

Ethical leadership and organizational cynicism: the mediating role of leader-member exchange and organizational identification

Ethical
leadership and
organizational
cynicism

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Yuxia Qian
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, Pennsylvania, USA, and
Guowei Jian
Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to construct and empirically test a theoretical model of a mediated relationship between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism.

Design/methodology/approach – From a communication perspective, this study examines the underlying mechanism of the association between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism. A cross-sectional survey was sent to participants in different occupations. Path analysis was used to test the overall model fit.

Findings – The results indicate that ethical leadership has both a direct and indirect effect on organizational cynicism through the mediating role of leader-member exchange (LMX) and organizational identification. However, a surprising finding is that the mediating mechanisms of LMX and organizational identification are not in a parallel structure, but in a serial pattern. That is, the mediating role of LMX is further mediated by organizational identification.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the literature in several aspects. First, the study sheds light on leadership as an important source of organizational cynicism. In particular, the theoretical model presents pathways that show how the predictive effects of ethical leadership on organizational cynicism are mediated through leader-member relationships and organizational identification. Second, the theoretical analysis on the mediating process highlights the role of communication in facilitating the influence of leadership and constructing organizational identification. Third, the mediating model offers concrete guidance for organizations in their attempt to mitigate organizational cynicism.

Keywords Ethical leadership, Organizational cynicism, Leader-member exchange (LMX), Organizational identification, Organizational communication

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Both scholars and practitioners in corporate communication have long recognized employees as a strategic public whose attitude toward, and relationship with, their employing organizations may have consequential impact on corporate performance and reputation (Berger, 2014; Grunig, 1992b; Grunig, *et al.*, 2002; Men, 2014b). However, as organizations face frequent changes, self-serving management and corporate scandals, organizational cynicism is on the rise (Cartwright and Holms, 2006; Dean *et al.*, 1998; Evans, *et al.*, 2010). Cynicism has been found to adversely affect job satisfaction, organizational commitment and employee performance (Khan, *et al.*, 2016; Nafei and Kaifi, 2013; Neves, 2012), and positively affect work alienation, employees' intention to quit, employee burnout and emotional exhaustion (Akbaş, *et al.*, 2018; Chiaburu, *et al.*, 2013; Kocoglu, 2014).

Prior research has attributed employee cynicism to such organizational factors as coworker influence (Kuo *et al.*, 2015; Qian and Daniels, 2008), psychological contract violation (Andersson, 1996; Griep and Vantilborgh, 2018; Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly, 2003), lack of



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organizational support (Kasalak and Aksu, 2014), lack of perceived organizational justice (Wu, *et al.*, 2007), perceived corporate social responsibility (Archimi, *et al.*, 2018; Sheel and Vohra, 2016) and negative organizational politics (Davis and Gardner, 2004). However, the effect of leadership on employee cynicism has not received its due attention in spite of the call for more research in this regard over a decade ago (Cole, *et al.*, 2006). This gap in knowledge is especially salient considering that the role of leadership and management in general is recognized as one of the key ingredients of excellence in corporate communication (Grunig, 1992a; Grunig *et al.*, 2002). Leadership actions are inherently communicative (Jian, 2019) and are imbued with ethical meaning. As an essential component in excellence theory (Bowen, 2007), ethical decision-making is an integral part of leadership.

Previous research on ethical leadership has examined its effects on various organizational outcomes, such as employee performance (Ahn *et al.*, 2018; Lin *et al.*, 2019; Walumbwa, *et al.*, 2011; Zhu *et al.*, 2015), organizational citizenship behavior (Gerpott *et al.*, 2019; Mo and Shi, 2017), employee misconduct (Mayer, *et al.*, 2010) and workplace bullying (Stouten, *et al.*, 2010). However, little research has explored the theoretical relationship between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism. Our search of the extant literature revealed two studies which empirically tested this relationship only in the context of developing a measurement scale of ethical leadership (Brown, *et al.*, 2005; Kalshoven, *et al.*, 2011). In both aforementioned studies, a direct, although negative, relationship between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism was found, but the underlying theoretical mechanism was left unexamined. In particular, we would argue that the role of communication in this relationship has been largely ignored. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to advance the existing scholarship by constructing and empirically testing a theoretical model of a mediated relationship between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism from a communication perspective.

This study contributes to the literature in several aspects. First, it adds to a growing body of research in corporate communication on leadership (Conte, *et al.*, 2017; Hamrin, 2016; Killingsworth and Flynn, 2016; Ngai and Singh, 2018; Men and Yue, 2019; Men, 2014a, 2014b; Men and Jiang, 2016). In particular, our theoretical model presents pathways that show how the predictive effects of ethical leadership on organizational cynicism are mediated through LMX and organizational identification. Second, our theoretical analysis on the mediating process highlights the role of communication in facilitating the influence of leadership, as we conceptualize both LMX and organizational identification through a communicative lens. Third, the mediating model offers concrete guidance for organizations in their attempt to mitigate organizational cynicism.

Literature review

Ethical leadership

Grunig (1992a) argues that effective leadership is an integral element in defining excellence in communication management. However, it is only in recent years that corporate communication scholars have given increased attention to leadership (e.g. Berger, 2014; Conte, *et al.*, 2017; Hamrin, 2016; Killingsworth and Flynn, 2016; Men and Yue, 2019). For example, in a most recent study, Men and Yue (2019) examined the predictive effects of responsive leadership communication on the emotional culture of organizations. In another study, Killingsworth and Flynn (2016) offered assessment of leadership competencies and credentials for senior corporate communication and public relations executives. In spite of this exciting development of leadership research, there is still lack of attention to ethical leadership in corporate communication. In the light of past and ongoing corporate scandals, and their devastating effects on shareholder value and public trust, it becomes imperative to examine ethical leadership and its effects on employees' behaviors and outcomes (Bedi, *et al.*, 2016; Den Hartog, 2015; Eisenbeiss, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2017).

Scholars have proposed various ways to capture the theoretical essence and normative groundings of ethical leadership (Ciulla, *et al.*, 2018; Eisenbeiss, 2013; Lawton and Paez, 2015). In this study, we adopt the definition of ethical leadership proposed by Brown *et al.* (2005), which is “the demonstration of normatively 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, p. 120). In comparison to others, this definition has two advantages. First, by not specifying what “normatively appropriate conduct” is, the definition recognizes the variability in normative values across organizations, industries and cultures (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Second, the definition entails two aspects of ethical leadership: the moral person aspect and moral manager aspect. While the moral person aspect is exhibited through personal traits, character and altruistic motivation, the moral manager aspect is demonstrated through leaders’ proactive efforts, in particular, communication behaviors to influence followers’ ethical conduct by role modeling, communicating ethical message and using the reward system (Brown and Treviño, 2006).

Empirical research on ethical leadership has been steadily developing, shedding light on its effects on organizational and individual outcomes (Bedi *et al.*, 2016; Den Hartog, 2015; Treviño and Brown, 2014). A recent study by Wang *et al.* (2017) identified positive influence of ethical leadership on both the financial and social performance of organizations, although the bulk of the growing literature focuses on the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of employees. In addition to research mentioned earlier, studies have shown that ethical leadership is positively associated with employees’ work engagement (e.g. Demirtas, *et al.*, 2017), moral attentiveness (e.g. Zhu, *et al.*, 2016), whistleblowing (Cheng *et al.*, 2019), mindfulness (e.g. Eisenbeiss and Van Knippenberg, 2015) and exit intentions (e.g. Lam, *et al.*, 2016), to name a few.

Despite the accumulating research on ethical leadership as reviewed above, few studies have theorized its association with employee cynicism and the association’s underlying mechanism. Why is it imperative to address this void? How should we conceptualize its relationship with ethical leadership? These are the questions to which we turn next.

Organizational cynicism and its relation to ethical leadership

The public’s mounting distrust in organizational decisions and corporate interests, which fueled the growth of ethical leadership research, engendered the emerging research interest in organizational cynicism (Griep and Vantillborgh, 2018; Gkorezis, *et al.*, 2015). Dean *et al.* (1998) provided a comprehensive definition of organizational cynicism:

A negative attitude toward one’s employing organization, comprising three dimensions: (1) a belief that the organization lacks integrity; (2) negative affect toward the organization; and (3) tendencies to disparaging and critical behaviors toward the organization that are consistent with these beliefs and affect. (p. 345)

Researchers from various perspectives have examined the antecedents of organizational cynicism, many of which are related to leadership practices and behaviors, such as perceived organizational politics (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013; Davis and Gardener, 2004), perceived corporate social responsibility (Archimi, *et al.*, 2018; Sheel and Vohra, 2016), leadership support (Akbaş *et al.*, 2018; Cole *et al.*, 2006), leadership types (Dobbs and Do, 2019; Gkorezis, *et al.*, 2015), top management credibility (Kim *et al.*, 2009), perceived organizational justice (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013) and psychological contract violations (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Johnson and O’Leary-Kelly, 2003). Although important, these existing studies have not adequately theorized the connection between the ethical dimension of leadership and organizational cynicism.

We would argue that ethical leadership has the benefit of reducing employees' organizational cynicism and that communication plays a central role in their association. According to social information processing theory, employee attitudes are influenced by the social cues in the work environment (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). Prior research has already suggested that social cues communicated through colleague cynicism (Qian and Daniels, 2008), badmouthing of coworkers (Wilkerson, *et al.*, 2008) and gossip in the workplace (Kuo *et al.*, 2015) contribute to the formation of organizational cynicism. Extending from social information processing theory, we argue that leaders, defined in this study as employees' direct supervisors in an organization, could play a crucial leadership role in furnishing social cues that shape employees' perceptions of an organization. As presented earlier, ethical leaders are moral managers who proactively influence followers' ethical behaviors through communicating messages that emphasize honesty, integrity and high moral standards. At the same time, ethical leaders are moral persons who communicate a genuine sense of care and responsibility for others, which, in turn, foster trust and respect and reduce cynicism. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Ethical leadership is negatively related to organizational cynicism.

The mediating role of LMX

Existing research suggests that the effects of ethical leadership on organizational outcomes are often indirectly mediated by leadership-member relationships (Gu *et al.*, 2015; Hassan *et al.*, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2017; Lin *et al.*, 2019; Smith *et al.*, 2017; Thiel *et al.*, 2018; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2011; Yang *et al.*, 2016). For example, research has shown that LMX fully mediates the association between ethical leadership and team performance (Lin *et al.*, 2019) and that LMX partially mediates the effects of ethical leadership on organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) (Yang *et al.*, 2016). Both Thiel *et al.* (2018) and Walumbwa *et al.* (2011) demonstrated the mediating effects of LMX between ethical leadership and employee performance. In the present study, we propose that the effects of ethical leadership on employees' organizational cynicism are also subject to the mediation of LMX.

To conceptualize this mediating role of LMX, it is necessary to first consider the direct relationship between ethical leadership and LMX. We contend that the impact of ethical leadership does not take place in a vacuum without context; rather, it is facilitated and materialized in a relationship that is constituted in routine leader-member communication and interaction (Jian, *et al.*, 2014; Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017). Based on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005), LMX theory posits that high-quality LMX is characterized by a high degree of mutual trust, respect and loyalty, whereas low-quality LMX is limited to economic exchanges specified by the job contract (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien and Maslyn, 2003). Ethical leadership behaviors that communicate a strong feeling of fairness, honesty, integrity and care to members are more likely to cultivate mutual trust and respect within the leader-member dyads and result in higher quality relationships. The positive connection between ethical leadership and LMX has received strong support from past empirical research in organizations (e.g. Mahsud *et al.*, 2010; Hassan *et al.*, 2013; Thiel *et al.*, 2018). Consistent with social information processing theory we mentioned earlier, the empirical findings provide confirmation that leaders' ethical behaviors are communicative in the sense that they carry "important cues about the extent to which [members] can develop open and trusting relationships with their leaders" (Hassan *et al.*, 2013, p. 141).

Thus far, we have conceptualized the direct link between ethical leadership and LMX. To further establish the mediating role of LMX, it is necessary to consider the connection between LMX and organizational cynicism (Davis and Gardner, 2004; Jiang *et al.*, 2014; Mehta, 2016). From a communicative lens, research has already shown that leader-member

exchanges shape employee perceptions and behaviors, such as work stress (Jian and Dalisay, 2018), communication satisfaction (Muller and Lee, 2002) and organizational citizenship behavior (Bakar and McCann, 2016). We argue that leader-member communication plays a significant role in shaping organizational cynicism. First, according to Jian *et al.* (2014), high-quality LMX is highly correlated with high-quality conversations between leaders and members, which encompass efficiency, accuracy and coordination in communication (Barry and Crant, 2000). With higher quality of communication, leaders and members have a higher chance to resolve potential issues that may lead to misperceptions toward each other, in particular, members' negative perceptions toward the relationship and tasks. Furthermore, drawing upon an attribution model (Green and Mitchell, 1979), Davis and Gardner (2004) theorized that in a dyadic relationship, leaders and members make attributional accounts regarding such matters as leader behavior, member performance and leaders' differential treatments of members. In low-quality LMXs, the attributional accounts between leader and member are more likely to be incompatible than those in high-quality dyads, and members are more likely to perceive leader behavior as unfair and unjustified; higher degrees of attributional biases and incompatibility of attribution result in higher levels of perceptions of organizational cynicism (Davis and Gardner, 2004). Based on resource exchange theory (Foa and Foa, 1974), Jiang *et al.* (2014) argued that lower LMX quality is associated with the provision of lower job resources by leaders to members, which results in member cynicism. Adding to Jiang *et al.* (2014), we would argue that resource exchange has to be facilitated by communication and that low-quality LMX limits critical communication for resource coordination, which results in and exacerbates employee cynical response. Thus, we reason that LMX and organizational cynicism have a negative association.

Taken together, we can see that the influence of ethical leadership behaviors on organizational cynicism is not straightforward but mediated through LMX conceptualized as a communicative process. Ethical leadership first exerts its influence in enhancing LMX, which then reduces the likelihood of creating perceptions of organizational cynicism. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H2. LMX partially mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism.

The mediating role of organizational identification

To further conceptualize the association between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism, we argue that organizational identification, parallel to LMX, also functions as a mediator. Our reasoning for the mediating process relies on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) as well as a communicative understanding of organizational identification (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; Scott, 1997, 2007; Atouba *et al.*, 2019). First, according to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1985), people classify themselves into different social categories in order to locate their social positions, enhance self-esteem and reduce uncertainties. Organizational identification is regarded as a specific form of social identification where employees refer to the self in terms of their organizational membership (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). Simply put, organizational identification is defined as the perceived oneness with or belongingness to one's organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Although organizational identification can be viewed as a cognitive outcome, communication scholars have shown it to be fruitful to conceptualize organizational identification as a communicative process (Cheney, 1983; Scott, 1997, 2007; Agarwal and Buzzanell, 2015; Dailey, *et al.*, 2016; Lammer *et al.*, 2013). It is through communication and interaction that identities acquire meaning, the images of self and other are produced and compared and certain identities appear more salient than others. As Atouba *et al.* (2019) described, organizational identification is a process in which "individuals come to

define who they are or are not, communicate that definition to others, make sense of their place in the world, and meaningfully navigate their lives” (p. 534).

The influence of leaders on organizational identification is manifested in the communicative and symbolic acts of leaders. Enacted through communicative behaviors, such as advocacy for moral standards, ethical leadership is symbolic portraying of a positive image of an organization to which employees are willing to claim belongingness and attachment. Also, leadership practices that effectively communicate the message of respect and openness are more likely to accommodate diverse individual values and promote shared organizational values. As a result, we reason that ethical leadership is more conducive to the creation of a perceived oneness. Prior research has also provided empirical support to the positive association between ethical leadership and follower organizational identification (e.g. Walumbwa *et al.*, 2011; Zhu *et al.*, 2015).

Furthermore, we argue that employees’ enhanced organizational identification as a result of ethical leadership behaviors could have a positive impact on reducing organizational cynicism. First, Scott (2007) maintains that identification is mainly expressed through language in the interactions with others. Employees communicating positive views and acceptance of an organizational identity simultaneously symbolize the connection between the values of their organization and their own, thus achieving the perceived oneness. Therefore, employees with stronger organizational identification are less likely to hold beliefs that their organization lacks integrity, or to share negative affect or attitude toward the organization. In contrast, as shown in Mignonac *et al.* (2018), ambivalent identification with an organization is significantly associated with greater levels of organizational cynicism. Showing cynicism communicates one’s disagreement, disapproval and/or even rejection of certain organizational decisions and practices, thus symbolizing one’s distance from a prescribed organizational identity. From a critical point of view based on theories of power and resistance, Fleming and Spicer (2003) further argued that employee cynicism is an active response as employees actively dis-identify with the organizational cultural ideologies to “carve out a space of freedom” while still performing the cultural rituals at the surface level. Thus, we can argue that ethical leadership counters the growth of organizational cynicism through the development of a strong sense of organizational identification among employees. Based on the above reasoning, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. Organizational identification partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism.

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the theoretical model that contains Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 presented above.

Method

Participants and procedures

Participants were recruited through the referrals by undergraduate students in a variety of communication courses at an Eastern university in the USA, where the study received the

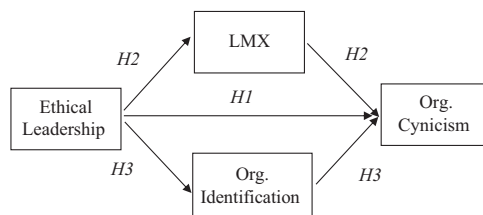


Figure 1.
The proposed model

approval of its Institutional Review Board (IRB). Students were asked to provide names and contact information of up to three people within their close personal networks, such as their family members and close friends. The participants had to be at least 18 years or older, currently employed full time and had supervisors above them. The students' participation in making the referrals was completely voluntary. The students were offered extra credits for making the referrals, but alternative extra credit assignments were offered if the students chose not to participate. With the IRB approval, the researchers sent email invitations with the cross-sectional survey link to 167 participants recommended by the students.

One hundred and two respondents completed the survey, with the response rate of 61.7%. Among the 102 respondents, 57 of them were females, 43 males and 2 did not respond to this question. The average age range lies between 36–45 years, and 83% of the respondents were identified as Caucasians. The years of working experience ranged from 1 to 31 years ($M = 10$; $SD = 9.305$). To make our study representative of different industries, we recruited participants from a variety of industries, with the most popular being educational institutions, health services, non-profit organizations and retail and wholesale. In addition, the participants came from different hierarchical levels. The reported job positions indicated that 47% of them were employees without subordinates, 31% middle managers, 7% top managers and 15% were not identified. All of them had higher-level supervisors, and they were asked the same sets of questionnaires with regard to their perceptions of their supervisors and their attitudes toward their organizations. Their supervisors consisted of 55 males and 46 females (1 unidentified), with an average age range between 41 and 50 years. The majority (81%) of their supervisors were Caucasians.

Instrumentation

Ethical leadership. The ethical leadership scale (Brown, *et al.*, 2005) was used to assess participants' perceptions of their supervisors' ethical leadership. The scale contains 10 Likert-scale items ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. A sample item is, "my supervisor conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner." The scale was reported to have a high reliability of over 0.90 in the original scale development. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale in the current study is 0.904.

Leader-member exchange. Leader-member exchange was measured by using the 7-item LMX scale developed by Graen *et al.* (1982). The Cronbach's alphas of the scale ranged from 0.80 to 0.90 in previous studies. A sample item is, "My working relationship with my supervisor is effective." The reliability of the scale in the current study is 0.908.

Organizational identification. We adopted Scott's (1997) 9-item instrument of organizational identification. As a unidimensional scale, the instrument is a simplified version of the 19-item scale by Barker and Tompkins (1994). Scott (1997) used this 9-item instrument to measure the multiple levels of identification in a geographically dispersed organization, with satisfactory reliability ranging from 0.86 to 0.71. The 9-item scale achieved a reliability of 0.80 in our study.

Employee cynicism. Organizational Cynicism Scale (Brandes, *et al.*, 1999) was used to assess participants' cynicism toward their organizations. The 14-item scale was assessed with a 5-point Likert-type format ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A sample item is, "I believe the management says one thing and does another." The scale contains three dimensions of cynicism: beliefs, affect and behavior (Brandes, *et al.*, 1999). The reported reliability of the scale was 0.87. Our data replicated the three-factor structure with satisfactory reliability for each factor: belief (0.92), affect (0.90) and behavior (0.88). Because our interest in the study is in the employees' overall level of cynicism, we collapsed the three factors into one overall measurement, with a scale reliability of 0.94.

Results

Table 1 reports means, standard deviations and Pearson correlations of all variables. First, a simple linear regression was run to test the main effect of ethical leadership on organizational cynicism. The results indicated that ethical leadership was negatively associated with organizational cynicism ($R^2 = 0.418, p < 0.05$). H1 was supported. Next, path analysis was used to test the hypotheses and causal model in this study. Path analysis enables examination of causal relationships among the variables and of the significance of indirect effects of mediating variables. Data analysis was conducted by using AMOS 25.0. To assess the overall model fit, the following indexes were applied: the chi-square χ^2 test, the comparative fit index (CFI), the normed fit index (NFI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). In addition, the path coefficients were assessed for statistical significance at $p < 0.05$. The χ^2 statistic is used to test the difference between the predicted and observed relationships. A nonsignificant χ^2 is desired. CFI and NFI assess the fit of the proposed model relative to the independence model. The criterion of acceptable value is 0.95. The RMSEA is “the average of the residuals between the observed correlation/covariance from the sample and the expected model estimated from the population” (Meyers, et al., 2006, p. 633). A value less than 0.08 indicates good fit.

In this study, the chi-square test was nonsignificant, $\chi^2 (9, N = 102) = 7.045, p > 0.001$, indicating a good match between the proposed model and the observed data. The CFI and the NFI yielded indexes of 0.971 and 0.967, respectively, meeting the 0.95 criterion and indicating a good model fit. However, the RMSEA showed a value of 0.245, more than the 0.08 criterion, which indicates a relatively poor fit of the model. These results from the fit indexes suggest possibility for further development of the theoretical model.

Table 2 and Figure 2 show the results of path analysis. Supporting H1, ethical leadership was shown to be negatively associated to organizational cynicism ($\beta_{direct} = -0.31; \beta_{indirect} = -0.34$). H2 predicts that LMX partially mediates the association between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism. However, the path connecting LMX with organizational cynicism was statistically nonsignificant. Thus, H2 was not supported. H3 predicts organizational identification partially mediates the association between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism. The results showed significant effects of ethical leadership on organizational identification ($\beta = 0.59$) as well as significant effects of organizational identification on organizational cynicism ($\beta = -0.47$), thus supporting H3.

Given the results on the overall model fit and path analysis, we revised our theoretical model by removing the nonsignificant path between LMX and organizational cynicism and re-specifying a path between LMX and organizational identification. A few reasons led to our decision. First, correlation analyses (Table 1) indicate that LMX is positively related to organizational identification ($r = 0.573, p < 0.01$). Second, previous meta-analyses have established the predictive effect of LMX on organizational commitment (Dulebohn, et al., 2012; Gerstner and Day, 1997). Given the considerable conceptual and empirical overlap between organizational commitment and organizational identification (Miller, et al., 2000), it is reasonable to hypothesize the predictive effect of LMX on organizational identification. Re-

Table 1.
Means, standard deviations and Pearson correlations of all variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Ethical leadership	3.81	0.75	–	0.734**	–0.647**	0.586**
2. LMX	3.74	0.81	0.734**	–	–0.582**	0.573**
3. Organizational cynicism	2.65	0.83	–0.647**	–0.582**	–	–0.700**
4. Organizational identification	3.69	0.66	0.586**	0.573**	–0.700**	–

Note(s). ** $p < 0.01$

specifying this connection on our revised model leads to our revised hypothesis regarding the mediated relationship between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism, which is as follows: The effects of ethical leadership on organizational cynicism is partially mediated by LMX and organizational identification in a serial, rather than parallel, relationship (see Figure 3).

The revised model fit

The revised model was evaluated through AMOS 25.0. The chi-square test was nonsignificant, $\chi^2(9, N = 102) = 0.779, p > 0.05$. The CFI and NFI indexes were 1.0 and 0.996, respectively. The RMSEA value was 0.00. All the indexes demonstrated a superior fit, with significant improvement over our original model. The revised model explained 58% of the variance in organizational cynicism. All of the five path coefficients in the revised model indicated statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) (see Table 3). The results are visualized in Figure 3.

Consistent with those from the original model, the results support H1 ($\beta = -0.36, p < 0.05$), which predicts the negative association between ethical leadership and organizational

Outcome	Predictors	Causal effects		Total
		Direct	Indirect	
Organizational identification	Ethical leadership	0.59*	–	0.59
LMX	Ethical leadership	0.73*	–	0.73
Organizational cynicism ($R^2 = 0.57$)	Ethical leadership	-0.31*	-0.34	-0.65
	LMX	-0.09	–	-0.09
	Organizational identification	-0.47*	–	-0.47

Note(s): * Direct effect is significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ level

Table 2. Causal effects among the variables in the proposed model

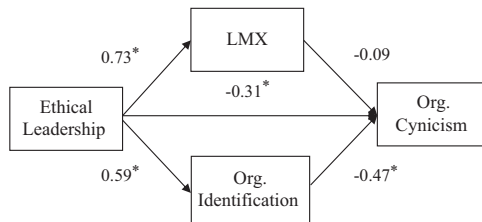


Figure 2. Path analysis results of the proposed model

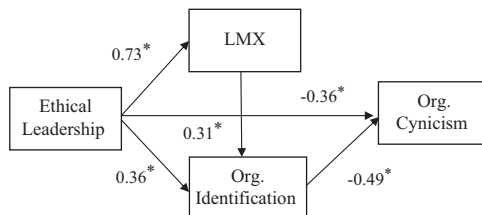


Figure 3. The revised model

cynicism, as well as H3, which predicts the partial mediating role of organizational identification. Unlike the original model, the revised model re-specified the mediational role of LMX vis-à-vis organizational identification, predicting that LMX and organizational identification function as two mediators in a serial, instead of parallel, relationship. The results offered support to this revised hypothesis. More specifically, LMX was shown to have a significant predictive effect on organizational identification ($\beta = 0.31, p < 0.05$), which, in turn, demonstrated significant predictive effect on organizational cynicism ($\beta = -0.49, p < 0.05$). Thus, LMX and organizational identification have a serial connection in mediating the effects of ethical leadership on organizational cynicism.

Discussion

Research of corporate communication argues that employees are an important public of an organization, whose negative attitudes may pose a significant threat to corporate reputation (Haywood, 2005). Organizational cynicism as an outcome of a negative employee-organization relationship has received scant attention in the corporate communication literature. Our knowledge is even more limited in understanding the communicative mechanisms that are associated with organizational cynicism. To shed light on this topic, the present study focuses on the predictive effects of ethical leadership on organizational cynicism and the mediating mechanisms that underly their association. Overall, our findings lent support to the mediating mechanisms of LMX and organizational identification conceptualized as two communicative processes in connecting ethical leadership and organizational cynicism. However, differing from our initial conceptualization, we found that ethical leadership has both direct and indirect predictive effects on organizational cynicism; most interestingly, instead of being in a parallel structure as we predicted, LMX and organizational identification have a serial connection when functioning as mediators between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism. In the following, we explore the significance of our findings and discuss the limitations of our study.

Theoretical and practical implications

First of all, effective management of employee communication and employee-organization relationship is an integral part of corporation communication (Grunig, 1992) and reputation management (Haywood, 2005). Past research has examined the role of management's interpersonal communication, symmetrical internal communication and culture, among other factors, in affecting employee-organizational relationship (Jo and Shim, 2005; Kim and Rhee, 2011; Men and Jiang, 2016). Our study extends this literature by attending to what we consider as a form or expression of negative employee-organizational relationship, that is, organizational cynicism. Our finding is consistent with those in Men and Jiang (2016), in which authentic leadership was found to be an antecedent of quality employee-organization relationship. Ethical values are central to authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Violation of ethical norms and values by leaders erodes leader-member relationship,

Table 3.
Causal effects among
all the variables in the
revised model

Outcome	Predictors	Causal effects		
		Direct	Indirect	Total
Organizational identification ($R^2 = 0.39$)	Ethical leadership	0.36*	–	0.36
	LMX	0.31*	–	0.31
Organizational cynicism ($R^2 = 0.58$)	Ethical leadership	0.73*	–	0.73
	Organizational identification	–0.36*	–0.29	–0.65
		–0.49*	–	–0.49

Note(s): * Direct effect is significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ level

undermines organizational identification and results in employee cynical attitudes toward their employing organizations.

Second, previous studies have provided ample arguments on the crucial role of communication in constituting leadership (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Jian, 2019; Jian and Fairhurst, 2018), in particular, LMX relationship (Fairhurst, 2007; Jian *et al.*, 2014; Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017), and in the formation of organizational identification (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; Scott, 1997, 2007; Atouba *et al.*, 2019). Building on these developments, this study identifies the mediating role of LMX and organizational identification, viewed from the communicative lens that connects ethical leadership with organizational cynicism. In the past, scholars (Brown *et al.*, 2005; Kalshoven *et al.*, 2011) only empirically tested the direct relationship between ethical leadership and organizational cynicism in the context of developing ethical leadership measurement scales. Thus, our research makes an important theoretical contribution by specifying the underlying path. Our finding is also consistent with social information processing theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978; Sutcliffe, 2001), which posits that work-related attitudes are socially constructed and are subject to social influence. In the context of ethical leadership, moral behaviors enacted by leaders provide social cues that influence employee cynicism directly through symbolic messaging, and indirectly through relational communication between leaders and members and the formation of organizational identification.

Third, our findings challenge Den Hartog's (2015) theoretical model regarding the mediation mechanisms of ethical leadership. Den Hartog proposed four parallel processes of mediation, including (1) relational process (e.g. LMX), (2) identification-based process, (3) obligation and (4) ethical cognitions, norms, decisions and awareness. Although our model is only limited to the examination of two of the four suggested processes, the findings present a more complex path in which the relational process is connected to the identification process in a serial, instead of parallel, manner. This suggests that these underlying processes are not independent, but interdependent and interplay with each other. Future research should aim to further uncover such complexity.

Fourth, the present study offers several suggestions to organizational practitioners. Based on our findings, to reduce organizational cynicism, instead of blaming, questioning and attempting to change employee attitudes, leaders should first and foremost pay attention to their own conduct. In particular, our findings suggest that ethical conduct by leaders in decision-making and other daily interactions and communication with employees could have powerful impact on their perceived identification with and attitude toward their organization. When they witness and experience ethical conduct and messages by leaders, employees have a better chance of developing higher relational quality with their leaders, increasing their sense of belongingness and finding better alignment between organizational missions and values and those of their own. As a result, employees are less likely to express a cynical attitude toward their organization. Given our findings on the communicative mechanisms, corporate communication practitioners should first design leadership trainings and corporate messages that aim at (1) enhancing managers' awareness of the symbolic force and cascading influence of ethical leadership on leader-member relationship and, eventually, on employee attitude toward the organization, and (2) aligning corporate ethical values with individual ethical conduct of both leaders and members. Second, to maximize the effects of corporate training and messaging, organizations should consider improving feedback mechanisms that encourage employee voice in safely reporting unethical leader conduct. These concerted efforts reflect the principle of symmetrical internal communication that characterizes excellence in corporate communication practices (Grunig, 1992; Grunig *et al.*, 2002).

Limitations and future directions

In spite of these significant findings and implications, our study is limited in several aspects. First of all, the test of our revised model is exploratory, which requires future confirmatory tests in different samples (Byrne, 2010). In addition, our sample size is acceptable, but relatively small, which might decrease the power of the study. Future studies should use a larger sample size to test the model. Second, our cross-sectional data from a network sample limit the generalizability of the findings, although our sampling strategy allows representation of a broad range of occupations and industry sectors. Third, our study focused on the leadership of employees' immediate supervisors. Since top management plays a crucial role in shaping organizational values (Grojean, et al., 2004), future studies should investigate ethical leadership of top management and employee cynicism toward their organizations. Finally, although being able to account for a large portion of variance of organizational cynicism, our theoretical model still has room for development. Future research should explore other potential mechanisms that connect ethical leadership and organizational cynicism and the interconnection among these mechanisms.

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Corresponding author

Yuxia Qian can be contacted at: qian@kutztown.edu

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