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Influence of Ethical Leadership on DSIW of Employees: A Study on Healthcare Workers

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Abstract: COVID-19 has brought severe impacts on societies for a protracted period of time. The purpose of the current study is to examine the antecedents of societal behaviour in employees to enable them to bring positive change to societal well-being through their work. Drawing on the signalling theory, the current study investigated the association between ethical leadership and the desire to have a significant impact through work (DSIW) via the mediating role of perceived organisational support (POS). Data were collected through doctors and nurses delivering their services in the health sector in large cities of Pakistan. The findings of the current study envisaged that ethical leadership style has a direct influence on the DSIW of employees. Moreover, study findings show that POS plays a vital role in ascertaining the association between ethical leadership style and employees' DSIW. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed in light of the study findings.

Key Words: Ethical leadership, COVID-19, DSIW, POS

Introduction

After the wide spread of the coronavirus pandemic since 2020 across the globe, it has raised some crucial concerns for individuals ([Hellmann et al., 2021](#); [Singh & Singh, 2020](#)), organisations ([Wanasida et al., 2021](#)) and societies at large ([Chakraborty & Maity, 2020](#)). The uncertainty posed by the COVID-19 situation has raised the concern of organisations to play their role in a supportive way to employees in order to elicit prosocial behaviours among them ([Hu et al., 2020](#)). Such times of crisis situation demand individuals' responsible behaviour too so as to participate in

societal impact with broadening perspective. Such behaviours are preceded by a strong societal desire to be considerate in bringing change in others' lives through one's work. [Gully et al. \(2013\)](#) ascertained such positive desire as DSIW. DSIW is defined as a natural disposition that creates the desire among individuals to be the change agent in society so that others' lives can be improved substantially ([Sawmong, 2020](#)). DSIW is such a selfless behavior which is targeted to bring betterment to society ([Barrick et al., 2013](#)).

In this wake, there is a need to foster such leadership in organisations under whom employees

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would develop positive aspirations and desires. According to [Allal-Chérif et al. \(2021\)](#), ethical leadership goes far beyond competency skills to exhibit sincere motivation and kind consideration. Drawing on social learning theory ([Bandura, 1986](#)), ethical leaders exhibit role model that is characterised by love, care and respect, which is emulated by their followers who become prosocial towards others ([Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015](#); [Eva et al., 2019](#)).

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) is deeply inherent in organisational support theory. It constitutes the extent to which employees believe in their organisations' support and the degree to which their organisations value their contributions ([Eisenberger et al., 1986](#)). POS depends largely on the treatment received from the organisations, which in turn fulfils the socio-emotional needs of employees ([Kurtessis et al., 2017](#)). On receiving positive treatment from employers, employees feel emotionally fulfilled, as posited by psychological theory ([Freud, 1997](#)). The current study posited the mediating role of POS in the direct association between ethical leadership and DSIW.

The present study, through its proposed model, furnishes several contributions to the literature on the emerging concept of DSIW. Firstly, our study enriches the nascent understanding of the concept of DSIW and its widespread implication for society in a period of a crisis situation like that of COVID-19. Secondly, the current study addresses the research call by ([Al Halbusi et al., 2021](#)) in exploring "to advance on how ethical leadership can become more effective at work." Thirdly, by presenting POS as an underlying mechanism in the direct relationship between ethical leadership and DSIW among employees, our study contributes to the literature on positive organisational psychology. Finally, our study presents a significant contribution to the South Asian context, i.e., Pakistan. Our study poses implications for hospital administrators, specifically policy makers and organisational managers generally, in promoting ethical leadership across all supervisory levels so as to reap the positive consequences for organisations as well as societal levels.

Theoretical Framework

Ethical Leadership and Signaling Theory

Signalling theory ([Spence, 2002](#)) postulates that information asymmetry between two parties can be bridged with effective signals communication. Effective signals are subject to the attention of receivers and the extent of their observability. Signalling theory has also gained wide application in the field of management ([Connelly et al., 2011](#)). As leadership is characterised by the influential social process, signalling theory explains the process of how followers notice the behaviour of their leaders as signals. [Banks et al. \(2021\)](#) claimed that signalling theory explains how ethical signals generated by ethical leaders become the mechanism by which ethical values are disseminated among the followers. Ethical leaders, through their normative behaviours, pass on the signals of behavioural consideration, fairness interaction and honesty to their followers. Such positive signals bring closer the leaders and followers on the same objective, hence reducing the information asymmetries. This is the power of positive signals that renders the followers on developing a positive perception of the supportive role of their organisations as well as building in them the society-oriented desire.

Ethical Leadership and Perceived Organisational Support

Ethical leaders exert their social power by establishing moral codes (moral person) and creating complex moral codes for others (moral managers) to influence followers' behaviours ([Trevino et al., 2000](#)). Moreover, ethical leaders are said to be transparent, honest, considerate and principled individuals who make rational decisions ([Brown & Trevino, 2006](#)) and are actively involved in managing the ethical and social responsibility ([Groves & LaRocca, 2011](#)).

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) is deeply inherent in organisational support theory. It constitutes the extent to which employees believe in their organisations' support and the degree to which their organisations value their contributions ([Eisenberger et al., 1986](#)). POS is the perception of favourable treatments by the employing

organisations and is concerned with the beliefs of employees regarding their organisations in valuing their contributions and being thoughtful about their well-being ([Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002](#)).

An ethical leader has the legitimate power to influence the employees' behaviour in an anticipated direction ([Tan et al., 2019](#)). Moreover, [Moore et al. \(2018\)](#) highlighted that employees are more inclined towards superiors who are able to establish a fair and transparent work environment and afford fair judgments. Adding to this, if supervisors care for the concerns of employees and respect their dignity, employees would be more pleased and optimistic ([Yang, 2014](#)). Therefore, the current study contends that ethical leadership would enhance the POS of employees that their organisation is supporting and caring for. Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H₁: Ethical leadership is positively associated with perceived organisational support

Ethical Leadership and DSIW

According to [Gully et al. \(2013\)](#), DSIW is defined as the preference of employees to influence others' lives substantially with their work and is society-oriented thought that focuses not on the individual development solely but rather on the societal welfare task. It brings about a positive change in employees and instils in them the desire to make a huge effect through their work. [Barrick et al. \(2013\)](#) pointed out that such a desire can influence the individual's aspiration to bring some meaning to their work. The notion of DSIW is parallel to the concept of altruism ([Gully et al., 2013](#)). Altruism refers to the helping and kind behavior of an individual towards others (Rushton et al., 1981). Organ (1988) claimed altruism to be the core dimension of OCB (Organizational Citizenship Behavior).

Extant of literature propounded that ethical leaders treat their employees with care and due respect, which in turn evokes OCB among followers based on theoretical underpinnings of social learning and social exchange theories ([Mayer et al., 2009](#); [Wang & Sung, 2016](#); [Yang & Wei, 2018](#)). Based on the postulations of social learning

theory ([Bandura, 1986](#)), ethical leaders exhibit role model that is characterised by love, care and respect, which is emulated by their followers who become prosocial towards others ([Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015](#); [Eva et al., 2019](#)).

On the basis of social exchange theory ([Blau, 1964](#)), quality relationship with their leaders hones followers' positive behaviours at work. With this positivity and prosocial motivation triggered in followers under ethical leadership, some of them think that their foremost duty is to bring forth meaningful change in others' lives ([Colby et al., 2001](#)). Therefore the normative behaviours of ethical leaders elicit positivity among the followers and kindle the spark of DSIW in them. Hence, based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H₂: Ethical leadership is positively associated with DSIW

POS as a mediator

[Viot et al. \(2019\)](#) demonstrated the linkage between organisational benevolence and employee well-being via mediating role of POS. In the current study, it is expected that POS mediates the direct association between ethical leadership and DSIW. This implies that when leader deals with employees with empathy, care and sincerity, employees perceive their organisation to be supportive of them, and DSIW of employees, in turn, is achieved, which according to [Gully et al. \(2013\)](#), is the deemed to be the societal oriented approach among employees to help others by their work and is parallel to the concept of altruism. The ethical leadership style fosters an environment of fairness, care and honesty, which cultivates a sense of perceived organisational support among employees ([Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002](#)). Furthermore, employees would develop a positive desire among themselves in the presence of support from superiors.

As discussed, employees regard the trustworthy and caring relationship received from their leaders as a kind of discretionary action. Taking into account the employees' favourable appraisal of their supervisor's empathetic and caring motives towards

them, they might develop a perception that their organisation supports them (Cheung, 2013). When employees feel they are fully backed and supported by their organisations, their desire and sense of obligation to reciprocate the organisation increases (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Gouldner, 1960). Moreover, there is empirical evidence in this regard that organisational support perceived by employees not only triggers their task performance but also leads to extra-role behaviour, fulfils their socio-emotional needs (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) and as a result, they exhibit helping and societal behaviour. As demonstrated by Gully et al. (2013), DSIW is deemed to be the societal-oriented approach among employees to help others through their work and is parallel to the concept of altruism.

Literature extends the role of POS towards employees' prosocial behaviour that is beneficial for society in general. For instance, Kang et al. (2020) contemplated a positive association between employees' perceived organisational support and their prosocial service behaviour. Likewise, Wang (2012) investigated the positive influence of POS on extra-role behaviour. Drawing on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), it is explicated by Deckop et al. (2003) that employees tend to exhibit helping behaviour in exchange for the support received from an organisation without any return. In light of the arguments built, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H₃: Perceived organisational support mediates the relation between ethical leadership and DSIW



Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Methodology

We collected data from healthcare workers, i.e., doctors and nurses being employed in both public and private sector hospitals in large cities of Punjab, Pakistan, i.e., Lahore, Faisalabad and Islamabad. As the data were collected during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic, so in order to reduce the response burden from frontline healthcare workers, we opted split questionnaire design following Ahmed et al. (2015). All of the scale items were divided into two parts, i.e., odd-numbered items from each scale were extracted for the set A questionnaire, whereas even-numbered items of each scale of study variables were extracted for the set B questionnaire. Set A questionnaire was distributed to 150 respondents and set B questionnaire was distributed to another 150. However, the demographic variables were asked from both sets of respondents. In the demographic section, we asked the respondents

about their gender (male, female), marital status (single, married, widowed and divorced) and age (below 25 years, 25–34 years, 35–44 years, 45–54 years and 55 years above), we also asked about the hospital type (i.e., public/private) in which the respondents are employed.

Taking into consideration the fact that respondents of the current study might be burdened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we employed both mediums of data collection, i.e., questionnaires (hard form) as well as google forms (soft form). After merging both datasets, i.e., Set A and B, and discarding the outliers and incomplete responses, we came up with a total dataset of 200 responses. The descriptive statistic indicates that 37% of respondents were male, and 64% were female. Age descriptive analysis revealed that the majority of respondents (i.e., 45%) belonged to the 25 years to 34 years age category. Frequency analysis of demographic variable marital status indicates that predominantly 62% of respondents in our study

were married. Out of 200 respondents, 142 (71%) were employed in public sector organisations, whereas 58 (29%) belonged to private sector hospitals.

Measures

Ethical Leadership

We used a 10-item ethical leadership scale developed by [Brown et al. \(2005\)](#) on a 7-point Likert scale (7 = strongly agree to 1= strongly disagree). One of the sample items was "My supervisor has the best interests of employees in mind". The Cronbach alpha was 0.93.

POS

To measure perceived organisational support, we employed a 7-item scale developed by [Coyle-Shapiro and Conway \(2005\)](#) rated on 5 points Likert scale (5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree). One of the sample items was "My hospital really cares about my well-being". The Cronbach alpha was found as 0.947.

DSIW

Similar to [Farooq and Salam \(2020\)](#), we measured DSIW by using 4 item scale being developed by [Gully et al. \(2013\)](#) with a rating on a 5-point Likert scale (5=always to 1 = never). One of the sample items was "I want to improve the lives of others (outside my hospital) through my work". The Cronbach's alpha for the construct was 0.907.

Analysis

Preliminary Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on both datasets separately to test the construct validity of all the three study variables. The results of the analysis exhibited that convergent and divergent validity of the constructs is achieved in both datasets (see Table 1). The results demonstrated that the Cronbach alpha value is higher than 0.70, hence establishing the support for reliability (i.e., internal consistency) of data. As $MSV < AVE$ for all the scales in both odd and even datasets, discriminant validity is achieved. The criteria for convergent validity are also met as all the AVEs of the scales in both datasets seem to be more than 0.50.

Table 1. Convergent and Divergent Validity

Even Dataset: CFA validity results							
	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	POS	EL	DSIW
POS	0.866	0.626	0.073	0.056	0.791		
EL	0.837	0.506	0.042	0.040	0.198	0.711	
DSIW	0.920	0.799	0.073	0.057	0.270	0.204	0.894
Odd Dataset: CFA validity results							
	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	POS	EL	DSIW
POS	0.849	0.587	0.096	0.079	0.766		
EL	0.836	0.506	0.062	0.054	0.249	0.711	
DSIW	0.920	0.800	0.096	0.071	0.310	0.214	0.894

Furthermore, we also performed series of CFA tests in order to compare our hypothesized model with alternative models. The model fit indices demonstrated in Table 2 show that our three factor model (i.e., ethical leadership, perceived organizational support and DSIW) adequately fit

with the data (Chi-Square/df = 3.442, GFI = 0.885, AGFI = 0.824, TLI = 0.894, CFI = 0.918, RMSEA = 0.111) than two factor model in even dataset as well as (Chi-Square/df = 3.904, GFI = 0.875, AGFI = 0.809, TLI = 0.867, CFI = 0.897, RMSEA = 0.12) in odd dataset (see Table 2)

Table 2. Measurement and Alternative Model Fit Indices

	Chi-Square/df	GFI	AGFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
CFA Even datasets						
Three-factor model	3.442	0.885	0.824	0.894	0.91	0.111
Two-factor model	11.356	0.649	0.483	0.551	0.63	0.228
One factor model	15.947	0.568	0.376	0.352	0.47	0.274
CFA odd datasets						
Three-factor model	3.904	0.875	0.809	0.867	0.89	0.121
Two-factor model	9.650	0.670	0.514	0.603	0.68	0.208
One factor model	14.497	0.580	0.393	0.381	0.40	0.260

Note: two-factor model: *el* and *pos* were combined, one-factor model: *el*, *pos* and *dsiw* were combined

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive analysis revealed in Table 3 above average ethical leadership (mean = 5.36, SD = 0.97), above average perceived organizational support (mean=3.79, SD= 0.60) as well as higher positive state of DSIW (mean = 4.28, SD = 0.73). The correlation results show that ethical leadership is

positively and significantly related with perceived organizational support ($r = 0.213, p = 0.01$) and DSIW ($r = 0.387, p < 0.01$). Perceived organizational support is also positively and significantly related with DSIW ($r = 0.535, p < 0.01$). Further the descriptive results of demographic variables in which respondents of current study are employed are also shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean, Standard Deviation and Inter Item Correlation

	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gender	1.64	0.48	1.00						
Age	2.55	1.03	-.323**	1.00					
M_Status	1.68	0.52	-0.01	.540**	1.00				
Hosp_type	1.32	0.47	-0.10	.175*	-0.05	1.00			
EL	5.36	0.97	.182*	-0.05	-0.02	0.13	1.00		
POS	3.79	0.60	0.10	0.13	0.10	0.13	.213**	1.00	
DSIW	4.28	0.73	.181*	-0.05	0.02	-0.01	.387**	.535**	1.00

Note: $n = 200$; ** significant correlation at the 1%; * significant correlation at 5% level

Hypothesis Testing

In order to test our hypotheses, we used process model 4. The results in Table 4 show that ethical leadership positively impacted perceived organizational support of employees ($\beta = 0.1322, SE = 0.0432, p < 0.01, CI\ 90\% [0.0609, 0.2036]$). Hence, the results provide support for hypothesis 1. Similarly, process results revealed that ethical leadership positively influence the DSIW of employees ($\beta = 0.2153, SE = 0.0437, p < 0.01, CI$

90% [0.01431, 0.2876]), providing support for hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 suggested a mediating role of POS between ethical leadership and DSIW. The results of standardized indirect effects through process model 4 demonstrated in Table 4 revealed significant effect (effect = 0.1008, BootSE = 0.0334, CI 90% [0.0452, 0.1560]) hence providing support for hypothesis 3. Furthermore, an additional Sobel test was also performed to confirm and test the mediation results. The results indicated significant

results ($z = 2.87, p < 0.01$), hence providing support for hypothesis 3 as well. The Sobel test was also performed to test the results of the mediation model

(Sobel, 1982). The formal test of significance (two-tailed) revealed that the indirect effect (0.05) was significant and positive, Sobel $z = 2.96, p < 0.00$.

Table 4. Standardised Effect Estimates (Direct and Indirect)

Model Pathways	β	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Direct Effect						
EL → POS (H1)	0.1322	0.0432	3.0617	0.0025	0.0609	0.2036
EL → DSIW (H2)	0.2153	0.0437	4.9244	0.0000	0.1431	0.2876
	Effect	BSE		BLLCI		BULCI
Indirect Effect						
EL → POS → DSIW (H3)	0.1008	0.0334		0.0452		0.1560

Note: 90% bootstrap = 5,000

Discussion

In the current study, we investigated the mediating role of POS in the direct association of ethical leadership and DSIW. The results of mediation analysis and the Sobel test indicated that ethical leadership has a positive indirect influence on DSIW. Furthermore, the results provided evidence of the direct effect of ethical leadership on building perceived organisational support of employees as well as on establishing the altruistic desire among employees to bring societal change with their work.

Theoretical and Practical Implication

The current study poses a contribution to the literature on ethical leadership. Although past researches provide versatile consequences of ethical leadership on the behaviours of followers, the influence of ethical leadership towards establishing positive and societal desire among employees is at nascent stages. The current study made a substantial contribution to ethical leadership literature since it's the first to look at the unique relationship between ethical leadership and DSIW with the mediating role of POS in the South Asian context.

Our result provides the avenues to the hospital administrators specifically and organisational leaders in general about how ethical leaders evoke the desire to bring significant impact on others' lives through one's work among employees via mediating role of perceived organisational support. The results indicate a partial mediation of perceived

organisational support, suggesting that ethical leadership, in addition to the direct impact it has on DSIW of employees, also has an indirect effect through perceived organisational support. The great potential of ethical leadership can be used when organisational leaders and policymakers would take effective measures in providing training to the supervisors in developing the ethical leadership behavioural dimensions among employees. For instance, by making them people-oriented, training them about being fair and clear about their roles and showing concern for integrity.

Furthermore, our findings suggest perception of organisational support built under the supervision of ethical leaders might have a crucial role in shaping employees' positive and society-oriented desires. This poses implications for managers and policymakers in general as well as hospital administrators in specific. The administration should invest in building ethical leadership traits in their managers and supervisors, especially in traumatic and crisis situations such as COVID-19, so as to reap the fruitful implication of ethical leadership. Hence, fostering ethical leadership and cultivating a culture of ethical and supportive work environment is essential in nurturing positive and societal desires among employees.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although our study accorded significant contributions, current research is not free from

certain limitations. First, as our study opted for a cross-sectional design, we cannot establish the causal effects between the study variables. Future studies might consider longitudinal design to examine the effect of POS on the direct effect of ethical leadership on employees' societal desires or their involvement in volunteering behaviours. As in our study, we opted for purposive sampling, which was the most appropriate sampling technique suited to our study's objectives, notwithstanding the restriction of the generalisation of our study findings to other cultures and contexts. Thus, future studies might replicate the hypothesised model of our current study in other cultural settings or sectors other than the healthcare sector. Lastly, a small sample size might curb the likelihood of constructing a more detailed and integrated model with more variables. Future studies are suggested to focus on more sample size to make SEM (structural equation modelling) possible, so that simultaneous testing of all variables might occur.

Conclusion

The current study contributed to the ethical leadership literature by testing a mediation model of the relationship between ethical leadership and DSIW via mediating role of employees' perceived organisational support. Our hypothesised mediating model and the empirical findings suggest that ethical leadership traits are highly effective in building positive and societal desire among employees to bring in positive change in others' lives by their work, hence providing twofold merits towards improving the quality of work at the organisational level as well as bringing positive change in the societal well-being. Moreover, perceived organisational support explains the underlying mechanism in building the social desire to bring change in others' lives through one's work under the leadership of ethical leaders.

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