Understanding Ethical Leadership in High-publicness Organizations

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Abstract

Scholars have more recently integrated the generic ethical leadership concept to Public Admin-istration and Management research (e.g. Kolthoff, Erakovich, and Lasthuizen, 2010; Hassan, 2015; Bellé and Cantarelli, 2017). However, whether this concept fully transfers to high-public-ness organizations is rather empirically unclarified. Several scholars have emphasized that re-search on public leadership needs to pay more attention to publicness itself (Vogel and Masal, 2015; Tummers and Knies, 2016). The aim of this study is, therefore, to investigate whether the generic ethical leadership concept transfers to high-publicness organizations. Based on 42 inter-views with employees, frontline, middle, and top leaders at two Danish public hospitals, I com-pare the generic concept with empirical insights from the interviews in order to see whether the concept fits understandings in high publicness organizations. The study[1] shows that the generic concept only to some extent transfers to high publicness organizations, as the political level, the unlimited demands from citizens, and the dilemma-filled context seem to require some modifi-cations of the concept. The insights from this study calls for more conceptual work on ethical leadership in Public Administration and Management research.

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[1] Based on a preliminary analysis of 11 of the 42 interviews

Introduction

Scholars argue that ethical leadership, i.e. a leader's behavioral demonstration and promotion of normative appropriate conduct (Brown, Harrison, and Trevino, 2005), is one of the most relevant leadership approaches in public administration today (Van Wart, 2013). Generally, ethics is understood as widely accepted moral judgments about what is "right" and "good", and several scholars have emphasized the potential of a public leader's prestigious position in the organizational hierarchy to affect public employees' ethical conduct (Hassan, Wright, and Yukl, 2014; Hassan, 2015). Although laws and ethical code of conducts provide public employees with direction, public leaders can be powerful sources of ethical guidance (Cowell, Downe, and Morgan, 2014). The growing interest in ethical leadership in Public Administration and Management research has resulted in empirical studies investigating the relationships between ethical leadership and positive outcomes in public organizations (e.g. Hassan, Wright, and Yukl, 2014; Hassan, 2015; Bellé and Cantarelli, 2017). However, a present issue in these studies is their use of the generic ethical leadership concept, and the lack of focus on whether generic conceptual understandings actually transfer to high-publicness organizations (Yukl et al., 2013; Tummers and Knies, 2016). According to a group of scholars and a growing amount of empirical evidence, organizational context matters for organizational behavior (e.g. Bozeman, 1987; Rainey, 2014; Vogel and Masal, 2015; Tummers and Knies, 2016). Therefore, "research on public leadership needs to pay more attention to publicness itself" (Vogel and Masal, 2015, p. 1179).

According to Bozeman (1987), an organization's degree of publicness will either limit or enable organizational behavior. Ethical behavior is required in public organizations, but as high-publicness organizations are "(…) fraught with ethical dilemmas" (Bowen, 2004, p. 65), it might require leadership abilities different from the generic understandings of ethical leadership. However, to what extent the generic ethical leadership concepts transfer to high-publicness organizations remain empirically unclarified. This calls for more qualitative research in the area.

In this study, I investigate whether the generic understanding of ethical leadership transfers to organizations with a high degree of publicness. Based on 42[2] interviews with leaders at different managerial levels and employees at two Danish public hospitals, my aim is to explore whether the generic ethical leadership concept fits understandings among employees and leaders in high publicness organizations. Such insights are theoretically important in order to advance our conceptual understanding of ethical leadership in organizations with high publicness.

The article will proceed as follows. First, I outline the existing theoretical insights from the broader social science literature on ethical leadership. Next, I present arguments for why the generic ethical leadership concept might not fully transfer to high-publicness organizations. Then I present the research design and methodological procedures followed by the analysis and presentation of the condensed qualitative data. Finally, I discuss the implications of the findings, the limitations of this study, and suggestions for future work on the concept of ethical leadership in Public Administration and Management research.

Theoretical framework

The ethical leadership literature

Scholars have considered leadership essential for management of ethics for a long time (Barnard 1938; Antonakis, Cianciolo, and Sternberg, 2004). Although definitions of ethics is debated, scholars often understand ethics as generally accepted moral judgments about what is "right" and "good" (Trevino, Weaver and Reynolds, 2006, p. 952). Brown, Trevino, and Harrison (2005) were the first to develop "ethical leadership" as a standalone concept. They defined ethical leadership 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" (ibid., p. 120). Thus, ethical leadership is about creating ethical conduct in an organization by demonstrating ethical behavior as a leader and by promoting such behavior. The mechanism linking ethical leadership to employee behavior is social learning theory. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that everything can be

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[2]To date, I have only 11 transcribed interviews available. The analysis presented in this paper represents a preliminary analysis, which will be finished after the transcription of the remaining 31 interviews.

learned by observing significant others' behavior. In a work situation, employees learn what expected behavior is by observing what their leaders do. Leaders are often the most influential persons due to their status in the prestige hierarchy in organizations. The seminal work by Brown, Trevino, and Harrison (2005) is based on interviews with leaders in private organizations and showed that ethical leadership is about personal traits such as integrity and a leader's efforts to uphold ethical conduct among followers. They, therefore, distinguished between two core components in ethical leadership: The moral person and the moral manager. The moral person component refers to a leader's personal character and behavior such as demonstrating integrity, being a role modeling and treating people fairly. The moral manager refers to a leader's efforts to influence ethical conduct among followers. More specifically, that includes clear two-way communication about ethical expectations and guidance and the use of reinforcement tools such as rewards and sanctions to hold followers accountable for their ethical conduct (ibid). However, the moral person component is not solely essential for ethical leadership, but overlaps to some extent with existing leadership concepts such as authentic and transformational leadership (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Den Hartog, 2015; Bedi, Alpaslan, and Green, 2015). Therefore, scholars argue that it is the moral manager component that makes ethical leadership a distinct leadership concept (Brown, Trevino, and Harrison, 2005).

Recently, some scholars in the generic management and psychology literature have attempted to advance the concept by including additional behaviors related to ethics such as caring about sustainability (Kalshoven et al., 2011) and taking responsibility for mistakes (Yukl et al., 2013), while others have excluded behaviors that were not only related to ethical leadership such as listen to what employees have to say (Yukl et al., 2013). Some scholars have also criticized the descriptive approach to ethical leadership for being ethical relativistic. In an attempt to merge the philosophical normative research and social science descriptive research on ethical leadership, Eisenbeiss (2012) argued that four normative principles underlies ethical leadership. First, humane orientation which means that ethical leaders should treat other with respect and see them as ends rather than means. Second, ethical leadership should be justice oriented meaning that leaders must make fair decisions. Third, ethical leadership should be altruistic oriented, meaning

that leaders should follow altruistic rather than selfish interests, and the final principle is moderation orientation, which means that decisions should be balanced. These four principles are all present in existing descriptive conceptualizations (Brown, Trevino, and Harrison, 2005; Kalshoven et al., 2011; Yukl et al., 2013). More specifically, if we look for common ground among existing conceptualizations, scholars mainly agree on some core elements related to ethical leadership (Brown, Trevino, and Harrison, 2005; Kalshoven et al., 2011; Yukl et al., 2013; Bellé and Cantarelli, 2017). More specifically, they all agree that ethical leadership includes, (1) demonstration of integrity and high ethical standards, (2) basing conduct on altruistic rather than selfish motives, (3) caring about followers and treating them fairly, (4) engaging in explicit ethics-related communication with followers, and (5) using reinforcement tools so that followers are held accountable for their ethical conduct (Bellé and Cantarelli, 2017, p. 4).

Empirical studies on ethical leadership and the role of organizational publicness is highly limited (Hassan, Wright and Yukl, 2014). However, a few studies indicate that ethical leadership might matter for public employee behavior (e.g. Kolthoff, Erakovich, and Lasthuizen, 2010; Hassan, Wright, and Yukl, 2014; Hassan 2015; Thaler and Helmig, 2016). As examples, scholars have found a positive relationship between ethical leadership and organizational commitment, willingness to report ethical problems (Hassan, Wright, and Yukl, 2014), and improvement-centered voice (Hassan, 2015) in government organizations. To my knowledge, only two experimental studies on ethical leadership effects in public organizations exist. A survey experiment made by Thaler and Helmig (2016) find a positive effect of ethical leadership on government employees' organizational commitment, while a lab experiment by Bellé and Cantarelli (2017) did not find any support for ethical leadership having an effect on honesty among different public employees. Nevertheless, whether the generic concept transfers to high publicness organizations remain relatively empirical unclarified. As Yukl and colleagues (2013, p. 46) emphasize, research on how the generic ethical leadership concepts fits conceptions of ethical leadership among public servants is an important question for further research. A question that this study aims to answer. In the following, I present Bozeman's dimensional understanding of publicness (1987) and outline potential explanations for why the generic ethical leadership concepts might not fully transfer to organizations with high publicness.

Publicness as a context for ethical leadership

Organizational publicness can be understood as the characteristic of an organization, which reflects the degree that the organization is influenced by (a) political authority and (b) economic authority (Bozeman, 1987). Instead of a core dichotomy understanding of public and private organizations related solely to ownership, Bozeman (1987) argues for a dimensional approach. Organizations can therefore be either more public or more private depending on the combination of the two dimensions. Political authority refers to the degree of political control, while the economic authority dimensions refer to the extent that the organization depend on the economic market (Bozeman, 1987). This means that even business organizations can have a higher degree of publicness than some governmental agencies depending on the combination of the two dimensions (Bozeman, 2013, p. 176-177). For instance, an increase in the degree of political authority of a private organization increases the organization's degree of publicness. According to Bozeman (1987), all organizations are, therefore, public. As political authority might either limit an organization or rationalize, enable, and enhance it, it is important to bare the context in mind when analyzing organizational behavior such as leadership. In the following, I present some arguments for why ethical leadership understandings in organizations with high publicness might differ from the generic concept. More specifically, I focus on how high publicness creates complex ethical environments and low economic authority creates unlimited demands from citizens, which may have implications for ethical leadership understandings.

High publicness implies that organizations are subject to political control, which means that they have to live up to political determined goals and values. An important leadership task for public leaders is to ensure that the organizations live up to these goals and values. However, to determine what the "right" conduct is in a context with multiple, and sometimes conflicting goals and values might not always be a simple leadership task (Van Wart 1998, p. 316). As Bowen (2004, p. 68) emphasize, "The ethics codes of the major public relations associations are normally too general to provide specific guidance in a given dilemma and sometimes contain logical contradictions". In particularly, due to goal and value complexity, ethical dilemmas emerge. Moreover, the

likelihood of sudden political changes creates a complex work environment. As a result, this might imply that ethical decision-making is too complex in high-publicness organizations to be captured in absolute ethical standards as generally understood as an important ethical leadership task. This might suggest that ethical leadership in high-publicness organizations is less about promoting high ethical standards of conduct, but more about promoting ethical discussion and reflection about the implications of followers' behavior.

High-publicness organizations also have a low degree of economic autonomy, as they are publicly funded and owned. They, therefore, find themselves torn between limited resources and unlimited public service demands. In the generic ethical leadership understandings, acting on altruistic motives rather than selfish motives is part of ethical leadership. On one hand, we could expect that this is also the case in high-publicness organizations as public leaders have committed to serve the public interest. However, on the other hand they might not understand this as ethical leadership due to the unlimited public service demands. As the literature on the dark side of altruistic behavior also show, it can lead to burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter, 2001). Thus, this might imply that ethical leadership in high-publicness organizations is more about finding the right balance between acting on altruistic and selfish motives.

Research design and methodology

In this study, I investigate to which extent the generic ethical leadership concept transfers to organizations with a maximum degree of publicness. Thus, the aim of this study is to advance our theoretical understanding of ethical leadership in high-publicness organizations rather than empirical generalize to all high-publicness organizations. In order to explore understandings, a qualitative design seems appropriate as it can provide in-depth and detailed descriptions of ethical leadership understandings. I, therefore, conduct 42 interviews with employees and leaders working at two middle-sized Danish public hospitals. In Denmark, public hospitals are high-publicness organizations due to their low economic authority as they are fully governmental owned and funded and high political authority as they are controlled by both government and regionally elected politicians (Pedersen, Christiansen, and Bech, 2005). They, therefore, create ideal cases for the purpose of this study.

As Yukl and colleagues (2013, p. 46) emphasize, we know little about whether ethical leadership concept fits leaders' understandings at different managerial levels. I, therefore, conduct interviews with both top leaders, middle leaders and frontline leaders in order to explore potential similarities and differences between different managerial levels. I also conduct interviews with employees, as differences between ethical leadership expectations and practices might reduce the effectiveness of the leadership approach. In total, that result in interviews with the following individuals (see characteristics of interviewees in appendix 1):

- 18 leaders consisting of
    - 6 top leaders
    - 8 middle leaders
    - 4 frontline leaders
- 24 employees

Given the relatively limited amount of existing studies on ethical leadership in high-publicness organizations, the study has an explorative focus. That requires some flexibility in the interview guide to make it possible to follow new relevant paths during the interviews. At the same time, I need to incorporate questions related to the generic conceptualization of ethical leadership in order to test the fit of the concept. I, therefore, constructed a semi-structured interview guide to structure the interviews, while I also made it possible to follow new interesting paths during the interviews. At the beginning of the interview, I asked open-ended questions such as "What do you understand as ethical leadership", "What characterizes an ethical leader", "What does an ethical leader do to support ethical decision-making among followers?", and "How does an ethical leader support followers' in resolving ethical dilemmas?" In order to validate or disconfirm existing elements in ethical leadership conceptualizations, I used the existing theoretical framework about ethical leadership to guide the interviews. I included a vignette entailing a written example of a fictional leader conducting ethical leadership (see figure 1). As Bellé and Cantarelli (2017, p. 4) point out, existing conceptualizations of ethical leadership (Brown, Trevino, and Harrison, 2005; Kalshoven et al., 2011; Yukl et al., 2013) entails some core elements. More specifically, ethical leadership includes (1) demonstration of integrity and high ethical standards, (2) basing conduct on altruistic rather than selfish motives, (3) caring about followers and treating

them fairly, (4) engaging in explicit ethics-related communication, and (5) using reinforcement tools so that followers are held accountable for their ethical conduct. Thus, inspired by their synthesis of existing conceptualizations, I created a vignette entailing these elements. In order to make the vignette more convincing, I chose the most common Danish names for the leader (Danmarks Statistik, 2019). As some studies on leadership evaluations have revealed a positive gender match bias (e.g. Jackson, Engstrom, and Emmers-sommer, 2007), I used the name "Peter" for the leader when conducting interviews with male leaders and employees, and the name "Anne" when conducting interviews with female leaders and employees. Moreover, I changed the leader position so it fitted the interviewee's leadership position in order for the vignette to be as relatable as possible. Additionally, I changed the leadership position to the nearest leader when conducting interviews with employees. After presenting the vignette for the interviewee, I asked "what do you think about Anne/Peter? Is (s)he conducting ethical leadership? Why (not)?"

Figure 1. Ethical leadership vignette

Imagine Peter, who is part of the management team at a surgeon department at a medium-sized hospital.

Peter always considers what the right thing to do is before making a decision. He acts in accordance with high ethical standards - also in situations where other considerations points in the opposite direction.

Peter always puts the needs of others and the organization over his own.

Peter cares about the well-being of his employees and treats them fairly.

Peter communicates clearly to the employees about the organization's expectations of ethical conduct. He sheds light on the ethical aspects of his own and his employees' decisions and behavior. In addition, he makes it possible for him and the employees to discuss ethical issues and dilemmas.

If some employees act unethically, Peter holds them responsible. At the same time, Peter also recognizes employees who act in accordance with what is considered ethical conduct.

I collected the 42 interviews during a 6-month period from January to June 2019. Each interview lasted 1-1.5 hour and was conducted by me. In order to make the setting as natural as possible, I conducted each interview at the workplace of each interviewee. After the data collection, two student assistants transcribed the 42 interviews following a strict transcription guide made by me.

As the aim of this study is to investigate whether the generic ethical leadership concept fits leaders and employees' understandings in high-publicness organizations, I use a constant comparison analysis strategy. This strategy is characterized by the constant examination of differences and similarities between (1) experiences and understandings as presented in the interviews and (2) the concept that I am interested in (Strauss, 1987). The aim of the constant comparison analysis is to advance the conceptual work on ethical leadership by looking into whether and how the generic ethical leadership concept transfers to high-publicness organizations. Using the data management program NVIVO, I code the data continuously when it is collected and transcribed, which makes me able to use insights from the conducted interviews in the interviews that followed.

Analysis

I base the following analysis on preliminary insights from 11 interviews with leaders and employees at two public hospitals. Besides their answers to the more open-ended questions, I base the analysis on the interviewees' comments on the vignette elements as described above.

So to what extent does the generic ethical leadership concept transfer to high-publicness organization? According to the generic ethical leadership understanding, an ethical leader demonstrate (1) integrity and high ethical standards. The interviews show that demonstrating integrity is important. More specifically, they emphasize that a leader's behavior must be consistent with what the leader *personally* think is the right ethical behavior. This is illustrated in the following quote:

"I would like to be able to see myself in the mirror every morning. Can I vouch for the direction of the organization? Is it, for example, a hospital where we do the very best for the patients or is it something else we are doing? And if I can't vouch for it and just keep going anyway, it's not what I would call decentness." (Top leader H1.1)

However, although several interviewees mention equality, fairness, and respect as important ethical standards, most of the interviewees (top leader H1.1, top leader H1.3, top leader H2.1,

top leader H2.3, middle leader H2.C1, frontline leader H2.C,) emphasized that it is often not possible to talk about *absolute* ethical standards, because different persons might have different ethical standards. Instead, ethical leadership is about demonstrating *personal* ethical standards as illustrated in a quote by a frontline leader:

"We are different individuals – right? - … and depending on the context, then… then the ethical codex and conduct, it might differ… and still be equally good" (frontline leader H2.C)

Additionally, several interviewees emphasize, that it is important to be able to deviate from one's personal ethical standards, if the leader in dialogues with the surrounding environment discover other and better ways to act ethical (Top leader H2.3, H2.1, and H2.3, middle leader H2.C, frontline manager H2.C). Thus, as several interviewees emphasize it is important to doubt one's position as illustrated in the following quote:

"There is a… a really nice quote by Kierkegaard, who says "doubt is like a spinning top, it must always be kept going". Yes… I think it is an extremely true quote because if I do not doubt, if we do not doubt as leaders at a hospital, if professionals do not doubt themselves when they are out there with the patients, then you are… then you risk ending up being dangerous". (Top leader H2.3)

The generic conceptual understanding of ethical leadership also entails that the leader (2) bases her conduct on altruistic rather than selfish motives. In the interviews, there is disagreements within and across job positions, whether this characterizes ethical leadership. Most of the top leaders (top leader H1.1, H1.2, H2.3, H2.1, H2.3) and one employee (Physician H2.C1) emphasize that an ethical leader's selfish interest should be altruistic motivated *per se*. Thus, the leader's needs and interests should be aligned with the organization's interest. However, one top leader (Top leader H2.1) as well as several employees and the frontline leader (Frontline leader H2.C, Physician H2.C1, nurse H2.C3) argue that a public leader who only act on altruistic motives will burn out in the long in organizations with unlimited public service demands. Thus, according to them, ethical leadership is much more about finding the right balance between selfish and altruistic motives. As a quote from a top leader illustrates:

"(...) it may be a myth, but I've heard that in the old days when the sailors sailed on the oceans and were sent up in the mast, they said that when you climb up in the mast, then you should only give one hand to set sail and the other hand to hold on to the ship. You should never give more than one hand to the ship. And that, that, I think, is a good picture. We must never give more than one hand to the ship, because then we burn down. Especially when we work in the healthcare sector, because there are so many patients and there are so many needs, and in large organizations, they are insatiable" (Top leader H2.1).

Another important element in the generic ethical leadership concept is (3) caring about followers and treating them fairly. According to all interviews, such ethical interpersonal behavior is also required of an ethical leader in high-publicness organizations. In particularly, fair distribution of tasks to followers is important. However, dissimilar to employees and middle and frontline managers, top leaders (H1.1, H1.2, H1.3, H2.2, H2.3) emphasize that it is more important to care about welfare recipients as the following quote illustrate:

"Well,(...) we are here for a reason. And if the patients weren't here, then we wouldn't be here either. (...) They are the core task. And that is what we need to focus on, and of course we must be (...) a healthy workplace where employees thrive. But it is the other thing that needs to come first" (Top leader H2.3).

The generic ethical leadership concept also entails that a leader (4) engage in explicit ethics-related communication with followers. According to all interviewees, it is particularly important to facilitate ethical discussions about ethical dilemmas and conduct. Several leaders also emphasize that it is important to make the ethical direction clear for employees to guide them in one direction, (top leader H1.3, middle leader H2.C1), although some employees (middle leader H2.C1, frontline leader H2.C) argue that this direction should not only be agreed upon by the leader. Although all top leaders see it as their duty to loyally implement policies in their organizations,

some of the top leaders (H1.1, H1.2, H1.3) emphasize that it is also important to communicate *upwards* to the political level about ethics as the following quote illustrates:

"(...) it is an acceptance I have given myself, when I was hired, that it is a politically controlled organization, and I should not undermine it and, what can I say, speak poorly about my political leadership if they make a decision that I do not agree with, well, because that is how a democracy or a political organization is led. If it is a wrong decision in my eyes, then I have to do what I can to change it, influence and draw attention to it, but otherwise, then it is a condition, and then it is also a task." (Top leader H1.2)

Lastly, (5) using reinforcement tools so that the followers are held accountable for their ethical conduct is also seen as part of ethical leadership according to the interviews. However, the interviewees understand reinforcement as feedback and acknowledgement rather than disciplining. Because the publicness context is so complex with many ethical dilemmas, it is more important with dialogue and acknowledgement (all top leaders, frontline leader H2.C, Middle leader H2.C1). Moreover, reinforcement is used to increase reflection on how things can be changed to the better in organizations. However, all interviewees agree that it is necessary to do something if employees act clearly unethically in order to uphold the integrity of the leader as the following quote illustrates:

"It has to be addressed, if you think, "this simply point in another direction" because otherwise you cannot say a as leader," this is what we do here in the organization" if everyone does everything else." (Nurse H2.C)

The following display presents the condensed data compared to the elements in the generic ethical leadership concept.

Display 1. Generic ethical leadership vs. understandings in high-publicness organizations

Generic ethical leadership	Ethical leadership in high-publicness organizations
Integrity and high ethical standards	Integrity understood as behaving according to *personal* ethical standards, not absolute ethical standards, is important. It is also important to be responsive to the surroundings and other's thoughts about ethics (frontline leader H2.C, Middle leader H2.C, top leader H2.1, H2.3)
Altruism rather than selfish motives	selfish motives should be based on altruistic motives per se, according to most of the top leaders (Top leader H1.1, H1.2, H1.3, H2.2 and H2.3), while others argue that it is more about finding the right balance between altruistic and selfish motives due to unlimited demands from the public (Top leader H2, frontline leader H2.C, Physician H2.C2, Nurse H2.C2)
Care about followers and treat them fairly	Care about followers and treat them fairly is important (all), but top leaders (H1.1, H1.2, H1.3, H2.1, H2.3) emphasize that their first priority is to care about welfare recipients.
Explicit ethics-related communication with followers	Explicit ethics-related communication by discussing ethical dilemmas and issues with followers is important (all). Some top leaders (H1.1, H1.2, H1.3) add that ethics-related communication with politicians is important too.
Reinforcement to hold followers accountable of (un)ethical conduct	Reinforcement understood as feedback and dialogue on (un)ethical conduct is important in order to learn what can be done differently (all). However, it is important to acknowledge that ethical conduct can take many and different forms (top leader H1.1, top leader H2.1, top leader H2.3, middle leader H2.C1, frontline leader H2.C, nurse H2.C). Highly unethical conduct should be disciplined (all).

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study has been to investigate whether the generic ethical leadership concept transfers to high-publicness organizations. Based on preliminary insights from interviews with leaders and employees at two public hospitals, the answer to this question is that the generic concept only to some extent transfer to high-publicness organizations. Thus, this study suggests that some modifications to the generic concept are needed in order to make it more applicable to high-publicness organizations. The preliminary analysis also indicates that there might be variation between organizational levels, which the analysis of the remaining interviews will enlighten. To sum up the insights, ethical leadership in high publicness organization is less about integrity in terms of living up to high absolute ethical standards, but more about acting accord-

ingly to personal ethical standards, and be responsive to colleagues' personal ethics. Additionally, although I found some disagreements in the interviews, most interviews indicate that rather than acting on altruistic instead of selfish motives, ethical leadership is more about finding the right balance between the two motives due to the unlimited and high demands for public services. Only some top leaders argue that selfish motives should be altruistic *per se.* To care about followers and treat them fairly is important for all, but top leaders emphasize that caring about welfare recipients is more important. In accordance with the generic understanding, the interviews indicate that communication about ethics and discussions on ethical dilemmas with followers is important. Additionally, some of the top leaders argued that it is not only important to discuss ethics with followers, but also to discuss ethical implications of policies with politicians. Finally, most of the interviewees argue that reinforcement is more about giving feedback and discuss ethics in employees' behavior, rather than disciplining behavior. Overall, the preliminary analysis indicates that some modifications of the generic concept would make the concept more transferable.

There are of course some limitations to the study. The empirical generalizability of the analysis is limited, as I base it on interviews with leaders and employees in one specific public subsector. It is plausible that some of the insights might be subsector specific and I, therefore, urge future research to investigate the same question in other subsectors. Moreover, the Danish context is unique in the sense that ethical conduct is generally high and unethical conduct such as corruption is low. This might explain why the interviewees emphasize that there is less need of ethical standards and disciplining and more need of ethical reflection and discussion. Thus, I encourage scholars in the field to investigate whether they can find the same insights across different countries. Yet, it is important to mention that the aim of this study was not empirically generalization to all high-publicness organizations, but theoretical generalization. More specifically, the aim was to shed light on the applicability of the generic concept in high-publicness organizations operationalized as Danish public hospitals. The findings in this study suggest that research should be careful about integrating the ethical leadership concept developed in a private context into a high-publicness context. In particularly, it seems like context specific factors such as the political level, the unlimited demands for public services, and the many ethical dilemmas

might have implications for ethical leadership understandings in high-publicness organizations. Thus, this study indicates that future research should seek to advance the existing conceptual work on ethical leadership in order to make the concept more transferable to high-publicness organizations.

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Appendix 1: Overview of interviewee characteristics

ID	Profession	Age	Gender	Hospital	Ward
Top leader H1.1	Political Scientist	40-50	Male	1	-
Top leader H1.2	Physician	50-60	Male	1	-
Top leader H1.3	Nurse	60-70	Female	1	-
Top leader H2.1	Political Scientist	40-50	Male	2	-
Top leader H2.2	Physician	60-70	Male	2	-
Top leader H2.3	Nurse	60-70	Female	2	-
Middle leader H2.C1	Physician	40-50	Male	2	C
Frontline leader H2.C	Nurse	50-60	Female	2	C
Physician H2.C1	Physician	40-50	Female	2	C
Physician H2.C2	Physician	30-40	Male	2	C
Nurse H2.C1	Nurse	50-60	Female	2	C