

The Role of Organizational Cynicism and Conscientiousness in the Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Deviance

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Abstract: This study examines the influential role that organizational cynicism plays in understanding the relationship between ethical leadership and deviant work behavior. Scant research has addressed leadership or personality traits in determining organizational cynicism and its relationship to important outcomes such as deviant work behavior. An interactive effect of ethical leadership and conscientiousness is examined to determine if conscientious individuals are more or less prone to become organizational cynics based on the presence or absence of ethical leadership. The results suggest that conscientious individuals are less likely to rely on ethical leadership to prevent organizational cynicism and subsequent deviant behaviors. Conversely, individuals with lower levels of conscientiousness are more sensitive to ethical leadership and are more likely to respond as cynics, and with subsequent deviant behaviors. That is, individuals with higher levels of conscientiousness do not need ethical role models to prevent cynicism and deviant behaviors nearly as much as those who have lower levels of conscientiousness. The results provide important insights into how, and when, ethical leadership affects deviant workplace behavior.

Keywords: organizational cynicism, ethical leadership, workplace deviance

As the employees filed into the meeting room, they awaited the Vice President of their division to announce the reason for the meeting. "We are here today to discuss the results of the employee engagement survey," he states. "As you know, our results were poor again this year. The leadership team for the company wants to know why. My perspective is that you are free to leave at any time if you are unhappy. No one is forcing you to work here. You know where the door is." The following year only a few employees filled out the engagement survey; they reasoned that it was not worth the time if management was not going to take it seriously to improve their leadership.

As demonstrated in the above vignette, suspicion, mistrust, and negative expectations can arise from the behavior of organizational leaders, potentially leading to cynical attitudes and dysfunctional behaviors. Unfortunately, two-thirds of adults are reported to believe corruption in business is widespread (Khoury and Crabtree, 2019). In the United States, the cynical belief that organizations and organizational leaders are principally self-serving rose in recent years with polls showing only about half of respondents trusting business institutions (Edelman, 2018). These trends are worrisome as employee cynicism is often associated with negative outcomes such as intentions to quit, poor job performance (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013), and deviant behavior (Evans *et al.*, 2011). Despite its prevalence and implications, a comprehensive knowledge of employee cynicism is lacking, and there is a need to examine its causes and consequences (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013; James and Shaw, 2016; Scott and Zweig, 2016).

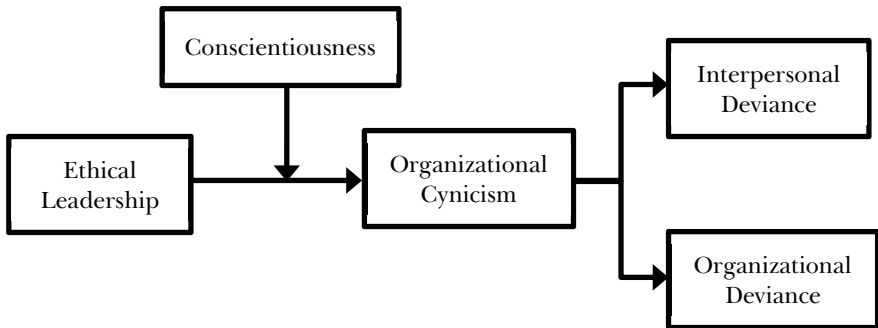
Organizational cynicism is an attitude distinguished by the belief that one's employer, including its procedures and management, lacks integrity and is self-serving with little to no concern for its employees (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Wilkerson, 2002). Research finds that contextual aspects of the work environment are strong predictors of organizational cynicism (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013). Positive aspects (e.g., supportive management and fair treatment) reduce cynicism while negative aspects (e.g., broken promises and self-interested management) are associated with increased levels of cynicism. These antecedents, while informative, focus mostly on organizational policies and practices to alleviate cynicism among the ranks of employees. Research is needed that moves beyond the symptoms of various policies and practices to the essential problem: the persons who make those determinations and manage the employees. Although limited, research in the field of education indicates that organizational cynicism can be mitigated by leadership approaches, including leader-member exchanges (Gkorezis *et al.*, 2014), democratic leadership (Terzi and Derin, 2016), and ethical leadership (Mete, 2013).

The present study empirically tests ethical leadership as an antecedent of organizational cynicism and the subsequent deviance that results from cynicism (see Figure 1). Ethical leadership embodies the policies, practices, and institutionalized norms often associated with organizational cynicism. Ethical leadership is "the demonstration of ethically appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown *et al.*, 2005: 120). Ethical leadership likely encompasses many of the antecedents of organizational cynicism as research indicates employees often feel supported and valued by ethical

managers (Bedi *et al.*, 2016; Loi *et al.*, 2015). Thus, organizations with ethical leadership are less likely to be plagued by perceptions of management duplicity and self-interests.

This study also examines conscientiousness as a moderator of the ethical leadership-organizational cynicism relationship. Conscientious individuals are goal-oriented, dependable, hardworking, and persistent, and these characteristics determine how individuals experience, decipher, and react to their environment (Roberts *et al.*, 2009). Persons high in conscientiousness are typically confident in their own abilities and less sensitive to contextual elements (Roberts *et al.*, 2009; Gerhardt *et al.*, 2007). Individuals are therefore likely to respond differently to ethical leadership depending on their own level of conscientiousness.

Figure I
Hypothesized Model



This study contributes to understanding ethical leadership and organizational cynicism more fully. First, in response to calls for research examining mediated models (Ng and Feldman, 2015; Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013), organizational cynicism is proposed as a mediator of the ethical leadership–deviance relationship. Ethical leadership studies often neglect indirect models that examine how employees process and react to ethical leadership (Ng and Feldman, 2015); similarly, Chiaburu *et al.* (2013) contend organizational cynicism research needs more robust empirical models. Since people generally respond to their evaluations of workplace events rather than the events directly (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993), organizational cynicism can function as a clarifying lens to illuminate the process by which ethical leadership affects employee attitudes and workplace behavior.

Second, the present study incorporates an important individual difference variable into the understanding of ethical leadership and its relationship to workplace deviance. Situational factors dominate studies of organizational cynicism, but there is a need to examine which persons might be more prone to cynicism (Scott and Zweig, 2016). Leadership research also has a history of discounting individual attributes (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014) though personal attributes, such as equity sensitivity, can produce differential reactions to ethical leadership (Evans *et al.*, 2016). Individual differences frame how workplace events are perceived and understood (Roberts *et al.*, 2009); therefore, it is

proposed that ethical leadership and conscientiousness interact to affect organizational cynicism, which in turn influences employee deviance behaviors.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Organizational cynicism is a negative attitude toward one's employing organization; as such, is comprised of the belief that one's employer lacks integrity, negative emotional reactions toward the organization, and behavioral tendencies consistent with these beliefs and feelings (Dean *et al.*, 1998). Cynicism typically arises when employees believe the organization, its management, procedures, and processes are operating in a manner counter to the interests of employees (Wilkerson, 2002). Managers are often viewed as organizational agents (Levinson, 1965) who can have a powerful influence on employee feelings and beliefs about one's employer (Brown *et al.*, 2005; Dean *et al.*, 1998). Research demonstrates the employee-manager interactions can be negative workplace experiences (e.g., unmet expectations) that cause higher employee cynicism, or positive experiences (e.g., fair treatment) that diminish cynicism (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013).

Since ethical leaders promote feelings of trust in management and more positive feelings toward the organization (Bedi *et al.*, 2016), experiencing ethical leadership will likely minimize cynical beliefs about one's employer. The effects of ethical leadership are often examined through the lenses of social learning theory and social exchange theory (Hansen *et al.*, 2013; Ng and Feldman, 2015). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) suggests individuals learn from each other via observation, imitation, and modeling. Learning often occurs by vicarious experience—by observing others' actions and the corresponding consequences. Employees look to organizational leaders as role models to determine their attitudes and behaviors toward many aspects of organizational life including ethical values (Brown *et al.*, 2005).

Social exchange theory describes relationships in terms of a series of interdependent interactions that produce obligations toward one another (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). A common theme in social exchange theory research is that reciprocity is rooted in quid pro quo tendencies. Specifically, unlike economic exchanges that are more contractual in nature, high quality social exchanges generate greater reciprocity through trust, obligation, and gratitude (Blau, 1964; Brown and Trevino, 2006). When employees receive favorable (or unfavorable) treatment, they in turn feel an obligation to reciprocate favorable (or unfavorable) treatment in some kind. Because of the fair and consistent treatment they receive, followers of ethical leaders are more likely to believe they are in a social exchange relationship (Hansen *et al.*, 2013).

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leaders are described as being moral people and moral managers in both their personal and professional lives that instill and reinforce similar values in their followers (Brown *et al.*, 2005; Brown and Trevino, 2006). Moral people act fairly, honestly, and with concern for others in their interpersonal relationships. Moral managers treat followers justly and fairly, which increases the quality of subordinate-follower relationships (Hansen *et al.*, 2013) and thus, ethical leaders are likely to be viewed favorably by followers. Ethical leaders also “practice what they preach” (Brown and Trevino, 2006), which enhances role model credibility and attractiveness. Ethical leaders personally exhibit virtuous behaviors via their own actions, which aligns with

their communications and managerial efforts toward employees. Behavioral integrity, which is the alignment of the words and deeds of managers, is positively related to employee satisfaction with leadership and with favorable attitudes toward an organization (Davis and Rothstein, 2006).

Ethical leaders, as conceptualized by Brown *et al.* (2005), construct employee-employer relationships that adhere to many principles of organizational justice. Ethical leaders act with integrity; they treat followers in a fair, bias-free manner that produces perceptions of leader honesty and favorable views of the organization (Bedi *et al.*, 2016). The consideration style of ethical leaders reflects interactional justice (respectful, truthful), procedural justice (unbiased, consistent), and distributive justice (equitable, fair) (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Xu *et al.*, 2016). Meta-analysis results from Chiaburu *et al.* (2013) revealed all three types of justice have a negative relationship with organizational cynicism. Conversely, unjust treatments, processes, or outcomes are associated with employees having negative feelings and views toward the organization (Colquitt *et al.*, 2013).

Ethical leadership is thus more likely to result in constructive interactive employee-employer relationships (Bedi *et al.*, 2016) that reflect positive socio-emotional attributes such as trust and respect versus low quality employee-employer relationships characterized by suspicion and malice (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Xu *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, ethical leadership has strong positive association with employee trust of management (Bedi *et al.*, 2016; Ng and Feldman, 2015). Organizational cynics, on the other hand, believe employers lack integrity, and cynics have a negative expectancy about the future (Wilkerson *et al.*, 2008). Cynics believe that negative and disappointing experiences will continue in future. Trust and cynicism are opposing beliefs and negatively related: trust emphasizes credibility of one's actions while cynicism implies a lack of trustworthiness (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013). Since trust and organizational cynicism are negatively related, the relationship between ethical leadership and trust provides a compelling inference that ethical leadership will be negatively related to organizational cynicism.

In sum, ethical leadership provides a positive employee-employer experience for employees, which reduces disapproving evaluations of one's employer. Rather than focusing on the policies and practices, this study incorporates the source: the people who make and enact those decisions. Therefore, the first hypothesis is that:

Hypothesis 1: Ethical leadership is negatively related to organizational cynicism.

Individuals tend to respond to their organizational environment in ways that are consistent with their attitudes toward the organization (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993); hence, employees are likely to express organizational cynicism with negative behavioral responses. The model proposed here treats organizational cynicism as a mediator of the ethical leadership-workplace deviance relationship. Workplace deviance is "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in doing so, threatens the well-being of the organization or its members, or both" (Bennett and Robinson, 2000: 349). Workplace deviance can be classified according to the target of the perpetrator's actions. Organizational deviance includes intentionally harmful behaviors directed toward the organization, and interpersonal deviance includes intentionally harmful behaviors directed toward other organizational members.

Deviance typically results from provocations in the workplace such as feeling mistreated, unsupported, or subject to unfair decisions (Colbert *et al.*, 2004; Robinson and Bennett, 1997). The causes underlying deviance are similar to the feelings and beliefs of organizational cynicism. Cynics believe their employers are unscrupulous, lack integrity, and accordingly, cynics feel strong negative emotions such as contempt and anger toward their employing organization (Dean *et al.*, 1998). When employees experience disparity or feel outrage at their situation, they often become motivated to restore balance, improve their circumstances, or vent their frustrations (Robinson and Bennett, 1997). Ethical leadership though is a positive experience, which is likely to reduce disapproving evaluations of one's employer, which should decrease the likelihood of engaging in intentionally harmful behavior. Hence, it is anticipated that:

Hypothesis 2: Organizational cynicism mediates the negative relationship between ethical leadership and (a) organizational deviance and (b) interpersonal deviance.

Personality

Conscientiousness is likely to influence the ethical leadership–organizational cynicism relationship for at least three reasons. First, highly conscientious persons exhibit a higher tendency to utilize self-management practices, including planning to achieve goals and personal motivation (Gerhardt *et al.*, 2007). Self-management entails not only motivation, but also self and situational awareness that support one's own purposeful efforts to achieve goals. Second, conscientiousness is associated with generalized self-efficacy at work (Burke *et al.*, 2006) with a number of studies indicating conscientiousness is related to an overall belief in one's ability to successfully complete work tasks (Roberts *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, conscientiousness is negatively associated with perceived situational constraints (Gerhardt *et al.*, 2007). Conscientious persons will likely respond to challenging situations with more planning and persistence in order to achieve their goals. Third, conscientiousness is associated with experiencing positive affect and more satisfaction with life and work (Heller *et al.*, 2004). Persons with higher levels of conscientiousness are more likely to engage in positive coping actions (i.e., problem-focused planning and action). As these findings suggest, persons with higher levels of conscientiousness are industrious self-managers and thus should be less sensitive to the effect of ethical leadership.

Consistent with the person-situation interactionist paradigm, respondents should have nuanced responses to ethical leadership based on their degree of conscientiousness. More specifically, persons with low levels of conscientiousness are more likely to respond favorably to ethical leadership exhibited by their managers, since low conscientiousness persons are typically more susceptible to situational circumstances. Persons low in conscientiousness are more likely to look to their supervisors for cues for managing their circumstances and as a source of satisfaction. In addition, since low conscientiousness persons typically experience more negative feelings and beliefs, they are more likely to feel contempt and resentment toward their employer when ethical leadership is low, and thus they will engage in higher levels of workplace deviance. Hence, conscientiousness should moderate the effect of ethical leadership such that:

Hypothesis 3a: Conscientiousness moderates the indirect negative relationship between ethical leadership and organizational deviance through organizational cynicism. For persons with lower (higher) levels of conscientiousness, there will be a stronger (weaker) negative indirect effect of ethical leadership on organizational deviance through organizational cynicism.

Hypothesis 3b: Conscientiousness moderates the indirect negative relationship between ethical leadership and interpersonal deviance through organizational cynicism. For persons with lower (higher) levels of conscientiousness, there will be a stronger (weaker) negative indirect effect of ethical leadership on interpersonal deviance through organizational cynicism.

METHOD

Participants and Data Collection

Working adults enrolled as graduate-level students at a metropolitan university in the United States were solicited to participate in an online survey in exchange for nominal extra credit. Participation was voluntary and responses were confidential. From a possible 359 subjects, 332 surveys were recorded online. Fifty-five surveys were missing entire sections of data and thus discarded, which resulted in a sample of 277 working adults. Median age was 27.1 years ($SD = 6.1$) with average work experience of 8.1 years ($SD = 6.0$). Subjects were mostly male (53.4%) and 24.2% reported having managerial/supervisory experience. The majority of the subjects identified as Caucasian (79.1%), followed by Black (7.9%), and then Asian (6.1%).

Measures

Constructs were measured with established instruments and respondents answered using a five-point Likert-type scale unless otherwise noted. Scale responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Ethical leadership. Employees responded to ten questions regarding the extent to which their supervisor engaged in behaviors consistent with ethical leadership (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Sample items include “makes fair and balanced decisions” and “discusses business ethics or values with employees” ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Organizational cynicism. This attitude was measured with the Wilkerson *et al.* (2008) seven-item instrument. Employees were asked to think about their employing organization when responding to each of the items. Sample items include “Company management is more interested in its goals and needs than in its employees’ welfare” and “Overall, I expect more success than disappointment in working with this company” (reverse scored) ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Conscientiousness. The International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) scale (Goldberg *et al.*, 2006) for conscientiousness from Costa and McCrae (1992) was used to assess the extent to which respondents engaged in behaviors representative of trait conscientiousness. Sample items for this ten-item scale include, “Am always prepared” and “Make plans and stick to them” ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Workplace deviance. Employee deviance was measured with scales developed by Bennett and Robinson (2000) that differentiate deviance directed at the organization and deviance directed toward coworkers. Sample items from the twelve-item

organizational deviance scale include “Taken property without permission” and “Intentionally worked slower than you could have worked” ($\alpha = 0.76$). Sample items from the seven-item interpersonal deviance scale include “Said something hurtful to someone at work” and “Cursed someone at work” ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Social desirability responding (SDR). Social desirability responding (SDR) was a control variable to limit potential bias associated with dependent variables (workplace deviance) that are less socially acceptable or desirable. SDR was measured with the thirteen-item True/False scale developed by Reynolds (1982). Sample items include “I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable” and “No matter who I am talking to, I am always a good listener” ($\alpha = 0.66$).

RESULTS

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations, and reliability coefficients. As expected, ethical leadership was negatively correlated with organizational cynicism ($r = -0.65$, $p < 0.01$), and organizational cynicism was positively correlated with organizational deviance ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$) and interpersonal deviance ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$).

MPlus 8.1 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998-2017) was used to estimate the model parameters for the confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs). The weighted least squares mean and variance (WLSMV) estimator was used for all models. For the purposes of latent variable scaling and model identification, each latent factor variance was fixed at one. Table 2 includes the different models tested ranging from a one-factor to a six-factor model with chi-square difference testing. Of the six models, the hypothesized six-factor model exhibited the best fit ($\chi^2 = 2298.80$, $df = 1637$, $CFI = 0.95$, $TLI = 0.95$, $RMSEA = 0.04$, $SRMR = 0.09$).

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations and Cronbach Alpha Reliabilities

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
SDR	8.46	2.62	(0.66)					
Ethical Leadership	3.95	0.82	0.19**	(0.94)				
Organizational Cynicism	2.50	0.77	-0.17**	-0.65**	(0.88)			
Conscientiousness	4.06	0.52	0.29**	0.19**	-0.18**	(0.83)		
Organizational Deviance	1.55	0.39	-0.43**	-0.18**	0.25**	-0.57**	(0.75)	
Interpersonal Deviance	1.48	0.55	-0.36**	-0.15*	0.19**	-0.21**	0.43**	(0.83)

Notes: SDR = social desirability responding; ** = $p < 0.01$. Cronbach Alpha reliability values are shown on the diagonal.

Table 2
Measurement Model Assessment

Models	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$, $\Delta df[1]$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Model 1: One-factor model	5071.16**	1652		0.73	0.72	0.09	0.15
Model 2: Two-factor model (Deviance, cynicism, and social desirability created as its own factor.)	4490.96**	1651	166.27, 1**	0.77	0.76	0.08	0.15
Model 3: Three-factor model (Conscientiousness as own factor.)	3618.55**	1649	196.58, 2**	0.84	0.84	0.07	0.13
Model 4: Four-factor model (Social desirability as its own factor.)	3554.16**	1646	31.51, 3**	0.85	0.84	0.07	0.13
Model 5: Five-factor model (Cynicism as its own factor.)	2469.98**	1642	221.95, 4**	0.93	0.93	0.04	0.10
Model 6: Six-factor model (Hypothesized model)	2298.80**	1637	69.25, 5**	0.95	0.95	0.04	0.09

CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean squared residual, * $p > 0.05$; ** $p > 0.01$

Hypotheses were tested using SPSS version 23 along with the PROCESS version 3 macro developed by Hayes (2018). Hierarchical multiple regression and conditional process modeling are tools to analyze direct effects, indirect effects, and conditional indirect effects. Table 3, Model 1 reports the regression results for Hypothesis 1. The control variable of SDR was entered in step 1 and the predictor in step 2. Results support a negative relationship between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism ($B = -0.60, t = -13.30, p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 2a predicted organizational cynicism would mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and the outcomes of organizational deviance and interpersonal deviance. SDR was entered in step 1, ethical leadership was entered in step 2, and organizational cynicism was entered in step 3 (see Table 4). Hypothesis 2a was supported as the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational deviance was no longer significant when the mediator was entered (Baron and Kenney, 1986) while organizational cynicism had a significant effect on organizational deviance ($B = 0.10, t = 2.86, p < 0.01$). Mediation was also tested by the bootstrapping resampling method that creates an empirical representation of the indirect effect with the distribution of results used to create a confidence interval (CI) (Hayes, 2018). Based on the bias corrected method with 5,000 estimates, the indirect effect is supported (estimated effect = -0.06 , CI $[-0.11, -0.02]$). Regression results did not support Hypothesis 2b, which predicted a mediated effect for the outcome of interpersonal deviance. The CI around the regression coefficient for organizational cynicism ($B = 0.09, t = 1.67, p < 0.10$) includes zero, and the indirect effect estimate also has zero in the CI (estimated effect = -0.05 , CI $[-0.11, 0.00]$).

Table 3
Regression Results for Organizational Cynicism as Dependent Variable

	Organizational Cynicism			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	95% C.I.	B	95% C.I.
Constant	5.21 **	[4.61, 5.80]	8.67 **	[6.21, 11.13]
SDR	-0.01	[-0.04, 0.02]	-0.01	[-0.04, 0.02]
Ethical Leadership	-0.60 **	[-0.69, -0.51]	-1.49 **	[-2.11, -0.87]
Conscientiousness	-0.07	[0.90, 1.11]	-0.91 **	[-1.52, -0.31]
Ethical Leadership * Conscientiousness			0.22 **	[0.07, 0.37]
R^2	0.42 **		0.44 **	
$R^2 \Delta$	0.39 **		0.02 **	

** = $p < 0.01$

Table 4
Regression Results for Mediation Analysis

Organizational Deviance				
	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	95% C.I.	B	95% C.I.
Constant	2.45**	[2.01, 2.47]	1.74**	[1.32, 2.15]
SDR	-0.06**	[-0.08, -0.04]	-0.06**	[-0.08, -0.04]
Ethical Leadership	-0.05 †	[-0.10, 0.00]	-0.05**	[-0.05, 0.08]
Organizational Cynicism			0.10**	[0.03, 0.27]
R^2	0.19**		0.21**	
$R^2 \Delta$	0.01 †		0.02**	

Interpersonal Deviance				
	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	95% C.I.	B	95% C.I.
Constant	2.33**	[2.00, 2.67]	1.89**	[1.27, 2.15]
SDR	-0.07**	[-0.10, -0.05]	-0.07**	[-0.10, -0.05]
Ethical Leadership	-0.06	[-0.14, 0.02]	-0.01	[-0.10, 0.09]
Organizational Cynicism			0.09 †	[-0.02, 0.19]
R^2	0.14**		0.15**	
$R^2 \Delta$	0.01		0.01 †	

** = $p < 0.01$; † = $p < 0.10$

Hypothesis 3 concerned the conditional indirect effect of the ethical leadership-conscientiousness interaction through the mediator of organizational cynicism. Hypothesis 3a predicted a conditional indirect effect on the outcome of organizational deviance. Table 3, Model 2 shows organizational cynicism regressed on the interaction term, which was significant ($B = 0.22$, $t = 2.86$, $p < 0.01$). Figure II shows a graph of the interaction with organizational cynicism plotted at $\pm$ one standard deviation. Results from simple slope analysis revealed that, for those persons low in conscientiousness, the negative relationship between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism was significant (simple slope = -0.72 , $t = -2.24$, $p < 0.05$). However, for those persons high in conscientiousness, the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism was not significant (simple slope = -0.49 , $t = -1.52$, n.s.). Table 5 reports results from the PROCESS analysis of the mediated relationship between ethical leadership and the two types of workplace deviance at different levels of conscientiousness. Bootstrapping resampling was again used to estimate the moderated mediation effect. Hypothesis 3a predicted conscientiousness would moderate the indirect negative relationship between ethical leadership and

organizational deviance through organizational cynicism. Hypothesis 3a was supported as the strongest mediated effect was for persons with lower levels of conscientiousness (estimated effect = -0.07, CI [-0.13, -0.21]). Hypothesis 3b that predicted a moderated mediation effect for the outcome of interpersonal deviance was not supported. The CI for each estimated effect includes zero, as did the regression coefficient previously reported.

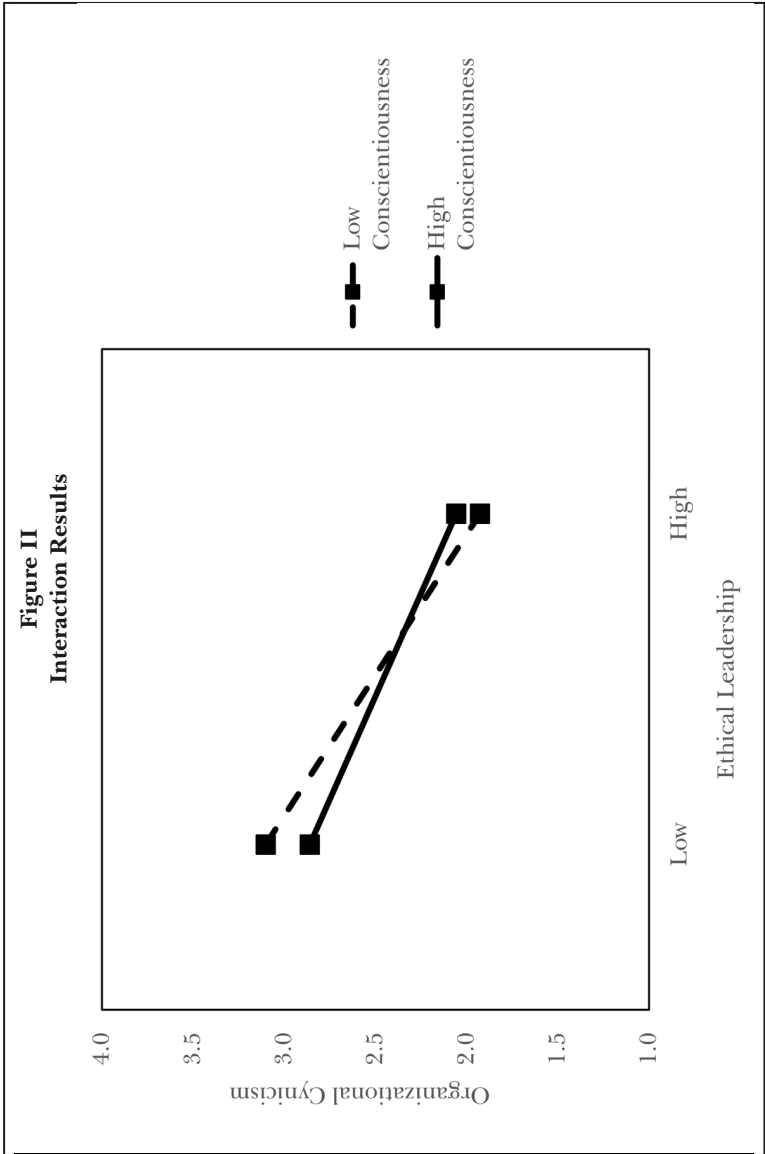


Table 5
Conditional Indirect Effects

Ethical Leadership → Organizational Cynicism → Organizational Deviance					
Conditional Values	Conscientiousness	Effect	SE	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
-1 SD Conscientiousness	3.54	-0.07	0.03	-0.13	-0.21
Mean Conscientiousness	4.06	-0.06	0.02	-0.11	-0.02
+1 SD Conscientiousness	4.58	-0.05	0.02	-0.09	-0.01
Ethical Leadership → Organizational Cynicism → Interpersonal Deviance					
Conditional Values	Conscientiousness	Estimate	SE	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
-1 SD Conscientiousness	3.54	-0.06	0.03	-0.13	0.00
Mean Conscientiousness	4.06	-0.05	0.03	-0.11	0.00
+1 SD Conscientiousness	4.58	-0.04	0.02	-0.09	0.00

Lower and upper bounds are 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals

DISCUSSION

Investigating the relationships among ethical leadership, conscientiousness, organizational cynicism, and workplace deviance provides new insights for further understanding the processes by which ethical leadership affects employees (Ng and Feldman, 2015) and second, how organizational cynicism develops (Scott and Zweig, 2016). Examining ethical leadership as an antecedent of organizational cynicism moves research beyond symptoms of organizational policies and practices to the underlying cause: the people who make and enact those decisions. In doing so, the findings demonstrate that the character and leadership of the individuals who execute policies and practices may be just as important as the policies / practices themselves. This study also demonstrates the power of individual differences—specifically conscientiousness—as potential buffers in the formation of attitudes and subsequent behaviors.

Findings indicate organizational cynicism mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and organizationally targeted deviance. Furthermore, persons low in the trait of conscientiousness reacted more strongly to the lack (or presence) of ethical leadership than persons with higher levels of conscientiousness. While ethical leadership was negatively related to organizational cynicism, persons with lower levels of conscientiousness reported higher levels of organizational cynicism when ethical leadership was low. When ethical leadership was high, persons low in conscientiousness reported lower levels of organizational cynicism. Persons may differentially react to ethical leadership and thus, develop different degrees of organizational cynicism, which then influences one's degree of organizational deviance.

The results also indicate that ethical leadership has an impact on organizational deviance, but not on interpersonal deviance. This is important for understanding organizational cynicism. This form of cynicism is not a broadly focused attitude, nor is it an artifact of persons who are cynical in nature. Rather, it is an attitude focused specifically on the organization and its managers, and the behavioral impacts of this

form of cynicism appear concentrated on the organization and its managers. This provides further evidence that the leadership behaviors of an organization's managers actually matter.

Theoretical and Future Research Implications

These findings can be interpreted in the context of calls for a person-situation framework of organizational cynicism (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013; Scott and Zweig, 2016). Attitudes generally have both dispositional and experiential roots (Heller *et al.*, 2004; Eagly and Chaiken, 1993); yet organizational cynicism research has largely overlooked how personal predilections and tendencies affect how contextual issues are internalized. Some individuals may be acutely sensitive to organizational events, while others may be less responsive to contextual events. Individuals who have a cynical attitude toward their employers often suffer negative personal consequences, such as lower job satisfaction and lower levels of performance (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013). The current findings reinforce the notion that unethical leadership, and the resulting organizational cynicism, leads to negative outcomes not only for individuals, but for the organization as a whole.

The mediated model tested in this study also contributes to the ethical leadership literature. In particular, there remains a need to examine the process by which ethical leadership impacts employee outcomes such as behavior and decision-making (Ng and Feldman, 2015). The current findings point to organizational cynicism as an important part of this process. Organizational cynicism represents an evaluation of one's employing organization as to current and future events (Dean *et al.*, 1998; Wilkerson, 2002) and thus, this attitude provides perspective as to how an employee thinks, feels, and may respond based on the degree of ethical leadership exhibited by their managers. Managers are often seen by employees as having power and prominence, and thus can be instrumental forces on the perceptions of followers (Bandura, 1986; Levinson, 1965). The current results indicate that ethical leaders can reduce negative employee evaluations and reduce the likelihood of organizationally targeted deviance.

Another contribution of this study is revealing that conscientiousness influences the development of organizational cynicism in response to ethical leadership. Those high in conscientiousness appear less susceptible to the negative impacts of unethical leadership. This is consistent with research on conscientiousness, which shows that persons high in conscientiousness engage in more self-management, are less influenced by situational factors (Gerhardt *et al.*, 2007), and have higher generalized self-efficacy (Burke *et al.*, 2006). However, low conscientious persons appear to need effective ethical leader interactions since they are more susceptible to and responsive to the work context. Since conscientious individuals are more capable of self-regulation of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Roberts *et al.*, 2009), this trait may serve as a buffer against the influence of an unethical leader.

The non-significant findings for the outcome of interpersonal deviance are also informative. In general, deviant acts are in response to perceived injustices, threats to oneself, or mistreatment (Colbert *et al.*, 2004; Robinson and Bennett, 1997). Interpersonal deviance targets other members of the organization while organizational deviance focuses on the organization as a whole. Within this study, employees might be differentiating their responses to cynical attitudes according to the object of those attitudes. Employees with high levels of organizational cynicism are directing their frustration toward the primary object of their frustration—the organization. Cynical

employees may very well act out (i.e., cursing, making fun of) toward perceived agents of the organization (boss or managers) yet still treat fellow co-workers well. Similar results were found by James and Shaw (2016) who assessed cynicism stemming from coworkers, immediate supervisors, and upper-level management. Their study found that employees differentiated between specific types of individuals, and that employees were apparently sensitive to specific persons viewed as accountable for perceived psychological contract violations. Future research should continue with a finer grained examination of both the sources of employee cynicism and associated outcomes to elucidate the nomological network of organizational cynicism.

Future research should also continue to extend the person-situation framework of organizational cynicism. While organizational cynicism is often seen as an attitude with negative consequences, it may also serve as a coping mechanism for persons in a challenging, unethical environment. Persons exposed to unethical leadership likely have few prospects for actually changing their leaders' behavior. However, a "healthy" amount of cynicism may provide individuals with the psychological resources needed to cope with extenuating or challenging circumstances. Further, such healthy cynicism may keep individuals from falling prey to unethical leaders, who often have the power and persuasive capacity to compel followers into unethical behaviors. An interesting question to consider is whether higher levels of organization cynicism inoculates persons from the persuasive power of unethical leaders attempting to dupe their followers into behaviors they may regret. Since personality can affect employee-supervisor dynamics, other personality variables could also be examined. For instance, traits such as moral identity may be particularly relevant when experiencing pronounced levels of organizational cynicism. Moral identity, a person's self-conception of moral beliefs and ideals (Aquino and Reed, 2002), seems likely to function as a form of self-regulation to resist social pressures.

Practical Implications

Organizations concerned with the implications of a cynical workforce could (a) promote ethical leadership and/or (b) conscientiousness. First, organizations would benefit from actively promoting ethical leadership among their supervisors. However, effective ethics training can be elusive. Results from a recent Gallup poll found less than half those persons completing ethics training learned something to apply in their day-to-day work, and only one-third of those persons thought the training had an effect on their coworkers (Khoury and Crabtree, 2019). More effective ethical leadership programs include an overarching organizational ethical infrastructure (e.g., communication, control, and accountability systems) and in addition, train participants to be aware of the self-deception pitfall of not honestly recognizing one's actions (Tenbrunsel and Messick, 2004).

When implementing ethical leadership initiatives, managers should: (1) recognize employee perceptions of fairness are paramount, (2) beware of bounded ethicality (Bazerman and Moore, 2012), and (3) consider contrarian viewpoints of one's managerial assertions as favored positions may be plagued with hubris (Heath and Heath, 2013). First, managers must contemplate how employees perceive situational constraints. Leaders are choice architects and their frame, options presented (or not presented), and the order of the options presented can guide employee attitudes and behaviors (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). Second, bounded ethicality suggests that

managers may act in unethical ways unconsciously. For example, doing favors for other people perceived as similar (i.e., in-group favoritism) and unconsciously stereotyping others (i.e., implicit bias) can be harmful for individuals who are dissimilar; through self-reflection and accountability from others in the organization, managers can overcome these issues. Last, managers should allow employees to act as devil's advocates and actively disagree. This reduces hubris and managerial bias from impeding decisions. Having a participative process for decision-making is a primary aspect of ethical leadership (Brown *et al.*, 2005).

Organizations would also benefit from actively promoting conscientiousness throughout the employee ranks. These findings point to the need for attention to not just leaders but to the role of followers in ethical behavior. In this study, persons high in conscientiousness were less susceptible to the negative impacts of unethical leadership. This suggests that organizations faced with questions of ethical leadership among its supervisors and managers may want to intervene not only on the leaders, but also on the followers. To address this issue, organizations can (1) hire individuals higher in conscientiousness, and (2) train followers in behaviors and decision-making processes that promote thoughtful responses to leader behaviors.

Conscientiousness can be learned through activities that incorporate contingency management, mental contrasting, and cognitive remediation (Javara *et al.*, 2019). With contingency management, positive changes in behavior are reinforced and rewarded. This is something that an organization can do quite easily for an employee. Mental contrasting involves imagining a goal, the path to the goal, and the obstacles that may arise. This may help managers proactively provide support and assistance for employees to reach goals. Cognitive remediation entails cognitive exercises and educational games to improve attention, working memory, and social cognition. Through these exercises, individuals may transfer these cognitive gains to other challenges and in daily life—specifically work-related tasks. Each of these processes provides tangible guidance for improving the conscientiousness of employees and managers.

Limitations

This study should be interpreted within its limitations. First, all measures were recorded via self-reporting, raising concerns that self-reports may be biased. However, the assumption of a universal biasing effect in mono-method designs is overstated (Spector, 2006). Furthermore, self-report methods are appropriate for assessing personal psychological states. The survey design also included instructions assuring respondents of anonymity, which can lessen response bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003) particularly when asking about sensitive issues such as negative feelings or deviance. In addition, SDR tendency was a control variable to account for the possibility of subjects presenting themselves favorably (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Another potential limitation is that subjects were recruited from a single university, potentially limiting the generalizability of the observed results. A third concern is that Cronbach alpha for SDR equaled 0.66, which is below the often cited, but not absolute, 0.70 threshold (Streiner, 2003). Cronbach alpha measures the interrelatedness of the scale items, and lower alpha values can indicate that some items are reflecting unique variance (Cortina, 1993). Measurement precision is thus a concern of this study, and all studies, because it can affect statistical validity and associated inferences about the relationships among variables.

Finally, cross-sectional designs do not account for temporal sequencing, which leaves open the possibility of reverse causality. The proposed directionality is however rooted in established theory and draws from other published studies. Deviant acts though could be the starting point for the attitude of organizational cynicism as past behaviors are sometimes used to rationalize attitudes (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). Deviant and cynical employees may function as social cues that lessens perceptions of ethical leadership. Overall, each of these limitations represents opportunities for future researchers to address through alternative designs.

Final Comments

The results of this study provide a better understanding of the causes and outcomes of organizational cynicism. The person-situation framework is particularly suited to advancing the understanding of how the complex relationships among ethical leadership, organizational cynicism, and individual personality can ultimately impact individual responses such as deviant behavior. While employee cynicism may be widespread in today's organizations, ongoing research on this important topic can continue to provide insights into solutions to this unfortunate phenomenon.

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