ABSTRACT  Is there one best practice for ethical leadership? Studies suggest that the publicness of an organization can have important implications for leadership. Yet research on ethical leadership generally assumes that one ethical leadership style should fit all types of organization alike. This study explores the validity of that assumption by using qualitative interviews to unravel similarities and differences in how Dutch public, hybrid and private sector managers conceive ethical leadership. The results suggest that most aspects of ethical leadership may be transferable across public and private sectors. However, in comparison with their private sector counterparts, the managers operating in public and hybrid sector organizations placed greater value on being altruistic, showing concern for the common good, and being responsive, transparent and accountable to society at large. Moreover, whereas public and hybrid sector managers considered explicit and frequent communication about ethics to be a key component of ethical leadership, most of the private sector managers preferred communication strategies in which ethics was more implicitly embedded in discussions of, for instance, ‘the business model’ or ‘customer relationships’. The results suggest further research on the contingencies of ethical leadership views and practices across different types of organizations is warranted.

KEY WORDS: Ethical leadership, publicness, organization type, context, variform universal leadership

Introduction

Research on ethical leadership has proliferated in the last decade. As a result, understandings of what ‘ethical leadership’ entails and how it works have improved significantly (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Research shows that ethical
leadership helps to reduce counterproductive and unethical behaviour (Huberts et al., 2007; de Hoogh and den Hartog, 2008; Lasthuizen, 2008; Mayer et al., 2009), raises followers’ moral awareness and judgement (Treviño et al., 1999; Resick et al., 2010), and fosters dedication, optimism, initiative, extra effort, altruism, better work attitudes and willingness of followers to help others with work-related problems (Brown et al., 2005; de Hoogh and den Hartog, 2008; Mayer et al., 2009; Toor and Ofori, 2009; Kalshoven, 2010). The effects of ethical leadership on followers’ behaviour are shown to have wider ramifications than the effects produced by a more general leadership style (e.g. transformational leadership) that does not have such an explicit focus on ethics (Brown et al., 2005; Lasthuizen, 2008).

An important limitation to most research on ethical leadership, however, is the common assumption that the same style of ethical leadership is adequate for all organizations under all circumstances. By contrast, studies on implicit leadership theories indicate that not only are conceptions of leadership context-dependent, but they also influence the extent to which particular leadership characteristics and behaviours are effective in influencing follower decision-making and behaviour (den Hartog et al., 1999; Resick et al., 2006; van den Akker et al., 2009). Moreover, a meta-analysis by Lowe et al. (1996) reveals that both the prevalence and effectiveness of leadership styles are partly contingent upon the public–private nature of the organization (i.e. its ‘publicness’). Such studies raise questions as to what extent a ‘one style fits all’ approach to ethical leadership is tenable. Is there one best way to be an ethical leader, a ‘best practice’ that is transferable across organizations? Or are there different approaches to ethical leadership that might be used in different types of organizations?

The present study aims to provide some initial insights into questions like these by uncovering both similarities and differences in the way public, hybrid and private sector managers conceive ‘ethical leadership’. It thereby explores whether the prevailing ethical leadership model fits with the views of managers that operate across different types of organizations, or whether some of the universalistic premises underlying the current model need to be revisited. In doing so, this study can provide important insights to further advance the conceptualization and operationalization of ethical leadership.

**Literature Review**

**Ethical Leadership**

Drawing on qualitative research (Treviño et al., 2000, 2003) as well as conceptual and quantitative validation studies (Brown et al., 2005; Brown and Treviño, 2006), ethical leadership has been defined as ‘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). As this definition implies, the primary objective of ethical leadership is to cultivate ethical decision-making and behaviour among followers and it is this explicit focus on promoting and managing ethics that distinguishes ethical leadership, both
conceptually and empirically, from other leadership styles such as transformational or authentic leadership (see Brown et al., 2005 and Brown and Treviño, 2006 for a more extensive discussion). Prevailing theory and research specifically sees ethical leadership as consisting of two fundamental components, the ‘moral person’ and the ‘moral manager’ (cf. Treviño et al., 2000).

**Moral person.** Whilst a clear definition is lacking in today’s literature, the ‘moral person’ component of ethical leadership is often described in terms of: (1) the personal character of the leader, and (2) the moral nature of the leader’s own decision-making and behaviour. Ethical leaders are portrayed as being ‘ethical by nature’ (Aronson, 2001, p. 253) and having strong moral values that are highly principled and concerned with ‘doing the right thing’ (Treviño et al., 2000; Kaptein, 2003). Ethical leaders also have the moral courage to uphold these values even in the face of significant external pressures (May et al., 2003). In addition, ethical leadership is associated with a plethora of moral traits such as integrity, responsibility, trustworthiness, authenticity and conscientiousness (Craig and Gustafson, 1998; Treviño et al., 2003; Caldwell, 2009; den Hartog and de Hoogh, 2009; Kalshoven and den Hartog, 2009).

The values and traits of ethical leaders are embedded in their decision-making and behaviour (Treviño et al., 2000). Ethical leaders have a high level of moral awareness (Treviño et al., 2003) and make sound moral decisions by ‘judging ambiguous ethical issues, viewing them from multiple perspectives, and aligning decisions with their own moral values’ (Brown and Treviño, 2006, p. 599). As Turner and associates (2002, p. 305) show, this necessitates the application of higher levels of moral reasoning. It is said that ethical leaders make great efforts to remain consistent, coherent and constant in their decision-making and behaviour: they walk the talk and talk the walk (Kaptein, 2003; Brown and Treviño, 2006).

Leaders’ decisions and behaviours inevitably affect their relationship with followers and thereby their ability to influence follower (ethical) decision-making and behaviour. For this reason, ethical leaders are open, caring and people-oriented (Michie and Gooty, 2005), and they show respect, trust, fairness and loyalty towards followers (Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2009). In doing so, ethical leaders strengthen their relational attachment with followers and followers in turn will come to identify themselves more with their ethical leaders. This makes followers more likely to reciprocate with constructive behaviours and to deter from behaviour that hurts the leader or the group (Popper and Mayseless, 2003; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Neubert et al., 2009 Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009). Also, a fair and just interpersonal treatment of followers elevates the credibility and moral authority of leaders and enhances followers’ motivation to emulate the leader’s ethical behaviour (Neubert et al., 2009; de Schrijver et al., 2010).

**Moral manager.** The second component of ethical leadership, the ‘moral manager’, is concerned with those behaviours of the leader that are deliberately geared towards promoting ethical decision-making and behaviour amongst followers (Brown et al., 2005). Specifically, the ‘moral manager’ component...
includes four key aspects: role modelling, reinforcement, communication about ethics and empowerment.

Role modelling ethical behaviour is the first and most critical factor in being a moral manager (Treviño et al., 1999; Lasthuizen, 2008; Neubert et al., 2009), as it directly attests to the credibility of the ethical leader and their attempt to foster ethics among followers. Although role modelling overlaps with being a ‘moral person’, it goes beyond one’s mere individual behaviour by highlighting the reputational and perceptual side of ethical leadership (Treviño et al., 2000). It is important that the decision-making and behaviour of the leader is sufficiently visible and salient to be observed by followers ‘against an organisational backdrop that is often ethically neutral at best’ (Brown and Treviño, 2006, p. 597).

At the same time, ethical leaders must be careful not to send out negative or conflicting signals. ‘[People] are generally not aware of our intent. They see the actions and make inferences based upon them’ (Treviño et al., 2000, p. 134). Ethical leaders are aware of how their decisions and behaviours might be interpreted by followers, make efforts to avoid conduct that could be perceived as inconsistent with moral values and norms, and explicate the reasoning behind their decisions and behaviours if needed (May et al., 2003; Weaver et al., 2005).

Adding a more transactional side to ethical leadership, the second aspect of the ‘moral manager’ component concerns reinforcement of ethical standards through discipline and reward. Importantly, the learning experience of reinforcement lies not just with the person(s) being rewarded or punished, but also occurs vicariously and anticipatorily among those that observe the reinforcement actions of the leader (Treviño, 1992; Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2009). Rewards and punishments should thus be made visible to other followers as well (Treviño et al., 2000). In dealing with unethical behaviour, leaders should also apply a fair and balanced amount of authority, so as to prevent resentment and cynicism yet still send a clear message that ethical lapses are not tolerated (Johnson, 2005). Formal reinforcements should be used with caution. Too much emphasis on formal reinforcement could lessen the level of moral reasoning used by followers and provide them with a reason for not considering the broader ethical implications of their actions (Baucus and Beck-Dudley, 2005). Furthermore, formal rewards might lead employees to sacrifice the overall desired outcomes for the sake of the rewarded behaviour (Bartol and Locke, 2000). Informal rewards such as recognition, trust and status, however, can be powerful incentives for people to engage in ethical behaviour (Grojean et al., 2004), while the threat of informal sanctions, such as ostracism by peers and leaders, can effectively deter people from committing unethical behaviour (Treviño, 1992).

The third aspect that is said to be important to being a ‘moral manager’ is communication about ethics (Brown et al., 2005). Such communication includes highlighting the moral implications of decisions, having open discussions about individual and organizational values, clarifying norms and role expectations and providing guidance on the appropriate course of action (Grojean et al., 2004; de Hoogh and den Hartog, 2008; van den Akker et al., 2009; Piccolo et al., 2010). Leaders also communicate their ethical message by making their own decision-making processes transparent to followers (Treviño et al., 2003; de Hoogh and
Ethical leaders are open, approachable and willing to listen to the questions and dilemmas that followers may have (Huberts et al., 2007), and they provide followers with feedback regarding their ethical conduct (Grojean et al., 2004).

Similar to leadership in general (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999), recent studies suggest that empowerment of followers is a fourth important aspect of moral management (Resick et al., 2006; den Hartog and de Hoogh, 2009). Ethical leaders provide followers with opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and allow them to voice their own perspectives and concerns, they help them to set realistic and motivating goals and they provide them with individual attention, coaching and opportunities for personal development (Khuntia and Suar, 2004; den Hartog and de Hoogh, 2009; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009). Ethical leaders stimulate followers to view things from different perspectives, to question their assumptions and to think independently and creatively (Resick et al., 2006). Empowerment may provide for a natural growth in the ethicality of followers (cf. Jurkiewicz, 2006). Moreover, empowerment heightens perceptions of fairness and of trust in the leader, increasing the leader’s own ability to influence the followers’ ethical decision-making and behaviour (Resick et al., 2006; Mayer et al., 2009).

Ethical Leadership in Public, Hybrid and Private Organization Contexts

These days, there are many types of organizations that defy the label of a strictly ‘public’ or ‘private’ organization. Hence, it is necessary to establish a more dynamic and multidimensional approach to distinguishing public and private organizations, accounting for the many different types of organizational configuration. In this study, the terms ‘public’ and ‘private’ are taken as the opposite ends of a continuum indicating the degree of ‘publicness’ of an organization (Bozeman, 1987). The position of an organization on this public–private continuum follows from three dimensions: (1) the extent to which organizations are constrained by political control, (2) how organizations are funded and financed, and (3) the extent to which organizations perform public or private tasks in order to reach public or private goals (cf. van der Wal, 2008). The terms ‘public’, ‘private’ and ‘hybrid’ organization then denote typical positions on the public–private continuum.

To date, there have been few studies that have looked at contextual variations in what people consider to be ethical leadership (see, however, Resick et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2009), let alone whether a more public organization would require a different style of ethical leadership than a more private one. Indeed, most studies on ethical leadership simply assume that one style of ethical leadership is adequate for any type of organization. Yet, as argued below, there are reasons to suspect that the publicness of an organization may shape a person’s understanding of ethical leadership. Specifically, these reasons relate to the public service motivation of employees, the core tasks of organizations and the influence of external stakeholders on the organization.

First, public service motivation (PSM) may affect the ways in which ethical leadership is conceived. PSM reflects such things as a person’s desire to serve the public interest, one’s loyalty to the government, the strive for social equity and
a so-called ‘patriotism of benevolence’ motive (Perry and Wise, 1990). On average, PSM is higher among public organization employees than among private organization employees (Vandenabeele, 2008; Leisink and Steijn, 2009). People with higher levels of PSM, in turn, are shown to be less dependent on monetary and other extrinsic incentives (Perry and Wise, 1990; Bright, 2005) and exhibit more social altruism (Brewer, 2003), interpersonal citizenship behaviours (Pandey et al., 2008) and a willingness to report integrity violations that are harmful to the public interest (Brewer and Selden, 1998). This could imply that in organizations with higher levels of PSM, presumably the more public organizations, leaders might need to appeal more to the intrinsic motivations of employees. They may, for example, want to emphasize general ethical principles and the value of decisions and actions to the public interest over specific procedures, rules, punishments and rewards. Or, conversely, leaders in public organizations might assume that their followers are already intrinsically motivated to serve the greater good and may therefore consider frequent communication on ethics to be superfluous. By contrast, leaders in organizations with lower PSM, arguably the more private organizations, may wish to relate ethical conduct more directly to employees’ own career opportunities or their chances of receiving bonuses, status and recognition. Additionally, in private organizations, explicit communication on ethics and integrity in terms of ‘the public interest’ and ‘the common good’ may not be sufficiently motivating for employees and perhaps less effective than in public organizations.

Second, the differences in the core tasks and mission of public and private organizations may be important to ethical leadership. Whereas the primary aim of private organizations is generally to maximize profits, public organizations are primarily executers and enforcers of democratic law and policy, serving the public interest and providing public services that are generally not sold on economic markets (Dahl and Lindblom, 1953). As such, public organizations often make decisions and operate in ways that are not only coercive and monopolistic, but which also have a broader societal impact and greater symbolic significance (Hughes, 2003; Rainey and Chun, 2005). The very nature of their tasks suggests ethical dilemmas may, therefore, be more pronounced in public organizations. Whether it is interrogating a recalcitrant prisoner, deciding to spend taxpayers’ money on education or on welfare for the elderly, or determining when to inform the general public on the possible bankruptcy of a bank, public organizations frequently face ethical dilemmas that are inherent in the core of their business. Because of this, managers of public organizations may, for example, feel the need to address the ethical dimensions of certain decisions and actions more explicitly and frequently than their private sector counterparts.

Third and last, the different demands and expectations that external stakeholders have of public and private organizations could shape managers’ views on ethical leadership. Political dynamics and external oversight inhibit the discretion of public and hybrid organization managers, particularly when it comes to personnel management (Rainey and Chun, 2005). Moreover, the publicness of an organization affects the extent to which the organization is susceptible to citizen pressure and scrutiny, with public organizations facing uniquely high public expectations for fairness, openness, accountability and transparency (Pollitt and Bouckaert,
2004; Rainey and Chun, 2005). As a result, managers in public and hybrid organizations may feel ‘forced’ to employ more explicit ethical leadership and institutionalized ethics programmes. In the Netherlands, for instance, public organizations are now legally required to have a formal code of ethics and ethics policy (National Integrity Bureau, accessed 2009). Backed up by such an extensive ethics programme and political mandate, managers in public organizations could be more inclined to talk explicitly about ethics with their employees, discussing ethical dilemmas and reflecting on the ethical aspects of their decisions and actions. Furthermore, ethics programmes may foster the use of more formal reinforcement mechanisms in case of ethical transgressions.

At present, presumptions like the above regarding the effect of an organization’s publicness on ethical leadership lack a solid empirical basis and thus remain highly speculative. At the least, however, this discussion suggests that it is quite possible that different types of organizations may elicit different views on ethical leadership. Hence, empirical exploration of the similarities and differences in ethical leadership conceptions across public, hybrid and private organizations is needed to determine whether the universalistic approach to ethical leadership is sufficiently valid and fitting with managers’ own perspectives or whether we should take a more context-sensitive approach to ethical leadership instead.

Method

Given the lack of pre-existing theoretical and empirical insights on ethical leadership contingencies, particularly in relation to organizational publicness, an explorative research design must be employed. In doing so, this study explicitly aims for theoretical generalization (cf. Yin, 1990; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). When it comes to theoretical generalization, the goal is not to universalize results (e.g. ‘managers’), but rather to elicit insights that can inform and expand present theories and enable the development of hypotheses for future empirical testing. To achieve such theoretical generalizability, it is not the representativeness of the numerical sample that is of concern, but rather the richness and breadth of the sample and its ability to represent the variety of views on ethical leadership. In addition, theoretical generalizability requires the internal validity and reliability of data (Yin, 1990; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003), which in turn is aided by careful, transparent and structured administration and justification of the data collection methods and analyses.

To foster the internal validity of the study, the data were collected using qualitative interviews. Compared with most quantitative designs, qualitative interviews can provide a deeper understanding of the assumptions and processes underlying (ethical) leadership (Bryman, 2004) and allow for a more detailed analysis of the various contextual factors that might affect it (Bryman et al., 1996). Furthermore, qualitative interviews are generally more sensitive to the multiple social meanings that people attach to a construct. Hence, interviews are more appropriate for studying the subjective, diverse and idiosyncratic understandings people may have of ethical leadership (cf. Bresnen, 1995). Interviews allow interviewees to formulate their conceptualizations of ethical leadership in their own words, to attach meaning to the construct and to express how they value certain aspects of it.
(Alvesson, 1996). Consistent with this, the study focuses on what managers think ethical leadership should look like and the subjective meaning they attach to the concept, rather than on evaluating the managers’ own ethical leadership or lack thereof. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect that managers largely base their views of ethical leadership on their daily experiences and realities. Managers’ conceptions of ethical leadership are thus necessarily informed by practice and situated in the context within which they operate.

Internal validity is also fostered by an open, inductive approach to the research object. However, semi-structured interviews rather than completely open interviews were used for several reasons. Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that where constructs are relatively well-delineated, a tighter design of the qualitative interview will provide more clarity and focus and yields more comparable, reliable and economic results. Furthermore, qualitative research is often criticized for its lack of cumulativeness even though building on previous research and explicitly relating the study to pre-existing literature can be just as important in qualitative research as it is in quantitative studies (Bryman, 2004). Given the existence of a relatively well-developed ethical leadership construct and the importance of more cumulative and reliable qualitative research, at least some structuring of and focus in the interviews was deemed necessary. Still, in order to allow multiple subjective meanings to come to the fore and enable the occurrence of unanticipated findings, the interviews maintained a relatively open and flexible character.

The interviews commenced with some general questions probing respondents’ initial definitions of and associations with the term ‘ethical leadership’, e.g. with questions such as ‘what would you consider to be ethical leadership?’ and ‘what characteristics should an ethical leader have?’. Subsequently, the interviews were structured around a topic list including themes such as ‘role modelling’, ‘communication’ and ‘the role of organizational context in ethical leadership’. When interviewees diverged in promising directions, or the course of the interview suggested a different order of questions might be more appropriate, the interview protocol was put aside and the questions were adjusted to the situation at hand. In many cases, the themes suggested in the interview protocol emerged naturally from the responses of the interviewees, and we were able to relate the questions more directly to the interviewee’s own story. At times, the insights obtained from the interviews led to a revision of (aspects of) the interview protocols used for the subsequent interviews. Thus, there was a continuous interaction between the conceptual framework and the empirical data, which helped combat the risk of too much a priori framing and structuring on our part.

In total, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers working in a wide variety of organizations in the Netherlands. A theoretically driven, purposive sampling method was employed to maximize the richness and possible variance of views on ethical leadership and to ensure that a wide range of organization types were included in the sample. The final sample (see Table 1) included managers from typical public organizations such as a police force and a municipality to typical private organizations in retail and engineering, and various hybrid organizations in between. Although the definition of publicness presented earlier prohibits strict labelling of all the organizations, a rough
## Table 1. Sample description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Financial sources</th>
<th>Political control</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Org. size**</th>
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<th>Management scope***</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Police Department Head</td>
<td>Full public funding</td>
<td>Full ministerial responsibility</td>
<td>Public</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>Inspection Inspector-General</td>
<td>Full public funding</td>
<td>Full ministerial responsibility</td>
<td>Public</td>
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<td>Medium Very Large</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>Municipality City Manager</td>
<td>Full public funding</td>
<td>Full ministerial responsibility</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>Public bank Department Head</td>
<td>99-50% Public funding</td>
<td>Full ministerial responsibility</td>
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<td>E</td>
<td>Public bank Member Board of</td>
<td>99-50% Public funding</td>
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<td>Directors Special-hospital</td>
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<td>Primarily public</td>
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<td>G</td>
<td>Social housing corporation</td>
<td>Full private funding</td>
<td>Very limited political control</td>
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<td>Daycare Governance Affairs</td>
<td>Full private funding</td>
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<td>K</td>
<td>Financial firm Senior Partner</td>
<td>Full private funding</td>
<td>No direct political control</td>
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<td>L</td>
<td>Consultancy Senior Consultant</td>
<td>Full private funding</td>
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<td>Private bank</td>
<td>Member Board of Directors</td>
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<td>No direct political control</td>
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<td>P</td>
<td>Private bank</td>
<td>Supervisory Board</td>
<td>Full private funding</td>
<td>No direct political control</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Very large</td>
<td>Very large</td>
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<td>Q</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Member Board of Directors</td>
<td>Full private funding</td>
<td>No direct political control</td>
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<td>R</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Member Board of Directors</td>
<td>Full private funding</td>
<td>No direct political control</td>
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* Small = less than 100 employees; Medium = between 100 and 1000 employees; Large = between 1000 and 25,000 employees; Very large = more than 25,000 employees
** In Euros. Small = less than 10 million; Medium = between 10 million and 100 million; Large = between 100 million and 1 billion; Very large = more than 1 billion
*** Number of employees that the manager is directly or indirectly responsible for. Small = 10 or less employees; Medium = between 11 and 50 employees; Large = more than 50 employees.
categorization of public (five organizations), hybrid (five) and private organizations (eight) can be made. Both with respect to the number of employees and the organization’s budget, the sample ranged from medium-sized local organizations to very large multinationals. One smaller organization was included in the sample.

The sample included both middle managers and executive managers. Of the 18 interviewees, 13 were male. Ages ranged from 34 to 61 years, with an average age of 48.5. All interviewees had completed tertiary education, with most having obtained university-level degrees. While it may be that people with lower education levels have different views on what ethical leadership entails, the lack of diversity in the education levels of the interviewees seems consistent with their function levels. More problematic in this regard is the lack of diversity in terms of ethnic background: all interviewees were Caucasian. Within the Netherlands, the workforce is much more heterogeneous and includes large groups of ethnic minorities. The extent to which this lack of ethnic diversity in the sample may or may not have affected our results, cannot be determined at this point.

Data were analysed along the ‘ladder of abstraction’ (see Carney, 1990 as cited in Bresnen, 1995, p. 92), employing both incremental coding procedures using Atlas.ti (version 4) and qualitative data matrices. To facilitate the coding process, a provisional list of sensitizing codes was developed. This list was applied to the first three interviews, and then examined thoroughly to determine its fit with the data and to make adjustments where necessary. While some codes were revised, added, separated into sub-codes or deleted, the overall structure chosen to code the interviews seemed to fit the data well. The revised code list was then applied to the next set of interviews and again reviewed and revised to achieve a better fit with the data. This procedure was repeated several times and the final code list developed progressively through close interaction with the data. Next, a qualitative data matrix was used to further organize, aggregate and analyse the data to identify relevant within-case and cross-case patterns of similarities and differences in managers’ conceptions of ethical leadership.

It is important to note that in the analysis, aside from considering the publicness of the organization context, specific attention was paid to potentially confounding factors, most notably interviewees’ gender, age, management scope (i.e. the number of respondents they are directly and indirectly responsible for), and the size of the interviewees’ organization. Where the comparison of data based on these characteristics suggested differences in interviewees’ views on ethical leaders, these will be explicitly noted.

Results and Analysis

Being a Moral Person

As expected, all interviewees either explicitly noted or implied that ethical leadership entails having strong moral values. However, the focus of these moral values differed between public, hybrid and private organization managers: it was mostly the managers of public and hybrid organizations (6 of 10) who emphasized that ethical leadership requires altruism, serviceability to the common good and
responsiveness to societal demands, values and norms. As a police department head (respondent A) remarked: ‘I think that when you talk about ethical leadership, you should have a clear vision on the position of the police within society. We are not here as a goal in and of itself, we are here to do a job for that society [...] in the middle of society’. Such a societal, outward-oriented focus was not notable in the views of the private sector managers, who tended to describe ethical leadership more as something that concerns the internal organization and its members. In fact, only one private sector manager (K) noted altruism as an ethical leadership characteristic. The data do not allow for any definitive conclusions on the causal mechanisms underlying this apparent difference between the public, hybrid and private sector managers’ views on ethical leadership. However, three of the public and hybrid sector managers (A, E, G) did explain that their organizations tend to attract and select members who have a higher than average motivation to serve the public interest. Conversely, only one of eight private sector managers (M) indicated that his organization selects its employees based on their commitment to societal goals. Furthermore, five of the public and hybrid sector managers (respondents A, B, E, F, H) stressed that their organization’s task and position in society automatically make ethics an issue that needs to be addressed and accounted for both within the organization and society itself.

Whatever the precise moral values, there was general agreement between public, hybrid and private sector managers that both authenticity and moral courage were key (13/18 respondents): ethical leaders should always be true to themselves and stand up for what they believe in, even in the face of difficult external circumstances. And, although they were not mentioned very consistently across respondents, there were signs to suggest that ethical leadership is associated with moral traits such as integrity (7/18), trustworthiness (2/18), modesty (2/18) and conscientiousness (2/18). Female interviewees seemed particularly inclined to discuss many different traits of ethical leaders. And, interestingly, while honesty seemed particularly central to the views of private sector managers (5/8), only one hybrid sector manager (respondent G) and none of the public sector managers mentioned it.

Obviously, leaders’ moral values and traits are inferred from their decision-making and behaviour. Five interviewees noted explicitly that an ethical leader should be able to recognize ethical dilemmas and make sound moral deliberations. This requires talking to the people involved, taking account of different perspectives, and considering both short-term and long-term implications. To four of the interviewees (respondents I, K, P and Q), ethical decision-making and behaviour also mean being consistent and congruent not just in terms of practising what you preach and aligning your words and deeds, but also in terms of being consistent in what you say or how you treat different people. Other managers (e.g. A, G and L), however, felt consistency in decision-making should not be taken too strictly, as changing (moral) environments, specific circumstances and learning over time may warrant a change of heart or direction. Close inspection of the interview data in the end did not suggest a relation between these differences and specific characteristics of the respondents or their organizations.
Interviewees also emphasized that, to them, ethical leadership entails being transparent about decisions made (10/18) and being open to feedback (7/18). Ethical leaders share their decisions to enable others to judge their intentions, their decisions and conduct, and thus their integrity. The interviewees even suggested that ethical leaders should organize such feedback themselves by frequently asking followers, colleagues and/or superiors to tell them what they are doing wrong or could do better. Again, most of the managers working in public organizations (4/5) seem to have a strong focus on (also) being transparent to stakeholders outside the organization. Respondent A: ‘In your accountability to the external environment . . . [you should be], as transparent as possible, try to explain that you act according to the values and norms that are imposed on you and that you impose on yourself. And do what you as an organization in general are expected to do by the broader society’.

Interviewees further described ethical leaders as being caring and empathic (7/18). In line with this, some interviewees noted ‘people-orientation’ (5/18) and ‘respectfulness’ (4/18) as aspects of ethical leadership. Ethical leaders were described as having a general interest in people, in their backgrounds and their development, in how they feel and what they are experiencing. They have ‘sympathy’ and are able to understand and relate to another person’s thoughts, feelings and actions. However, it was particularly the women who stressed such care and empathy traits: four of five female interviewees (D, H, I and K) referred to them as attributes of an ethical leader, whereas only three of thirteen male interviewees (E, L and P) suggested empathy and/or care to be characteristic of ethical leadership. As one male interviewee explicitly noted: ‘the people I have in mind are not softies’ and ethical leaders should still be able to ‘keep enough distance in order to hold people accountable’ (respondent E).

More specifically, many interviewees implied that ethical leadership requires a high quality leader–follower relationship. Ethical leaders are leaders that have the ability to build strong relationships of trust, respect, fairness, safety and openness with their followers (12/18). Ethical leaders should be supportive, loyal and protective of followers, even in times of hardship. In line with previous ethical leadership research, one interviewee (F) argued that positive socio-emotional exchanges are in fact a prerequisite for ethical leadership. He explicitly noted that if you treat your followers well ‘in the end it pays off’, because followers will repay you with the same behaviour. Likewise, follower judgements of a leader’s integrity may be more related to the overall leader–follower relationship than to the morality of the leader’s actual conduct: ‘It is difficult to separate whether it is really about integrity or whether it is just a general feeling about the management’ (respondent D).

**Being a Moral Manager**

**Role modelling.** All managers agreed that ethical leadership is largely a matter of role modelling the right behaviour: ‘You shouldn’t make it too complicated, it is still about role modelling’ (respondent J). They considered role modelling essential to ethical leadership because it attests to the credibility of leader and strengthens, or weakens, the message that the leader aims to send. Role modelling communicates the underlying principles that the leader tries to maintain.
Consequently, being an ethical role model is not just about big gestures or dealing well with an ethical dilemma. In fact, it seems to be the rather mundane everyday behaviours that are the most powerful vehicles for role modelling: ‘It’s really in everything: in how you react to situations, in being consistent in what you say and do [...] So it is continuously that that principle needs to be confirmed for people’ (respondent I). These behaviours that the leader role models, but which may not have a clear ethical dimension to them, are assumed to have spillover effects to situations in which there are serious ethical issues. Furthermore, interviewees almost exclusively discussed examples of negative role modelling and argued that leaders should foremost avoid (inadvertently) sending out the wrong signals by exhibiting behaviour that could be interpreted as inconsistent with the values and norms of the organization.

Reinforcement. Initially, very few interviewees volunteered descriptions of ethical leadership that included the use of reinforcement through punishments and rewards. It seems reinforcement is not preferred as a primary means for ethical leadership but should only be used to, as the term itself suggests, reinforce other components such as role modelling and communication. Nevertheless, when asked, interviewees generally did feel (16/18) that reinforcement is necessary for ethical leadership.

Interviewees particularly acknowledged the symbolic function of reinforcement. Punishments and rewards are seen as ways to explicate and exemplify the norms and values of the organization. Moreover, reinforcement can communicate the sanctions that employees can expect in response to unethical behaviour, which in turn is thought to prevent other employees from committing such unethical acts: ‘And the difficult thing is, when the environment sees that you witnessed a certain behaviour in the team and your environment also sees that you do not respond, then you become part of the problem. And you lose your authority as a leader in that respect’ (respondent A). The same goes for rewarding behaviours. As with role modelling, reinforcement is not about the punishment or reward per se, but about its symbolic function and the underlying principles that it communicates. In line with this, reinforcement is said to apply to all kinds of behaviours – smaller and bigger, with or without a clear ethical component.

A number of interviewees (8/18) emphasized the importance of safety and procedural conscientiousness in dealing with unethical behaviour. More specifically, these interviewees argued that ethical leaders should create and maintain an environment in which followers feel comfortable and safe enough to report ethical transgressions. Ethical leaders make sure that people are not penalized for reporting unethical behaviour. Additionally, when unethical behaviour has been detected, ethical leaders need to remain thorough, careful and fair in the process of investigating the behaviour and punishing the individual(s) involved. By maintaining procedural conscientiousness and respect for all people involved ‘the hard decisions that you sometimes have to take will get support [from the punished employee as well as other employees]’ (respondent A).

Most interviewees (15/18) seemed to have an overall preference for informal sanctions. When unwanted behaviours occur, ethical leaders should call that person to account, making clear in a respectful way that such behaviour is not
allowed and if it ever occurs again that there will be consequences. Moreover, interviewees feel that ethical leaders should actively stimulate followers to call each other to account as well. Where possible, formal punishments are to be avoided. At some point, however, more formal actions are necessary to prevent the occurrence or reoccurrence of certain behaviours. Several interviewees did indicate, however, that in determining the appropriate sanctions, a distinction should be made between people that violate rules because of some sort of naivety or by mistake, and those that repeatedly and willingly cross moral norms. Interestingly, only one interviewee (P) remarked that it is just as important not to reward unethical behaviour: perverse incentives in the system of an organization that could lead to risk-taking or unethical behaviour should be removed in order for reinforcement to be effective.

When asked whether they would be in favour of rewarding exemplary ethical behaviour, most interviewees responded rather hesitantly and several were quick to add that such rewards should only be immaterial, most notably in terms of compliments and recognition (7/18): ‘For many of these things I think that the most important thing is that it is seen and that they get the confirmation ‘gee, I saw that and I think that was really good of you’ […] I think that material rewards do very little in things like these’ (respondent E). Four other managers (H, J, K and R) felt that rewarding ethical behaviour, whether formal or informal, is unnecessary or in practice just too difficult. As a department head at a public bank indicated: ‘I think that that behaviour is rewarded by itself, because you also get it back, I assume, in the response you get from the one you do it to. Yes, that is rewarded in and of itself’. Three interviewees (D, L, O) did consider material rewards to be somewhat useful, but only when applied indirectly by including ethical behaviour as a recurring theme in the yearly assessment interviews.

Communication about ethics. To a large majority of the interviewees (17/18), communication about ethics is important, although there are notable differences as to the preferred frequency and explicitness of such communication. All the managers working in public organizations (5/5) considered communication about ethics as something that should occur very regularly. As one public sector manager (A) noted: ‘In your daily contact with people, you can just start a conversation about it. There are so many opportunities in practice […] allowing you to express [norms and values] as a leader’. For another public sector manager (B) ‘it is just a natural topic’. For many of the managers working in hybrid and private organization contexts, however, ethics is not a daily topic. These interviewees felt that ethics is something that requires only periodic maintenance and should therefore only be raised as an issue every once in a while (4/5). However, in practice, discussion about ethics may not always be easy to organize because ‘tomorrow the business comes first and integrity can always wait another day’ (manager at a social housing corporation). There are also interviewees (5/18) – all from private organizations – who feel that communicating about ethics is not necessary at all. One interviewee even indicated: ‘talking about it is nonsense […] The less talk about it the better. You just have to do it’ (respondent P). For these interviewees, ethics is communicated through behaviour and selection of personnel rather
than through words. Verbal communication about ethics should only occur ‘by exception’ or ‘when there is reason to’ (respondents P and R).

In most cases, the different views on the frequency of ethics communication seems to reflect differences in managers views on how ethical leaders should communicate about ethics. That is, it is a reflection of interviewees’ opinions on whether or not one should explicitly communicate in terms such as ‘ethics’, ‘integrity’ and ‘morals’. On the one hand, there are interviewees (respondents F, K, P and Q), three of which are private sector managers, who feel that communication about ethics should occur in rather general terms, using the everyday vocabulary of the organization and its members. These interviewees avoid terms like ‘ethics’ and ‘integrity’ and instead rephrase them into ones that fit the concrete context of their organization or department. Here, ethics is ingrained in communication about ‘atmosphere’, ‘appropriate prices’, ‘quality structures’, ‘corporate identity’, ‘the business model’ and ‘long-term client relations’. An interviewee from a financial firm (K): ‘It is not like I emphasize it from an ethical standpoint, but everyone knows that that is what it’s about’. On the other hand, there are those who suggest ethical leadership also requires more explicit communication about ethics (11/18). Specifically, these latter interviewees prefer that ethical leaders explicate the ethical component in their work, for instance, by discussing what their moral norms and values are and how to deal with ethical dilemmas. Here, the implicit and the explicit communication style are not seen as mutually exclusive but as complementary to one another. Again, the differences between managers’ views on communication show an interesting pattern along the public–private continuum: although there are exceptions, most managers working in private sector organizations tend to prefer more implicit communication strategies (5/8), whereas those operating in the more public and hybrid organizations clearly favour a mix of both implicit and explicit communication about ethics (8/10). Again, these results seem consistent with managers’ arguments that the tasks of public and hybrid organizations and their position in the broader society make ethics a ‘natural topic’ to discuss. Also, as suggested by three public and hybrid sector managers (A, E, G), explicit communication might appeal more greatly to the motivation of public organization employees to serve the common good.

To those interviewees that consider explicit communication about ethics important, ethical leadership entails being transparent about decisions processes and explaining the reasoning behind one’s behaviour. And, some interviewees added (5/18), ethical leaders should put themselves in a vulnerable position by sharing their struggles and insecurities with followers. Respondent I: ‘When people see that their manager can be vulnerable, it makes it easier for them to also do it’. Ethical leaders should be willing to admit to their own mistakes and be held accountable for them. Even more so, ethical leaders can use their own and others’ mistakes as valuable learning experiences for both themselves and the organization at large (3/18). Ethical leaders should furthermore be clear about their own moral standards and try to come to some shared moral standards for the organization. Ethical leaders need to ‘stimulate the conversation about ethics’ and ‘make it live’ (respondents D and H). In how and what they communicate, ethical leaders are role models to their followers. They show that it is desirable to think and talk about values, dilemmas or occurrences of unethical
behaviour: ‘It makes the conversation [about ethics] more normal’ (respondent D). Communication about ethics also helps bring to the fore a person’s ‘blind spots or weaknesses’ (respondent A) and raises followers’ awareness of the moral aspects of certain issues. Similarly, communication about incidents of unethical behaviour is considered important for organizational learning. But, many interviewees stressed that communication about ethics is more than a one-directional message from the ethical leader (8/18). Communication is also about asking questions and listening to the doubts, struggles and issues raised by followers. Ethical leaders are willing to ‘receive’ messages, even when it is about the leader’s own conduct. Additionally, ethical leaders should facilitate the conversation amongst followers.

Empowerment. Consistent with recent additions to the academic literature, most of the interviewees had a general preference for an approach to ethical leadership that emphasizes empowerment, independent judgement, commonsense and personal responsibility (17/18). Interviewees suggested that ethical leaders should not give too many instructions on what is and what is not allowed, as rules and regulations merely create a ‘false sense of security’ (respondent Q). Moreover, putting too much emphasis on existing norms and rules can stifle the discussion about those norms and rules. It is the ethical leader’s job to stimulate followers to think for themselves about what is and what is not acceptable behaviour. Ethical leaders, interviewees noted, should try to emphasize the underlying principles rather than the precise rules that would apply in a specific situation. In addition, ethical leaders should enable an open and constructive discussion about the organization’s values, norms and rules so that followers become directly and personally involved in the development of moral standards.

At the same time, interviewees suggested that rules still remain necessary to protect both the organization and the employee. By emphasizing principles over rules, an ethical leader leaves much open to interpretation and thereby allows for different interpretations of ‘appropriate behaviour’. This poses a risk to both the organization and the employee and rules thereby function as a ‘safety net’. Rules, according to general consensus, should be applied only ‘where the organization really doesn’t want something to happen’, where ‘intuition fails’ and/or the ‘temptations are great’ (respondent L). One private sector manager (R), however, was adamant in stating that general principles and personal responsibility are just not enough: ethical leaders should above all clarify unequivocally what is and what is not allowed, avoid vague norms and maintain a strict zero-tolerance approach to ethical transgressions. Also, two interviewees (J and K) remarked that when the education level of followers is low, ethical leaders might need to give more precise guidelines and instructions on what is expected of the followers.

Discussion

The results, summarized in Table 2, suggest that there are great similarities between public, hybrid and private sector managers’ views on ethical leadership. Along with a few additions and specifications, many of the characteristics and behaviours that prevailing theories and empirical insights attribute to ethical
### Table 2. Summary of the results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPONENT</th>
<th>ASPECT</th>
<th>MAIN RESULTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral Person</td>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Strong moral values are generally considered essential to ethical leadership. But compared to private sector managers, public and hybrid sector managers placed greater value on also having an outward, societal focus in ethical leadership. The data suggest this difference may be attributable to the organisational task and the public service motivation of public sector employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traits</td>
<td></td>
<td>Authenticity and moral courage are deemed crucial to ethical leadership. Ethical leadership is further associated with many moral traits such as integrity, modesty, trustworthiness, conscientiousness. Private sector managers were more inclined to emphasize honesty as a trait of ethical leaders than their public sector counterparts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making and behaviour</td>
<td>An ethical leader is expected to make sound ethical decisions and behave accordingly. The decision-process involves carefully weighing of various interests and perspectives, talking to the people involved, and considering both the short-term and the long-term implications of decision alternatives. There is some disagreement as to how important consistency is in ethical leadership. Transparency, accountability, and willingness to receive feedback are also important to the decision-making and behaviours of ethical leaders. Again, compared to the private sector managers, the public sector managers seemed more inclined to also stress accountability and transparency to outside stakeholders.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader-follower relationship</td>
<td>Ethical leaders should be respectful, caring, and empathic -both to followers and more in general. Women seem to emphasize care and empathy in ethical leadership more than men. Ethical leadership requires a good relationship with followers that is based on mutual trust, support, safety, loyalty, and openness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Manager</td>
<td>Role modelling</td>
<td>Role modelling is considered the most crucial and influential means to foster followers’ ethical decision-making and behaviour. Role modelling is generally conceived in negative terms, i.e. in terms of the kind of behaviours that an ethical leader does not engage in rather than the kind of behaviour that an ethical leader does display. Moreover, role modelling is primarily done through all sorts of smaller, mundane behaviours that occur every day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reinforcement</td>
<td>Reinforcement was far less prominent in managers’ initial discussions of ethical leadership. Nevertheless, managers do consider reinforcement to be a necessary requirement for ethical leadership. Reinforcement is particularly of importance to ethical leadership as a means to further explicate and exemplify the norms and values of the organization. Informal sanctioning such as calling followers to account and having a conversation with them was generally preferred over the use of formal punishments. Ethical leaders are expected to reserve punishment for recurring or severe cases of integrity or other rule violations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethical leadership requires a safe environment and procedural conscientiousness in dealing with (reports of) unethical behaviour. Rewards for ethical behaviour are either considered not necessary or should be informal only, i.e. in terms of recognition and compliments. Material rewards were generally not supported.

Communication

While communication was generally considered important to ethical leadership, the public and to some extent hybrid sector managers seemed more in favour of frequent and explicit communication about ethics than the private sector managers. Most of the private sector managers preferred communicating only implicitly about ethics, i.e. by using the everyday vocabulary of the organisation and its members and avoiding terms like ‘ethics’ and ‘integrity’. Conversely, the more public and hybrid sector managers preferred addressing ethics-related issues both implicitly and explicitly. Again, the differences in preferred communication style seem to relate to the organisation’s core tasks, as this makes ethics a more or less ‘natural’ and appealing topic for discussion.

Communication about ethics involves making decisions transparent and explaining the reasoning behind one’s behaviour. Communication about dilemmas, decisions, struggles, and mistakes makes the conversation about ethics more normal. Communication furthermore entails asking questions, being approachable, and listening to the doubts, struggles, and issues raised by followers.

Empowerment

There was a general preference for an approach to ethical leadership that emphasises empowerment, independent judgment, common sense, and personal responsibility. Strict rules and regulations are considered a necessary ‘safety net’, but should not be the focus of ethical leadership.
leaders were found in the data, and most were agreed upon by a majority of the interviewees. The data specifically revealed that the managers see ethical leadership as firmly based upon being a ‘moral person’, i.e. leaders’ own moral values and traits, their ethical decision-making and behaviour, as well as their relationships with followers. To many of the interviewees, ethical leadership also entails a more or less deliberate attempt to influence the ethical decision-making and behaviour of followers, i.e. being a ‘moral manager’. Through role modelling, reinforcement, communication and empowerment, ethical leaders send out signals that explicate and strengthen the underlying (moral) principles that they wish to instil in followers (cf. Brown et al., 2005; Resick et al., 2006; den Hartog and de Hoogh, 2009). For this reason, the findings of this study are consistent with the social learning, social exchange and social identity perspectives of ethical leadership proposed in the literature (Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2009) and suggest that the fundamental components and mechanisms underlying existing models of ethical leadership are indeed applicable across different organizational contexts.

Yet the results also imply some qualifications of the general model of ethical leadership, as subtle differences were found between public, hybrid and private sector managers’ views on ethical leadership. These differences provide valuable insights to aid the development of propositions and may be used to formulate a more nuanced ethical leadership theory. Specifically, while the private sector managers placed more emphasis on honesty, public and hybrid sector managers were more inclined to emphasize that ethical leadership requires an outward, societal focus. In line with the theoretical speculations formulated earlier, interviewees attributed this to the very nature of their organizational tasks and mission and to the PSM of their employees. Also consistent with theoretical expectations, differences were found in managers’ preferred style of communication: in general, the public and hybrid sector managers were more in favour of addressing ethics-related issues frequently and explicitly in terms like ‘ethics’ and ‘integrity’, whereas the private sector managers often wanted to avoid these terms and preferred to use more implicit communication strategies. In addition, women seemed to emphasize empathy and care in ethical leadership more than men. Finally, though seemingly unrelated to specific individual or organizational characteristics, there was some variation on the necessity of consistency in decision-making and how and when to use formal reinforcements.

It seems then that ethical leadership is perhaps best understood as a variform universal phenomenon, rather than a mere simple universal phenomenon. In cases of variform universal phenomena, the general principles are universally stable yet the precise meaning and enactment of those principles vary across contexts (cf. Bass, 1997; den Hartog et al., 1999; Resick et al., 2006). In other words, the results of this study suggest that while the basic components of ethical leadership – moral person, moral manager – may be rather consistent across different types of organizations, the way these components are interpreted and enacted may differ, as may the relative weight that people give to the respective components.
Limitations

Of course, this study is not without its limitations. The data presented here concern the views of 18, non-randomly selected participants, who are not fully representative of the general population of managers in the Netherlands. Likewise, the organizations that the respondents represent are not exhaustive of all types of organizations that one may find across the public–private continuum. This limits the external validity of the findings and thus no generalizations can be made regarding (Dutch) managers’ views on ethical leadership or about the differences between the public and private sector managers in this respect. However, as noted before, the study explicitly aimed for theoretical rather than empirical generalization (cf. Yin, 1990; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The interviews aimed to delineate some initial insights on how the publicness of an organization could shape managers’ views on ethical leadership, so as to inform and expand theory on this issue and aid the development of hypotheses for further testing – not to yield definitive conclusions on the empirical distribution of specific viewpoints on ethical leadership across different organizational contexts. Additional research is required to further examine the extent to which the different views presented here are supported by a wider population of managers and whether the publicness of an organization is indeed antecedent to the differences in viewpoints.

Another important limitation of the current study is that the sample does not include employees. Therefore, no inferences can be made regarding the effectiveness of the various approaches to ethical leadership proposed by the interviewees. Employees’ needs for ethical leadership may be very different than how managers conceive and exert it in practice. Employees may actually expect and want an ethical leader that reduces ethical ambiguity by providing clear rules, as studies by Lasthuizen (2008) and Kaptein (2003) imply. Or perhaps employees feel that implicit communication about ethics, as some of the managers interviewed in this study seemed to prefer, is not salient or clear enough (cf. Brown and Treviño, 2006). Indeed, there may be various sources of discrepancy in the implicit ethical leadership theories of managers and employees, which in turn may decrease the effectiveness of ethical leadership on followers’ ethical decision-making and behaviour (cf. House et al., 2002; Resick et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2009; van den Akker et al., 2009). In future research on ethical leadership conceptions, employees’ views will therefore need to be explored as well.

Conclusion

In our view, this study warrants further inquiry into the differences and similarities that may exist in conceptions and manifestations of ethical leadership. To allow for a better understanding of the variform universal nature of ethical leadership, however, it is imperative that we develop measurement instruments that are more context-sensitive and allow for variety in styles of ethical leadership. Existing ethical leadership measures tend to provide little information on the specific expressions of the traits and behaviours that they entail, and yet it is with respect to these specifics that the most variety in ethical leadership is likely to be found.
To illustrate, existing measurement instruments include items like ‘discusses business ethics or values with employees’ (Resick et al., 2006, p. 125) and ‘my supervisor clarifies ethical decisions and norms concerning my work’ (den Hartog and de Hoogh, 2009, p. 594). Given the different views on what communication about ethics entails, items such as these may be understood in different ways: one respondent might score a leader on the amount of explicit communication about ethics, whereas another might feel that this item also encompasses more implicit discussions of norms and values. Different interpretations of these measurement items might cause variance in ethical leadership scores that is not an indication of whether someone is more or less perceived to be an ethical leader, but which rather reflects the differences in how ethical leadership is exerted. Moreover, not all existing measures enable analysis of the relative importance of the different aspects across various contexts (see, however, Martin et al., 2009; van den Akker et al., 2009). Recognizing the variform universal nature of ethical leadership and developing additional measures of ethical leadership that enable more variation to occur will advance our understanding of ethical leadership itself, its relation to the organizational context, as well as its antecedents and effects.

The study also pointed out gender differences in the respondents’ conceptions of ethical leadership: not only did female respondents emphasize more moral traits than their male counterparts, they were also more inclined to stress aspects of care and empathy as critical to effective ethical leadership. These results are consistent with Gilligan’s notion that men and women may differ in their moral reasoning, with women applying more of an ‘ethics of care’ whilst men have more of a tendency towards an ‘ethics of justice’ (Gilligan, 1977, 1982; see also Woods, 1996 for an overview). This latter line of research, however, has been highly contested and criticized over the years (Walker, 1985; Rest, 1986). Meanwhile empirical research on gender differences in leadership styles remains inconclusive at best (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Perhaps, as Ambrose and Schminke (1999) suggest, gender differences are merely perceived in ethics, and thus only perceived in the ethical leadership styles of men and women. By contrast, precisely because there is so much ambiguity surrounding the relationships between gender and ethics as well as gender and leadership, the present results suggest it may be worth looking into the relation between gender and ethical leadership more thoroughly in the future.

This study furthermore provides important information to managers and ethics trainers. Whether the different views on ethical leadership discussed in this article are indeed effective in practice still remains to be tested empirically and hence this study cannot be taken as a ‘checklist’ that one can simply tick-off in order to become an ethical leader. Nevertheless, the study provides a useful benchmark for managers to assess their own ethical leadership efforts and suggests managers should reflect more specifically on what is the most appropriate ethical leadership approach in their own public, hybrid or private organizational context. Moreover, it indicates that ethics training programmes need to appeal more directly to the specific beliefs and experiences of their participants and provide concrete information on how managers can apply certain ethical leadership behaviours in their specific sector. After all, it is the managers who will need to incorporate
the ethical leadership training within their daily routines and it seems unlikely that
they will incorporate behaviours that they perceive to be unrealistic, unfitting or
irrelevant to their everyday work environment.

More generally, this study suggests that it is important for managers to take
account of the different views on and approaches to ethical leadership that may
exist within their own organizations. Differences in views on ethical leadership
should be addressed explicitly, as incongruence between ethical leadership expec-
tations and practices are likely to lessen its effectiveness (cf. House et al., 2002;
Resick et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2009; van den Akker et al., 2009). Similarly,
inconsistencies between the organization’s formal ethics programmes and man-
gers’ own perspectives on the best means to foster organizational ethics might
lessen the effectiveness of such ethics programmes. To assure that both managers’
ethical leadership efforts and formal ethics programmes are optimally effective,
one must identify inconsistencies between expectations and approaches and con-
sider whether such inconsistencies can be mended to make the organization’s
ethical leadership efforts more coherent and mutually reinforcing.

Finally, we want to stress that the differences found in the views of public,
hybrid and private sector managers could have important implications when
these different ‘worlds’ meet, for instance in public–private partnerships or
other forms of cooperation such as outsourcing. When private parties carry out
public tasks and deliver public goods, they should be aware that their public
counterpart holds different expectations of what ethical leadership entails and
that public stakeholders have other demands with regard to integrity. By highlight-
ing managers’ expectations and preferences for ethical leadership in public, hybrid
and private sector contexts, this study can contribute to a better mutual under-
standing of managers who operate across these different organizational contexts.
Where the different public and private worlds meet, these worlds could and should
learn from one another on the basis of this study.

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Notes

1. To illustrate, ‘public organizations’ refers to organizations such as ministries and municipalities, which
are predominantly public on all three dimensions: they are under substantial and direct political
control, primarily depend on public funding, and perform public tasks. By contrast, private organizations
are predominantly private on the same three dimensions and involve organizations such as retailers and
engineering companies. In such organizations, political control is limited, funding is predominantly or
fully private, and the primary aim is to reach private goals (most notably, to make profit). Hybrid organ-
izations then concern organizations where the degree of publicness of the organization differs according to
the three dimensions. For instance, in the case of Dutch universities, where political control is moderate,
funding is increasingly becoming a mix of private and public sources, but the primary aim is still to
provide a public service.
2. A more extensive report and discussion of the results of this study can be found in Heres (2010).
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