The Relationship between Ethical Leadership, Organizational Trust, and Employee Commitment Across Cultural Contexts

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Received: 11 January 2024; Revised: 27 January 2024; Accepted: 15 February 2024; Published: 29 March 2024

Abstract

The connection between ethical leadership, organizational trust, and employee commitment in a variety of cultures still presents a challenging issue from both theoretical and methodological perspectives within organizational science. While existing literature has focused on exploring the relationships among the above concepts, it is necessary to conduct additional research in order to reveal the mediation of organizational trust as well as the moderating impact of cultural values of individuals. This study proposes a conceptual framework and methodological roadmap for examining the relationships among the specified variables within cross-cultural organizational contexts. Based on the principles of social learning theory, social exchange theory, and cultural values theory, the proposed model considers organizational trust as a mediator between ethical leadership and employee commitment. The model differentiates affective and normative commitment based on the differences in terms of emotional attachment and obligations that the employees feel towards their organizations. Six hypotheses, along with sub-hypotheses, have been created that will direct any future empirical study. The methodology section provides a roadmap for any future research by providing the research design, measurement scales, cross-cultural measurement invariance tests, and the analytical strategy, which involves confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modeling, and moderated mediation analysis. There is no empirical evidence from the own studies, and the relationships stated are not considered as facts. The strength of this paper is in putting the theory into practice and providing an empirical research roadmap. Future research could use this framework to check how the relationships differ among various cultures and organizational contexts.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership; Organizational Trust; Employee Commitment; Cultural Context; Moderated Mediation; Cross-Cultural Management.

I. INTRODUCTION

The organizations operating across borders require leaders who can show their character through behavior, indicating what the organization is all about. It is believed that ethical leadership, which is the process by which leaders demonstrate the normatively correct conduct by means of their own behavior and interpersonal relationships as well as promote such conduct among the followers via two-way communications, reinforcement, and decision-making, serves as a resource in maintaining the engagement of employees. According to the meta-analytical

studies, ethical leadership is related to positive employee attitudes and behavior, including commitment (Mitonga-Monga et al., 2023; Thiel et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2021). This current paper is essentially conceptual in contrast to being empirical in nature. The objective of this research paper is to develop an understanding of how theories that have been developed so far can be brought together to explain the connection between ethical leadership and employee commitment using organizational trust and how this connection might differ based on cultural values. This paper will not test any hypotheses but instead will develop the methodology needed for their empirical analysis in the future. There are two aspects that still need to be clarified. First, it is mostly assumed that there is a connection between ethical leadership and commitment, but it has not been modeled. The most reasonable option would be trust, as the workers who have noticed the consistent and principled behavior of their leaders can develop positive expectations about them and become ready for vulnerability. Trust in leadership is an indicator of commitment by itself. Secondly, the empirical foundation is too limited in geographic terms. Culture determines the expectations of the followers regarding their leaders, the interpretation of authority and the obligations toward the team, and relatively few researchers study the same pattern cross-culturally (Bueechl et al., 2023; Eluwole et al., 2022).

The issue that multinational corporations have to deal with is the implementation of ethical leadership in their culturally diverse workforces. While integrity, justice, and accountability form an ethical foundation, employees can interpret leaders' behavior and corporate responsibilities in various ways. The proposed conceptual framework provides a theoretical background for exploring these issues and finding out the circumstances in which ethical leadership is related to trust and commitment on the part of employees. Consequently, the practical recommendations must be considered hypotheses for future research, not findings proven in the current study (Nienaber et al., 2023; Malik et al., 2023).

The present paper addresses the above concerns by offering a moderated mediation model, along with an accompanying research agenda to be tested empirically in the future. There are no empirical findings, statistical results or conclusions reported here, nor any hypothesis testing performed. The purpose of this paper is rather to combine elements of social learning theory, social exchange theory and cultural values perspectives into a number of hypotheses to be tested, suggest suitable measures, and outline the procedure of analysis, taking into consideration cross-cultural measurement invariance.

1.1 Guiding Questions

The model is structured along the three research questions below. RQ1: In how far does the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' commitment take place through organizational trust? RQ2: Can the direct link of ethical leadership with commitment hold true when trust is considered? RQ3: How do cultural values moderate the two above-mentioned relationships?

1.2 Contribution and Roadmap

The paper contributes to existing theory in three different respects: (i) the notion of organizational trust as a possible mediating process through which ethical leadership influences employee commitment, (ii) individual cultural orientation as a potential moderating factor rather

than the mere classification of the country, and (iii) the provision of a methodological roadmap for further empirical validation of the hypothesized links. In Section 2, theoretical basis and research gap are discussed, whereas in Section 3, the conceptual model and hypotheses are developed. Section 4 describes the proposed research methodology, data collection and analysis procedures. The potential implications of the theoretical framework both in terms of theory and management practice are discussed in Section 5, while Section 6 identifies limitations and areas for future empirical studies.

II. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Ethical Leadership as a Social-Learning Process

According to the social learning theory, individuals learn how to behave through observation of credible role models and consequences associated with their behavior. Ethical leaders serve as credible role models, inasmuch as they are considered as both moral individuals who have credibility of honesty and fairness in their everyday decisions and moral managers who establish standards of behavior and provide rewards for conformity and punishment for nonconformity. It is not limited to only the immediate subordinates as there is multilevel evidence suggesting that ethical leadership flows from top management to supervisory level and even to subordinate level. The very nature of the construct being studied as perception of leader's behavior makes it amenable to cultural filters (Addai, 2023; Guo et al., 2023).

2.2 Organizational Trust as a Relational Judgement

Trust has been defined as an inclination to put oneself at the mercy of another person's actions because of favorable expectations of their intentions or behaviors. The notions of ability, benevolence and integrity underpin trustworthiness, and a meta-analysis confirms the existence of clear links between these concepts and organizational outcomes. Ethical leadership involves principles of integrity and benevolence, because these values can be seen in the actions of leaders and managers. In this research, organizational trust will be seen as followers' trust in the leadership and management of their organizations, the referents of ethical leadership. The formation of trust is culturally conditioned itself, because the emphasis placed on ability, benevolence and integrity while evaluating a leader can vary across societies (Abun et al., 2023).

2.3 Employee Commitment and Its Components

According to the three-components model, affective commitment can be described as the desire to stay, continuance commitment as the cost of separation while normative commitment refers to the obligation to stay. In a meta-analysis of the antecedents and consequences of organizational commitment, affective commitment is found to have stronger and positive relationships with attendance, performance and wellbeing outcomes compared to continuance commitment which is shown to have weaker and even negative relationships. Ethical leadership is presumed to operate via identification rather than coercion; therefore, the three components of organizational commitment identify affective commitment as the primary outcome while normative commitment as the secondary outcome, with its cultural meaning being highly diverse (Cheng et al., 2022; Ashfaq et al., 2021; Tamer, 2021).

2.4 Culture as a Boundary Condition

Context may be one of the most significant variations in organizational behavior, and cultural values may be one of the most investigated elements of context. The framework of Hofstede and the GLOBE project may represent two different vocabularies, while power distance, individualism-collectivism and uncertainty avoidance become more relevant in terms of follower assessment of the leader and his/her debt towards the organization. The research implies that the characteristics of ethical leadership may be universally acceptable despite the fact that the importance of each characteristic may vary between societies. Due to the fact that national averages hide individual variations, cultural values will be measured on an individual level along with country membership. Table 1 explains the Core Constructs, Working Definitions and Primary Sources.

Table 1: Core Constructs, Working Definitions and Primary Sources

Construct	Working Definition in This Paper	Primary Source
Ethical Leadership (El)	The Followers View the Leader to be Practicing Good Normative Behavior and Encouraging this Behavior Through Communication, Reinforcement and Decision Making.	Mitonga-Monga et al., (2023) and Thiel et al., (2022)
Organizational Trust (OT)	The Readiness of Followers to Expose Themselves to the Leadership of the Organization Depends on their Abilities, Benevolence, and Integrity.	Bueechl et al., (2023) and Nienaber et al., (2023)
Employee Commitment (EC)	Psychological Connection to the Organization, with the Core Being Affective Commitment and Normative Commitment as the Peripheral Aspect.	Mitonga-Monga et al., (2023) and Gollagari et al., (2022) and Mishra & Tikoria, (2021)
Cultural Values (CV)	Country-Level Orientation on Power Distance, Collectivism, and Uncertainty Avoidance at Individual Level.	Bueechl et al., (2023) and Nienaber et al., (2023)

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

Two key issues that form the basis for the suggested framework can be identified. Firstly, there is a need for more conceptual clarity about the connection between ethical leadership and organizational commitment in relation to the possibility of organizational trust as a mediator in this connection. Specifically, employees, who believe that their leaders are consistent, ethical, and just, may develop a certain level of trust, which would result in organizational commitment. Secondly, cross-cultural studies call for the methods that will be able to separate individual cultural orientation from country cultural classification. Cultural values may affect employees' perception of leadership behavior, trustworthiness of leaders, and organizational commitments.

III. MODEL DEVELOPMENT AND HYPOTHESES

3.1 Direct and Mediated Relationships

Based on Social Exchange Theory, the hypothesized model assumes that ethical leadership is an antecedent of organizational trust and employee commitment. Below follow the proposed hypotheses to test the predicted theoretical relationships.

H1: Ethical Leadership Is Positively Linked to Organizational Trust.

H2: Organizational trust is linked to employee commitment.

Ethical leadership can also impact commitment through mechanisms other than trust such as value communication that is internalized by the employees. This explains the partially mediated model:

H3: There exists a positive relationship between ethical leadership and organizational commitment.

H4: Partial mediating effect of organizational trust on ethical leadership and commitment.

The difference between total mediation and partial mediation is important. Total mediation will suggest that the ability of leaders to affect commitment can only come about once trust is developed, while partial mediation suggests that ethical leadership can affect commitment in other ways besides trust, including shared values and identification. Considering the construct's broad definition, which encompasses not just the behavior of the individual but also the promotion of ethics among his or her subordinates, total mediation seems possible.

3.2 Cultural Moderation

Cultural values can affect the interpretation of ethical leadership and the conversion of organizational trust into commitment. Instead of focusing on the national-level cultural orientation, this research adopts an individual-level cultural orientation on power distance, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and individualism. This is because these dimensions will affect the various associations in the proposed moderated mediation model. The power distance dimension pertains to how much the individuals accept the unequal distribution of power. Under high power distance orientation, the act of being ethical is perceived as an indication of legitimate leadership.

H5a: The effect of ethical leadership on organizational trust is positively moderated by power distance. This means that the relationship increases as power distance becomes high.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the level of discomfort that people experience with uncertainty and ambiguity. Principled and consistent leadership could offer a better framework for fostering trust among people who desire clarity.

H5b: Ethical leadership and organizational trust show a positively moderated association in the presence of uncertainty avoidance, where the association is stronger with greater uncertainty avoidance.

Collectivism focuses on being part of a group and having loyalty and obligations towards it. Collectivists tend to be more prone to convert their trust in their organizations' leaders into organizational commitment.

H6a: The collective dimension positively influences the association of organizational trust and employee commitment, especially the normative dimension of employee commitment.

Individualism focuses on independence and individual interests. Therefore, organizational trust will not be so highly correlated with normative commitment, which is about duty to stay,

for employees who exhibit individualistic tendencies. Affective commitment, which concerns emotional connection, will nonetheless still have a positive relationship with organizational trust.

H6b: Individualism has a negative moderating effect on the association between organizational trust and normative commitment, hence making the connection weak at high levels of individualism.

The hypotheses formulated in this section constitute theoretical statements, not empirical evidence of relationships. The direction, size, significance, and cultural invariance of these hypotheses need to be established by collecting and analyzing data.

Taken together, H1, H2 and H4 address RQ1, H3 addresses RQ2, and H5 and H6 address RQ3 shown in figure 1.

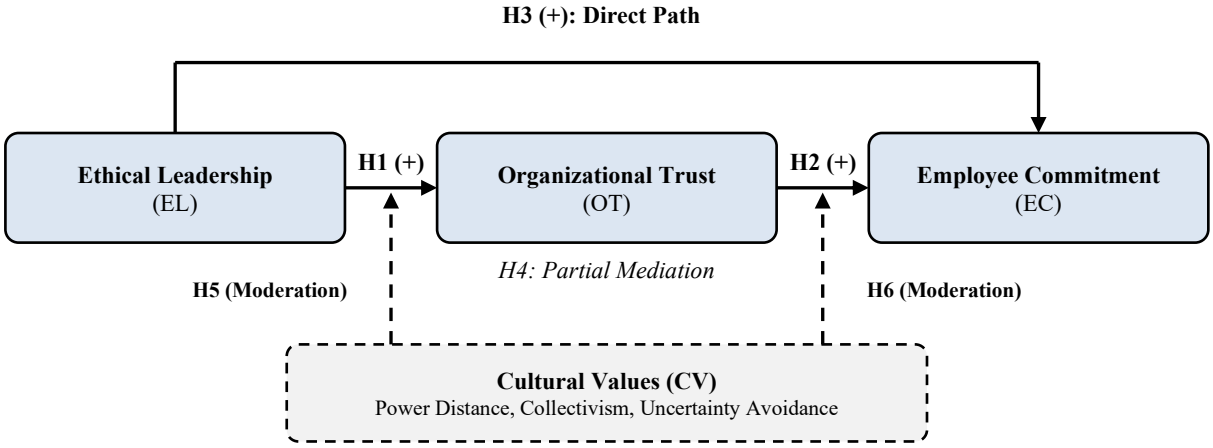

Figure 1: Proposed Moderated-Mediation Model of Ethical Leadership, Organizational Trust and Employee Commitment

3.3 Controls and Rival Explanations

There are several factors that may lead to spurious relations and have to be controlled or considered: tenure of employees, hierarchical position, industry, company size, and the quality of the relationship between employees and supervisors. One more factor that might explain some variations is that of the propensity of people to trust regardless of the behaviors of the leader. This reverse causation where committed employees perceive their leaders as being more ethical might be one alternative explanation that a time-lag design might reduce but not eliminate. Other mediating factors such as organizational support or psychological safety can be introduced in extended research.

IV. PROPOSED RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL BLUEPRINT

4.1 Sampling Frame and Data Structure

This proposed design is a multi-country; multi-source study of nested employees in teams and organizations. Country samples will have to be purposefully chosen to reflect the whole spectrum of power distance, collectivism and uncertainty avoidance and be sufficiently large for each country to allow for multi-group estimation. Common method variance would be minimized by measuring ethical leadership and cultural values in Wave One and trust and commitment in

Wave Two some weeks apart, using supervisor ratings or archival data as triangulation where appropriate. Instruments would be translated, back translated and pre-tested in each language. Since employees are nested within teams, the intraclass correlations will be calculated to see if the variance in trust and commitment between teams is high enough to justify multilevel modeling, while country will only enter as a higher-level group if there are enough of them.

4.2 Measurement Instruments

The proposed instruments are listed in table 2 below. They all represent well-established measurement tools that need to be reliable and valid before structural estimation.

Table 2: Proposed Measurement Instruments and Quality Criteria

Construct	Proposed Instrument	Format and Quality Checks
EL	Ethical Leadership Scale, 10 Items	Five-Point Agreement Scale; Reliability of at Least .70
OT	Trust-in-Management Scale Based on Ability, Benevolence and Integrity	Seven-Point Agreement Scale; AVE of At Least .50
EC	Affective and Normative Commitment Scales	Seven-Point Agreement Scale; Discriminant Validity between Components
CV	CVSCALE, 26 Items, Five Dimensions	Five-Point Agreement Scale; Invariance Across Countries

4.3 Analytical Sequence

The suggested empirical analysis consists of six consecutive steps, as presented in figure 2 below. The steps outlined constitute the process that should be followed by future researchers and are not analyses carried out in the current paper. The first stage involves screening the data for missing values, outliers, and potential problems in response quality. The second step is to run confirmatory factor analysis for the measurement model. In particular, the focus is on reliability and validity. The third step is to test configural, metric, and scalar invariance prior to comparing latent means or the structural relations. The fourth step involves the estimation of structural paths (a_1, b_1, and c') and interaction terms considering the clustering in the data. The fifth step will involve conditional indirect effect estimations and examination of cultural interactions at substantively meaningful values of cultural dimensions. Finally, robustness tests will be conducted varying the commitment components, trust referents, and country samples.

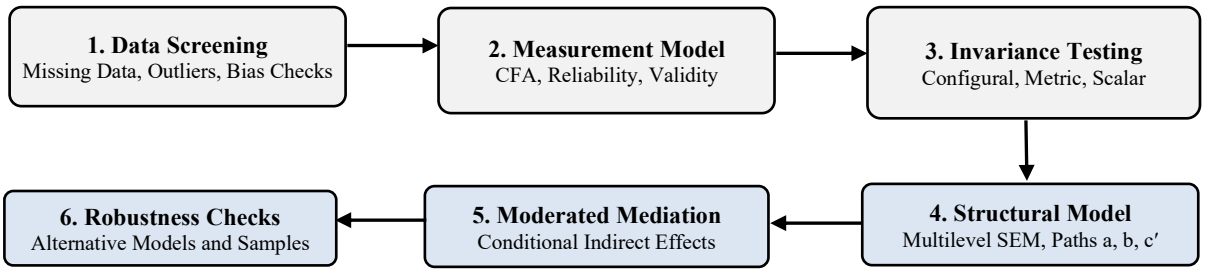

Figure 2: Proposed Analytical Sequence for Testing the Model

4.4 Model Specification and Inference

Cultural values (CV) for employee (i) are captured one at a time in each cultural dimension. The proposed framework considers the relationship between ethical leadership, organizational trust, and employee commitment, moderated by cultural values. The structural relationship is captured through the following equations (1) and (2).

Equation (1): Organizational Trust

$$OTi = a0 + a1\,ELi + a2\,CVi + a3\,(ELi\,X\,CVi) + e1i \qquad (1)$$

Equation (2): Employee Commitment

$$ECi = b0 + c'ELi + b1\,OTi + b2\,CVi + b_3(OTi * CVi) + e2i \qquad (2)$$

In these equations, OTi denotes organizational trust, ELi represents perceived ethical leadership, (CVi) refers to the cultural dimension being examined, and ECi represents employee commitment. The coefficients (a0) and (b0) are the intercepts, while the remaining coefficients represent the effects of the corresponding predictors. The interaction terms $EL_{\mathrm{i}} \times CV_{\mathrm{i}}$ and $OT_{\mathrm{i}} \times CV_{\mathrm{i}}$ capture the moderating effects of cultural values on the relationships between ethical leadership and organizational trust, and between organizational trust and employee commitment, respectively. The terms e_{1i} and e_{2i} represent the error terms for the two equations.

The model also suggests that the indirect effect of ethical leadership on employee commitment can occur through organizational trust. The strength of this indirect effect will vary along the different cultural dimensions. Since this paper offers a conceptual model, the equations show the relationships that need to be tested empirically, but no coefficient or significance value is provided. The employee commitment equation needs to be run separately for affective and normative commitment when these two outcomes are considered independent from each other. This is specifically the case for H6b where normative commitment is the dependent variable.

4.5 Research Ethics and Data Governance

Ethical leadership research should not only be guided by high levels of research ethics; participation will be anonymous and voluntary, with informed consent collected in the language spoken by the participant and the appropriate institutional review boards' approval granted. Since the participants assess their leaders, it is imperative that the findings are not disclosed to the employer in an identifiable format; aggregated data will therefore be provided without the identification of individuals or teams. All data collection will conform to the privacy regulations set out for each participating country, and the study protocol will be registered before collecting any data.

V. THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS AND IMPLICATIONS ACROSS CULTURAL CONTEXTS

5.1 Cultural Propositions

The following four cultural propositions encapsulate the directional predictions outlined in Section 3.2 as H5a, H5b, H6a, and H6b. These have been provided as hypothesis to path mapping

to provide more clarity rather than as any extra hypotheses. These four propositions are all theoretical expectations that need to be tested shown in table 3.

Table 3: Propositions on Cultural Conditioning of the Model Paths

Hypothesis	Cultural Dimension	Expected Conditioning Effect	Rationale
H5a/P1	Power Distance	Strengthens EL → OT	Ethical Behavior can be Considered an Important Indicator of Legitimacy of Power.
H6a/P2	Collectivism	Strengthens OT → Commitment, Especially Normative Commitment	Trust Generates Commitment and Obligation to the In-Group.
H5b/P3	Uncertainty Avoidance	Strengthens EL → OT	Consistency and Principles make People Feel Less Risky.
H6b/P4	Individualism	Weakens OT → Normative Commitment; Affective Commitment is Assessed Separately	Individual Freedom Could Diminish the Importance of Obligations in the Choice of Staying Put.

The model assumes that cultural values will influence the intensity of the suggested links rather than the direction of the relationship. The predictions can be empirically tested.

P1 maps to H5a and P3 maps to H5b; both concern the $\boldsymbol{EL} \times \boldsymbol{CV}$ interaction in equation (1). P2 maps to H6a and P4 maps to H6b; both concern the $\boldsymbol{OT} \times \boldsymbol{CV}$ interaction in equation (2). Each cultural dimension should first be examined in a separate model, as specified in Section 4.4. A joint model may be used as a sensitivity analysis if sample size and collinearity diagnostics support it.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

There are a number of theoretical implications associated with the proposed framework that may be investigated through future research. First, the framework sees organizational trust as a potential mediator between ethical leadership and employee commitment, thus setting forth a foundation for investigating the underlying processes involved in this link. Second, the framework takes into consideration the impact of individual cultural orientations as potential boundary conditions on the way employees interpret ethical leadership and trust to form commitment. Third, the framework differentiates between affective commitment and normative commitment, acknowledging the fact that emotional attachment and obligation may serve as two separate dimensions of the relationship of an employee with the organization. This model ties together two bodies of knowledge that have emerged almost independently: the body of knowledge on leadership, which focuses on the perception by followers of the behavior of the leaders, and the body of knowledge on cross-cultural management, which focuses on the differences in values between societies. The integration of these two bodies of knowledge implies that culture has more influence on the interpretation of behavior than on its appreciation.

5.3 Managerial Implications

In the case of multinational management, the model suggests that the universal core of ethical leadership (i.e., integrity, fairness, and accountability) is invariant, while its application varies according to the workforce. Such recommendations are some examples of practical uses of the suggested theoretical framework, which still need to be empirically tested for their effectiveness. This cycle is illustrated in figure 3, where profiling the workforce, maintaining the universal core, adapting the application, and evaluating trust and commitment are included.

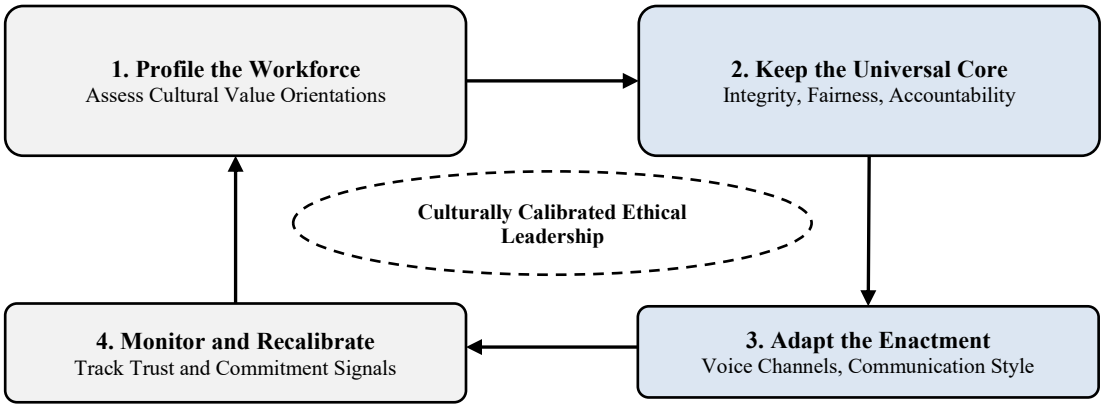

Figure 3: Culturally Calibrated Ethical Leadership Cycle for Multinational Managers

5.4 Rival Interpretations and Boundary Conditions

There are three alternative interpretations worth considering. One interpretation would be that of a universalist one, where the pathways in the model are equivalent across cultures and moderation does not exist – a finding which would be consistent with the literature on leadership ethics and would be interesting in its own right. Another interpretation would be a compensatory one, where trust in the institution, in rules and in peer relations makes up for trust in the leader and keeps commitment constant. The final interpretation would be a measurement one, where differences between cultures would simply be due to response styles or meaning inequivalences in the measures used.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 Limitations

The main constraint of this paper is the fact that the suggested conceptual model has not been empirically tested or validated through the use of new data. This implies that the suggested hypotheses and the moderating effect of culture still remain at the level of assumptions and not empirical findings. Although the suggested time-lagged, multi-country research design can solve the problem of temporal ordering, it cannot prove causation on its own. In future research, researchers will have to consider such issues as common method variance, social desirability bias, measurement equivalence across cultures, and the potential impact of ethical climate in organizations, HRM, industries, and national systems.

6.2 Future Research Directions

There are several ways in which future research may take shape. First, the manipulation of leader behavior and culture may help to investigate cause-and-effect relations through vignette experiments. Second, a longitudinal study design may be used to study whether trust precedes commitment or vice versa. Third, a multilevel analysis may be used to distinguish between team-based ethical leadership and individual perception, along with including peers' and institution's trust as referents as well. Fourth, the model may be applied to hybrid work and online work, where observations are limited.

VII. CONCLUSION

The present paper seeks to construct a theoretical framework and methodological outline for studying the interrelationships between ethical leadership, organizational trust, and employee commitment. Using the social learning theory approach, social exchange theory, and cultural values perspective, this framework suggests the concept of organizational trust as the mediating variable between ethical leadership and employee commitment, whereas individual cultural orientations are considered as the moderators. Additionally, it takes into account the distinction between the concepts of affective and normative commitment, which enables a more differentiated analysis of the interrelationships between employees and organizations. This paper presents six hypothesis clusters along with sub-hypotheses, suggested measures, modeling, and methodology for future research. The most significant contribution is the synthesis of these theoretical approaches within a well-defined and empirically testable framework that takes account of cross-cultural measurement equivalence. Nevertheless, there are no empirical results from an original study reported in the paper in terms of estimated coefficients and hypothesis testing results. Therefore, the suggested relationships along with their hypothesized directionality can be viewed only as theoretical propositions which need to be validated in a future study. The future research should use the proposed multi-national design, assess reliability and validity of the measures, test structural relationships and indirect effects conditioned by cultural orientation, and investigate whether the suggested relationships vary depending on cultural orientation and organizational context. Such research will help to prove the empirical adequacy of the suggested framework. For multinational organizations, the presented model is useful theoretically but needs to be validated empirically to make appropriate managerial recommendations.

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