice. When hierarchy of authority is lower, we argue that others will notice conscientious employees' voice because the context is more ambiguous and as such, it is expected that employees are free to voice according to their personalities. In such work contexts, others likely respond to cues about the appropriateness and relevance of decision-making latitude and leeway of completing tasks, which conscientious employees will demonstrate by engaging in either promotive or prohibitive voice (Chamberlin et al., 2017). Others will likely attend to the propensity of conscientious employees to contribute to the organization by guiding attention toward opportunities and away from risks through voicing constructive suggestions (Chamberlin et al., 2017). When employees have the freedom to actively contribute to the organization, others will likely notice and recognize how conscientious employees voice improvement suggestions or advise against undesirable behaviors that could undermine unit performance.

Trait activation theory posits that weak situations enable "much more variability in behavioral responses to be observed" (Lievens et al., 2006, p. 248). This suggests that in work contexts with lower levels of hierarchy of authority peers will not only notice the voice of their highly conscientious counterparts, but they will also recognize, observe, and judge the lack of voice of those who score lower on conscientiousness. Lower conscientiousness captures a lack of diligence, organization, and persistence—qualities that are critical for systematically identifying work issues and voicing them in a credible manner, which explains the negative relationship between lower conscientiousness and both promotive and prohibitive voice (Chamberlin et al., 2017). In social contexts characterized by lower hierarchy of authority, those scoring lower on conscientiousness are less likely to voice and this behavioral response will be detected by peers. In such contexts, peers will notice that their less conscientious coworkers lack the propensity to voice suggestions as well as shy away from discussing issues due to their dispositional tendencies. Peers will notice their lack of both promotive and prohibitive voice due to more ambiguous situational cues associated with lower hierarchy of authority, which

directs attention to trait expressive behaviors such as the lack of voice of employees who are lower on conscientiousness.

Hypothesis 1. Hierarchy of authority moderates the positive relationship between conscientiousness and both (a) promotive voice and (b) prohibitive voice, such that these links are stronger (weaker) at lower (higher) levels of hierarchy of authority.

2.2 | Promotive and prohibitive voice and perceived ethicality

Building on the social information processing perspective (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), we argue that promotive and prohibitive voice are likely to be positively associated with perceived ethicality. This perspective posits people judge others based on behaviors they observe in their immediate social environment (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Using the social learning perspective, research has shown how leaders' explicit communication about ethical issues influences others' perceptions of their ethicality (Jordan et al., 2013). Integrating this research with social information processing, we argue both promotive and prohibitive voice will be salient and informative indicators that peers use to judge focal employees' ethicality. Voice is a visible change-oriented behavior that extends normative expectations (Trevino et al., 2014) and as such will be salient to others, particularly peers who are often recipients of voice (Chen & Trevino, 2022). When employees make suggestions to improve work unit performance or raise concern about a detrimental work practice, peers will likely perceive them to be ethical because helping one's team achieve their goals is normatively appropriate across all organizations, regardless of their goals (Carpini et al., 2017). Supporting this, promotive voice is positively related to others' perceptions of how valuable voice is because of its value-added contributions (Lam et al., 2022).

Promotive voice is akin to "doing good" in the organizational context (Liang et al., 2012). Yet prohibitive voice entails corrective action to "not do bad" and is particularly important when trying to minimize or avoid harm, as evident in research demonstrating the salience of prohibitive voice for safety (Morrison, 2023). Peer voice can be conceptualized as a form of ethical symbolism that can direct effort toward improving the situation, even in the absence of formal authority (Mesdaghinia et al., 2022) and reflects the dual nature of ethicality as both doing good and refraining from wrongdoings (Brown et al., 2005).

Hypothesis 2. Both (a) promotive voice and (b) prohibitive voice are positively related to perceived ethicality.

2.3 | Integrated moderated mediation model

Combining the above two hypotheses, we propose an integrated moderated mediation model, wherein the positive indirect relationship between conscientiousness and perceived ethicality (via voice) will be

weakened (strengthened) when the hierarchy of authority is higher (lower). We argue that when hierarchy of authority is higher, the organization instills an ethical infrastructure through a centralized control system that signals to employees that they are not responsible for their own ethicality because the system will constrain their behavior one way or the other. In such contexts, peers will less likely notice either the promotive and prohibitive voice of highly conscientious workers because, through social learning and vicarious experiences, peers realize such voice is not expected or relevant. As benchmarks of normatively appropriate behavior (Cohen et al., 2014), conscientious employees are likely to voice, as demonstrated meta-analytically (Chamberlin et al., 2017). Yet when the social context has a higher hierarchy of authority, voice is expected less and thus others are less likely to notice conscientious employees' voice. Consequently, they appraise conscientious employees as failing to do the right thing and hence will view them as less ethical. In such work contexts, peers will also not notice lack of voice of those who score lower on conscientiousness, which in turn will result in lower ethicality perceptions of these employees.

In contexts characterized by lower hierarchy of authority, there is greater behavioral variability due to more ambiguity regarding appropriate and normative behaviors. In such contexts, highly conscientious employees may become a social form of ethical infrastructure because they are benchmarks of normatively appropriate behavior. Their voice is likely to be visible and hence peers will perceive such behavioral responses to decentralized decision-making and dispersed authority in organizations as "doing the right thing." This will further reinforce the image of conscientious employees as ethical role models (Cohen et al., 2014). The self-initiating and constructive change-oriented nature of voice (Liang et al., 2012) becomes relevant in a social context where decision-making freedom is encouraged. Hence, in lower hierarchy of authority contexts, others will view highly conscientious employees who voice promotively or prohibitively as being more ethical. Conversely, due to greater behavioral ambiguity in such contexts, employees lower on conscientiousness are unlikely to engage in voice, which will be observed and noticed by their peers. By noticing the lack of voice, peers will interpret such trait behavioral responses as lacking ethicality.

Hypothesis 3. Hierarchy of authority moderates the indirect positive relationship between conscientiousness and perceived ethicality via both (a) promotive voice and (b) prohibitive voice, such that for higher (lower) hierarchy of authority this linkage is weaker (stronger).

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Participants and procedure

We collected data² from multiple sources by recruiting participants, who were part-time students in a Master of Business Administration (MBA) at an Australian university ($N = 820$), their peers ($N = 529$), and their supervisors ($N = 445$). There were three cohorts of incoming

MBA students each year, and thus we collected data three times a year for four consecutive years (2013–2016). Prior to attending the MBA orientation session, the participants completed an online survey about their personality (i.e., conscientiousness) and demographics. They also provided the names of their supervisors and peers, who were contacted by the MBA office and emailed an anonymized survey that captured the MBA students' organizational context (i.e., rated by supervisors) and focal employees' voice and ethicality (rated by peers). Supervisors rated the hierarchy of authority for 238 participants, out of 820 participants. There were 528 and 300 participants for whom peers provided ratings of voice and ethicality, respectively. In some cases, participants received multiple supervisor and peer ratings, which we aggregated following verification of aggregation statistics.

Most participants self-identified as male (54%) with 14% choosing not to report their gender. Participants had a mean age of 34.41 years old ($SD = 7.15$). All participants had at least 5 years of work experience as per the MBA's entry requirements. In terms of work sector, 557 participants were asked this question and 384 (69%) reported working in a private sector, followed by 119 (21%) and 54 (10%) being employed in public and non-for-profit sectors, respectively. Most supervisors self-identified as male (78%) with the mean age of 45 years old ($SD = 8.96$). Peers also predominantly self-identified as male (62%) with a mean age of 40 years ($SD = 10.14$).

3.2 | Measures

All measures, if not indicated otherwise below, used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

3.3 | Conscientiousness

We measured conscientiousness with the 10-item subscale of conscientiousness in the HEXACO-60 inventory (Ashton & Lee, 2009). We asked participants to report the extent to which they are diligent, organized, planful, and detail-oriented (e.g., "I always try to be accurate in my work, even at the expense of time"; $\alpha = 0.75$).

3.4 | Hierarchy of authority

We measured hierarchy of authority with a three-item scale (Aiken & Hage, 1966). We asked supervisors to respond to items that assess the extent to which their organization allows employees to make decisions without management approval (e.g., "Even small matters have to be referred to someone higher up for a final decision"). Given supervisors are responsible for decision-making in organizations, they are best positioned to rate the hierarchy of authority ($\alpha = 0.85$). Some employees received multiple supervisor ratings (average 1.79 ratings per employee). Hence, we followed recommendations (Biemann et al., 2012) and aggregated these ratings because the aggregation statistics suggested there was acceptable inter-rater agreement ($r_{wg} = 0.70$, $SD = 0.33$).

3.5 | Promotive and prohibitive voice

We measured promotive and prohibitive voice with a six-item scale (Liang et al., 2012). The promotive voice subscale has three items and assesses the extent to which a focal employee speaks up with suggestions to improve work practices and procedures. We asked peers, who were nominated by the participants, to assess focal employees' promotive voice (e.g., "[Employee's name] makes constructive suggestions to improve his/her unit's operations"; $\alpha = 0.85$). The prohibitive voice subscale has three items and captures the extent to which employees express their concerns about existing incidents or behaviors that may be harmful for the organization. Focal employees' peers assessed their prohibitive voice (e.g., "[Employee's name] advises other colleagues against undesirable behaviors that would hamper unit performance"; $\alpha = 0.75$). We obtained peer ratings of both promotive and prohibitive voice because peers are frequently the targets of speaking up in organizations due to the increasing interdependent nature of work (Brykman & Raver, 2021) and may provide more reliable and valid reports of voice than managers (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Peer ratings of voice have been critical to many outcomes (e.g., championing and vetting of voice, leader emergence, and team performance) and this source of ratings has been under-examined in the literature (Brykman & Raver, 2021). Given several coworkers rated focal employees' promotive and prohibitive voice (average of 3.19 ratings per employee), we aggregated their ratings. Aggregation statistics indicated that there was good interrater agreement for both promotive voice ($r_{wg} = 0.90$, $SD = 0.15$) and prohibitive voice ($r_{wg} = 0.81$, $SD = 0.24$).

3.6 | Perceived ethicality

We measured perceived ethicality with the "behaving ethically" subscale of servant leadership (Liden et al., 2008). This subscale captures the extent to which an employee is perceived as "interacting openly, fairly, and honestly with others" and factor analyses support the distinctiveness of this factor (Liden et al., 2008, p. 162). A recent review found these items to be conceptually similar to other measures including the ethical behavior factor of authentic leadership and ethical behavior of ethical leadership (Lemoine et al., 2019). We obtained ratings of perceived ethicality from the focal employee's peers to avoid the subjective nature of self-reported ethicality (Pierce & Balasubramanian, 2015) and because peers are well-positioned to experience and notice deviations from organizationally desirable behaviors (Jacobs et al., 2014). Additionally, assessing peer perceptions of ethicality contributes to calls for scholars to "reverse the lens" in the study of business ethics (Babalola et al., 2022, p. 906). Consistent with best practice related to the use of antithetical items, we only used the three positively phrased items. We asked peers to respond to the following items: "[Employee's name] ... holds high ethical standards; ...is always honest"; and "...values honesty more than profit" ($\alpha = 0.86$). On average, focal employees received 3.30 peer ratings and aggregation statistics supported aggregation ($r_{wg} = 0.90$, $SD = 0.14$).

4 | RESULTS

Table 1 contains variable descriptives and correlations. Prior to testing our hypotheses, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) and an analysis of variance extracted (AVE). Table 2 has the results of the CFAs that evidence the suitable fit of the hypothesized five-factor model to our data as per established fit indices (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). We complemented our CFA with an AVE to further establish convergent and discriminate validity of our three peer-reported measures. The convergent AVE was all above the 0.50 threshold. They were 0.70, 0.68, and 0.54 for perceived ethicality, promotive voice, and prohibitive voice, respectively (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The discriminate validity was 0.17, 0.29, and 0.03 for perceived ethicality, promotive voice, and prohibitive voice, respectively—all below the 0.50 threshold. Together, these results suggest peers adequately discriminated between constructs and the items loaded on their respective factors.

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test our moderated mediation model using MPlus Version 8.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). The MPlus syntax used in this study (Stride

et al., 2015) corresponds with PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes, 2017) for moderated mediation models, wherein a hierarchy of authority moderates the IV-mediator path (i.e., from conscientiousness to promotive voice [H1a] and prohibitive voice [H1b]). This approach allows the testing of conditional indirect effects in moderated mediation models with multiple mediators by obtaining bias-corrected bootstrapped CIs (using 5000 bootstrap samples). We specified the type of analysis as “general and random” with maximum likelihood estimation. Table 3 has the results of moderated regression analyses using SEM.

4.1 | Hypothesis testing

As predicted by Hypothesis 1a, hierarchy of authority moderated the positive relationship between conscientiousness and promotive voice ($B = -0.19$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = -2.87$, $p = 0.00$). For lower levels (-1 SD) of hierarchy of authority (Figure 2a), the positive relationship between conscientiousness and promotive voice was stronger ($B = 0.33$, $p = 0.00$); it was weaker albeit nonsignificant for higher levels ($+1$ SD) of hierarchy of authority ($B = -0.05$, $p = 0.52$). Thus,

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

Variable	Source	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender ^a	Self	0.63	0.48						
2. Age	Self	34.41	7.15	0.01					
3. Conscientiousness	Self	3.82	0.49	-0.13**	-0.01				
4. Hierarchy of authority	Supervisor	2.62	0.94	0.02	0.01	-0.00			
5. Promotive voice	Peer	4.15	0.44	-0.04	-0.04	0.09*	0.09		
6. Prohibitive voice	Peer	3.75	0.52	-0.04	0.16**	0.02	0.00	0.40**	
7. Perceived ethicality	Peer	4.45	0.46	-0.20**	0.11	0.16**	0.01	0.37**	0.20**

^a0 = female, 1 = male; self = employee-rated variables ($N = 820$), manager = manager-rated variables ($N = 445$), peer = peer-rated variables ($N = 529$).
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 2 Comparison of alternative reflective models.

Model	χ^2 (df)	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI	$\Delta\chi^2$ (df) ^a
1. Baseline model (one factor, all items)	1376.58** (209)	0.16	0.14	0.35	0.28	-
2. Hypothesized model (five factors)	381.29** (199)	0.06	0.06	0.90	0.88	995.29** (10)
3. Alternative Model 1 (four factors: ethicality, combined voice, HOA, and conscientiousness)	500.18** (203)	0.08	0.07	0.84	0.81	118.89** (4)
4. Alternative Model 2 (same as Model 1 with ethicality and prohibitive voice combined)	595.64** (203)	0.09	0.09	0.78	0.75	214.35** (4)
5. Alternative Model 3 (same as Model 2 with ethicality and promotive voice combined)	659.91** (203)	0.10	0.08	0.75	0.71	278.62** (4)
6. Alternative Model 4 (same as Model 3 with variables combined based on source of ratings)	777.19** (206)	0.11	0.09	0.68	0.65	395.90** (7)

Note: df = degrees of freedom verified using Cortina et al.'s (2017) calculator.

Abbreviations: CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual; TLI, Tucker-Lewis index.

^aModels were compared to the hypothesized model. Both CFI and TLI were assessed against the 0.90 good fit lower bound. RMSEA and SRMR were assessed against the 0.08 and 0.10 upper bounds, respectively Vandenberg and Lance (2000).

** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 3 Moderated mediation results and conditional indirect effects.

	Promotive voice		Prohibitive voice		Perceived ethicality	
Conscientiousness	0.14* (0.06)	[0.04, 0.25]	0.00 (0.06)	[-0.09, 0.10]	0.13* (0.07)	[0.02, 0.24]
Hierarchy of authority (HOA)	0.02 (0.03)	[-0.02, 0.07]	0.00 (0.03)	[-0.04, 0.05]	–	–
Conscientiousness × HOA	-0.19** (0.07)	[-0.30, -0.08]	-0.20** (0.07)	[-0.31, -0.10]	–	–
Promotive voice	–	–	–	–	0.51** (0.11)	[0.34, 0.69]
Prohibitive voice	–	–	–	–	-0.03 (0.11)	[-0.22, 0.15]
Conditional indirect effects	Via promotive voice		Via prohibitive voice			
Conscientiousness, low HOA	0.17 [0.07, 0.27]		-0.01 [-0.05, 0.03]			
Conscientiousness, mean HOA	0.07 [0.02, 0.13]		0.00 [-0.00, 0.00]			
Conscientiousness, high HOA	-0.03 [-0.09, 0.04]		-0.01 [-0.03, 0.04]			
MMI	0.10 [0.03, 0.16]		-0.01 [-0.04, 0.03]			

Note: $N = 229$. Coefficients are unstandardized and standard error values are in parentheses. MMI = moderated mediation index; 95% confidence intervals are in brackets, and values in boldface do not overlap with zero. Conditional indirect effects are presented at a range of values of hierarchy of authority from low (-1 SD) to high ($+1$ SD).

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

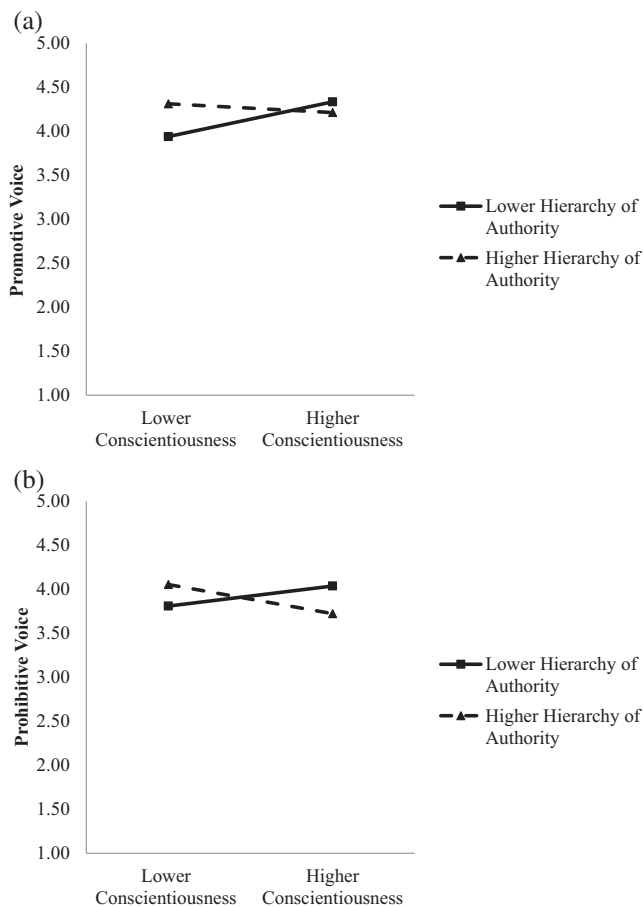


FIGURE 2 (a) Interaction effects of conscientiousness and hierarchy of authority on promotive voice. (b) Interaction effects of conscientiousness and hierarchy of authority on prohibitive voice.

Hypothesis 1a received partial support. Consistent with Hypothesis 1b, hierarchy of authority moderated the positive relationship between conscientiousness and prohibitive voice ($B = -0.20$,

$SE = 0.07$, $t = -3.11$, $p = 0.00$). This relationship was stronger for lower levels of hierarchy of authority ($B = 0.21$, $p = 0.03$; Figure 2b). At higher levels, unexpectedly, the relationship between conscientiousness and prohibitive voice was negative and significant ($B = -0.20$, $p = 0.01$). Thus, Hypothesis 1b received partial support. Supporting Hypothesis 2a, promotive voice was positively related to perceived ethicality ($B = 0.51$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 4.84$, $p = 0.00$). Contrary to Hypothesis 2b, prohibitive voice was not related to perceived ethicality ($B = -0.03$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = -0.28$, $p = 0.78$).

The indices of the moderated mediation model showed that the moderated mediation model was supported for promotive voice as a mediator ($Index = 0.10$, 95% CI = [0.03, 0.16]), but not for prohibitive voice as a mediator ($Index = -0.01$, 95% CI = [-0.04, 0.03]). Specifically, conscientiousness was positively related to perceived ethicality via promotive voice for lower (-1 SD) levels of hierarchy of authority ($conditional\ indirect\ effect = 0.17$, 95% CI = [0.07, 0.27]); these conditional indirect effects were nonsignificant for higher hierarchy of authority ($conditional\ indirect\ effect = -0.03$, 95% CI = [-0.09, 0.04]). In sum, when hierarchy of authority was lower, others perceived conscientious employees as engaging in promotive (and not prohibitive) voice and thus viewed them as being more ethical. Hence, Hypothesis 3a received partial support, and Hypothesis 3b was not supported.

4.2 | Robustness checks

To verify the robustness of our model we examined several alternative models. First, we examined our model with gender and age as control variables due to their influence on ethical judgment, as meta-analytically evidenced (Pan & Sparks, 2012), and obtained the same results as those without control variables. Specifically, the moderated mediation index was significant for promotive voice ($Index = 0.15$, 95% CI = [0.06, 0.24]), but not for prohibitive voice ($Index = -0.01$, 95% CI = [-0.05, 0.04]) as mediators. Consistent with our previous

analyses, conscientiousness was positively related to perceived ethicality via promotive voice at lower (-1 SD) levels of hierarchy of authority (*conditional indirect effect* = 0.24, 95% CI = [0.10, 0.37]); these conditional indirect effects were nonsignificant at higher levels of hierarchy of authority (*conditional indirect effect* = -0.06 , 95% CI = [-0.15 , 0.02]).

Second, it is possible that in organizations with higher levels of hierarchy of authority others will view conscientious employees as less ethical and thus they will not expect conscientious workers to engage in either promotive or prohibitive voice. As such, we compared two moderated mediation models: (a) our hypothesized model and (b) an alternative one, in which we tested perceived ethicality as a mediator and two types of voice as outcomes. To examine the model fit indices for our hypothesized and alternative moderated mediation models that involved latent variable interaction, we followed the recommendation by Sardeshmukh and Vandenberg (2017). We ran a baseline model in which we included our moderator (hierarchy of authority) but only specified its main effects on the outcome (perceived ethicality in our hypothesized model and promotive and prohibitive voice in an alternative model). It is then recommended to “evaluate the model using the traditional maximum likelihood estimation procedure” without including the latent interaction term (Sardeshmukh & Vandenberg, 2017, p. 738). We used the Akaike information criterion (AIC) test to compare alternative models such that a lower AIC indicates a more acceptable model.

The hypothesized baseline model showed acceptable fit indices (RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89, AIC = 9643.75; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). The fit indices for the alternative baseline model were as follows (RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89, AIC = 9640.42), suggesting that both the hypothesized and baseline models showed equally acceptable fit. Given the acceptable fit for both models, we then evaluated whether the inclusion of the interaction term changes the information criteria between the baseline and interaction models for both hypothesized and alternative models.

Consistent with the recommendations (Burnham & Anderson, 2004) and prior research (e.g., Howard et al., 2022), we used AIC to compare our hypothesized and alternative moderated mediation models. Our hypothesized moderated mediation model with the latent interaction term had a higher AIC value (AIC = 9718.63) than the alternative model (AIC = 9706.51, $\Delta = 12.12$). In particular, the results of our alternative model testing suggested that moderated mediation model was supported for both promotive voice as an outcome (*Index* = 0.13, 95% CI = [0.07, 0.20]) and prohibitive voice as an outcome (*Index* = 0.06, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.11]). Specifically, conscientiousness was positively related to promotive voice via perceived ethicality for lower (-1 SD) levels of hierarchy of authority (*conditional indirect effect* = 0.23, 95% CI = [0.13, 0.34]); these conditional indirect effects were nonsignificant at higher levels (*conditional indirect effect* = -0.03 , 95% CI = [-0.09 , 0.02]). Likewise, conscientiousness was positively related to prohibitive voice via perceived ethicality for lower (-1 SD) levels of hierarchy of authority (*conditional indirect effect* = 0.11, 95% CI = [0.03, 0.18]); these conditional indirect effects were nonsignificant at higher levels (*conditional*

indirect effect = -0.02 , 95% CI = [-0.04 , 0.01]). These post-hoc analyses suggested that although our hypothesized model fit the data well, the alternative model also seems plausible. Consistent with the recommendations of Vandenberg (2006), we lent on our theory, not the process of “exploring,” to ascertain the acceptable model. Vandenberg (2006) noted that “there could be any number of alternative models that fit mathematically equivalent to, and now also better than, the conceptual model” and thus highlighted the importance of “a conceptual decision” (p. 197). We emphasize that, according to both trait activation theory and theories of voice (Morrison, 2014, 2023), the behavioral responses (voice) of a focal employee are used to inform others' judgments of the employee (ethicality). Our theoretical arguments also are consistent with predictions that voice informs coworkers' perceptions of the voicer (Morrison, 2023). As such, we retained our theorized model while recommending future research to utilize longitudinal and experimental research designs to further test the viability of these two (hypothesized and alternative) models.

5 | DISCUSSION

Integrating trait activation theory (Tett et al., 2021; Tett & Burnett, 2003) with the social information processing perspective (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and work design scholarship (Parker, 2014), we examined why even employees with the most ethical predisposition—those scoring higher on conscientiousness—may not always be perceived as ethical by their peers. Using multisource field data from employees, their supervisors, and coworkers, we demonstrated that others are more likely to notice the promotive and prohibitive voice of highly conscientious employees in a work context characterized by lower levels of hierarchy of authority. Although the interactive effects were significant for both types of voice, only promotive voice explained why others view conscientious employees as being more ethical when decisions are decentralized and greater leeway about how tasks are completed is given. Unexpectedly, prohibitive voice did not mediate the interactive effects between conscientiousness and hierarchy of authority in informing perceived ethicality.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

Our research extended trait activation theory (Tett et al., 2021; Tett & Guterman, 2000) by integrating it with the social information processing perspective of work design (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) to explain why others may perceive conscientious employees as more or less ethical in certain social contexts. Trait activation theory has been applied in assessment centers to explain why others evaluate trait-relevant behaviors differently across contexts (Lievens et al., 2006; Lievens et al., 2015). According to this theory, “the opportunity to observe differences in trait-relevant behavior within a situation depends upon both the relevance and strength of the situation” (Lievens et al., 2006, p. 248). Although not all personality traits are

equally observable across situations, trait activation theory suggests conscientiousness is one of the most readily observable (Lievens et al., 2006). This is because qualities that define conscientiousness such as being organized, diligent, planful, and detail-oriented are readily observable and relevant to peers who work interdependently.

We extended this theory by examining the effects of trait perception in different contexts. In doing so, we build on the social information processing perspective, which suggests that people assess others' behaviors according to the social cues of their immediate social environment (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Integrating this perspective, we demonstrated that in some work contexts trait expressive behaviors may go unnoticed by others, whereas in other situations such behaviors are noticed. In doing so, we conceptualized voice as a behavioral response of conscientious employees at different levels of hierarchy of authority and explained how these behavioral responses may be perceived by others to varying degrees. Our research demonstrated that in work contexts characterized by lower hierarchy of authority others receive more cues to learn about normatively appropriate behaviors and hence are more likely to notice conscientious employees' voice because voicing is aligned with the social demands of decentralized work environment (Chamberlin et al., 2017). Yet only promotive voice explained why conscientious employees are viewed as more ethical in such work contexts. Our findings that, in lower hierarchy of authority, promotive (and not prohibitive voice) mediated the relationship between conscientiousness and perceived ethicality are consistent with meta-analytic research suggesting that conscientiousness is more positively related to promotive than prohibitive voice (Chamberlin et al., 2017). When decisions are decentralized others noticed more proactive voicing directed at approaching work issues, rather than prohibitive voice, which captures avoiding negative consequences.

Although trait activation theory conceptualized conscientiousness as one of the most observable traits (Lievens et al., 2006), our research has shown that the visibility and outcomes derived from this desirable trait depends on the context in which it is evaluated. When hierarchy of authority is lower, others appeared to notice both the promotive and prohibitive voice of conscientious employees, and the former type of voice explained their heightened perceived ethicality. Presumably, lower hierarchy of authority is a weak work context with ambiguous behavioral demands, wherein peers tend to evaluate others based on their trait relevant behaviors and hence they recognize the voice of conscientious employees. Our research extended the traditional view of trait activation theory that focuses on why individuals choose to engage in specific behaviors (Lievens et al., 2006). Instead, we demonstrated that the social context influences whether the behaviors of conscientious individuals are noticed or attended to by others. By incorporating individual differences and the social context, we extended understanding of how others make judgments about ethicality.

Contrary to our hypothesis, prohibitive voice did not mediate the conditional effects. In explaining this nonsignificant result, we lend on research examining the nature and content of voice that may give rise to differential peer ratings. Prohibitive voice captures stopping or

changing a detrimental practice in an organization (Liang et al., 2012). As such, prohibitive voice may be particularly risky and interpersonally challenging because it involves directly addressing issues with one's colleagues, even if it means embarrassing or straining interpersonal relationships. As such, prohibitive voice is target specific and sensitive because it relates to perceived deficiencies in others and their work (Mesdaghinia et al., 2022). Indeed, research suggests prohibitive voice may elicit mixed reactions from coworkers including both support for voiced issues as well as fear of potentially threatening changes (Morrison, 2023). The distinction between promotive and prohibitive voice may also reflect the ethically laden content of the items, reflecting a growing consideration of voice content (Burriss et al., 2017). Promotive voice items are positive in content, yet prohibitive voice items include both the recognition of a suboptimal work practice and the (potential) confrontation of peers (e.g., "I advise other colleagues... even if it embarrasses others"). Confronting peers may elicit negative reactions from the focal employee as well as others who may perceive prohibitive voice as a mixed message. Prohibitive voice should positively relate to ethicality perceptions because it seeks to correct a problem; however, it may also be negatively related to perceived ethicality due to its interpersonally challenging nature that may threaten norms around mutual respect. Consistent with this logic, Burriss et al. (2017) found the extent to which voice considered interdependence to be a key factor in determining whether managers perceived voice to be valuable. We also argue that it is possible that the mixed messaging inherent in prohibitive voice might have influenced raters' perceptions of ethicality. Perhaps there was a split amongst raters in that some of them viewed the prohibitive voice positively, whereas others thought it was negative, and these ratings canceled each other out resulting in nonsignificant findings regarding the prohibitive voice in our model.

The results of our research also advanced our knowledge about the antecedents of perceived ethicality by unpacking characteristics of "bad barrels" that can spoil (or result in reduced perceived ethicality) "good apples" (conscientiousness). Conscientious employees are characterized by their high ethical standards (Cohen et al., 2014) and research has found it is negatively related to organizational deviance (i.e., doing "wrong"), as evidenced by meta-analyses (e.g., Berry et al., 2007; Salgado, 2002). Given conceptual similarities between deviant and unethical work behaviors, it is surprising that conscientiousness has not received much empirical attention in the behavioral ethics literature (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Tenbrunsel & Chugh, 2015). Our research helps address this gap by showing how others perceive conscientious employees as being more (less) ethical in work contexts characterized by lower (higher) hierarchy of authority. Our findings contribute to the scholarship about the perils of conscientiousness (Liu et al., 2022; Venkatesh et al., 2021) by demonstrating how others are more likely to doubt the ethicality of these employees in social contexts where decision-making is centralized amongst supervisors and the stringent formalization of policies and practices is imposed. Others notice the voice of conscientious employees less, and a lack of recognition of their voice diminishes the perceived ethicality of these workers.

The moderating effects identified herein are noteworthy as research has mainly focused on examining either “bad barrels”—situations that contribute to unethical outcomes—or “bad apples”—where individual differences are the root cause of unethicality (Tenbrunsel & Chugh, 2015; Trevino et al., 2014). We responded to a call to “explore both the contextual or organizational conditions that might moderate individual differences effect” in the enactment and perception of ethical behavior (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010, p. 23). In answering this call, we examined hierarchy of authority because many organizations implement a higher hierarchy of authority as a way to minimize unethical transgressions (Bandiera et al., 2021). By integrating the social information processing perspective to work design (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) that explains how social contexts direct others' attention to certain cues when evaluating others' behaviors, we demonstrated how the positive relationship between conscientiousness and perceived ethicality may be weakened in some contexts. Our results unpacked how in poorly structured work contexts others may not notice the voice of conscientious employees and thus may judge these otherwise ethical benchmarks as less ethical. Job design plays a critical role in influencing the performance of employees, teams, and organizations (see a review on the topic: Parker, Morgeson, & Johns, 2017). Yet, it also influences other critical outcomes such as learning, development, happiness (Parker, 2014), and task performance (Bandiera et al., 2021; Carpini et al., 2017). Accordingly, researchers have been urged to expand the criterion domain of work design “by exploring when, why, and how work design can help to achieve different purposes” (Parker, 2014, p. 671). We responded to this call by examining why the nearly universal positive appraisal of highly conscientious employees as those upholding high ethical standards may be weakened in work contexts characterized by higher hierarchy of authority. Our research showed that others viewed conscientious employees as more ethical in social contexts characterized by decentralized decision-making and less policy and practice formalization that allowed others to observe greater behavioral variability. This in turn allowed peers to notice the voice of conscientious employees. Conversely, when organizations impose greater formalization and standardization, the opposite result was achieved in that others failed to notice the voice of conscientious employees, which led to others perceiving these otherwise highly valued employees as less ethical.

5.2 | Practical implications

First and foremost, our results speak to current challenges HR practitioners are facing in balancing organizational requirements for enhanced flexibility and inclusion (Snell et al., 2023), while simultaneously supporting greater efficiency and ethicality amongst employees through centralized decision-making and increased formalization in how tasks are achieved (Pham et al., 2023). Indeed, HR practitioners and organizational leaders alike recognize the importance of creating social contexts conducive to the promotion of ethical behaviors (e.g., Kuenzi et al., 2020; Manroop et al., 2014; Schmidtke, 2007).

Our results suggest that lower hierarchy of authority provides such a work context, particularly for highly conscientious employees whose promotive voice is more likely to be noticed by their peers. From an HR practitioner perspective, such results emphasize the importance of providing more freedom to complete tasks to support flexibility, inclusion, and perceptions of ethicality that can help meet the requirements of dynamic and uncertain business environments (Snell et al., 2023). This is particularly true for highly conscientious employees—organizational benchmarks of normatively appropriate action—who are oft strategically identified, selected and retained due to their propensity to perform highly (Wilmot & Ones, 2019).

Decentralizing decision-making and greater freedom in terms of performing work tasks can be achieved by enriching the jobs of employees so they can make task-related decisions (Parker & Carpini, 2023; Timming et al., 2024). In such contexts, employees have the discretion to make decisions and perform their tasks with minimal supervisory approval (Aiken & Hage, 1966). HR practitioners should support supervisors who encourage their employees to be active decision-makers and give them more freedom in how they perform their work. Such an approach may reduce administrative loads on supervisors who can focus on critical decisions as well as enhance the performance and well-being of all involved.

Second, our results highlight the importance of considering context in bounding the evaluations of critical work-related behaviors that contribute to individual, team, and organizational success (Carpini et al., 2017). Perceptions of ethicality have become an integral part of many performance appraisal systems, complementing traditional criteria such as task proficiency (Morrisette et al., 2021). Organizations that include ethicality in their appraisal systems and operate in a context of lower hierarchy of authority are likely to reward their highly conscientious employees because they are perceived to voice promotively. As such, organizations including ethicality as a criterion should also attend to the promotive voice of conscientious employees. Although our results did not support the assertion that higher levels of hierarchy of authority would undermine perceptions of promotive voice and thus ethicality, previous research has nonetheless highlighted the potential dark side of centralized decision-making and formalization. For example, research suggests a higher hierarchy of authority context was detrimental to the job satisfaction of people with disabilities for whom such a restrictive work context meant delayed time and efficiency in addressing and accommodating their needs (Baumgartner et al., 2015). Hierarchy of authority diminishes adaptive performance (Monteiro & Adler, 2022), one of the critical work behaviors, which benefits all employees, but women in particular (Carpini et al., 2023). As such, higher levels of hierarchy of authority may yield unintended negative and potentially discriminatory consequences that warrant HR practitioners' consideration. Lower hierarchy of authority may also generate unintended benefits (Carpini & Soo, 2022).

Finally, HR managers should be cognizant of the effects of hierarchy of authority on others' perceptions of conscientious employees' voice. Our results suggest that HR managers may be interested in promoting decentralized decision-making and greater leeway in doing

one's work because in such contexts others notice both the promotive and prohibitive voice of conscientious workers. Yet it is critical to raise awareness amongst HR practitioners that employee conscientiousness—a key selection criteria—is negatively related to perceived prohibitive (and not promotive) voice in work contexts with higher levels of hierarchy of authority. Such a negative relationship is consistent with other HR-driven efforts such as relative performance evaluation that inadvertently encourage ethical misconduct (Tzini & Jain, 2018). HR practitioners should be aware of how conscientious employees working in centralized decision-making and formalized contexts may face challenges in fulfilling their roles as ethical benchmarks that help discern “right” and “wrong.” Our results highlighted the concerns of many HR practitioners about the rising importance of ethicality and voice in workplaces (Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2021).

5.3 | Limitations and future research

Despite the strengths of our multisource field study, we note several limitations and opportunities for future research. First, we investigated peer perceptions of voice and ethicality as a function of the hierarchy of authority. However, it is possible a higher hierarchy of authority may attenuate the actual (as opposed to perceived) voice behaviors of conscientious employees. Due to the centralization of decision-making and formalization, conscientious employees may comply with signals that decisions are made by supervisors and all matters (even trivial ones) must be approved by higher-ups and thus refrain from voicing their suggestions or concerns. The reduction in actual voice by conscientious employees may also account for why peers perceive less voice in higher than lower hierarchy of authority contexts. Indirectly supporting this possibility, meta-analytic evidence showed similar correlations between conscientiousness and self- and peer-rated voice (Chamberlin et al., 2017; Zare & Flinchbaugh, 2018), while also acknowledging that “source of rating does not moderate the relationship between voice and the Big Five” (Zare & Flinchbaugh, 2018, p. 42). Based on this, we expect that our results will hold for actual (in addition to perceived) voice of conscientious employees. To minimize common-method variance, we measured the independent, moderator, and dependent variables across different sources, namely, self-reports, supervisor, and peer ratings, respectively. Future research may elaborate the distinction between actual and perceived voice in higher/lower hierarchy of authority contexts and can do so by leveraging multisource longitudinal designs. Such efforts may also demonstrate the incremental validity of promotive voice over and above other sources of information peers use in making ethicality judgments. Future research may also complement our findings by using objective indicators of voice such as number of constructive suggestions (Grant & Rothbard, 2013).

Second, this research examined both promotive and prohibitive voice as two emergent behavioral responses of conscientious employees; yet there are other theoretically relevant forms of voice. Maynes and Podsakoff (2014) proposed an expanded typology of

voice including supportive, constructive, defensive, and destructive—all of which may be bounded by the strength of the hierarchy of authority. Future research may extend our model to various forms of voice with ethics-specific voice (Zheng et al., 2022). Notably, there is an overlap between the items used to assess ethical voice (e.g., “I speak up in our team to stop others from behaving with a lack of integrity”) and those used in the present study (e.g., “Advises other colleagues against undesirable behaviors that would hamper unit performance”). Indeed, undesirable behaviors are broader than unethical voice and may include those behaviors contravening integrity. Finally, we collected our data in Australia, which may raise questions to the role of national culture in our findings. Ethical behaviors are culturally bound (Resick et al., 2011). For example, being open and flexible was viewed as a more important ethical behavior in the United States than in Asian (e.g., Hong Kong) or European (e.g., Germany) countries; whereas, having a narrow short-term focus was considered as more unethical in Hong Kong than the United States (Resick et al., 2011). Given these cultural variations in the perceptions of ethical behaviors, our model may play out differently across cultural contexts.

Based on the results of our findings, we offer several avenues for future research. First, we examined hierarchy of authority as a social context that shapes perceptions of conscientious employees' ethicality. Future scholars could extend our work by examining other potentially “bad barrels” that can predispose ethically intentioned employees to be perceived as upholding their ethical standards to a lesser degree (Trevino et al., 2014). Furthermore, what can be done to change the “barrel” to make manifestations of ethicality such as voice more visible and noticeable to others? Could proximal group characteristics mitigate the negative effects of a higher hierarchy of authority? Second, the types of voice included herein are more closely aligned with a rational approach to ethical situations; however, ethical judgments may be explained by irrational, affective responses (Tenbrunsel & Chugh, 2015). It would be theoretically promising to examine emotional responses of others viewing conscientious employees in work contexts that either highlight or suppress behavioral responses of these employees. Finally, we examined conscientiousness as one personality predictor of perceived ethicality because of its negative links with deviance and dishonesty (Berry et al., 2007; Giluk & Postlethwaite, 2015). Future research could explore whether other personality traits, which have been shown to relate to unethical behaviors such as Machiavellianism (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010) would be perceived by others differently if placed in different (good or bad) barrels.

6 | CONCLUSION

In our research, we examined why even the most ethically predisposed employees, who are oft considered to be the ethical benchmarks of an organization, may not always be perceived as upholding their presumed high ethical standards. Using multisource field data, we demonstrated that others viewed conscientious employees as ethical in social contexts that decentralized decision-making and gave

employees the freedom over how they achieve their work goals. This is because in such work contexts, others had more opportunities to observe, notice, and recognize conscientious employees' propensity to voice improvements or speak up about questionable practices that might undermine their team's performance. In contrast, others failed to appraise conscientious employees as raising their voices, resulting in reduced ethicality perceptions in work contexts with centralized decision-making and greater formalization. The results raise awareness of the potential unintended negative consequences of trends toward formalization and centralization that may inadvertently undermine the contributions of highly conscientious employees—those that are often amongst the most sought-after employees during selection practices.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no perceived or actual conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

¹ We acknowledge scholars have also used *moral* and *ethical* synonymously in previous research (e.g., Hannah et al., 2011; Jennings et al., 2015).

² Additional research from these data have been published elsewhere. Specifically, partial data overlap with Luksyte et al.'s (2022) Study 2 and partial data overlap with Carpini et al.'s (2023) Study 2. No data used here have previously been published.

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