Ethical Perception of Leadership and Responsible Behavior: An Exploratory Study of Leaders of Public Organizations in Iraq

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Abstract

The study aimed to identify the effect of the ethical perception of a sample of managers in public organizations on responsible behavior in light of the rapid changes taking place in the external environment. To achieve this, the researcher followed the descriptive analytical approach by applying a questionnaire of two parts. The first part dealt with the ethical perception according to the scale of Johnson (2015), which consisted of (22) items. The second part dealt with measuring responsible behavior, which consisted of (20) items based on the scale of Development of Ethical Behavior (Narvaez, 2006) for a sample of (125) respondents randomly chosen. The results showed that the estimation degree of managers in public governmental organizations of the level of ethical perception was average with arithmetic mean (3.26) and standard deviation (1.44). Moreover, the level of responsible behavior was average with arithmetic mean (3.19) and standard deviation (1.24). The results revealed a direct statistically significant relationship between the estimation degree of managers of the level of ethical perception and that for the level of responsible behavior, as the correlation coefficient reached (0.413). They also demonstrated statistically significant differences between the average scores of managers' estimation of the level of ethical perception attributable to the personal (demographic) variables. The study recommended that the priorities of the general agenda should focus on developing ethical perceptions of leadership in public organizations, which contributes to building and promoting responsible behavior in various directions.

Keywords

Ethical Perception, Ethical Leadership, Responsible Behavior.

Introduction

Many studies emphasized on the ethical perceptions of leadership, which have been accompanied by great concerns from a misunderstanding of the nature of behavioral

deviations when such perceptions are not available. This motivated researchers and those interested in management and organization to emphasize the need to promote and sustain the humanization of the institution and build responsible behavior (Lindsay, 2013, p. 160). Awareness of responsible behaviour is a prerequisite for public institutions to be able to overcome crises of different forms. According to Widyani et al. (2020), the ethical perception of leadership is related to the system of values and responsible social behavior. It can help workers understand duties for better institutional achievement. The Corona pandemic crisis may have added importance to the standards and ethical perceptions of leadership and enhanced awareness of the values and dimensions of responsible behavior. Particularly, most studies demonstrated that the behaviors and ethical perceptions of leadership today protect institutions and communities from the risks of practices of corruption, dependency and indifference (Ebitu & Beredugo, 2015; Hijal-Moghrabi et al.; 2017; Kim & Thapa, 2018). These studies demonstrated the positive role of leaders' ethical perception in the development of responsible behavior for others (Sharif & Scandura, 2014). Given the cultural change in Iraqi society and the prevalence of many irresponsible practices and behaviors due to political and economic instability, it is necessary to examine the nature of the relationship between ethical perceptions of leadership and its impact on promoting awareness of the importance of adhering to responsible behavior among managers after these transformations and major changes.

Research Methodology

1. Research Problem

In the light of changes in the external environment and societies, the problem of current study lies in revealing ethical perceptions of leadership and their relationship to responsible behavior. With a diagnostic approach to the reality of managers in public institutions, the results of the realistic test revealed a number of noteworthy points. The first point is that the lack of ethical perception of leadership in public institutions is associated with the decline in awareness of the importance of adhering to responsible behaviors towards different dimensions (social and institutional) among employees. The second point is that a realistic view of workers' situation in our institutions reveals a state of schizophrenia between workers and leaders and their role in promoting commitment to responsible behavior and between society and undermining this role. The current problem is therefore defined in the following main question:

- What is the relationship between ethical perception of leadership and responsible behavior for managers in public institutions?

The following sub-questions are derived from this main question:

1) What is the level of ethical perception among managers in public institutions from their perspective?
2) What is the level of responsible behavior from the perspective of research sample?
3) Is there a statistically significant correlation at the level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the managers' estimation degree of the level of ethical perception and that of responsible behavior?
4) How much influence does ethical perception have on responsible behavior among employees?
5) Are there statistically significant differences at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the average scores of managers' estimation of their level of ethical perception attributable to demographic variables?

2. Research Objectives

Through recognizing the importance of public institutions and their role in achieving the objectives of sustainable development, the current study mainly aims at revealing and determining the relationship and impact of ethical perception of leadership with responsible behavior among employees from the perspective of general managers in some service institutions. Moreover, it aims at:

1) Identifying the estimation degree of managers in public institutions of the level of ethical perception.
2) Identifying the estimation degree of managers in public institutions of responsible behavior.
3) Determining whether there is a statistically significant correlation at the level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the managers' estimation degree of the level of ethical perception and that of responsible behavior.
4) Determining the degree of impact of ethical perception on promoting responsible behavior among employees.
5) Determining whether there are statistically significant differences at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the average scores of managers' estimation of their level of ethical perception attributable to personal variables (gender, age, scientific qualification, length of service).

3. Research Significance

The importance of the study stems from the importance of its topic, which is the ethical perception of leadership and its impact on the building of responsible behavior. The subject of leadership and its behaviors and practices occupies a large part in the literature of organizational behavior. Many theories that dealt with leadership from different perspectives have emerged. The increased interest in the ethical aspects of leadership is attributed to the various administrative irregularities, manifestations of corruption, abuse of power, and nepotism that spread in many organizations and led to a weak commitment to responsible behaviors at all levels (individual, institutional, and social). Accordingly, the importance of this research lies in that:

1) The ethical perception of leadership is concerned with guiding others towards adhering to the values of institutional ethics and constantly emphasizing on continuous change in the ethical and behavioral aspect of employees.
2) The ethical practices of leadership have become the standard that determines the commitment of any organization to its ethical and social responsibility. The organization's commitment is often attributed to its leadership and its commitment to clear values and standards by influence, trust and the use of power appropriately when necessary.
3) The ethical perception of leadership is one of the important variables in the life of any group and a motive for it. Therefore, the leader must realize that one of his main tasks is to develop and promote responsible ethical behaviors to ensure an atmosphere of organizational stability. He is the one who leads the organization through his practices and skills in promoting responsible behavior, as well as making his institution more committed to its ethical responsibility to all relevant parties.
4) Finally, this research responds to calls to promote the positive and responsible behavior of managers in public institutions in dealing with information, facts and respect for others, and anticipation of anything new related to changing situations.

4. Research Hypotheses

The hypotheses to be tested in this research are:
H1: There is an ethical perception among public managers (leaders).
H2: There is a statistically significant correlation between the ethical perception of leadership and responsible behavior.

H3: There is a statistically significant impact relationship of leadership's ethical perception with responsible behavior.

H4: There are significant differences related to leadership's ethical perception according to demographic variables (gender, age, scientific qualification, length of service).

Previous Studies

1. The study of Schaubroeck et al. (2012) on embedding ethical leadership within and across organization levels.

The study aimed to develop and test a model that links perceptions of ethical leadership and their impact on ethical culture within the military institution across all organizational levels and within its external environment. It also aimed at showing how leadership and culture relate to ethical perceptions and behaviors to follow at lower levels. Data was collected from 2,572 U.S. soldiers representing three organizational levels deployed within combat units. The results provided limited support for simple penetration mechanisms for ethical leadership; however, a broader support was provided for a multi-level model that takes into account how leaders include common concepts by influencing the moral culture of workers at different levels, which in turn affects their ethical perceptions and behaviors.

2. The study of Ng et al. (2021) on changes in ethical leadership perceptions: impacts on performance outcomes and interrelated relationships.

This study aimed at determining the extent to which changes in ethical leadership perceptions affect the nature of the job relationships that exist between the organization's employees, as well as the performance results achieved through adopting the theory of social exchange. The study emphasized that changes in ethical leadership perceptions affect how employees evaluate the relationship of exchange with the organization and affect their pride in belonging to it or their contempt for it. The experimental data of 900 individuals (in Study 1) were collected, and field data were collected from 470 individuals through 4 parts over 14 months (Study 2). These studies were close in order to show that changes in ethical leadership perceptions were linked to changes in the same direction in the pride of the employees of organization or changes in the opposite direction in their contempt for it that exceeded the impact of the current ethical leadership level. The results also indicated that changes in ethical leadership perceptions are significant in themselves, and that they may change employee's behaviors negatively or positively.

Theoretical Background of Research

1. Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership has become a very important pattern at present due to the increasing and diverse problems of recent times related to ethical scandals and fraud in different organizations. Ethical leaders behave ethically in their personal and professional lives. They influence the ethical and unethical behaviors of subordinates through their proactive efforts and activities, as well as the use of rewards and penalties to set standards of responsible behavior (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In 2005, ethical leadership has been regarded as one of the leading methods. The focus has begun on studying it within the ethical components of other leadership patterns, such as authentic, engaging, sublime (spiritual) and transformational leadership (Kalshoven, 2011a, Den Hartog & De Hoogh; Brown & Treviño, 2006). Brown et al. (2005) focused on ethical leadership from a social learning perspective. The leader uses his ethical perceptions in transactions, modeling appropriate behavior to stimulate the behavior of subordinates. Other researchers pointed out that ethical leaders usually work based on a system of accepted beliefs and appropriate judgments rather than self-interest, which is important for subordinates, organizations and society. Kalshoven et al., (2011) and Brown et al. (2005) were among the first researchers to study ethical leadership and its perceptions as a separate leadership method. They explained that ethical leadership is a demonstration of traditionally appropriate behavior through procedures and personal relationships, and working to promote ethical behaviors and practices of subordinates (employees), using two-way communication and reinforcement and decision-making methods. This definition has often been used in recent years by many researchers (Kalshoven et al., 2011).

2. Ethical Perception

Ethical perception is one of the main elements leading to ethical behaviors. It is consistent with ethical inference and facilitated it in the context of the decision-making process, as it urges leaders to get rid of their preconceived thoughts and to consider and scrutinize the elements of ethical events while taking into account ethical issues in decision-making. Ethical perception enhances the process of ethical inference by stimulating creative perception, finding new alternatives and not adhering to traditional problem-solving methods (Kim & Thapa, 2018). But this process must be based on sound logic and inference because creative perception may be excessive if leaders are more focused. Forsyth et al. (2012) indicated that the most important thing that distinguishes ethical decision-making from others is to determine right from wrong based on the leader's personal ethical standards. Barsky (2011) stated that through this mechanism, the

individual can convince himself that the unethical work he is doing is in fact an ethical act. The unethical act is usually converted into ethical through several practices (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005):

a) Ethical Justification.
b) Use of euphemisms.
c) Favorable comparisons, such as comparing an unethical act with a criminal act in order show the unethical act in a more acceptable way.

Reducing harm is done through the following steps:

a) Shifting responsibility.
b) Distribution of responsibility.
c) Ignorance or deformation of the consequences.

The devaluation of others (victims) is done through blame, such as blaming some workers who accept bribery and practices that fall within corruption and justify their actions with a difficult economic reality that may not meet their basic needs.

The current research adopts the ethical perception that urges leaders to get rid of their preconceived notions, to consider and scrutinize the elements of ethical events and to take into account ethical issues in decision-making. In other words, the ethical perception promotes ethical inference, stimulates creative perception and finding new alternatives, and does not adhere to traditional problem-solving methods.

3. Responsibility

Thinking about the concept of responsibility reveals its structural dimensions (Bowman & West, 2018). The dictionary of social sciences terminology defines responsibility as being based on rights, duties, satisfying needs, solving problems, and it must be linked to the extent to which members of society contribute to and participate in satisfying their needs and solve their problems on their own. At the organizational level, Tan, B.K., Ching et al. (2015) defines it as the organization's effort to improve the well-being of society through the organization's contribution to its ethical resources and practices. Hence, responsible behavior cannot be effectively shaped and sustained alone, but requires a supportive environment that produces responsible behavior, which, according to Narvaez, D. (2006), includes:

a. Individual Characteristics

Individual characteristics act as internal controls and include skills that leaders are supposed to have in order to make ethically responsible decisions.

b. Organizational Structure

Organizational structure represents the second important factor for sustaining responsible behavior in public organizations. O'Connell, J., Sharp, K (2016) strongly stressed that there is little interest in understanding the importance of the dimensions of administrative ethical practice within the framework of the organizational situation. Moreover, Paarlberg and Perry (2007) emphasized that there is a need to promote and embrace planned cultural change by promoting the orientation of public organizations towards the adoption of professional values of democracy. On the other hand, Zhu et al. (2004) highlighted that important organizational variables in responsible ethical decision-making must take into account both structure of the organization and the system of reward and punishment. They called on organizations to establish sanctions for unethical behavior and reward ethical behavior (North, D. C.et al., 2009). Based on several studies, Brown et al. (2005) concluded that customs are also a source of behavioral guidance for individuals and group as they provide a tendency and willingness to help other individuals. Responsibility has two types (Craig, J. W e t al., 2015):

- Objective responsibility, which is enhanced at each level through direct and clear accountability definitions.
- Self-responsibility, which is enhanced at each level through the institutional (constitutional legal) nature of the organization.

4. Organizational Culture

According to Narvaez and Lapsley (2005), organizational culture can destroy and waste efforts of organizational leadership with regard to imposing desired individual qualities and developing behaviors supporting the organization. Informal culture may be discouraging of ethical behavior and may encourage unethical behavior (Northouse, 2014). The existence of organizational culture provides opportunities to encourage responsible ethical behavior if it is effectively managed, which is supported by Schein (1985). In this context, ethical leadership has become an important guarantee for subordinates, whereby their efforts and contributions to the organization are assessed. Finally, Menzel (2012) stressed that knowing the overall level of confidence in the organization's leadership provides a useful guide to predicting other qualities that are

important in promoting responsible behavior of organization members and improving organizational performance.

5. Community Expectations

This refers to the expectation of community of its public employees. These components are the most difficult to deal with and are vulnerable to the practices and behaviors of organizational leaders. They include both public participation in the drafting of laws and policies. Carl Friedrich was correct in identifying public participation as a prominent factor in administrative responsibility Plant, J.F. (2011). He predicted that the legislative task would become large and complex, whereby citizens increasingly being directed to hold administrator accountable for the consequences of the impact of his behaviors and practices on government business.

Practical Part

1. Research Community and Sample

Research community consisted of (125) administrators in a number of public organizations. Hence, (150) forms of questionnaire were distributed to a purposeful sample. Then, (130) forms were considered while (5) forms were neglected due to the failure to complete the answers; thus, the research sample became (125). Internal consistency and reliability of questionnaire was validated using Alpha Crop coefficient, which showed that reliability factor was high, whose value reached 0.81. This indicates that the questionnaire in all its aspects enjoys a high and acceptable degree of reliability and can therefore be adopted in the analysis and adoption of results. Validity was equal to the root of reliability factor, as the value of questionnaire validity was 0.84%, which is a high value indicating the validity of the scale. This research seeks to measure the relationship and impact of ethical perception of leadership on the components of responsible behavior during the present time characterized by rapid changes in the external environment and its impact on public organizations.

2. Procedures for Applying the Ethical Perception Scale

a. Ethical Perception Scale

The researcher adopted Craig's (2015) scale, which consisted of (22) items to measure the extent to which leaders of public organizations understand the importance of recognizing the ethical aspect of the organization's activities and work. This scale was adopted for the following reasons:

- The lack of an Iraqi scale to measure the ethical perception of the leaders of public organizations.
- In the current research, this scale can be considered the most comprehensive of all aspects influencing the formulation of ethical perception.

b. Description of Responsible Behavior Scale

Responsible behavior scale consisted of (20) items based on Narvaez's, D. (2006) scale of ethical behavior development, which includes four dimensions with (4) items: organizational culture, individual characteristics, organizational structure, and community expectations.

c. Validity of the Scale

The researcher verified face validity of the scale by presenting it to a committee of specialized experts to judge the extent to which its items are represented and the value of the agreement reached 0.87, meaning that the ratio of agreement is high.

Results and Discussion

The results were analyzed using descriptive statistics tools represented by arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and Pearson correlation coefficient to measure the correlation between dimensions of ethical perception and responsible behavior based on respondents' answers to the questionnaire designed according to the five-Likert scale (strongly applicable =5, applicable =4, unsure =3, inapplicable =2, strongly inapplicable = 1), as follows:

1. Results of the First Objective (Description of Ethical Perception)

After applying the scale to (125) public managers and processing the data statistically, the results showed average scores and standard deviations of the dimensions of the scale as well as the factor of difference. The scale of this variable included (22) items. The arithmetic mean of ethical perception reached (3.26), which is slightly higher than the average. This indicates the need for leaders of public organizations to increase the tendency towards strengthening and developing their ethical perceptions to reach a sound organizational construction, making the organization more able to interact and communicate with the requirements and factors of the environment and increases its ability to improve its performance.

2. Results of the Second Objective (Description and Diagnosis of Responsible Behavior)

This variable consisted of (20) items. The arithmetic mean of responsible behavior reached (3.19), which is slightly higher than the average. This indicates the need for leaders to increase the tendency towards creating and developing responsible behavior to reach a responsible behavior, as it makes the organization more able to respond to the requirements of the environment and its changes due to crises and disasters. These indicators may be evidence of the overall outcome of the responsible behavior development, which shows a score very slightly above the middle.

3. Results of the Third Objective (Identifying the Correlation between Ethical Perception and Responsible Behavior)

Table (1) demonstrates a positive significant correlation between ethical perception and responsible behavior with a level of confidence (0.05). This reflects that the ethical perception of the leaders of public organizations is directly correlated with responsible behavior. The value of the correlation coefficient was 0.768, which is a good positive significant correlation. These results confirm the validity of the third hypothesis that there is a significant correlation between ethical perception of leadership and responsible behavior.

Table 1 The Correlation between Ethical Perception and Responsible Behavior

Responsible behavior	Individual Characteristics	Organizational Structure	Organizational Culture	Societal Expectations	Total Components of Responsible Behavior
Ethical perception	0.710**	0.668**	0.697**	0.671**	0.768**

** Confidence level 0.05.

4. Results of the Fourth Objective (there is an Ethically Significant Effect of Ethical Perception of Leadership on the Dimensions of Responsible Behavior)

Table 2 Results of a Simple Linear Regression of the Effect of Ethical Perception of Responsible Behavior

Independent variable	Value of constant (α)	Value of beta coefficient (β)	Value of determination coefficient (R^2)	Calculated F-value (F)	Significance	Dependent variable
Ethical perception (X)	1,47	0,59	0,66	134,58	There is an effect	Responsible behavior

F-value calculated at the significance level 0.05 and freedom degree (2,123) = 4.01

5. Results of the Fifth Objective (Identifying the Differences in Managers' Recognition of Ethical Perception According to Demographic Variables)

T-test was used for two independent samples, and the calculated T-value was (5,315), which is higher than the tabulated T-value (2,048) at the degree of freedom (123) and the level of significance (0.05). This indicates that there are statistically significant differences between them in favor of males.

Table 3 The Significance of differences in the Dimensions of Ethical Perception According to Gender

Variable	Gender	Number	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	T-value		Statistical significance
					Calculated	Tabulated	
Dimensions of ethical perception	Males	69	118,31	15,33	5,315	2,048	Significant
	Females	56	114,57	15,11			

Freedom degree (123), the significance level 0.05

For the differences in ethical perception depending on the age variable (40-49,50-59), the calculated T-value was (2.77), which is higher than the tabulated t-value (2,048) at the degree of freedom (123) and the level of significance (0.05). This indicates that there are statistically significant differences between them in favor of the age group (40-49).

Table 4 The Significance of Differences in Ethical Perception According to Age

Variable	Age group	Number	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	T-value		Statistical significance
					Calculated	Tabulated	
Dimensions of ethical perception	40-49	73	118,41	13,88	2,77	2,048	Significant
	50-59	52	105,69	13			

Freedom degree (123), the significance level 0.05

Concerning scientific qualification, the calculated T-value was (2,196), which is higher than the tabulated t-value (2,048) at the degree of freedom (123) and the level of significance (0.05). This indicates that there are statistically significant differences between them for PhD.

Table 5 The significance of differences in ethical perception according to scientific qualification (PhD, Master)

Variable	scientific qualification	Number	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	T-value		Statistical significance
					Calculated	Tabulated	
Dimensions of ethical perception	PhD	65	117,19	15	2,196	2,048	Significant
	Master	60	112,5	15,86			

Freedom degree (123), the significance level 0.05

As for length of service, the calculated T-value was (3,068), which is higher than the tabulated T-value (2,048) at the degree of freedom (123) and the level of significance (0.05). This indicates that there are statistically significant differences between them in favor of the length of service (20-30 years).

Table 6 The significance of differences in ethical perception according to length of service (10-30 years)

Variable	Length of service	Number	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	T-value		Statistical significance
					Calculated	Tabulated	
Dimensions of ethical perception	10-19 years	48	114,41	17,31	3,068	2,048	Significant
	20-30 years	77	118	13,56			

Freedom degree (123), the significance level 0.05

6. Discussion of Results

a) There is an ethical perception among managers in public organizations. This result explains that the effects of global and local environmental disorder and change due to crises and disasters, such as the Corona pandemic, increased the necessity for the organizations managers' adherence to ethical standards. Therefore, they will be more capable of conducting business and public activities, since the completion of their work is based on the achievement of the public interest, which is reflected in the quality of the services provided. This is consistent with the results of Demirtas and Akdogan (2015) and Neubert et al. (2009) who pointed out that when organizations face uncertainty, instability and randomness, leaders have to formulate and implement new strategies and plans according to responsible ethical values and behaviors.

b) Responsible behavior obtains a total arithmetic mean of (3.19), which is slightly higher than the average. This is consistent with the study of Ng et al (2021) who noted that changes in the external environment play a role in bringing about important changes in the nature of the relationships and behaviors of workers within the organization, and changes in these relationships, in turn accelerate changes in behaviors that serve or harm the organization.

c) There are positive correlations between ethical perception and responsible behavior. This is consistent with the result of Demirtas and Akdogan (2015) who emphasized that managers are role models in their organizations. Specifically, through their ethical behavior, they can influence the behaviors and attitudes of workers at all levels to help create a positive ethical environment for the

organization that will reflect in the spirit of citizenship and belonging among employees, and increase their commitment and organizational loyalty.

d) Responsible behavior affects the building and realization of opportunities to develop responsibility towards different issues, and increases the commitment of employees to ethical standards of work. On the other hand, it influences on the ethical aspect of leadership, which leads to the promotion and enrichment of applications and practices of employees' responsible behaviors.

e) There are statistically significant differences between items of the gender variable in favor of males. This is consistent with the study of Ng et al. (2021) who concluded that there are differences between males and females in their ethical perceptions towards different issues in favor of males. This can be attributed to the fact that males have a greater tendency to follow ethical principles in their work, as being the most responsible for decision-making and policy formulation.

f) There are differences in ethical perception depending on the age variable (table 4) in favor of age group (50-59), which is consistent with the results of Engelbrecht et al., (2017). This can be explained by that they are the most aware of the importance and impact of their moral commitment as it is an influential factor in shaping and building responsible behavior among employees. In addition, there are differences in ethical perception according to the variable of scientific qualification for the benefit of PhD because the majority of managers (52) with different majors held PhD by (86.6%). This result is consistent with the study of Yidong, T., & Xinxin, L. (2013) who stressed that the behavior of individual creative work is positively linked to both the scientific qualification of individual ethical leadership and collective ethical leadership.

g) The results in table (6) showed statistically significant differences in ethical perception depending on the variable of length of service for the benefit of (20-30 years). This is consistent with the results of Demirtas and Akdogan (2015) and Schaubroeck et al. (2012) who confirmed that ethical perception is higher among individuals working in public organizations with long service duration.

Recommendations

In light of the results, the researcher recommends the following:

a) The need for public managers to act ethically, especially when they make decisions regarding business continuity. Adherence to the principles and ethics of work in public institutions is very important in terms of organizational performance and the promotion of a strong and positive organizational culture.

b) Activating commitment to the pattern of ethical leadership in public organizations. Today, it is crucial in reducing corrupt practices and ensuring the common good.

c) A leader must have an entrepreneurial spirit, and he must have a good organizational ethic in order to improve well-supported organizational performance.

d) Ethics become important when leaders make business continuity decisions. The leadership principles and ethics are therefore very important in improving organizational performance.

e) Further empirical analysis is needed to investigate the validity and reliability of construction with regard to the many ethical factors of organizations that will be of value. Greater efforts are also needed to build a scale that will build ethically strong organizations.

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