

The Influence of Personality Traits on Ethical Behavior of Police: The Mediating Effect of Ethical Leadership

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Abstract: Unethical behavior by police officers continues to garner a lot of attention. Engagement in such conduct will tarnish police reputation as law enforcers who are responsible to protect the welfare of society. Hence, fostering ethical behavior among police officers should be encouraged. However, there is a dearth of in-depth knowledge in existing literature, providing a sufficient explanation contributing to the ethical behavior of police officers. The purpose of this study is to assess the influence of the reciprocal relationship between personal factors and environmental factors on behavioral outcomes. By employing the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as an underpinning theory, this present study intends to examine the influences of personal factors, namely personality traits, on the ethical behavior of the police. This study also introduces ethical leadership as a mediating variable to fill the knowledge gap in the existing literature.

Keywords: *Ethical Behavior, Personality, Big Five Model, Ethical Leadership, Police.*

1. Introduction and Background

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) define a future development agenda for the year 2015–2030 to encourage the international community to move toward a globally sustainable future in the next few decades. Against this backdrop, SDG 16 calls for peace, justice, and strong institutions. SDG 16 emphasizes the rule of law at the national and international levels with an approach to accountability and transparency that prioritizes the eradication of corruption. The demand for transparency has emerged in the areas of governance and is predominantly targeted at government and financial institutions. Governance Transparency in many countries in the world is measured through the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) established by Transparency International (TI). CPI measures the perception of corruption in the public sector for their 180 participating countries.

Malaysia exhibits a fluctuating trend in the CPI score. A CPI score ranks countries based on how allegedly corrupt their public sectors are perceived to be (Transparency International, 2022). According to the President of Transparency International Malaysia (TI-M), Dr. Muhammad Mohan, Malaysia's score decreased from 51 in 2020 to 48 in 2021. Specifically, the country's CPI scores serve as a standard for its level of governance. Poor governance reflects a deteriorating level of national transparency and integrity. The decrease in score may suggest the need to enhance current measures and approach to encouraging ethical behavior across a variety of social sectors such as the public sector, political parties, law enforcement, the media, and business.

Ethics, regardless of rank or institution, is the ultimate predictor of accountability and trust. Ethics is essential for professionals of all professions, including in the sector of law enforcement. It is even more important for law enforcement officers to behave ethically in their day-to-day delivery of work as their role is to uphold the law and safeguard the interest of society. Engagement in unethical behavior demonstrated a disregard for ethical requirements as well as a disregard for the principal role of good governance in one country. This situation is perhaps even more worrying if it will erode public confidence in government and public service.

Police ethics are the most influential aspect of public trust in police services (Mathura, 2022; McDaniel, 2019; Wu & Boateng, 2019). Accountability of police exists when they act pretty and wisely, administer, the law equally to all citizens, and act morally (Westmarland & Conway, 2020). In Malaysia, there is an increasing and consistent complaint by the public about police misconduct. Public complaints of police misconduct have preceded any other law enforcement agencies. Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) received the highest number of complaints in 2022 which has been the highest in a decade (Enforcement Agency Integrity Commission,

2022). Therefore, there is a crucial need for highly ethical police officers. Hence, it is important to investigate factors contributing to ethical behavior among police which serve as the primary basis for this study.

2. Literature Review

Ethical Behavior: Ethical behavior of employees is the important key success to for the organization. Trevino, Weaver & Reynolds (2006) defined ethical behavior as “individual behavior that is subject to or judged according to generally accepted moral norms of behavior”. Importantly, employee ethical behavior contributes to an organization’s meaningful existence, prosperity, vitality (Nguyen, Wu, Evangelista & Nguyen, 2020), and financial performance (Sarfo, Zhang, O’Kane, Podgorodnichenko, Osei-Fosu, 2022). Further, ethical practices at various levels in the organization (co-worker and managerial) lead to employees’ organizational commitment (Roszkowska & Mele, 2021) job embeddedness (Roszkowska & Mele, 2020) organizational citizenship behavior and constructive performance (Sarfo et al. 2022). Towards employees, ethical behavior may enable employees to feel an alignment between their values and the values of the organization. These feelings make workplace ethics an integral part of fostering teamwork among employees. Employees who act ethically will build trust in their immediate surroundings. As a result, employee trust established via constant ethical behavior will save the company money.

Recently, due to recurring company and unethical behavior of employees in the organization, the focus on ethics study by managers and scholars has increased significantly (Fairchild, 2018 & Sigh, 2015). Because previous research has focused on unethical behavior and its consequences rather than ethical behavior, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate the integration of personal and environmental factors in predicting ethical behavior to shed light on the importance of ethical issues, as this type of research is scarce (Hassan et al., 2022; Fairchild, 2018; Kolk, 2016; Hough, 2015). Several theoretical perspectives have been presented by different researchers to underpin the studies of ethical behavior in different contexts that may result in diverse results. Hence, guided by Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), this study could examine personal and environmental factors that contribute to ethical behavior in the law enforcement context. While previous studies have yielded a variety of results, it is still unclear which initiatives will be effective, and the findings of this study likely highlight the need for coordinated action at all levels to foster ethical behavior in an organization (Loacker, 2022; Ferrer, Harrison, Ferrell & Hair, 2019; Roszkowska & Mele, 2021; Sarfo et al. 2022).

Social Cognitive Theory as Underpinning Theory: The theory underlying this research is Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) by Albert Bandura (1986). Bandura’s perspective has been applied to a wide range of topics, such as personality development and functioning, the understanding and treatment of psychological disorders, organizational training programs, education, health promotion strategies, advertising, and marketing, and many more. Triadic Reciprocity which represents the co-interaction of personal, environmental, and behavioural factors is core to this theory (Bandura, 1986) and acts as a regulator and influencer of human behaviour. SCT proposes that morality and other psychosocial factors (such as working conditions, climate, leadership, etc) explain how moral reasoning governs moral conduct (Wood and Bandura, 1989). Thus, social cognitive theory adopts an interaction perspective to moral phenomena and presents a framework in which personal factors, and environmental factors all operate as interacting determinants that influence each other in determining outcomes (Bandura, 1986).

Based on SCT, this study uses internal cues (personality traits) and external cues (ethical leadership) that could act as an influencer of employee behavior specifically in ethical behavior. As stated in SCT, individuals inside an organization are impacted by internal and external signals, which motivate them to engage in ethical behavior (Abdullah, 2019; Beauchamp, Crawford & Jackson, 2019). Furthermore, an employee with ethical behavior may continually regulate their behavior by self-assessing their ethical action that suits the ethical environment they are engaged (Ozyilmaz, Erdogan & Karaeminogullari, 2018; Boateng, Adam, Okoe & Anning-Dorson, 2016; Ng & Lucianetti, 2016). SCT also posits that ethical action influences the environmental context in which the behavior occurs. Accordingly, when employees perceive or observe the ethical behavior of their leaders or co-workers, it results in the notion that the organization supports an ethical climate, which in turn motivates ethical behavior.

Personality Traits: Personality is defined as an individual's preferred way of behaving, thinking, and feeling (Sutton, 2018). It is an essential and diverse source of information and understanding about human behaviors and attitudes (Simha & Parboteeh, 2020); Seigried-Spellar & Lankord, 2018). Individuals are motivated by their choices, personalities, and socially recognized values from their surroundings. The Big Five Model of Personality Traits by McCrae and Costa (1987) has emerged as a breakthrough in the field of personality. It includes five unique factors, defined as Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. The correlation found by analyzing personality traits and a wide variety of variables can be important and valuable for research to predict future behavior by individuals.

The attribute of openness to experience refers to individuals actively searching out unusual or even entirely new experiences, with a proper propensity to enjoy different ideas and methodologies (McCrae and Costa 1987; Giluk and Postlethwaite, 2015). A study by Parks-Leduc, Feldman & Bardi, (2015) and Giluk and Postlethwaite, 2015) indicates a finding that individuals with a "higher level of moral reasoning" are more open. In line with the study conducted by Jalal & Naveeda (2019), openness to experience and Islamic work ethics were found to have a positive relationship and become a significant new contribution to personality study and ethical behavior. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

H1a: There is a relationship between openness to experience and ethical behavior.

Conscientiousness is defined as the "tendency for individuals to be organized, goal-directed and followers of norms and rules (MacCann, Duckworth & Roberts, 2009). In line with Kalshoven et al. (2011), this personality attribute is divided into dependability and achievement, with the former referring to a person being profound, careful, responsible, and structured, and the latter referring to hard-working individuals who virtually always satisfy conditions and expectations. Moon, Khaltar, Lee, Hwang & Yim (2020) showed that conscientious persons tend to act ethically not only for themselves but also for the others around them. Likewise, Witt et al. (2002) proved that these individuals are inclined to take responsibility, while several other scholars (Roberts & Hogan 2001; Lodi-Smith & Roberts 2007; McFerran et al. 2010) linked them with general honesty and pro-social behavior and decisions. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

H1b: There is a relationship between conscientiousness and ethical behavior.

Scholars defined extraversion as the factor, which manifests as "confident self-expression, surgency, assertiveness, social extraversion, and power (John & Srivastava, 1999). There are a few reasons that enable scholars to agree that extraversion demonstrates a positive association with ethical behavior. First, extravert individuals experience less role ambiguity and stress than non-extraverts due to clear job objectives, higher job responsibilities, and greater clarity regarding work role expectations (Koodamara, Prabhu, Suhan & Narayanan, 2021; Rai & Kumar, 2012). Second, individuals with high levels of extraversion have good social networking with others as they are sociable, active, and positive (Servidio, 2019). These personality traits are likely to motivate them to be ethical. Third, extroverts tend to experience positive affect and demonstrate warmth, proactive and assertiveness (Helle, DeShong, Lengel, Meyer, Butler & Mullins-Sweatt, 2018). Fourth, extravert individuals, are likely to display a higher sense of security because of their proactive nature. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

H1c: There is a relationship between extraversion and ethical behavior

Agreeableness refers to a person having qualities like cooperativeness, self-sacrifice, trust and good-naturedness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Scholars posit that agreeableness is positively associated with the ethical behavior of employees (Anwar & Shah, 2019; Bhat & Bhat, 2018; Deng & Qian, 2017) because of some theoretical justifications. First, prior research showed evidence of a positive relationship between agreeableness and job performance (Koodamaran et al., 2021). Moreover, agreeable individuals may justify ethical behavior due to their strong desire to build a positive relationship with others and therefore, they tend to avoid conflict (Simha & Parboteean, 2019). Consequently, the present hypothesis has been developed:

H1d: There is a relationship between agreeableness and ethical behavior

The last personality trait is neuroticism. Neuroticism individuals display irrational ideas, and they become less creative than emotionally stable individuals (Rothmann & Coetzer, 2003). Neuroticism is negatively related to managerial performance because those who are neurotic poorly cope with stress. Prior research has also shown that neuroticism is negatively associated with trust because neurotic individuals are

emotional, and therefore, they may not familiarize themselves with a social community (Bhagat, Wu & Chang, 2019). Further studies have also shown that there is a positive association between neuroticism and unethical behavior such as plagiarism, fraud, or misconduct among employees (Niederhauser, 2019; Helle et al. 2018). Therefore, the present hypothesis has been developed:

H1e: There is no relationship between neuroticism and ethical behavior.

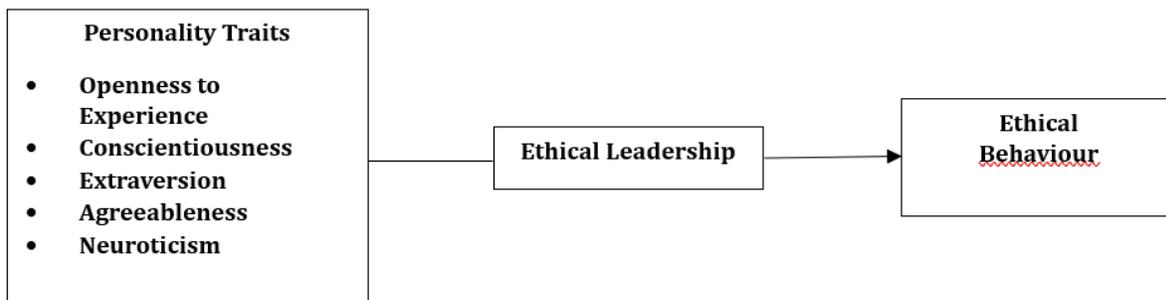
Ethical Leadership: The ethical quality of leadership is regarded to be particularly essential since such qualities are expected to have a favorable impact on organizational behavior (Trevino et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2006). Previous research has demonstrated that ethical leadership affects organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), organizational commitment (OC), supervisor satisfaction, and perceived leader effectiveness (Shahzad, Raja & Hashmi; 2021; Tuffley, David & Antonio, 2017; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009; Ozbag, 2016; De Hoogh & Den Dertog, 2008). Due to the leader's ability to influence employee and organizational behavior, it is crucial to comprehend the personality characteristics linked with ethical leadership. More recently, several studies have linked personality traits and attributes to leader ethical behavior, providing a substantial empirical foundation for the argument that traits do matter in the prediction of ethical leadership phenomenon (Kalshoven et al., 2011). Based on this idea, in this study, five factors of the personality model are used as a base to link to personality characteristics of ethical leadership. The Big Five taxonomy comprising extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and neuroticism is one of the most researched and well-established taxonomies of personality (Aydogmus, Camgoz, Ergeneli & Ekmekci, 2018). In addition, personality traits have remained central in predicting the leadership style of an individual. Based on this justification, this research employs this taxonomy to investigate its impact on ethical leadership.

The Mediation Effect of Ethical Leadership between the Relationship of Personality Traits and Ethical Behaviour. Ethical leaders are predicted to deliver ethical direction to employees. These employees imitate such behavior by observing their leader's role-model actions, decisions, and subsequent consequences. This is since, ethical leaders integrate ethical concepts with leadership skills and place a high priority on accomplishments to promote ethical actions that contribute to the organization's achievement (Talib, Bibi & Zamzam, 2019). It has been stated that in the organization, ethical leadership becomes more visible to followers when they are seen to set laws and regulations and develop behavioral expectations. Attitudes of followers then will be influenced by how they perceive their leader's approach and react to this. As a result, ethical leaders act as a mechanism to develop an ethical climate and direct the behavior of followers to be ethical. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Ethical leadership will mediate the relationship between personality traits and ethical behavior.

Research Framework: Figure 1 presents the summary of the relationship between personality traits (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism). The indirect path relationship explains the mediating effect of ethical leadership on the relationship between personality traits and ethical behavior.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



3. Research Methodology

This study employed purely quantitative research. The target population of this study involves police members in Bukit Aman Royal Malaysia Police Headquarters, Kuala Lumpur, and Selangor Contingent Police Headquarters. The sampling frame for this study is the total number of police according to rank. The purposive sampling technique is used to gather 250 respondents as the study's sample. Non-commissioned police officers are selected to participate in the survey. This study will use questionnaires as survey instruments. Instruments are adapted from the previous study. The Big Five Personality Traits by John & Srivastava (1999) will be used to measure personality traits. Meanwhile, the Ethical Leadership Scale by Brown et al., (2005) will be used to assess the mediating effect and instrument to examine ethical behavior adapted from Ferrel & Gresham (1985). The self-administered questionnaire will be distributed among police officers via hand and post to collect the data. Participants will be invited via email through the Corporate Communication Division, Bukit Aman Police Headquarters, Kuala Lumpur. The email included the intention of the study together with an attachment of research ethics approval. Consent forms for participants will be collected before the survey is conducted.

4. Results and Discussion

The result of this study will make several noteworthy contributions to understanding the personality influence on the ethical behavior of police officers. There is a scarcity in the literature pertaining to individual factors (specifically personality) influencing positive behavior (ethical behavior) among the police. The abundance of past studies examines the influence of personality traits on the negative behavior of the police such as police misconduct, police brutality, and police corruption (Schwartz, 2020; Malik & Qureshi, 2021; Hong, 2017). Apart from that, the Big Five dimensions of personality traits remain underexplored in a policing context. Moreover, in addition, most of the past research associates personality traits with the output of job satisfaction, job performance, job stress and police performance (Hussain, Majeed & Husain, 2023; Petasis & Economides, 2020; Batilmurik, Sudiro, Noermijati & Rohman, 2020; Massod, Rafique, Qaisar & Musarat, 2017) making the individual output remain under investigate. Finally, this study will provide a new perspective on nurturing positive behavior by employing the dimension of Big Five personality traits and will be an alternative technique to sustain the ethical behavior of police officers by utilizing mechanisms in the psychological dimension of personality.

5. Managerial Implications and Recommendations

This study will have some valuable implications for organizations, HR practitioners, and policymakers with respect to the selection, training, and development of police officers. Police institutions should pay special attention to the aspect of ethics and morality of police in the initial stage of recruitment. All applicants can be given a series of personality tests to assess their temperament and personal values. The results from the personality test can be utilized to reveal personality patterns and are useful in recruiting new police officers. Additionally, this study provides a baseline on matching personality traits and expected behavior of police officers. Besides that, personality assessment provided in training can enhance knowledge of ethics and professionalism in policing and foster the development of new initiatives to promote more ethical behavior and decision-making. Future research on personality may investigate the distinct aspects of police personality of new recruits from the alpha generation and compare the distinction of their personalities to create a new mechanism that suits them in nurturing ethical behavior. Furthermore, dyadic research is recommended to allow the researcher to investigate and compare the influence of the leader's response and the subordinate response regarding ethical conduct, which is very relevant for the study of ethical behavior.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the purpose of this study is to investigate the influential factors that contribute to the ethical behavior of police officers in the Royal Malaysia Police Force. This study examines personal characteristics (personality traits) and their relationship to ethical behavior using SCT as the underpinning theory. Furthermore, the effect of ethical leadership as a mediator between the relationships of personality traits has been investigated. This study's population consists of police officers from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Data were collected via a self-administered questionnaire that was physically distributed to the appointed officer in charge, and permission to conduct a survey was granted by the Bukit Aman Police

Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. The result of this study will contribute to the literature in the policing context and become an alternative technique to sustain ethical behavior by utilizing the psychological dimension of an employee's personality.

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