The Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Bullying Behavior: The Mediating Role of Organizational Justice

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Abstract
Ethical leadership plays a key role in the establishment of a school environment where negative behaviors such as mobbing and bullying seen less. Although there have been some studies on the relationship between ethical leadership and bullying behavior, potential determinants explaining this relationship needs further exploration. The purpose of the current study was to examine the mediating role of organizational justice in relationship between ethical leadership and bullying behavior. The participants were 551 teachers working in three different central districts in Konya, Turkey. Data was collected using the Ethical Leadership Scale to measure teachers' perceptions of ethical leadership, Negative Acts Questionnaire to measure teachers' perceptions of bullying, and Organizational Justice Scale to measure teachers' perceptions of organizational justice. Results revealed that ethical leadership and organizational justice was negatively correlated with bullying behavior. Besides, organizational justice partially mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and bullying behavior in which ethical leadership had both direct influence on bullying behavior and indirect influence through organizational justice. In the light of these findings, recommendations were given for further research and administrative applications.
Keywords: Ethics, Ethical leadership, School principals, Bullying behavior, Organizational justice.

1. Introduction

Ethical leadership has emerged as an important concept in educational administration field as societies move into a rapid change by cultural diversity and this change will need for ethical preparation that foster, develop, and lead more tolerant and democratic schools (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). School principals, as other managers and leaders in other professions, will need to more effectively serve a much more diverse people and be more responsive to ethnic, cultural, social, linguistic, economic, and other contextual differences (Gardiner & Tenuto, 2015).

Ethical leadership, as defined by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005, p.120), is "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." These "normatively appropriate" conducts, although they are context dependent, generally represents honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, and care and ethical leaders are regarded as the models of these conduct who make fair and balanced decisions (Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Karaköse, 2007). For instance, a cross-cultural study (Resick, Martin, Keating, Dickson, Kwan, & Peng, 2011) having examined the meaning of ethical and unethical leadership held by managers in six societies representing Asian, American, and European cultures demonstrated that although there were differences in perceptions of ethical leadership, *character* and *consideration and respect for others* were two dominant ethical leadership themes accepted by all cultures which are characterized with "demonstrating honesty, trustworthiness, integrity, and sincerity, having a personal moral code and a sense of ethical awareness, authentic, courageous, and self-disciplined, having good intentions, leading by example, treating others with dignity and respect, being approachable, good natured, and people-oriented, demonstrating empathy and understanding, being helpful, developing and protecting staff, and tolerance" (Resick et al., 2011, p.442).

A manager's reactions to a day-to-day problem faced by many employees are expected to be treated fairly because it is ethically appropriate way to behave in many cultures (Cropanzana, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007). Thus, justice is an important correlate of ethical behavior and many research findings supported this relationship (Loi, Lam, & Chan, 2012; Luria & Yagil, 2008; Neubert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts, & Chonko, 2009; Shin, Sung, Choi, & Kim, 2015; Yıldırım, 2010). According to a recent study on employees' reactions to peers' unfair treatment by supervisors, unfavorable perceptions of interactional justice for peers leads employees to react in the form of deviant workplace behaviors and decreases organizational citizenship behaviors, and it makes them more prone to perceiving their supervisor as unethical (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, & Suárez-Acosta, 2014). Thus, an atmosphere of justice within an organization is very important to prevent the organization from various

forms of organizational misconduct such as favoritism, unfair treatment of employees, bribe offering and bribe taking which can be widespread in unfair societies (Gürbüz, 2007).

Organizational justice is defined as "a personal evaluation about the ethical and moral standing of managerial conduct" (Cropanzana et al., 2007, p.35) and it is generally considered as a multi-dimensional construct (Colquitt, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Cropanzana et al., 2007; Niehoff & Moorman, 1996) with distributive, procedural, and interactional justice dimensions. *Distributive justice* deals with the appropriateness and perceived fairness of the outcomes of a dispute or negotiation (Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). According to the equity rule by Leventhal (1976), rewards and resources within an organization should be distributed in accordance with the recipients' contributions. Similarly, Adams (1965) suggested a formulation that people will compare the ratio between their perceived contributions and the outcomes they get and the discrepancy between the two will be perceived as "unfair." *Procedural justice* deals with the appropriateness and perceived fairness of the allocation process at which some critical principals are justified (Cropanzana et al., 2007; Lind & Tyler, 1988). These principles are consistency (treating all employees as the same), bias-suppression (no discrimination or mistreatment to anybody), accuracy (making decisions on accurate information), correctability (fixing mistakes with an appealing process), representativeness (giving all related parties the opportunity to participate during a decision process), and ethicality stating that the allocation process is consistent with the ethical norms of the perceiver (Cropanzana et al., 2007; Leventhal, 1976; Leventhal, 1980). *Interactional justice* deals with the appropriateness of the treatment one receives from authority figures and it has two components as *interpersonal justice* representing the degree of politeness, respect, and dignity by authorities or third parties, and *informational justice* representing the explanations given to people about why procedures were used in a certain way (Colquitt et al., 2001; Cropanzana et al., 2007). According to Bies and Moag (1986), there are four principles about the process of interactional justice, namely, justification, truthfulness, respect, and propriety. Justification refers to explaining the basis and providing information regarding the decisions taken and after an injustice has occurred; truthfulness states being honest and candid; respect deals with being noncritical, noninsulting, and polite; and propriety refers to not asking inappropriately personal questions, making prejudicial statements, and refraining from improper remarks (Colquitt, 2001; Rupp, Baldwin, & Bashshur, 2006).

Feeling of justice is very crucial in an organizational setting since it is one of the most significant antecedents of negative conducts in work settings (Neuman, 2004). These negative conducts are generally referred with various terms such as counterproductive workplace behavior (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Spector, Fox, Penney, Bruursema, Goh, & Kessler, 2006), emotional abuse (Keashly, 1997), social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), and retaliation (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997) in the workplace, workplace violence and aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Neuman & Baron, 2005; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002), workplace deviance (Robinson & Bennett, 1997), workplace bullying (Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999; Rayner, 1997), workplace harassment (Richman, Flaherty, & Rospenda, 1996; Rospenda, Richman, Ehmke, & Zlatoper, 2005), workplace mistreatment (Spratlen, 1994), and mobbing (Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 1999; Leymann, 1990, 1996). The common point of these conducts is that they are hazardous to the organization by directly affecting its functioning or by damaging employees in a way that will reduce their effectiveness (Fox et al., 2001). Two predominantly used negative work behaviors of those listed are mobbing and bullying behaviors in the workplace. Although they are used interchangeably, the term mobbing involves a physical aggression by a group of people and the term bullying is used for physical aggression by a single person, mostly by a supervisor rather than a group of people (Zapf, 1999).

Bullying at work has many reported negative individual outcomes such as post-traumatic stress disorders (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004), symptoms of somatisation, depression, anxiety, and negative affectivity (Hansen, Hogh, Persson, Karlson, Garde, & Ørbæk, 2006), negative views on self, others, and the world (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002), job dissatisfaction and intention to leave the job (Quine, 1999), and psychosomatic complaints (Gemzøe Mikkelsen, & Einarsen, 2002), and organizational outcomes such as purposely wasting company material and supplies, doing one's work incorrectly and damaging a valuable piece of property belonging to the employer (Ayoko, Callan, & Härtel, 2003), distress, avoidance and withdrawal at work (Hutchinson, Wilkes, Jackson, & Vickers, 2010), decreased organizational health (Cemaloğlu, 2007). These outcomes sometimes can be so severe that they can be comparable to post-traumatic stress disorder levels of war and prison camp experiences (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996).

Leadership style and feelings of justice within an organization emerges as two significant organizational factors influencing workplace bullying/mobbing behaviors (Cemaloglu, 2011; Cemaloğlu & Kılınç, 2012; Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010; Hutchinson, Jackson, Wilkes, & Vickers, 2008; Zapf, 1999). Thus, potential relationships between leadership styles, perceived organizational justice, and bullying behaviors needs further exploration for the practical implications and research in educational administration on the prevention and management of bullying at work, which may have many reported negative effects on individual and organizational basis. In the light of previous work, the current study aims at exploring the mediating role of

organizational justice between the relationships of ethical leadership and bullying behavior within school settings.
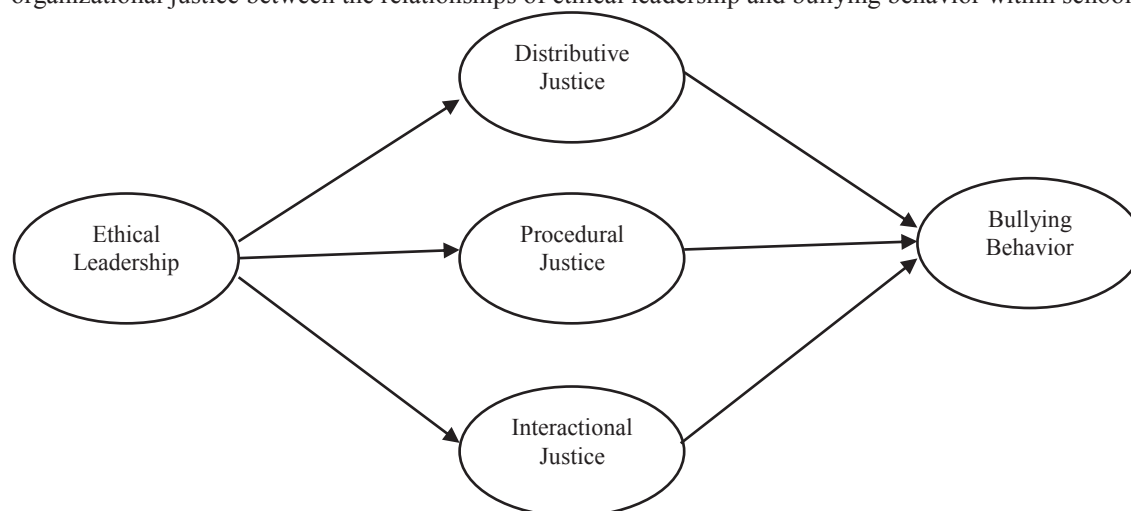

Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework of the Study

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants consisted of 551 teachers who were selected from a random sample of public primary and secondary schools located in three central districts in Konya, one of the biggest cities in central Anatolia, Turkey. Teachers were between the ages of 23 and 47, with a mean age of 26.5 years (SD = 3.9). Of the participants 282 (51.2%) were female and 269 (48.8%) were male. The teachers had an average of five years of seniority in the current school and 14.5 years of seniority as teachers. Eighty-seven percent had a bachelor's degree and 13% had a master's degree.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 *Ethical Leadership Scale* (ELS; Brown et al., 2005). The ELS is a 10 item-scale that measures respondents' perceptions of their supervisors'/directors'/managers'/principals' ethical behaviors. The current study used "My Principal" as the referent. Ratings are made on a five-point scale, ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5). Sample items include "My … makes fair and balanced decisions," and "My … talks about the importance of ethics." The concurrent validity of the scale was supported by the positive correlations with consideration behavior, honesty, trust in the leader, interactional fairness, socialized charismatic leadership and coefficient alpha reliability was .90 (Brown, et al., 2005). This study administered a Turkish version of the ELS (Tuna, Bircan, & Yeşiltaş, 2012). The adapted ELS had an alpha coefficient of .92 and factorial analyses supported the unidimensionality of the scale. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the current study was .93.

2.2.2 *Organizational Justice Scale* (OJS; Niehoff & Moorman, 1993; Polat, 2007). The Turkish version of the OJS is a 19 item-scale that measures respondents' perceptions of three different dimensions of organizational justice, namely, distributive (6 items), procedural (9 items), and interactional (4 items) justice. Ratings are made on a five-point scale, ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5). Sample items include "I feel I am being rewarded fairly considering the responsibilities I have'', ''My supervisor is neutral in decision making,'' and ''My supervisor provides explanations for the decisions related to my job.'' Niehoff and Moorman (1996) reported Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients of .72 for distributive justice, .83 for procedural justice, and .92 for interactive justice. The Turkish adapted OJS had also good psychometric properties with Cronbach alpha coefficients of .89 for distributive justice, .95 for procedural justice, .90 for interactive justice, and .96 for the full scale. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the current study was .92 for distributive justice, .95 for procedural justice, .92 for interactive justice, and .97 for the full scale.

2.2.3 *Negative Acts Questionnaire* (NAQ; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). The NAQ is a 18 item-scale that measures respondents' perceptions of exposure to typical workplace bullying behaviors. Respondents first read a definition of bullying and then given 22 types of specific bullying behaviors. They are asked to indicate how often they expose such behaviors on a five-point scale, ranging from *Never* (1) to *Daily* (5). The Turkish version of NAQ (Cemaloğlu, 2007, 2012) demonstrated good psychometric properties with Cronbach alpha coefficients well over .90. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the current study was .94.

2.3 Procedure

Packets of instruments and the covering letter explaining the purpose of the study, importance of voluntary

participation and guarantee of autonomy were delivered to 700 teachers by the first author. Of these delivered packets, 640 were returned with a %91.4 return rate. Sixty-nine of the instruments were omitted because of missing responses or inconsistencies. Lastly, twenty outliers were eliminated based on Mahalonobis Distance. The analyses were conducted with the remaining 551 teachers' instruments.

2.4. Analyses

Prior to analyses, study variables were examined for assumptions for normal distribution, linearity, and multicollinearity. No problems were detected with normality as normal probability plots of the residuals and residual histograms confirmed normality and multicollinearity as all correlations were below .90 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). To test the mediation effects, a series of regression models were tested following Baron and Kenny's (1986) four step suggestions that (1) the predictor must be significantly related to the outcome, (2) the predictor must be significantly related to the mediator, (3) the mediator must be significantly related to the outcome, and (4) the relationship between the predictor and the outcome become significantly weaker (partially mediation) or non-significant (fully mediation).

3. Results

Table 1 presents the basic descriptive statistics and correlations for the study variables. There is a significant negative relationship between the predictor variable ethical leadership and the outcome variable bullying ($r = -.34$, $p < .001$), suggesting that the more school principals demonstrate ethical leadership behaviors, the less bullying behaviors are perceived by the teachers. Ethical leadership was significantly positively related to three dimensions of organizational justice, namely, distributive, procedural, and interactional justice ($r = .66, .76, .73$, respectively), meaning that the more school principals demonstrate ethical leadership behaviors, the more organization is perceived as justice. Three organizational justice dimensions (mediator variables) significantly negatively correlated with the outcome variable bullying ($r = -.26, -.28, -.35$, respectively), indicating that the more the organization is perceived as justice, the less bullying behaviors are perceived by the teachers.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Ethical leadership	3.78	.88	-				
2. Distributive Justice	3.66	.99	.66***	-			
3. Procedural Justice	3.64	.99	.76***	.84***	-		
4. Interactional Justice	3.99	.95	.73***	.78***	.86***	-	
5. Bullying	1.42	.59	-.34***	-.26***	-.28***	-.35***	-

***$p<.001$

Results of the regression analyses to test mediation are presented in Table 2. As seen, in the first step, ethical leadership significantly predicted bullying ($\beta= -.39$, $p < .001$), accounting for 16% of the variance in bullying. In the second step, ethical leadership also predicted the organizational justice dimensions of distributional justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice significantly ($\beta= .67, 76, 73$, respectively, $p < .001$). In the third step, organizational justice dimensions significantly accounted for 17% of the variance in bullying, with interactional justice being the only significant predictor ($\beta= -.42$, $p < .001$). Since conditions for mediation test were met (Baron & Kenny, 1986) for only interactional justice dimensions, distributive justice and procedural justice dimensions are excluded and further mediation analyses were conducted for the mediation effect of interactional justice. In the last step, the predictor variable ethical leadership was still significant but smaller with the inclusion of interactional justice. This suggests that ethical leadership behaviors of the school principal are still important in predicting bullying behaviors perceived by the teachers. A Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) was conducted to provide evidence regarding mediation of interactional justice between ethical leadership and bullying behavior. The result of the Sobel test was significant ($z = 11.29$, $p < .001$), indicating that interactional justice partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and bullying behavior.

Table 2. Regression model results: Effects of ethical leadership on bullying

Level and variable	Bullying (Model 1)	Dis. Just. (Model 2)	Proc. Just. (Model 3)	Inter. Just. (Model 4)	Bullying (Model 5)	Bullying (Model 6)
Step 1						
Ethical leadership	-.39(.03)***					
R^2	.16***					
Step 2						
Ethical leadership		.67 (.04)***	.76 (.03)***	.73 (.03)***		
R^2		.44***	.57***	.53***		
Step 3						
Distributive Justice					-.07 (.04)	
Procedural Justice					-.08 (.05)	
Interactional Justice					-.42(.05)***	
R^2					.17***	
Step 4						
Ethical leadership						-.21 (.04)***
Interactional Justice						-.25 (.05)***
R^2						.19***

Note. Values in parentheses are standard errors; ***$p<.001$

4. Discussion

This study attempts to expand the literature on the potential relationships between ethical leadership, organizational justice, and bullying behavior especially within the context of educational administration. Specifically, the mediation role of organizational justice in relationship between ethical leadership and bullying behavior was tested.

The overall results revealed that bullying behavior was negatively related to ethical leadership and all three dimensions of organizational justice. That is, the more ethical leadership behaviors were demonstrated by school principals and the more fair the school principal is perceived in outcomes of a dispute or negotiation, the allocation process, and personal treatments, the less bullying behavior is perceived by teachers within the school. These findings are parallel with the literature suggesting that ethical behaviors by supervisors and an atmosphere of justice within an organization decreases the probability of the bullying behaviors (Cemaloğlu & Kılınç, 2012; Hoel et al., 2010; Zapf, 1999). For example, in a study of the relationships among school principals' ethical leadership behaviors and teachers' perceived organizational trust and mobbing, Cemaloğlu and Kılınç (2012) found that an ethical and trustworthy school environment decreased the perceptions of mobbing of teachers. Similarly, in their study as part of a nationwide survey of the prevalence of bullying in Great Britain drawn from 70 organizations within the private, public and voluntary sectors, Hoel et al. (2010) found that a non-contingent punishment, which is an unpredictable style of leadership and seen by its recipients as unjust (Treviño, 1992), was the strongest predictor of self-perceived exposure to bullying. According to Neuman (2004), feeling of injustice is an important trigger of workplace stress and aggression, thereby causing mobbing/bullying as a result of this aggression. At the very first stage of workplace mobbing/bullying, aggression behaviors seem to be covert or indirect such as talking behind the victim within small groups and then they become overt and directed to the victim such as repeatedly being exposed to an unmanageable work (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Copper, 2003; Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994).

The results of mediation test demonstrated that interactional justice partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and bullying behavior. That is, ethical leadership had both direct and indirect (over interactional justice) effects on bullying behavior meaning that ethical leadership behaviors decrease the occurrence of bullying behaviors within the school and that this could at least partly be explained by an improved interactional justice within the work environment. Similar to this result, ethical leadership was consistently found as a significant predictor of counterproductive work behaviors of bullying/mobbing (Cemaloglu, 2011; Cemaloğlu & Kılınç, 2012; Erkutlu, & Chafra, 2014; Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010; Hutchinson et al., 2008; Stouten, Baillien, Van den Broeck, Camps, De Witte, & Euwema, 2010; Zapf, 1999). Ethical leadership was also found to decrease unethical behavior conducted by employees (Miao, Newman, Yu, & Xu, 2013), which may contribute to employees' perceptions of interactional justice and reducing bullying behaviors. Likewise, according to Yamada (2008), in the prevention and reduction of workplace bullying, leadership comes first as they are very crucial in the establishment of a culture of open, honest, mutually respectful communication, thereby reducing bullying and other forms of mistreatment within an organization.

Here the current study also adds to ethical leadership literature by showing that interactional justice was the only significant mediator of the relationship between ethical leadership and bullying pointing out the importance

of teachers' perceptions of interactional justice, which is associated with justified, truthful, respectful, and proper behaviors of the supervisors (Bies & Moag, 1986), on bullying behaviors. A similar finding was reported by Skarlicki and Folger (1997) that interactional justice emerged as the most significant predictor of retaliation behaviors of employees towards their employer, which may trigger the bullying behaviors of the employer/supervisor back towards those employees. In another study, Burton and Hoobler (2011) concluded that interactional justice is a significant mediator of the relationship between the perceptions of abusive supervision and subsequent employee aggression meaning that employees interpret their supervisors' behaviors through the lens of their interactional justice. That is, the more they perceive their supervisor as justified, truthful, respectful, and proper, the less aggressive behaviors they represent. One possible explanation for the importance of interactional justice on bullying behaviors is that since bullying generally occurs in the interpersonal relationship between a supervisor and subordinates, interactional justice could be a more representative component of organizational justice within this relationship (Parzefall & Salin, 2010).

The results of the study should be interpreted in the light of the current study's limitations. First, it is a cross-sectional study, so it should be taken into consideration that alternative explanations for observed associations may exist. Thus, further studies may look for alternative models for the potential relationships between ethical leadership, organizational justice, and bullying behaviors. Besides, longitudinal designs may shed more light on the causality of the study variables. Second, although the respondents were guaranteed for autonomy and voluntary participation to minimize common method bias Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), there still have the possibility. As suggested by Podsakoff et al (2003), predictor and criterion measures may be obtained from different sources such that predictor measure from supervisor and outcome measure from the subordinates. A third limitation is that all the variables used in the study were self-report measures. Future research should include objective measures of the organizational variables (i.e., reporting the observed bullying behaviors) reflecting shared characteristics of the organization rather than individual interpretations. For the further applications of educational administration, the results of the current study should be taken into consideration. For instance, intervention programs targeting to decrease work place counterproductive behaviors such as mobbing, bullying, emotional abuse, social undermining, and so on, should encourage ethical leadership behaviors and foster a school environment where principals and teachers demonstrate more open, trustful, and mutually respectful interaction.

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