Making Room for Followers: A Grounded Theory Study of Ethical Followership Among Professional Engineers

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Introduction

In the last twenty-five years of organizational research, ethical leadership figures prominently as an answer to the question, "How do workers learn how to do the right thing when facing an ethical dilemma?" However, enthusiasm for a leader-centric view of ethics at work has outpaced the potential to explore the ways that followers navigate ethical dilemmas. To date, the literature has not defined and operationalized "ethical followership" as a construct, and as a result, it remains unclear what behaviors an ethical follower applies in response to an unethical directive or request. The antecedents and outcomes of these ethical follower behaviors also remain unclear.

This article provides an introduction to the literature on ethical leadership and ethical followership. It then outlines the methods and results of a grounded theory study on ethical followership among professional engineers, including a theoretical framework for ethical followership. Finally, it discusses implications for theory and practice, chief among them validating, integrating, and enhancing previous conceptual work related to ethical followership and making a case for follower development programs.

Ethical Leadership

Researchers of ethical leadership frequently cite the Brown et al. (2005) construct, which is grounded in social learning theory. It proposes that "leaders influence the ethical conduct of followers via modeling… by virtue of their assigned role, their status and success in the organization, and their power to effect the behavior and outcomes of others" (p. 119). Brown et al. (2005) suggest that followers identify and emulate ethical leaders who act in a manner that is "normatively appropriate and motivated by altruism" (p. 120) and who communicate explicitly about ethics and reinforce ethical behavior.

According to Brown et al. (2005), ethical leadership refers to "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" (p. 120). The researchers developed and validated a ten-item scale to measure ethical leadership, which is shown in Table 1. The scale relies on data reported by a follower about their perceptions of a leader's commitment to ethics.

Table 1: Ethical Leadership Scale

My leader conducts his or her personal life in an ethical manner.
My leader defines success not just by results but also the way that they are obtained.
My leader listens to what employees have to say.
My leader disciplines employees who violate ethical standards.
My leader makes fair and balanced decisions.
My leader can be trusted.
My leader discusses business ethics or values with employees.
My leader sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics.
My leader has the best interests of employees in mind.
My leader asks, "What is the right thing to do?" when making decisions.

Note: Adapted from Brown et al. (2005).

Treviño et al. (2000) articulate two objectives of ethical leadership – that is, to be a *moral person* and to be a *moral manager.* The latter requires "being a role model for ethical conduct, communicating regularly about ethics and values, and using the reward system to hold everyone accountable to the values and standards" (p. 141-142). Under ethical leadership, ethical behavior within a team or organization depends on the influence of an ethical leader. This leader-centric view begs the question, "Does this mean that followers themselves get to determine what is ethical?" (Price, 2020, p. 132). To put it another way, is there room in ethical leadership for the agency of an ethical follower?

Leadership research has historically revolved around the leader (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), leaving little room for analysis of the follower's contributions. The follower has been viewed as passive recipient of leadership rather than as a co-producer of the leadership process and its outcomes (Shamir, 2007). While there are instances in academic and popular literature of followers passively obeying a leader, "there are just as many others who engage with leaders in a constructive way to advance the objectives and goals of the group" (Carsten & Lapierre, 2014, p. 4). By focusing on the role of the follower, and by considering leadership as co-constructed through relational interactions, followership research reverses this traditional lens.

Ethical Followership

For Uhl-Bien and Carsten (2014), ethical followership refers to a follower stopping themselves from committing a "crime of obedience" – that is, refusing to comply with a leader's unethical request. Specifically, they refer to "constructive resistance," which occurs when a follower objects to a leader's directive or request and opens a dialogue about alternative actions (Tepper et al., 2006). The researchers juxtapose ethical followership with unethical followership, suggesting that the latter is when a follower is complicit in unethical behavior. Edmonds (2021) refers to unethical followership as "toxic followership," noting that examples abound in which followers have gone along with destructive leaders with terrible consequences, such as "systemic racism, suicide bombings, gang violence, corporate malfeasance, and political and religious extremism" (p. 1).

Uhl-Bien and Carsten (2014) identify two beliefs that appear to influence whether a follower will obey or constructively resist a leader's unethical request. First, a follower may believe in the "coproduction of leadership," which suggests that leaders and followers are partners who work together to produce leadership and its outcomes (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2009). Second, Uhl-Bien and Carsten (2014) refer to "romance of leadership," which means an inflated view of a leader's importance in effecting organizational outcomes (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987). Uhl-Bien and Carsten (2014) conclude that "individuals with stronger coproduction beliefs, who fail to romanticize leaders… are least likely to obey a leader's unethical request" (p. 10).

Chaleff's (2009) concept of "courageous followership" is closely linked to ethical followership. Unlike the complying vs. resisting dichotomy examined by Uhl-Bien and Carsten (2014), the apparent breadth and depth of ethical followership is evident in Chaleff's (2009) description of the "courage to take moral action." This phenomenon includes "the decision of whether to appeal to higher levels of authority within an organization, whether to stay in or leave an organization, how to frame conversations and actions around these decision-making processes, and how to conduct oneself in the face of different potential outcomes" (Chaleff, 2009, p. 149). Courageous followership paints a more detailed picture of how followers think

and behave when facing an ethical dilemma at work. It also suggests skills that may be necessary for ethical followership to be practiced and for it to produce intended outcomes.

Ethical Follower Typologies

Two typologies merit discussion as they shed light on ethical follower behaviors. First, from organizational communication, Kassing (2002) proposes a typology of strategies for upward dissent based on the results of a questionnaire completed by one hundred and seventy-three employees in Arizona. These strategies include solution presentation, direct factual appeal, circumvention, and threatening resignation. Kassing also includes repetition as a strategy in itself, which involves "repeated attempts to express dissent about a given topic at multiple points across time with the intention of eventually attaining receptivity to the dissent issue" (Kassing, 2002, p. 197-198).

In a follow-up study of two hundred and forty-five employees, Kassing (2005) examined participants' perception of these five predetermined strategies, finding that solution presentation and direct factual appeal were identified as more competent strategies than repetition, circumvention, and threatening resignation. Noting the study's limitation of relying on previously identified upward dissent strategies, Kassing (2005) suggests, "There may be additional upward dissent strategies that have yet to be recognized in the literature that should be incorporated in future models of employee dissent" (p. 232).

Second, from the behavioral ethics literature, Hernandez and Sitkin (2012) conducted a conceptual analysis of follower influence on leader ethicality and proposed a typology of four follower behaviors – modeling, eliciting, guiding, and sensemaking. In modeling, the researchers propose that social learning may be a two-way street as leader and follower model for each other. In eliciting, Hernandez and Sitkin (2012) propose that "followers can highlight a particular ethical issue to trigger a leader's moral schema, ultimately connecting the ethical issue to a leader's personal guilt, passion, or other powerful emotions" (p. 92). In guiding, the researchers propose that followers may draw the attention of leaders to particular moral rules and influence their judgment. Finally, in sensemaking, followers "challenge their leader's interpretation of morally relevant situations" (Hernandez & Sitkin, 2012, p. 95).

Distinguishing Ethical Followership from Ethical Voice

In another research stream, ethical voice is closely related to ethical followership. Ethical voice is defined as "employees communicating concerns about violations of societal ethical standards (e.g., honesty, fairness, care, and respect) and/or suggestions about upholding ethical standards to people who might be able to effect changes (e.g., managers or coworkers)" (Chen & Treviño, 2023, p. 1316). It draws on a broader definition of voice as "informal and discretionary communication by an employee of ideas, suggestions, concerns, information about problems, or opinions about work-related issues to persons who might be able to take appropriate action, with the intent to bring about improvement or change" (Morrison, 2014, p. 174).

To avoid construct proliferation, it is important to explain why ethical followership merits exploration and to distinguish it from ethical voice. The literature shows that voice is one of several followership behaviors that may be used to promote ethical behavior or inhibit unethical behavior at work. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) frame voice as one of many proactive behaviors that "assess the creative and deliberate ways that employees plan and act on their

environment to influence, change, and alter it in ways they see fit" (p. 93). Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) also refer to other followership behaviors like obedience, resistance, dissent, and feedback seeking.

Research Questions and Methods

In response to the leader-centric view represented in ethical leadership literature, and given limited research available on ethical followership, this study explores three research questions. First, what does it mean to practice ethical followership? That is, what ethical follower behaviors do workers use to promote ethical behavior within their team or organization? Second, what are the antecedents of ethical followership? Third, what are the outcomes of ethical followership?

Within the grounded theory tradition, the study methods are informed by Charmaz's (2006, 2014) constructivist grounded theory. This approach suggests that theory "emphasizes interpretation and gives abstract understanding greater priority than explanation" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 230), which departs from positivist approaches like Glaser (1978), Strauss and Corbin (1990), and the original concept of grounded theory from Glaser and Strauss (1967). In constructivist grounded theory, "there is a sense that researchers need to immerse themselves in the data in a way that embeds the narrative of the participants in the final research outcome," (Mills et al., 2006, p. 31) which has implications for how the data is collected and analyzed.

Classical grounded theorists suggest not engaging with the literature on a given subject when preparing to conduct a grounded theory study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which more recent scholars have critiqued as a "blank slate" approach (Timonen et al., 2018). A clarification on how the author engaged the literature on ethical followership, or ethics generally, is important at this point. In this study, the function of the literature review is to provide context for the research questions, not to shape the methods for conducting the study. That is, the purpose of this study is not to test any previous theory or proposition.

The author did not reference literature on ethical followership or ethics generally with participants, aside from providing a description of ethical followership as "relating to how we influence a leader or our peers when facing an ethical dilemma, particularly when we receive an unethical directive or request, or when we otherwise feel pressured to do something unethical." In a few cases, participants referred to ethics-related literature, including academic and popular sources, and the author responded only with curiosity to avoid skewing interview data.

Participants

Twenty-five participants were selected who are currently-practicing or recently-practicing professional engineers in the United States. Twenty of the participants were men (80%), whereas five participants were women (20%), which is consistent with gender diversity in the engineering profession (Pew Research Center, 2021). The study included eighteen White participants (72%), three Asian participants (12%), two Hispanic participants (8%), and two Black participants (8%), which is consistent with racial diversity in the engineering profession (Pew Research Center, 2021). The sample included age groups from participants in their 20's through participants in their 80's. However, the average age of participants was in the late 50's, which is skewed from the average age of professional engineers at 40 years old (Zippia, n.d.).

Participation was solicited via online discussion forums for two professional associations, the American Society of Civil Engineers and the National Society of Professional Engineers, and via the author's LinkedIn page. Participants were screened to verify that they are currently in full-time engineering practice in the United States or left it recently (a few participants had recently semi-retired, retired, or moved into a non-engineering role). Participants were currently licensed in at least one state or had held a license when they were in full-time practice as a professional engineer. Participants also acknowledged that they were willing to participate in an interview in which they would discuss their experiences with ethical dilemmas at work.

The author arrived at a sample size of twenty-five participants through verifying theoretical saturation at the theoretical coding stage of data analysis. Theoretical saturation occurs when the properties of each category are fully developed (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). In other words, "categories are saturated when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of core theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113).

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted over the Zoom video conferencing program. Interviews lasted anywhere from 50 minutes to 75 minutes. Transcripts were automatically generated in Zoom. Participants were reminded that they will be asked to discuss their experiences with ethical dilemmas at work. Participants were advised that their participation is strictly voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. They were advised that their participation is confidential and that the only record of the interview that will be retained is a transcript that has been scrubbed of identifying information and associated with a pseudonym. Participants were encouraged not to share any sensitive information, such as specific violations of ethical standards or the names of anyone involved in an ethical dilemma.

During the interview, participants were asked to share at least one significant event in their professional experience in which they faced an ethical dilemma that required them to influence a leader or their peers. Interview questions were open-ended and focused on what events, thoughts, and feelings were significant to the participant before, during, and after their engagement with the ethical dilemma. While the initial set of interview questions remained constant, follow-up questions varied and were informed by participant responses and by insights from past interviews. At the end of each interview, participants were asked for any other details or information that they thought may be relevant.

Consistent with a call by Bastardoz and Adriaensen (2023) to not treat subordinates as de facto followers, and a previous critique by Bedeian and Hunt (2006) of studies conflating "leaders" and "followers" with "managers" and "supervisors," interview questions excluded any mention of formal roles. That is, participants were asked about unethical directive or requests, or pressure in general, that came from leaders or peers, and they were asked about how they attempted to influence those leaders or peers in return. Participants' examples sometimes referred to formal reporting relationships and other times did not.

Data Analysis

Following a step to scrub identifying information from all transcripts, data was coded in three phases consistent with Charmaz (2006, 2014) – initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding. During initial coding, "the goal is to remain open to all possible theoretical

directions indicated by your readings of the data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46) Initial coding generates a list of codes that are related to the study's research questions and are grounded in the data. Data was coded shortly after each interview and in a line-by-line fashion, which can help provide "a close look at what participants say and, likely, struggle with" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 50).

Initial coding for this study was conducted using Taguette, a free and open-source qualitative data analysis tool. Following each interview, the author reviewed the transcript line-by-line, tagging significant words or phrases with short-hand terms, or codes, that represent ideas and concepts shared by participants. The author added notes to these codes to provide an emerging definition; in effect, these notes collectively served as a code dictionary. These notes were also used to store memos, which "document the analytical and methodological steps taken by the researchers" (Timonen et al., 2018, p. 7).

Focused coding is used to "pinpoint and develop the most salient categories in large batches of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). Through comparing and contrasting initial codes, it generates a shorter list of categories, each representing a group of codes (Birks & Mills, 2023). Through focused coding, an initial code may be further developed, it may be incorporated in other related codes, or it may be eliminated. Focused coding is critical to ensuring that a grounded theory study moves from "relatively superficial observations to more abstract theoretical categories" (Suddaby, 2006, p. 636). During this phase, which followed data collection, the author reviewed each transcript again along with its associated codes and notes (with definitions and memos), and diagrammed the initial codes and the emerging categories using Microsoft PowerPoint.

The third phase, theoretical coding, entails defining relationships among the categories established through focused coding. During this phase, the author used the aforementioned diagram to arrange categories based on ethical follower behaviors, what antecedents contribute to ethical follower behaviors, and what outcomes result from these behaviors. While traditionally thought of as generating a theory in all cases, this phase often generates "a new or better conceptualization or a framework that links concepts but falls short of a fully elaborated theory that covers all aspects, stages, consequences, and likelihood of a process or a phenomenon" (Timonenet al., 2018, p. 4)

The author consulted with two independent reviewers to validate the coding process, consistent with a technique used by Butterfield et al. (1996). Both reviewers were unfamiliar with the study and any literature on ethical followership. The reviewers were provided with a random sample of interview excerpts and a code dictionary (assembled from notes in Taguette), and they were asked to select a code for each excerpt that was the best fit. One rater disagreed with the other two raters on the interpretation of two codes, resulting in an interrater agreement score of .80 (that is, among three raters, the number of actual agreements divided by the number of potential agreements equaled .80). This result, while acceptable, prompted an immediate revision to define the two suspect codes more clearly and establish complete interrater agreement.

Results

Among professional engineers, the ethical implications of the work are significant. Whether their output is buildings or bridges, or roadways, or sewage systems, or electrical grids, professional engineers play an important role in protecting the public. As Bert reflected, "Stop

and think for a moment about the number of lives that the average engineer holds in their hands. It's an awesome responsibility!"

Professional engineers face a variety of ethical dilemmas in their work. Participants described pressures to provide services that were outside their area of competence. They face pressures to "take shortcuts" or "cut corners," such as substituting materials that are cheaper or can be more readily procured, or skipping important installation or testing steps. Participants also reported facing pressure to mislead clients, whether by making false representations or omitting important information. Participants also described pressures to approve, or "sign and seal," engineering work without having had the proper control or oversight to do so.

Professional engineers also face ethical dilemmas at work that are not specific to engineering work but that do affect the work environment and may ultimately present a risk to the public. Participants described instances of harassment, discrimination, and bullying. As Fernando explained, "That's how some leaders get things done. You find an engineer who is young, or who is the only woman in the office, or someone else who doesn't have much power, and you push them to do what you want."

Analysis of the data in this study generated twenty-nine codes that are organized into four categories, as shown in Figure 1. The first category *Developing Moral, Professional, and Follower Identities* explains how professional engineers develop identities related to being a "good person" and a "good engineer," as well as how they develop a sense of their role as a follower, whether in relation to a particular leader or a common purpose. It draws on what professional engineers learn from moral and ethical standards, from observing others and through group membership, and from experience. It also speaks to how they evaluate the extent to which they are living in accordance with their personal moral standards or the ethical standards of their profession. Rather than operating solely as an antecedent of ethical follower behaviors, this category represents an ongoing, iterative process that informs the other three categories.

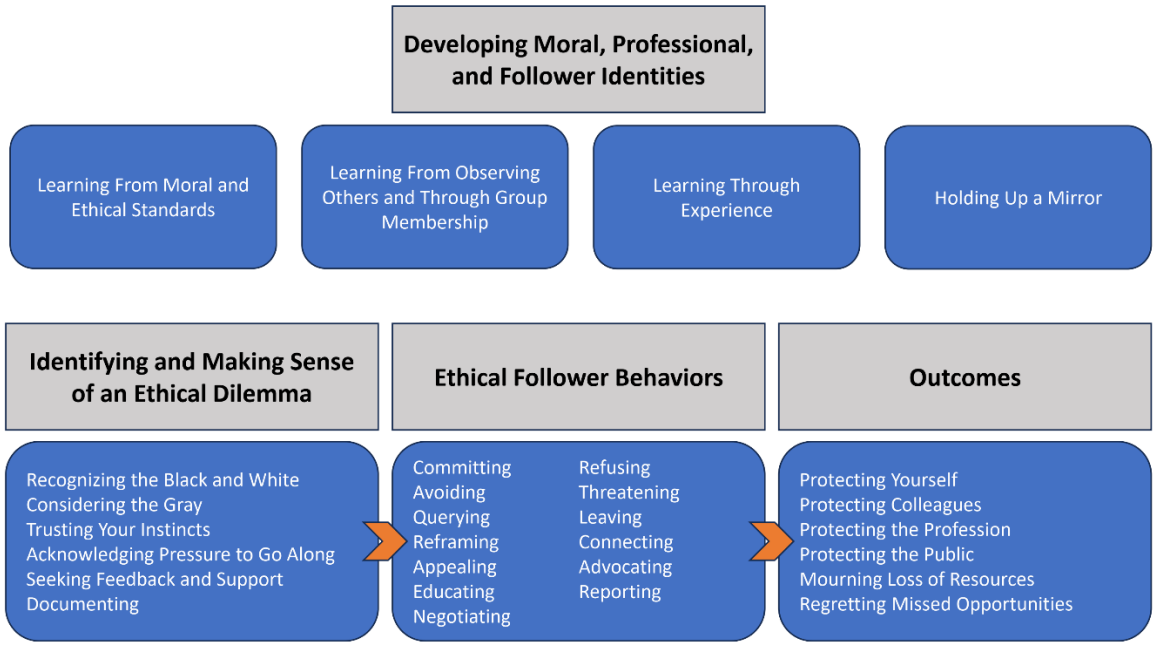
The second category is *Identifying and Making Sense of an Ethical Dilemma*. It speaks to how professional engineers recognize "black-and-white" ethical dilemmas, which is when the options available and their ethical implications are clear and it's relatively easy to determine the right thing to do. It also addresses how professional engineers navigate the "gray," ethical dilemmas that are more nuanced and in which the appropriate response is less clear. This category also addresses experiences of trusting one's instincts, acknowledging pressure to go along with an unethical directive or request, seeking feedback and support from others, and documenting observations and reactions.

The third and fourth categories represent *Ethical Follower Behaviors* and *Outcomes*. Ethical follower behaviors include examples that are focused on the leader-follower relationship, such as appealing or negotiating, as well as behaviors that involve going outside that relationship for a resolution, like reporting an unethical directive or request. Outcomes of ethical follower behaviors include protection of the ethical follower, their colleagues, the profession, and the public. These outcomes also include mourning the loss of material or symbolic resources associated with a job, such as a steady income and professional relationships, as well as reflecting on missed opportunities to do the right thing (or to act sooner).

As Figure 1 presents a theoretical framework for ethical followership and makes no mention of ethical leadership, it is important to clarify that categories and their properties in this theoretical framework may apply as much to leading as they do to following. Indeed, as Kellerman (2019) argues, "It might sound counterintuitive, but followers do not always follow,

any more than leaders always lead" (p. 42). Any serious attempt to model leading or following will invariably involve some overlap between the two processes.

Figure 1: A Theoretical Framework for Ethical Followership



Developing Moral, Professional, and Follower Identities

Learning from Moral and Ethical Standards

Professional engineers look to a written code of ethics for guidance on how to conduct themselves. The National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE) Code of Ethics, for example, was frequently referenced by participants as foundational to "doing the right thing" as a professional engineer. It's first fundamental canon to "Hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public" (NSPE, n. d.) informed their decision making when navigating an unethical directive or request.

Rather than serving merely as a symbol of good engineering practice, the NSPE Code of Ethics and other written standards provide the raw material necessary for professional engineers to form an identity, often coming to life through application to case studies. Participants shared memories of case studies they had learned about early in their career that helped them determine how they wanted to be perceived as a professional engineer. In reference to the Challenger Disaster, which was among a few frequently-cited case studies, Zac shared, "Hearing that story and putting myself in the shoes of an engineer who was trying to do the right thing – that's what helped me understand, 'this is what it means to be a good engineer.' Doing the right thing even when there's pressure to do otherwise.'"

Learning from Observing Others and Through Group Membership

Professional engineers develop a sense of who they are and who they aspire to be based on their observations of others, which may make a positive or negative impression, and via formal or informal group membership. John described an experience in college in which he identified damage to a pedestrian bridge on campus and reported it to his faculty advisor, worrying that his concern might not be taken seriously. To his surprise, the faculty advisor connected John with the appropriate engineer at the university to have the bridge formally evaluated. Describing it as a "reinforcing moment," John emphasized, "I was empowered! And since then I've never hesitated to share my concerns."

Experiences with bad role models also contribute to identify development, clarifying for professional engineers how they want to be perceived by others. Eliza described specific steps she has taken as an engineering manager to enable her team members to be more active and proactive followers – having an open door policy, encouraging critical thinking, and recognizing effort. Reflecting on her experiences with "toxic leadership" early in her career, she explained, "I don't want my team members to deal with what I had to deal with when I started out."

Group membership also informs identity development for professional engineers. Participants referred to social clubs, sports teams, and professional and academic societies that helped them gain a sense of who they are and what it means to follow the ethical standards of a profession. Participants expressed feelings of confidence and security knowing that they are part of a community of professionals. Osmond commented, "I was lucky to have peer pressure to do good work, which elevated my experience. It pushed me to be a better engineer and a better person."

Group membership also provides opportunities for professional engineers to exchange knowledge and consider how they might handle situations faced by their peers. For example, Barnaby explained, "You have a chance to observe. You're seeing what's happening with other people, and you can put yourself in their shoes and ask, 'How would I handle that?'" Participants described staying late at conference programs specifically to talk through ethical "what-ifs" that helped them gain insight from other members and follow others' examples.

Learning Through Experience

While the aforementioned identity development steps may help professional engineers understand who they want to be or how they want to be perceived by others, participants associated the confidence to actually *become* that person with learning through experience. In other words, they took a belief or value that they were attracted to, they applied it, and they reflected on the results. Reflecting on efforts to help her "bullheaded" leader think critically and make better decisions, Penelope described coming to an important realization, stating, "There are still a lot of men that don't think very highly of women and our abilities and don't want to work with us." As a result, she began to assess more carefully the effort she is willing to put forth to influence a leader or peer, thereby refining her identify and setting boundaries around her efforts to help others improve their decision making.

Holding Up a Mirror

Professional engineers have a means of checking in with themselves to evaluate whether they are living in accordance with their moral or ethical standards. That is, they have a mechanism for "holding up a mirror" to themselves and taking an honest look at their decisions and actions. Several participants shared a social referent for this mirror, usually in the form of a loved one by whom they would want to be perceived positively. Damon stated, "I ask myself, 'Is this something I would want my mother or my grandmother to see?' If it's something that would upset them or cause them to worry, then it can't be very ethical." For other participants, the social referent was a friend, a family member, a mentor, or someone they may never meet but who could be reading about their ethical lapse in the newspaper.

Identifying and Making Sense of an Ethical Dilemma

Recognizing the Black and White

When trying to determine whether an ethical dilemma exists and what action, if any, should be taken in response, it can help to see the "black and white" situations with clarity and not overanalyze. In Harmony's case, being asked to misrepresent who owns the fabrication shop where a client's components would be manufactured was an obvious step too far. In response to her leader's request, she explained, "I immediately took him aside and I said, 'You're going to come up with a reason why the client is going to see somebody else's name on the gate because I'm not!'" Justine shared a similar case about dishonesty in which she faced pressure to share an unrealistic project schedule, stating, "I'm literally being asked to lie to them. This is not okay."

Considering the Gray

According to participants, most ethical dilemmas that professional engineers face are not easily resolved with a simple black-and-white analysis. As Clive explained, "Engineers are not out there going, 'I want to implement something that kills somebody,' right? No one's doing that. Instead, most engineers are doing what they think is right. They're doing bad things for good reasons." As a result, it is important for professional engineers to be aware of, and curious about, the gray, or when an ethical dilemma is nuanced and the appropriate response is unclear.

The gray also entails recognizing the limitations of one's own perspective. As Rosalind shared, "Very rarely in an ethical dilemma is there one clearly bad person and one clearly good person." Considering the gray suggests critical thinking and a willingness, perhaps even an enthusiasm, to acknowledge when one's thinking is incomplete, or uninformed, or simply wrong. It is not simply an intellectual exercise. Acknowledging the embarrassment and shame that comes with correcting yourself, Arnold expressed, "I hate to be second guessed. I hate to be wrong."

Trusting Your Instincts

Being aware of, and attentive to, one's instinctive response is an important piece of identifying and making sense of an ethical dilemma. Participants described this initial reaction – that is, whether they "trusted their gut" – as a reliable predictor of whether they would take

timely action to resolve an ethical dilemma. Justine reflected on times when she did not trust her instincts, stating, “The most important thing is to not give up on that instinct. There’s a reason you feel that way.”

Acknowledging Pressure to Go Along

Just like pressure in a liquid or gas may be used by a professional engineer to exert force in a mechanical system, pressure may be used by a leader to encourage compliance with an unethical directive or request. Of course, pressure in a liquid or gas may be easier to measure and evaluate than the human mind when under stress. Participants emphasized the importance of their awareness of what actions others had taken to apply pressure and how they were feeling under that pressure, both as a means to respond appropriately and to avoid disengagement long term. Eliza described “sheep,” or conformist followers, she knew who grew accustomed to relenting under pressure and began to react without thinking. Expressing regret over “caving” to pressure, Fernando said, “I began to feel numb to the pressure and shut down my defenses.”

Seeking Feedback and Support

When identifying and making sense of an ethical dilemma, professional engineers can benefit from seeking feedback and support from their professional network. Jack emphasized the mental and emotional benefits of gaining perspective from someone outside the situation, stating, “You need to find other people you can talk to. Not your boss. Not your team. Somebody who can be an outsider looking in.” Referring to his efforts to join professional associations and build a strong network, Tom stated, “Very rarely will you come across a problem that hasn’t been experienced by someone else.” Participants also referenced the NSPE ethics hotline as a valuable resource for confidential feedback.

Documenting

Documenting refers to the ethical follower establishing and maintaining a record of decisions, actions, communications, and reactions associated with an ethical dilemma. Examples include meeting minutes and written summaries of telephone, video conference, or face-to-face meetings. For example, Justine described ensuring that all decisions and actions related to a design were documented in emails and permanently saved. She stated, “I made sure everything was in email. My license could be at stake.” Participants acknowledged the significant investment of time and attention that may be necessary for documenting, but they emphasized that it’s critical to remembering what happened and considering the implications.

Ethical Follower Behaviors

Participants described one or more ethical follower behaviors when asked about their responses to unethical directives, unethical requests, or other situations at work where they felt pressured to do something unethical. They also described a behavior of “Committing” when they identified someone or something they were highly motivated to follow. Each ethical follower behavior is defined below and explained via examples.

Committing refers to the ethical follower embracing a leader's directive, or request, or influence in a manner that is informed and often enthusiastic. Participants described past and current follower roles in which they were attracted to leaders or teams that demonstrated honesty, trust, and a willingness to consider different perspectives. Nelson referred to his experiences committing to a leader who encouraged followers to disagree and critique his ideas, stating, "He made sure that people were questioning him and holding him accountable as a leader."

Avoiding refers to the ethical follower withholding action on an ethical dilemma while forming their intentions to resist an unethical directive or request in some fashion. Participants described avoiding interactions with a leader and trying to evade further pressure to comply with an unethical directive or request. This behavior involves some degree of what participants described as passively "going along" or "looking the other way" and ignoring unethical behavior within their team. When explaining the rationale for their decision to avoid, participants explained that they were evaluating the best course of action while there was not yet an immediate risk to the safety, health, or welfare of the public. Toby expressed confidence that avoiding would pay off, stating, "I knew that I would find the right time to act and actually be able to make a difference."

Querying refers to the ethical follower asking the leader questions on what they are directing or requesting, or their rationale for doing so. While sometimes used genuinely to gain clarification, this behavior was often described by participants as an attempt to expose and document the leader's unethicality. As Barnaby suggested, "These guys are specialists in deniability. I wanted him to take responsibility for what he was asking me to do. I wanted to make him say it." Dominic expressed feelings of satisfaction and joy, stating, "It can be entertaining to watch a leader squirm."

Reframing refers to the ethical follower proposing a way of looking at the ethical dilemma from another perspective so as to reveal ethical implications or other options. This behavior was common when a follower could provide a unique perspective on the basis of their knowledge or experience, particularly when the leader was a non-engineer. Zac stated the premise to *Reframing*, noting, "I didn't expect him to understand the issue inside and out, but I did expect him to listen and consider other perspectives."

Appealing refers to the ethical follower asking the leader to withdraw the directive or request. Typically this approach entailed highlighting the ethical implications of complying with the directive or request. Faced with signing off on a new product that was not ready for market, Penelope described appealing to her manager to reconsider, stating, "I had to get pretty honest and explain that we will jeopardize business for everyone involved and that we can't afford that risk."

When appealing to a leader, direct and assertive communication is important. As Dino articulated, "It's a three-step process. You describe what they said, how it made you feel, and what they can do to correct that." This behavior gives an opportunity to the leader to consider the ethical follower's perspective and determine whether to reinforce the directive or request or to withdraw it.

Educating refers to the ethical follower helping the leader gain knowledge or skills that are critical to making or executing an ethical decision. Given that many participants identified the leader they were trying to influence as a non-engineer or as an engineer from another discipline, much of this education revolves around technical knowledge and putting complex subject matter in lay terms. For example, trying to educate a non-engineer city councilmember,

Tom related a roadway construction technique to how the leader might treat a potted plant. Participants also described helping a leader develop soft skills, such as communicating about a sensitive issue or resolving a conflict. Penelope emphasized that approaching a leader to educate them rather than to negotiate or refuse can help "defuse" the situation and "leave people in an honorable way."

Negotiating refers to the ethical follower working with the leader to find a suitable compromise that serves the leader's interests and the ethical follower's interests. In Tom's case, he was asked to sign and seal a design for a 225-ft water tower that originally provided an elevator for technicians to use but that would now exclude that option to reduce costs. Citing the concern for a technician's safety and well-being, Tom negotiated changes that would provide some relief for the technician.

Refusing refers to the ethical follower asserting to the leader that they will not execute their directive or request, usually with an explanation of the rationale. In cases where it was required that a professional engineer sign and seal, participants described leveraging the power of the PE license. In an effort to ensure that a report disclosed potential blasting costs for foundation work, Barnaby noted that his license served as "a pretty powerful club" and enabled him to uphold personal moral standards for honesty and integrity. Refusing comes with considerable risk; it resulted in involuntary termination for a few participants who attempted it.

Threatening refers to the ethical follower stating intention to take adverse action, such as *Leaving* or *Reporting*, if the leader pursues what they perceive to be an unethical course of action. Whether explicitly stated or implied, this behavior puts the leader "on notice" of potential consequences of their actions. For example, when noticing early signs of sexual harassment of a colleague, Buck advised his leader that he would report the harassing behavior if it continued, indicating, "I'm not going to keep quiet if this continues."

Leaving refers to the ethical follower leaving a business relationship, an organization, or the engineering profession voluntarily in response to an unethical directive or request. For participants who took this approach, the idea of leaving came easily but decisions regarding when and how to leave responsibly, as well as what to do next, were difficult and typically involved detailed contingency planning. Leaving can cause a significant loss of material or symbolic resources associated with a job, such as a steady income and professional relationships.

Recognizing the disconnect he felt with his firm's culture, Josh explained his rationale for leaving: "You're going to have to decide. If you can't change it, then you're going to have to leave. You're going to suffer otherwise." When determining whether and how to terminate a relationship with a client due to ethics concerns, Ollie took inspiration from an engineer who modeled leaving in a manner that resonated with him. According to Ollie, having observed unethical behavior that was excused by the state licensing board, the engineer sent his license to the state with the message, "If this is the way you're going to let other people work, then this license is not worth the paper that it's printed on."

Participants who left expressed empathy for those who decided to stay, including those who were complicit with unethical thinking or behavior. Harmony stated, "It's easy for me to walk away because I don't have kids and until recently I didn't have a mortgage. It's not that easy for everyone." Likewise, when evaluating a peer's decision to stay and become complicit with unethical behavior, Ollie shared, "Did I lose respect for him? A little. Did I understand why he did what he did? Yes. I don't think he should have been put in that position."

Connecting refers to the ethical follower bringing together perspectives from multiple sources that may otherwise be siloed or disconnected from one another. In some cases this

technique is used to educate, appeal to, or negotiate with, a leader. For example, Justine described being the single client-facing member of her team and encouraging the client to raise concerns in meetings. As she put it, "If the message comes from the client, it has more weight." Connecting may also be used to rally support to collectively respond to an ethical lapse. As Bert described when reflecting on leading a dialogue with his peers, "It's about strength in numbers. It's hard when you're the only person dealing with it."

Connecting may also transcend the leader-follower relationship that is the source of the ethical dilemma. That is, connecting may serve as a way to build *new* leader-follower relationships, within an organization or outside of it, and do work that is more ethical or fulfilling. Dominic discussed forming a cross-functional team that did innovative work on asset management in part because they rejected protocols and hierarchy. As he put it, "I was spearheading it, but I wouldn't say there was any particular leader. It was four people putting our heads together." Describing a similar effort to work across traditional boundaries, Josh shared, "It's not about the org chart. It's about doing the right thing!"

Advocating refers to the ethical follower contributing to policy or education in one's organization or profession to elevate the work. These behaviors may focus on general efforts to promote ethical behavior, such as organizing workshops or knowledge-sharing events. They may also be geared specifically to an issue that the ethical follower is concerned about. For example, Josh described a successful effort with other professional engineers to propose and pass state legislation to improve life cycle assessments on infrastructure projects.

Reporting refers to the ethical follower pointing out unethical behavior, or a leader's unethical directive or request, to an individual or group, or to the public directly as a remedy. There are several ways to report an ethical lapse, but participants generally described a progression. For example, an ethical follower may escalate their concern to a leader's leader or their human resources department. If necessary, they may further escalate the concern to an outside party like a client, or the media, or a state licensing authority. Participants described seeking feedback and support when determining whether to report and navigating fears of retaliation, and they pointed to the NSPE ethics hotline as a valuable resource.

Reporting as described by participants in this study could be associated with the term "whistleblowing," which is commonly defined in the literature as "a disclosure made by a person with privileged access to an organization's data or information about a wrongdoing, which implicates the organization, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action" (Culiberg & Mihelic, 2017, p. 787). The author has chosen to use the term "reporting" as it is grounded in the language used by participants and is a more value-neutral term.

Outcomes

When participants discussed the outcomes of their ethical follower behaviors, "protection" was a prominent theme. They described vividly the potential harms of unethical thinking and behavior on themselves, their colleagues, the engineering profession, and the public, and they shared pride and satisfaction in knowing that they prevented harm. Participants also acknowledged two negative phenomena that may come as a result of ethical followership – that is, mourning the loss of material or symbolic resources, as well as reflecting on missed opportunities to do the right thing (or to do it sooner).

Protecting Yourself

Over the course of a career, a professional engineer can expect to face a variety of ethical dilemmas, an experience that by itself can be mentally and emotionally draining. As Barnaby described, “Engineers may not realize it, but every hour of the day there are ethical dilemmas that can slap you in the face!” When a leader pressures an engineer to do something unethical, those ethical dilemmas become even more difficult to cope with and respond to. Participants described feeling miserable, disappointed, guilty, anxious, restless, and angry. Ethical followership provides a path toward resolving these negative feelings and a way for professional engineers to protect their moral and professional identities.

Protecting Colleagues

While there are instances of a single member of a team being targeted for unethical directives or requests, participants generally reported that unethical thinking or behavior spread and became normalized within their team. As a result, colleagues may be subject to feeling the same pressures to betray their moral or ethical standards and may experience the same negative effects. For a few participants, protecting their colleagues was the most important outcome of ethical followership. Arnold expressed relief after an executive he had reported for unethical behavior was forced to resign, stating, “Several people called me and thanked me for raising the issue since they could not report him themselves for fear of losing their job.”

Protecting the Profession

The PE license is a valuable indicator of a person’s engineering qualifications and their commitment to professionalism. For it to continue to hold that value, participants emphasized that ethical standards must be maintained and enforced. They recognized that their ethical follower behaviors helped other engineers improve or set a higher standard for ethics in the profession. As Malcolm explained, “I brought attention to the issue of plan stamping, and I think I at least helped reduce how much it happens. I encouraged engineers to do better.”

Protecting the Public

In keeping with the first fundamental canon of the NSPE Code of Ethics, participants recognized that their ethical follower behaviors ultimately protected the public by preventing them from harm. While a few participants focused on specific harms that they prevented via ethical follower behaviors, others reframed harm prevention as “confidence” and “peace of mind.” That is, rather than merely preventing bad things from happening, their actions enabled the public to live life freely and peacefully without having to worry about the structures and systems around them failing.

For a few participants, protecting the public has a spiritual significance as an example of doing “good works.” Toby described that, in life and in engineering, he must be responsible to something greater than himself, which entails being watchful for unethical behavior and intervening when necessary. Buck shared, “I am my brother’s keeper, so I have a responsibility not just for myself but for anyone who I can protect from harm.”

Mourning Loss of Resources

Being a professional engineer comes with risk. Specifically, as Rosalind put it, "It's a standard for any engineer. They are taking personal risk to protect the public from risk because retaliation is illegal, but that doesn't mean it doesn't happen." Participants described losing their employment, opportunities for promotion, and preferred work assignments. They described being alienated from other team members or clients. They faced a tremendous loss of material and symbolic resources that are difficult to recover.

Regretting Missed Opportunities

When reflecting on the outcomes of "doing the right thing," many participants sensed that they could have done more. Summarizing a progression she has observed in navigating ethical dilemmas, Rosalind reflected, "*I thought* it was wrong. Then *I was pretty sure* it was wrong. And finally, *I knew* it was wrong." Participants carried some guilt over not taking action sooner, not acting more decisively, or not using other methods or resources that were available to them. For Justine, that guilt was associated with not finding an alternative to leaving. As she put it, "It sucks, to be honest. I just hate that I didn't find a way to fix it or find some solution for the team."

Ethical Followership Defined

Building on a proposed definition from Payne (2023) and incorporating the data from the present study, ethical followership can be defined as *the demonstration of upward or lateral influencing within an organization or a profession to encourage ethical behavior*. It is informed by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). It is often directed toward improving an established leader-follower relationship, or it may transcend that relationship.

Discussion

Much like Chaleff's (2009) courage to take moral action, the findings of this study paint a more detailed picture of how followers think and behave when facing an ethical dilemma at work. It also suggests skills that may be necessary for ethical followership to be practiced and for it to produce intended outcomes. This more detailed picture of follower behaviors and competencies has implications for theory and practice that are discussed below.

Theoretical Implications

As Kassing (2011) argues about perhaps the most recognizable example of organizational dissent, whistleblowing "often serves as a signal that internal mechanisms designed to absorb and respond to organizational dissent have failed" and "would not be necessary if concerns about wrongdoing were addressed promptly and effectively" (p. 53). That is, if workers could identify, select, and apply a variety of ethical follower behaviors, and if they could do so competently and confidently, there may be little use for whistleblowing or other methods that are less favorable to

an organization. Given this context, this study makes three important contributions to theory regarding ethical follower behaviors.

First, this study validates and integrates previous conceptual work on courageous followership (Chaleff, 2009) and follower influence on leader ethicality (Hernandez & Sitkin, 2012), as well as the limited empirical research done on upward dissent strategies (Kassing, 2002). Second, it introduces two ethical follower behaviors – *Connecting* and *Advocating* – that transcend the traditional leader-follower relationship that informs research on follower behavior across research streams. Finally, it points to an important intersection of moral, professional, and follower identities not yet examined in the literature.

Several of the ethical follower behaviors identified in this study directly correspond with Chaleff's (2009) behaviors that show "courage to take moral action," including *Querying, Appealing, Refusing, Leaving,* and *Reporting* (or "blowing the whistle"). The ethical follower behavior of *Reframing* also aligns with more recent comments from the author comparing courageous followership and ethical followership. According to Chaleff (2024), the ethical follower may "reframe a choice the leader is making as potentially detrimental to the common purpose and to the leader's reputation and status," enabling the follower to "achieve a more receptive audience for alternative ideas" (personal communication, February 4, 2024).

In addition to moral actions that find empirical support in this study, Chaleff's (2009) discussion of how the courageous follower determines whether and how to take moral action is supported by the category of *Identifying and Making Sense of an Ethical Dilemma*. In a "values review," for example, Chaleff (2009) advises that unethical behavior in the organization can be so at odds with a follower's values that their cognitive dissonance may prevent them from fully registering the discrepancies. He advises, in keeping with *Trusting Your Instincts* and *Acknowledging Pressure to Go Along,* that followers pay attention to the actions taken within their team and any discomfort they feel in response. Consistent with *Documenting,* Chaleff (2009) suggests compiling lists to help them consider their values and assess "which actions support our sense of basic human values and which conflict with them" (p. 166)." Similarly, Chaleff's (2009) "follower self-examination" calls for *Seeking Feedback and Support* from peers, especially those who will provide an objective and candid response.

Identifying and Making Sense of an Ethical Dilemma and its properties could also be associated with moral awareness, which is an individual's determination that a situation has moral implications (Rest, 1986). This category could also be associated with moral attentiveness, which Reynolds (2008) defines as "the extent to which an individually chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences" (p. 1028). Moral attentiveness may, as van Gils et al. (2015) argue, "help followers assess and take action to restore the moral balance in their work environment" (p. 199).

Several of the ethical follower behaviors identified in this study are consistent with the follower actions identified by Hernandez and Sitkin (2012). "Modeling" could be associated with multiple behaviors in this study, but *Committing* stands out given that the follower's loyalties to ethical leadership, or ethical causes generally, can model values to which the leader may aspire. "Eliciting," in which the follower may ask provocative questions to help the leader consider the implications of their actions, is akin to *Querying*. "Guiding," which Hernandez and Sitkin (2012) liken to the bumpers used in a bowling alley to avoid a gutter ball, is consistent with advising the leader of consequences of an unethical action, such as *Reframing* or *Threatening*. Finally, "sensemaking" is closely associated with *Educating* as a means to help the leader "structure the

unknown" (Waterman, 1990, p. 41), or to make meaning where none is readily accessible, and adapting to new and novel situations.

While not explicitly coded in this study, Kassing's (2002) upward dissent strategies find additional empirical support and are evident as a subset of particular ethical follower behaviors. "Solution presentation" would fall under *Negotiation*. "Direct factual appeal" would fall under *Appealing*. "Circumvention" would fall under *Reporting*. "Threatening resignation" would fall under *Threatening*. Kassing's (2002) "repetition" is less of an upward dissent strategy and more of a reminder of a basic premise, which is that a follower may apply a behavior or strategy multiple times in an effort to achieve the intended outcome.

The second contribution of this study is the identification of two ethical follower behaviors that have not previously been explored in the literature, whether in followership research or associated research streams in organizational communication or behavioral ethics. The two ethical follower behaviors that are unique to this study, *Connecting* and *Advocating*, may in some cases transcend the traditional leader-follower relationship, which could explain why they have not been examined through the lens of followership. Rather than considering only those options that are associated with influencing a particular leader, participants found that *Connecting* and *Advocating* opened new paths toward promoting ethical behavior and doing more fulfilling work. Some participants who applied these behaviors did so after, or while in the process of, *Leaving*. Others applied these behaviors while still operating within the team or organization that presented them with their ethical dilemma.

The implication that ethical followers are out in the real world doing work that transcends the traditional leader-follower relationship may be cause enough to revisit the scope of followership behaviors that merit study. In their review of followership research, Uhl-Bien et al. (2014, p. 93) assert that "the issue of most relevance for followership research is how employees engage in this behavior in relation to leaders and how leaders perceive and respond to followers' proactive behaviors." While well-intentioned, this narrow framing focuses research on follower behaviors only insofar as they concern an existing leader-follower relationship. By focusing only on follower's attempts to influence a particular leader rather than the "invisible leader" (Hickman & Sorenson, 2014), or the common purpose, followership research may risk falling into the leader-centric thinking that it attempts to subvert.

Finally, this study points to three interwoven identify development processes that enabled participants in this study to piece together a coherent sense of being a good person, a good engineer, and a good follower. Researchers have examined multiple identities at work, such as the interactive effects of organizational identification and professional identification (Greco et al., 2021; Ramarajan, 2014). Followership researchers have also examined specific follower identities (Carsten et al., 2010) and how they are developed (Thompson, 2020). This study uniquely incorporates these separate analyses in one theoretical framework.

Practical Implications

For practitioners, the study's findings suggest opportunities for follower development, which can promote ethical behavior within a firm and may serve other organizational interests, such as innovation and teamwork. While the study points to evidence of several ethical follower behaviors that produce valuable outcomes, including some that may be more favorable to an organization, these behaviors are not always within reach. Indeed, much of participants' *Regretting Missed Opportunities* stemmed from times when, facing pressure, they failed to

consider the methods and resources available to them to practice ethical followership. Furthermore, they lacked what some researchers call "ethical efficacy" (Mitchell & Palmer, 2010). That is, they did not feel confident in their ability to "do the right thing" when facing an ethical dilemma and in the likelihood that doing so would produce intended outcomes.

Given that the strength of self-efficacy beliefs is influenced by past successes and failures (Bandura, 1997), whether via experience or observation, practitioners should consider highlighting stories of ethical followership and recognizing workers who demonstrate ethical follower behaviors competently and confidently. Several participants shared examples where they tried out an ethical follower behavior for the first time and felt anxious about what the response might be. To return to John's example from college, he shared a concern with a faculty advisor about a potential hazard on campus. When the advisor responded positively and helped John get connected to the right people to resolve his concern, the result was not just a safer pedestrian bridge. The faculty advisor enabled John to feel empowered and increased the likelihood that John would demonstrate ethical followership when facing ethical dilemmas in the future. Again, as he put it, "Since then I've never hesitated…"

Of course, there are limits to what a practitioner should expect from an ethical follower, and practitioners should be prepared to define those limits. When faced with a leader who did not work well with women and who tended to belittle or ignore women's concerns, Penelope described setting boundaries for herself. She re-evaluated her selection of ethical follower behaviors and determined that her first pick of *Educating* was no longer viable. When followers make this sort of tradeoff, limiting the ethical follower behaviors that they are confident applying because of incompetence of a leader, that should be concerning to the organization. That is, when evaluating leaders, organizations should consider leaders' awareness of, and ability to foster, ethical followership, such as responding to a follower who is attempting to educate.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has limitations, which can be remedied through future research. First, selecting a sample of professional engineers in the United States may limit the extent to which these findings can be generalized about workers in other professions, or non-professional workers, or workers in other parts of the world. In terms of representing the population of professional engineers in the United States, the sample's gender and race demographics were consistent with that of the profession; however, age was skewed toward those later in their career. Future research can use other samples to improve generalizability.

In keeping with guidance from Timonen et al. (2018) that a grounded theory study may produce a useful theoretical framework that links concepts but does not necessarily produce a fully elaborated theory, the theoretical framework in this study merely associates categories but not their properties. For example, there is no attempt in this study to explain a relationship between trusting one's instincts and leaving an organization other than to say that the former appears to be an antecedent of the latter, just as other properties of *Identifying and Making Sense of an Ethical Dilemma* appear to be antecedents of the properties of *Ethical Follower Behaviors*. Future research can examine these relationships more closely, as well as to quantify them, and could take input from reviews of influence tactics and their antecedents and outcomes (Lee et al., 2017), as well as ethical voice and its outcomes (Chen & Treviño, 2023). This future research could determine which ethical follower behavior, or combination of behaviors, or sequence of behaviors, may be best suited to particular conditions.

Finally, the ethical followership construct defined in this study has not yet been operationalized. This step would enable scholars to measure this construct and build on the theoretical framework presented in this study. It would also enable practitioners to implement follower development initiatives with clear guidance on how to measure and evaluate ethical followership. Future research can develop a scale for ethical followership.

Conclusion

In the last twenty-five years of organizational research, ethical leadership figures prominently as an answer to the question, "How do workers learn how to do the right thing when facing an ethical dilemma?" However, enthusiasm for a leader-centric view of ethics at work has outpaced the potential to explore the ways that followers navigate ethical dilemmas, leaving the experiences of "ethical followers" unclear. To make room for followers in this discussion, this article introduced the literature on ethical leadership and ethical followership. It outlined the methods and results of a grounded theory study on ethical followership among professional engineers, including a definition and theoretical framework for ethical followership. Finally, it discussed implications for theory and practice, chief among them validating, integrating, and enhancing previous conceptual work related to ethical followership and making a case for follower development programs.

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