Al Makhamreh, M., & Kutsyuruba, B. (2023). Ethical leadership: The role of ethical competencies in doctoral supervision context in Canada. *International Journal for Leadership in Learning*, *23*(1), 73–106. https://doi.org/10.29173/ijll33

Ethical Leadership: The Role of Ethical Competencies in Doctoral Supervision Context in Canada

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Abstract

Due to the influence factor in leader-follower relationships, leadership is an ethical undertaking by nature. In doctoral supervision, ethics are a critical competency, especially since it is an authoritative leadership context based on positional power. Doctoral supervisors have the power to impact their students' well-being and performance, which means that ethics and ethical leadership could be the most important competency that can make the difference in effective supervision. In this article, we examined the nature of ethics and ethical leadership in doctoral supervision based on the supervisors' and doctoral students' lived experiences and perspectives. Data analysis of the participant' responses revealed the importance of key ethical competencies in the context of graduate supervision: commitment, stewardship, honesty, justice/fairness, benevolence, nonmaleficence, respect, and autonomy. The data have shown that these competencies are vital within the doctoral supervision context as they can help maintain students' well-being and enhance their performance. Findings suggest that attention to ethical practices is key to the development of positive supervisory relationships and the implementation of successful doctoral programs.

***Keywords**:* ethical leadership, ethics, higher education, doctoral supervision, well-being, Canadian universities.

Introduction

Due to the influence factor in leader-follower relationships, leadership is an ethical undertaking by nature (Northouse, 2021). In fact, ethics is the heart of leadership (Ciulla, 1998), where leaders' actions, inaction, and the information and values that feed their decisions can determine their followers' well-being, social health, and success in their roles (Hollander, 1995). Ethical leaders behave in a way that creates and enforces trust (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2009; Salamon & Robinson, 2008). Ethical leadership is defined 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" (Brown et al. 2005, p. 120). Hence, ethical leaders behave in an acceptable manner and engage their followers when making ethical decisions.

Doctoral programs are places where graduate students gain valuable knowledge and training, produce new and innovative ideas, and seek to change and impact their societies (Millett & Nettles, 2006; Wisker, 2007). One of the central features of these programs is academic supervision that is based on the working relationship between the supervisor and student. Thus, doctoral supervision is an imperative leadership context, in which different leadership styles can influence a student's ability to achieve goals, as well as enhance performance and well-being. Devos et al. (2015) compared the experiences of doctoral students who completed the program with those who quit and found that the main difference between the two groups was a feeling of progression on a meaningful research project and the ability to work without stress and anxiety. Moreover, they noted that "supervisors' support was central to the participants' stories" (p. 61). The supervision style employed in a supervisor–student relationship is one of the main aspects influencing a student's experience (Leonard et al., 2006). Levecque et al. (2017) found that the supervisor's leadership style is one of the various organizational factors correlated with the prevalence of students' mental health problems. Developing positive working relationships in the workplace is generally a complicated process (Fiske, 2004), but it can be even more sophisticated in a power dynamic (leader–follower) context, such as the relationship between supervisors and doctorate students. As such, exploring how relationships manifest themselves and change in this specific context, determining how they are understood and perceived by supervisors and students, and identifying a potential leadership style that helps students thrive rather than just survive is an urgent necessity (Walker et al., 2008). In addition, understanding the role of ethics in this process

is critical, since it is an authoritative or positional leadership context based on power. In this chapter, drawing on data from a larger phenomenological research study (Al Makhamreh, 2019), we examine the nature of ethics and ethical leadership in the doctoral supervision based on the supervisors' and doctoral students' lived experiences and perspectives. Upon description of the literature review on ethical competencies in relation to the doctoral supervision context, we detail the research methodology and describe the research findings. Findings suggest that attention to ethical practices is key to the development of positive supervisory relationships and the implementation of successful doctoral programs.

Ethical Competencies in Doctoral Supervision

Ethical competencies are defined as the individual's ability to perform in an honorable manner successfully. People often use the terms *ethics* and *morals* interchangeably because they are both related to right and wrong behavior. The basic rule is that people's actions/inactions and decisions should not harm any person (Weinstein, 2011). But the two terms differ in that ethics in the workplace, for instance, refer to what a professional should or should not do in their profession. It also involves a great deal of the professional's life in which they need to reflect that behavior in all their dealings. On the other hand, *morals* or *moral values* refer to an individual's own principles regarding right and wrong. Scholars referred to this as the *moral person* element of ethical leadership, which includes the leader's traits and personality (Treviño et al., 2003; Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). Ethical leadership, then, involves both ethics and morals (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Ethics are a critical competency in leadership (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2021), especially in the case of an authoritative or position leadership context that has power in its nature (Hollander, 1995). Northouse (2022) suggested that position power entails an individual gaining power from a specific office or rank in a formal organizational system, and it includes legitimate, reward, coercive, and information power. This indicates the significance of ethical competencies in position leaders, such as doctoral supervisors. The ethical competencies that are expected in the leadership context and found in the graduate supervision literature (see Lowenstein, 2008 for a comprehensive review on ethical foundation in academics advising) are: (a) commitment (Lowenstein, 2008); (b) stewardship (McClellan, 2007; Menyah, 2013) (c) honesty (Barnes & Austin, 2008; Bolton & Bolton, 2009); (d) justice/fairness (Hopkins & Weathington, 2006; Jones,

2013; Mayer et al., 2007); (e) benevolence (Colquitt & Salam, 2009; Komives et al., 2006); (f) nonmaleficence (Weinstein, 2011); (g) respect (Canals, 2010); and (h) autonomy (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2012).

Commitment

Commitment refers to the supervisor's ability to fulfill an obligation to help the students achieve their goals. Commitment refers to "an act, or ongoing activity relating a person as agent and chooser to aspects of his life in which he invests his energies, his care, and his identity" (Perry, 1970, p. 135). In the supervision context, there are two types of commitments. The first is the supervisor's commitment to helping the student succeed, which is built into the role they have taken (Lowenstein, 2008). The second goes beyond the basic supervision role and comprises the supervisor's aim to help the student excel rather than merely succeed. This second type reflects the relational supervisor's genuineness, which is expected to be received with appreciation by the student. This type is called stewardship and is discussed in the following section.

Stewardship

Stewardship refers to the supervisor's ability to fulfill the student's potential and to encourage inquiry, enjoyment, and creativity. As a steward, the relational leader (supervisor) is a collective-minded one who makes decisions and takes actions that will benefit the follower (student) and demonstrate altruism (Menyah, 2013). When the leader (supervisor) demonstrates unselfishness, the level of trust increases (Frost et al., 1978). When the level of trust increases, the follower (student) can then rest assured that their leader (supervisor) is their key supporter and that they are in safe hands (Tschannen-Moran, 2014) and consequently will be willing to back up their leaders' (supervisors') decisions (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Inspiring the students to publish and participate in national and international conferences is important (Donald et al., 1995), and this implies the importance of stewardship as a competency that supervisors should demonstrate. Supervisors are also expected to expand the students' knowledge by finding opportunities to discuss their thoughts with other scholars in their fields (Brown & Adkins, 1988). This also means that supervisors need to be stewards for their students, and not mock or diminish the student's ideas or impose their own values on them (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). At the same time, supervisors are called to be honest with their students, and we highlight this competency in the following section.

Honesty

It is understood as the individuals' ability to display trustworthiness and integrity in the supervisory relationship. Honesty is an important value (Bolton & Bolton, 2009), and it means telling the truth and being trustworthy. Honest people are truthful with others as well as themselves. One of the major supervisor's responsibilities is to confirm that the student's work is done well and up to standards (Fowler, 1999), and they are also responsible for helping students maintain honesty with themselves and others about their successes and limits (Lowenstein, 2008). This suggests that honesty is an essential competency that plays a primary role in the supervisory relationship. Being an honest individual necessitates the leader (supervisor) to explain to their followers (students) the rationale for their feedback, actions, or decisions honestly and clearly, but this should be achieved in a genuine, transparent, trust-building manner (Luthans et al., 2015). When leaders (supervisors) display a higher level of transparency, their followers (students) will trust them more and view them as leaders of higher integrity (Simons, 2002, 2008; Simons et al., 2007).

Relational transparency is a major element of honesty, and it refers to "leader behaviors that are aimed at promoting trust through disclosures that include openly sharing information and expressions of the leader's true thoughts and feelings" (Walumbwa et al., 2011, p. 6). Providing noncontrolling positive feedback and recognizing the student's perspective are important (Sheldon et al., 2004). Feedback is a two-way process, and this helps supervisors guide their students in a genuine and honest manner. In one study, supervisors reported that honesty in their advising relationships should always be combined with reinforcement, kindness, and support (Barnes & Austin, 2008). When honesty is practiced in this ethical manner, the possibility of creating harm when offering honest advice will be minimized. Honesty is a shared responsibility in which both the supervisor and student should act in a truthful manner (Benaquisto, 2000). It is a mutual competency in the supervisory relationship, and relational supervisors who model genuine honesty enforce this positive behavior within it. Additionally, being an honest leader or supervisor requires paying attention to justice and fairness within their students. In the following section, we present the importance of this competency and the challenges that come with it and ways to face these challenges.

Justice/Fairness

Justice relates to the supervisor's ability to treat all their supervisees fairly or equitably, granting no one any privileges that are not accessible to all; further, any differences in treatment should have a defensible basis and must not create inequalities (Lowenstein, 2008; Weinstein, 2011). It is understandable that individuals expect to be treated fairly (Bolton & Bolton, 2009), and research has highlighted issues of discrimination, equity, and equality in the graduate students (Jones, 2013). This is problematic, especially if the lack of equality comes from the supervisor, whom students rely on most. Followers (students) expect their leaders (supervisors) to display moral values such as justice and equality because the perception of fairness is important to them (Yukl, 1994; Hopkins & Weathington, 2006; Mayer et al., 2007).

The followers' (students') emotions are influenced by the way their leaders (supervisors) treat them whether fair, biased in their favor, or biased in favor of another (Weiss et al., 1999). Followers feel a sense of fairness when they can use their voices and see that they are heard (Komives et al., 2006). When followers are treated fairly, they tend to demonstrate positive behaviors such as higher levels of job performance and more organizational citizenship (Colquitt et al., 2001), and they experience fewer conflicts (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001).

Followers (students) expect their leaders (supervisors) to use two kinds of justice: (a) procedural justice (tangible) and (b) interactive (intangible)/interactional justice. Procedural/tangible justice refers to fair processes when allocating resources (Konovsky, 2000), and it affects cognitive and affect-based trust and mediates the relationship between employee development and trust in leaders (Jones & Martens, 2009). Interactive/interactional justice refers to fairness of the interpersonal treatment individuals receive from others (Bies, 1987, 2001; Bies & Moag, 1986; Brockner & Wiensenfeld, 1996; Sitkin & Bies, 1993), and it predicts trust in one's direct leader (De Cremer et al., 2006). Both types of justice are important for students and could impact the supervisory relationship positively or negatively. Research has indicated that supervisors find balancing tasks to their students in a way that they perceive to be fair to all is problematic, which makes them fear complaints of "favouritism or mistreatment" (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2012, p. 9). This is a valid challenge, but it is still the leader's (supervisor's) responsibility to demonstrate their ability to make right-versus-right choices such as justice versus mercy with compassion and empathy (Kidder, 2005). Moreover, supervisors need to display their ability to

communicate their actions in a way that enforces rather than violates trust and demonstrates care or benevolence/ beneficence which builds up trust.

Benevolence/Beneficence

Benevolence refers to the leader's (supervisor's) ability to display goodwill, which is a key element of relational trust between a trustor and a trustee (Solomon, 1960; Strickland, 1958). It is about benefiting others (beneficence) and promoting their interests above self-interest and self-gain (Komives et al., 2006). Benevolence is defined as "the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor" (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 718), and it enhances trust over time (Brower et al., 2000). Benevolence happens through frequent demonstrations of goodwill and frequent interactions between the leader (supervisor) and follower (student), and it requires some time for the follower (student) to judge the leader's (supervisor's) benevolence (Colquitt & Salam, 2009). This indicates the importance of frequent communication in creating trust and displaying benevolence, especially because time is a real challenge for both the supervisor and the student. However, it is not enough to show benevolence; ethical leadership also entails having on malintent or nonmaleficence.

Nonmaleficence

Nonmaleficence is about the supervisor's ability to demonstrate a do not harm ethical rule (Kitchener, 1984; Weinstein, 2011). This competency is about the supervisors' genuineness and mindfulness of their emotions and behaviors and their impact on their students. This requires leaders to pay attention to their own and others' values, knowledge, strengths, and context (Avolio et al., 2004).

When supervisors' actions or decisions unintentionally harm their students, they have an ethical obligation to admit their mistakes and make an effort to ease the consequences, whether tangible or intangible. In the same token, the student's actions or decisions must not harm their supervisors in any way. For example, switching supervisors for any reason—such as mismatched expectations—should be done professionally. This means that the student is expected to be mindful and to follow the *do not harm* ethical rule when dealing with the processes and consequences of switching supervisors. In order to diminish potential maleficence, ethical leading and supervising requires a foundation of respect.

Respect

Respect refers to the supervisor's ability to build a mutual-regard environment in the supervisory relationship (Ismail et al., 2011; James & Baldwin, 1999; Rawlins & Rawlins, 2005). It is about the leader's (supervisor's) ability to regard, handle disagreement, and work effectively with their follower (student), ***even*** if the follower (student) has strongly held views that differ from the supervisor's views (Komives et al., 2006).

A common perspective of ethics embraces "respect for the dignity of individuals" (Canals, 2010). This means that leaders (supervisors) are expected to behave and communicate in a way that creates mutual respect and high regard (Bolton & Bolton, 2009). Supervisors who managed to build this healthy and respectful relationship with their students were described as wise, and their former students still seek their advice (Bloom et al., 2007). These supervisors tend to treat their students as rational, autonomous agents, not as "things that can be manipulated" (Lowenstein, 2008, p. 40). Manipulating students could leave them with bitterness and is a major threat to trust in the supervisory relationship. Respect can also be demonstrated by supervisors facilitating and enhancing the student's autonomy.

Autonomy

It entails the supervisor's ability to provide the perfect amount of independence—not too little or too much (Delamont et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 2000; Löfström & Pyhältö, 2012). Allowing students to make decisions is an ethical obligation (Lowenstein, 2008) and is described as a "delicate balance [where] a supervisor has to strike between ensuring the planning is done but not undermining the student's autonomy by 'taking over' the research" (Delamont at al., 1997, p. 6). Relational leaders and relational supervisors are aware of the importance of autonomy and can provide it properly.

Taken together, these ethical competencies are important for building a positive relationship with students. Fulfilling them could increase the level of trust, which is the underlying element of this relationship. Failing to demonstrate any of these competencies—intentionally or unintentionally—is hazardous because it could violate trust or even break it.

Research Study Methodology

We set out to explore the nature of ethical leadership and how doctoral supervisors and doctoral students viewed it and experienced it within the Canadian university setting. The following research question guided our inquiry: What is the nature of ethical leadership that exists in the doctoral supervisor–student context? Our study used an interpretive phenomenological research design seeking to study the individual lived experience by exploring, describing, and analyzing its meaning (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Given that interviews can generate in-depth dialogues between the researcher and participants about a phenomenon (Heppner et al., 2008), the semi-structured interviews in this study offered rich insights into perspectives that characterize the supervisory work relationships.

Sampling

The participants were doctoral students and supervisors—a heterogeneous group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon of doctoral supervision (Creswell, 2013). We aimed to recruit supervisors and students who were not paired with the intent not to have to exclude potential students who had dysfunctional supervisory relationship. Seeking in-depth discussions between the researcher and participants about a phenomenon (Heppner et al., 2008), semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2018 and included doctoral supervisors (N = 16) and doctoral students (N=19). Supervisors were from different career stages: full professors (n = 8), associate professors (n = 5), and professor emeriti (n = 3) (see Table 1). Doctoral students were at different stages in their program (See Table 2).

Table 1.
Participants' Program/Demographics–Supervisors

Name	Disciplines	Age at time of interview	Years of experience	Number of doctoral students supervised /supervising
Noel	Social sciences & humanities	52	18	1
Randal	Social sciences & humanities	42	5	3
Rachel	Social sciences & humanities	62	5	7
Norman	Social sciences & humanities	60	7	12
Nigel	Social sciences & humanities	58	11	11
Lawrence	Social sciences & humanities	65	28	71
Henry	Natural sciences & engineering	49	12	2
Robert	Natural sciences & engineering	49	11	10
Dana	Natural sciences & engineering	66	25	7
Thomas	Natural sciences & engineering	70	28	12
Reina	Natural sciences & engineering	74	36	15
Nathan	Natural sciences & engineering	80	45	30
Samuel	Health sciences	50	11	3
Lance	Health sciences	63	35	11
Richard	Health sciences	74	44	26
Turner	Health sciences	71	41	30

Table 2.
Participants' Program/Demographics–Doctoral Students

Pseudonyms	Disciplines	Age at Completion of PhD	Age at time of Interview	Stage in the Program
Laura	Social sciences & humanities		28	Finishing 2nd year
Daisy	Social sciences & humanities		26	Finishing 2nd year
Natasha	Social sciences & humanities		28	Finishing 2nd year
Tiffany	Social sciences & humanities		26	In 3rd year
Sara	Social sciences & humanities		29	In 5th year (ABD)
Stephanie	Social sciences & humanities	30		Graduated in 2018
Heather	Social sciences & humanities	50		Graduated in 2018
Michael	Social sciences & humanities	38		Graduated in 2017
Nora	Social sciences & humanities	53		Graduated in 2013
Nicholas	Natural sciences & engineering		26	In 5th year
Ronald	Natural sciences & engineering		29	In 5th year
Chris	Natural sciences & engineering	33		Graduated in 2015
Reginald	Natural sciences & engineering	27		Graduated in 2010
Adam	Natural sciences & engineering	27		Graduated in 2008
Leslie	Health sciences		41	In 3rd year
Nancy	Health sciences	27		Graduated in 2013
Lamar	Health sciences	48		Graduated in 2005
Randy	Health sciences	26		Graduated in 2004
Nelly	Health sciences	28		Graduated in 1997

Data Collection

We recorded and transcribed all interviews verbatim, with all proper names and identifiers removed and changed to pseudonyms. We aimed to be attentive and tentative— "attentive to the data, and tentative in our conceptualizations of them" (Dey, 2003, p. 108). This meant that we needed to employ a close reading strategy in which we focused on the contents before generalizing our findings. We used the interpretation analysis method to explore the themes of the lived experiences of our participants (Reiners, 2012; van Manen, 1997). We verified our themes through

constant revision of transcripts and memos and by comparing, reflecting, reading, rereading, coding, and recoding (Boeije, 2002).

Research Findings

Ethical competencies, which concern the individual's ability to perform in an honorable manner successfully, were found to be the heart of the supervision relationship. Supervisors and students reflected on their understanding of ethics and ethical behaviors in the supervision context and the same themes emerged in both data sets: commitment to roles, responsibility, and accountability; research-related ethics; and nonresearch-related ethics. We present these themes in the following sections.

Supervisors' Lived Experiences and Perspectives

Here, we present the doctoral supervisors' reflections on their understanding of ethics and ethical behaviors in their supervision context.

Commitment to Roles, Responsibility, and Accountability

Supervisors have an ethical obligation to be committed to their roles and the duties their departments expect them to fulfill, and they must accept responsibility and be held accountable when tasks are not accomplished. A supervisor reported, *"I have a responsibility with everybody in my lab to ensure that they have the opportunity to be successful. That's my responsibility there. What happens next is up to them"* (Lance), which indicated that one hand cannot clap; in other words, both individuals are responsible for reaching the completion stage.

Fulfilling the roles means that *"the doctoral supervisor has a responsibility to be fair and kind and patient with the student, and the student has a responsibility to be fulfilled"* (Nigel). Additionally, ensuring the students are successful was the ultimate aim of the supervisors, who were keen to "recognize that and deal with that in a way that is in their best interests ultimately, and also in mine" (Lance).

One of the fundamental activities that can ensure students are on the right track is to provide them with constructive and timely feedback. Supervisors acknowledged that it is their job to provide students with timely feedback that can inform their thinking (Richard). The following interview transcript highlights the challenges that some students who needed feedback had to deal with:

We have professors who won't be named who don't make it a priority to even read a thesis. It might take a whole term before they get around to reading a thesis. That, to me, is bordering on criminal because you're putting these students' lives on hold. (Reina)

While supervisors emphasized the importance of providing their students timely feedback, some also spoke about their other responsibilities and how they managed them while supervising students. Supervisors are sometimes not able to provide feedback as quickly as they would like. As such, mutual trust can moderate this delicate scene between an ethical supervisor and a considerate and understanding student.

Accountability—which explains how supervisors hold themselves accountable for their actions or inactions and encourage their students to do the same thing—is an important ethical competency. The supervisors talked about making mistakes and how acknowledging mistakes and working to fix the consequences is what really matters. According to Dana, *"Supervisors are not perfect. They can make mistakes. They can misjudge people. They can expect too much."* Hence, this positive environment of accountability allowed supervisors not only to demonstrate to their students how they respected their obligations but also encouraged open dialogue to address any obstacle together, break it into small pieces, and fully understand and solve it.

When students make mistakes, Richard suggested, *"You certainly don't ever think of mocking somebody because they make a mistake; we all make mistakes."* Therefore, supervisors deal with the situation "in a positive way," and they *"never try to make* [students] *feel small"* (Nathan). Supervisors reported that fostering an environment of accountability facilitates their jobs, enhances mutual trust and respect, and helps find the root cause of the problems to solve them.

Research-related Ethics

Ethics in research includes "avoiding coercion" with research involving humans, maintaining confidentiality, and avoiding *"artificially manipulating environments to achieve the ends that they hope to"* (Rachel), which means being honest about *"interpreting the results"* and *"monitoring biases"* (Nathan).

Unfortunately, both Reina and Noel had dreadful experiences in which their students breached research ethical standards when they worked on their data. Reina's student did not get his degree, and Noel's student was dismissed from the program. They both learned firsthand that

breaching these standards is not only costly to students but also to their supervisors, who needed a substantial amount of time to be able to trust new students again.

Supervisors also spoke about ethics in publishing and co-authoring as an immense ethical issue that could create conflicts. Researchers are supposed to be *"saying what you did and only what you did and not taking credit for someone else's work"* (Dana). Turner reported that *"there* [are] *a lot of ethics in publishing* [and] *in giving credit to the right people,"* which *"causes more fights than almost anything else."* These situations are best handled when each supervisor is fully engaged to *"figure out . . . who did contribute the most"* because it is an ethical obligation and an *"issue of fairness"* to do so (Turner).

For Reina, her *"rule of thumb"* is that the "*student will be the first author because in science, … that's the important author … I know that's not true, necessarily, in the social sciences."* She added that her job is *"to facilitate success during that program,"* and *"translating the science that* [students] *do in the lab to a publication"* is part of the success that students pursue.

Ethics in research also requires supervisors to be ethical when spending money, as Dana reported: "*What does it mean to take money to do research? It's an ethical thing. The taxpayers give money to the government. The government gives us money. It's not my money, right? I can't just spend it."*

Nonresearch-related Ethics

Being mindful that doctoral supervision is a "power scene" and conscious of authoritative leadership, which supervisors spoke about, means that building a supportive and safe culture is essential. For Henry, *"When it comes to supervision,* [it] *is the discussion around power in the relationship* [that is required to address] … *power imbalances in the relationship."* Henry explained:

> *So, as a doctoral supervisor, doctoral supervisors have power over their graduate students because in some ways, the supervisor decides if that student's going to graduate,* [and] *they are directing the research, so the students do depend on the supervisor, and there's this power imbalance there, so part of the ethics of supervision is making sure that the boundaries of that power are well defined and that they're not crossed over so that students aren't exploited.*

The importance of building a supportive and safe culture in which "power is not abused" that is based on respect, treating others ethically (e.g., handling disagreement), benevolence, nonmaleficence, honesty, justice (fairness/inclusiveness), autonomy, and stewardship was evident in all the supervisors' quotes.

Respect and ethical treatment. Treating others properly and showing *"respect for each individual* [and] *recognition of their—their intellectual contributions and their personal contributions to anything you're working on together"* (Lawrence). That is believed to be *"a normal part of being a human and an individual, to be ethically treating others"* (Noel). Respect was demonstrated in different ways, such as following up with students, and *"if something happens, you're ill or whatever, you apologize to the student.* [You tell them] *you could not do that and here's the reason why"* (Reina). Another example of respect that supervisors shared was encouraging different thoughts and handling disagreement well. These supervisors reported how their students disagreed with them sometimes, and they handled this by asking them to justify their thoughts and being open to changing their minds.

Supervisors detailed how respect starts with the supervisor and how students reciprocate when they find themselves respected. The following interview transcript highlights the supervisors' perspectives:

> *I would say the leadership part, of course, rests more with the supervisor than with the student. The student is not going to be the leader of that role. So, the doctoral supervisor has to be the one* [who places] *the emphasis on what I just said to treat people fairly and respectfully, reliably, and so on.* (Nigel)

Benevolence/beneficence and nonmaleficence. These were ethical competencies that were obvious in the supervisors' experiences. The following interview transcripts indicated benevolence/beneficence:

> *I'm fortunate enough in my lab that I can find extra money if they need it for a good reason. I can,* [so] *if they're having real issues at home, …. go away for a month and sort it out. It's not going to stop; we're not going to stop paying you or anything stupid like that. Come back when you're ready.* (Lance)

Henry shared how he assured his students that he is a "*safe person to talk to*" and that he respected confidentiality, which is an example of nonmaleficence. He added that what determines his actions is that he has nothing but their best interests at heart.

Another perceptive that demonstrates nonmaleficence was shared by Nathan:

> [My PhD supervisor] *didn't try to exploit me,* [which] *I guess is the word I'm trying to say. And … I am aware of situations where supervisors, you know, ... in a sense encourage students to stay longer. And … I'm not always convinced that it's in the best interest of the student, you know.*

These supervisors' promptness to help their students and their promptness not to cause them harm, were found to be daily practices that could be as simple as not saying a word that could make them feel bad, to more sophisticated situations, such as facilitating their graduation in a timely manner.

Justice (fairness, inclusiveness). Accepting students with all their differences and treating them with justice, fairness, and inclusiveness stemmed from the supervisors' strong beliefs and was translated into their effective behaviors. For example, they tended not to *"single students out"* (Thomas), and they talked to their students about fairness by—for example—*asking them whether an action/inaction looked fair to them* (Dana).

Supervisors shared how they engaged all of their students, which characterized inclusiveness. Thomas and Reina shared that they tend to engage and include quiet or shy students as well. Thomas elaborated by saying that quiet students "*may not get as much attention, and you have to draw them out*." Reina provided an example of having a student who was shy talking in front of a crowd, so she encouraged them to give research talks every term so they would "*get used to talking in front of an audience*."

It was evident that inclusivity and acceptance are key in the supervision context, as highlighted in the following interview script.

> *It doesn't matter whether you're male or female or your color or your clothes. You have that interest in* [research area]*, you have that in common, and that's what's driving you. And that's actually the magic formula, right? When everyone has holy Moses, it's very exciting, and the rest takes care of itself.* (Richard)

These supervisors recognized ensuring justice, which includes fairness, inclusiveness and acceptance, as a serious responsibility that requires them to create learning opportunities for all of their students, rather than obstacles, and removing obstacles from their paths, rather than creating them. Many of them mentioned that they treat their students the way they like to be treated, in the sense that no one likes to be ignored, left aside or be disadvantaged.

Autonomy. Supervisors provided their students with different autonomy levels, as needed. Robert explained:

> [My students] *are autonomous enough … if I see from the meetings that we have together that progress is not being made, or they are struggling with data analysis, or they're way off in a direction that I don't think will help them, then I will step in and guide them back onto the tracks, basically.*

These supervisors recognized their students' need for autonomy, which required them to step back and allow their students to experiment. At the same time, they gradually offered autonomy, so that their students would not feel trapped or less competent, and they were ready to step in whenever necessary, and as their students demanded.

Stewardship. Stewardship comprises what some supervisors did to support their students that went above and beyond their roles and responsibilities. Supervisors provided different examples that showed their stewardship, but the highest level of stewardship came from Nathan. He shared that one of his early students was writing his PhD thesis while Nathan was in New Jersey on sabbatical. The student's thesis "wasn't going very well," so Nathan invited the student to live with him and his family for two weeks while they got his "thesis done together." Nathan explained that his student was very smart and capable but had a writing anxiety and needed to feel like he was supported to complete the dissertation.

Doctoral Students' Lived Experiences and Perspectives

The results here are also organized under the same three main themes: commitment to roles, responsibility, and accountability; research-related ethics, and, nonresearch-related ethics.

Commitment to Roles, Responsibility, and Accountability

Nelly shared that ***"****commitment is definitely a big deal. … I think in any graduate program you've got to have students who are committed."* Adam emphasized the significance of the

supervisor having *"very clear guidelines out from the outset—guidelines and expectations that are very clearly defined for both the student and the supervisor."*

The students spoke about feedback, which is one of the supervisors' main roles. Nicolas, Stephanie, Ronald, Reginald, and Lamar all did not receive proper feedback from their supervisors. Stephanie, for example, received negative and nasty feedback from her supervisor. She shared how she did not see her supervisor as a role model, and his nasty feedback stressed her out.

Heather also did not receive the feedback she needed when she started her program, and she explained why this prompted her to switch supervisors:

> *I was mindful enough to say, 'I need to have eyes, and the individual needs to have more feedback, more contact with my supervisor in order for me to grow as a student.' …. I was very mindful of that first experience, in the sense that I wanted to ensure that I had the support required to finish.*

Tiffany highlighted accountability when she said how her supervisor admits mistakes: *"She'll say, 'Yeah, I did wrong. I'm sorry.' Or she'll say, 'I don't know how to do this,' … so I think that's important as well. And I think that's very ethical in the sense that she's honest about it."*

It was evident that the students acknowledged their commitment to their roles and responsibilities as main ingredients in the supervisory relationship. They also knew that they had to follow through on their commitments and hold themselves accountable. These students needed to have clear expectations (from both sides) and clear feedback, which required clear conversations with their supervisors.

Research-related Ethics

Tiffany, Randy, and Nancy all spoke about the importance of ethics in research and labs. When Tiffany was not sure about something, she asked her supervisor. Randy, who used mice in her lab, explained that ethics *"is very important, especially in science"* and that *"it was very important that we always treated the animals well"* and *"we never committed plagiarism or data manipulation."* She found that *"ethical concerns were always very well addressed."*

Nancy highlighted the role of the supervisor in enforcing ethics in research, especially when students do not get results in their experiments in the lab (negative data):

> *I think it's important with a supervisor to make sure that they indicate that it is fine …. if the results again are negative data, and then to ensure that animal ethics are followed and adhered to.*

Co-authoring was also emphasized when students spoke about ethics **(**Sara; Adam; Nelly; Randy). Among others, Sara shared an example of co-authoring that also indicated the importance of *fairness (justice)* in the supervision context: "*There was one time where I requested* … [my supervisor] … *not* [to] *include someone on a publication."* She explained that this student did not contribute to the article, so it did not seem fair to include him. She added, *"It was basically me understanding that I had to stand up for what I thought was right. And then her saying, 'Yes, you're right.'"*

Nonresearch-related Ethics

Stephanie shared that she suffered from her supervisor misusing power and his egotism. Her worries and fear are clear in the following transcript:

> *I worried that he would give up on me, or I worried that … he would get mad at me. And then, like, I just would worry that if — if I ever got him mad that he would maybe not turn around my drafts,* [or] *he would not respond to my emails. Like, he didn't do that, but I would worry that would happen because that can happen to other people. … So, because I needed him … because I need him to get through* [and defend my dissertation on time]. *I can't get through without him. So, there's like a — there's a dependence piece there, which is evident. Somebody's trying to assert their position over you in some instances that I could have lived without; I would have appreciated more of a collaborative approach.*

Ronald reported how his trust in his supervisor decreased when he realized that his supervisor was delaying his graduation. The lack of trust in their relationships left him worried and trapped in a foggy path that depleted their motivation. He explained that what breaks trust *"is to perceive your supervisor is acting according to their interests"* or *"basically hurting your interests to satisfy his."* He felt like his supervisor was exploiting him, wasting his time, and leaving him to suffer in a hopeless situation. Having his supervisor misusing his power and

delaying his graduation for no valid reason was not fair, according to him, and it stressed him out. Lamar, Nicholas, and Ronald all preferred to suffer in silence because they knew their supervisors had the power to make their situations even worse. Other ethical elements that students underlined include respect (treating people ethically and handling disagreement), benevolence/beneficence and nonmaleficence, honesty, fairness (justice), autonomy, and stewardship.

Respect and ethical treatment. Students spoke about mutual respect as a must-have element in the supervisory relationship. Nelly appreciated respect and explained, *"Well, respect is a really big one. …* [It's] *the characteristic of a probably … successful relationship in any capacity."* She said her supervisor *"was always very respectful of me as a female student",* which also indicated inclusiveness.

A few students felt comfortable enough to disagree with their supervisors (Nancy; Adam; Randy; Chris), which indicated that their supervisors provided them with the freedom to express themselves. Ronald said, *"I don't think* [my supervisor] *is very used to being questioned, but he's very good at managing."* He added that his supervisor has been *"pretty respectful"* when he talks to him.

Benevolence/beneficence and nonmaleficence. Heather spoke about how her supervisor cared about her, which made her feel comfortable sharing personal matters with her. Also, Chris shared that his supervisor "*loses sleep about making sure that he funds and takes care of the students,*" which clearly shows his benevolence.

Sara, Nancy, and Ronald valued nonmaleficence. even though their experiences were different. While Nancy shared how harming others is "*a good way to break trust,*" Sara explained:

> *But beyond all these articles and whatever that you have to abide by, the most important things to me are, is nonmaleficence, so not actively trying to do bad. So, while benevolence, I think, is important as well, in trying to do good, I think that it's really important to not do wrong to people. … I just say this because I've seen it … try to go behind each other's backs or to do wrong or to, undermine someone. And that is something that I have seen in other doctoral supervisory relationships that has led to a lot of harm being done to the student: students being put behind because*

they can't finish because their supervisor isn't present, or their supervisor stole their idea.

Ronald felt like his supervisor caused him harm, which supervisor Nathan also highlighted earlier under the same topic. Ronald elaborated:

> *The supervisor has incentives to hold you hostage until you publish enough papers, and you—it's not necessarily the best thing for you to publish so many* [because] *sometimes, you want to finish your PhD faster* [rather than] *try to publish papers.*

Fairness (justice). Adam and Tiffany offered their perspectives on this topic. Adam—who shared how his relationship's dynamic with his *"angry"* supervisor worked for him and how he benefited from it—raised an interesting point. For him:

> *As far as ethical leadership, I think it really comes down to making sure that everyone has the same opportunities* [and] *making sure that everyone has the same … opportunity to have the same interactions.*

Tiffany highlighted one of the enormous supervisors' dilemmas that arises when their students are at different stages and each require**s** different amounts of time and attention: *"So I'm not going to say, 'Oh, you're giving, like, John more time than me right now. I think I need more time.'"* Laura rarely met with her supervisor because her supervisor provided more time and attention to other students. These two points do not contradict one another—they pinpoint how students' needs are different, but also how students should not be disadvantaged because of that. It is the supervisor's responsibility to balance this out.

Autonomy. Among other students, Leslie, Heather, and Adam treasured autonomy. Leslie explained, *"It's all autonomy, … so I have a lot of independence."* While Randy benefited from being autonomous when her supervisor sensed her needs and offered her the independence she required, Ronald had to speak up for himself and ask for a more hands-off approach. His supervisor provided this to him but without a positive attitude (he was hesitant), which created a discouraging work environment for Ronald.

Stewardship. Lamar mentioned that she trusts supervisors who are there *"to provide guidance and stewardship as you go along the journey towards getting your PhD."* Chris spoke about an ethical issue that he faced, and how his supervisor became a "*champion*" or steward to address a hidden issue. He *"shared some technical skills, ….. math sums, and programming*

algorithms" with colleagues in a different faculty, and then they used them in a publication without his knowledge or acknowledgment. Chris said that when his *advisor "became aware of this, … he became a champion."* He did not ask Chris to solve this ethical issue alone but rather stepped up and went to those people and talked to them. Chris *"ended up taking over the authorship of the manuscript."* Chris explained that he could have never done this by himself, and he appreciated this ethical action from his supervisor, who made the issue a priority and followed up until it was solved.

Discussion and Implications

The findings described how both supervisor and student are expected to exhibit their ethical competencies, which are the cornerstone of any workplace relationship. They are *both* committed to their roles (e.g., supervisors know the required tools to equip students with; students do the required tasks) and responsibilities (e.g., providing timely and constructive feedback, which students act on), and they hold themselves accountable for their actions or inactions (e.g., admitting mistakes when they occur and correcting them). Both parties were expected to professionally deal with research-related ethics such as presenting accurate data and handling co-authoring issues as well as nonresearch-related ethics, which means displaying personal characteristics such as honesty, respect, benevolence, and nonmaleficence.

Supervisors exhibited both the *moral person* and *moral manager* dimensions of ethical leadership, as shown in other studies (Treviño et al., 2000; Treviño et al., 2003). According to Treviño et al. (2000), an ethical leader is a moral person who demonstrates *personal moral* characteristics and traits. Additionally, an ethical leader needs to display *moral manager* behaviors to influence followers, such as making decisions that are fair and just. The *moral person* dimension (personal characteristics) was evident, for instance, when supervisors displayed honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness, and the *moral manager* dimension was obvious when they took the lead in exhibiting ethical behaviours (e.g., benevolence and nonmaleficence), role modeling them and making them priorities.

Providing constructive and honest feedback and valuable advice that offered guidance for students, which is the essence of supervision, exhibited both dimensions—the moral person and moral manager. In other cases, feedback and guidance were unethical. Recall student Stephanie, who received negative feedback; her supervisor's feedback was nasty, which did not show the

moral person dimension of supervisors who are expected to be considerate, and his egotistical behaviors did not show the *moral manager* dimension of supervisors who are expected to be role models. Student Stephanie reported how she did not see her supervisor as a role model, and this kind of negative feedback impacted her and other students, which echoed several studies that showed the role of negative feedback on students' performance and well-being (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000), and our research confirmed these findings.

Because this leadership context is authoritative—or a power scene—there are more ethical expectations on the supervisors' side. For example, supervisors have the power to decide if and when students graduate, which puts students in a tough spot—if this power is misused (recall students Stephanie and Ronald), then ethical lines are crossed, unethical leadership takes over, and undesirable consequences follow. The participants' supervisors were mindful of this imbalanced relationship and suggested it is their role rather than the students' role to make it work. These supervisors adjusted their roles to match their students' needs (Malfoy & Webb, 2000) and built a positive and safe culture for their students to express themselves, and they welcomed disagreements and handled them with respect.

Our research confirms that applying a single supervision style is ineffective and no longer tolerable (Boehe, 2016; Pearson & Brew, 2002), which means it is the supervisor's responsibility to accommodate the student's learning style (e.g., hands on or hands off) and adjust as students grow and develop in their programs. It is evident in this research that fostering ethical leadership and ethical competencies as the foundation of doctoral supervision can render the supervision effective and enhance students' performance and well-being. This finding is consistent with the findings of Piccolo et al. (2010), who proposed that "leaders with strong ethical commitments who regularly demonstrate ethically normative behavior" influence employees' motivation and performance (p. 259).

Students who experienced misused power and egotism suffered in their efforts to move forward, and more importantly, they developed anxiety and depression. The supervisors' negative behaviors, egotism, abusive, toxic, and controlling style as well as their leadership absenteeism were all ethical issues that demotivated students, impacted their performance, and depleted their energies. This research confirms what a great body of research reported about how unethical

leadership can impact people negatively (Ashforth, 1994; Duffy et al., 2002; Hoel et al., 2010; Tepper, 2000, 2007; Zellars et al., 2002).

All universities have policies and procedures that confront unethical behaviors. However, these policies apply only when students report them, and this research showed how many students prefer to suffer in silence to avoid complicating their situations even more (you might recall student Ronald). Additionally, absenteeism was found to be as a real ethical issue that left students in all cases alone to deal with. Even if universities have policies that address absenteeism, nothing will be solved if students do not step up and draw attention to their struggles. As such, addressing these issues at the organizational level means offering ethical context and culture that supports ethics-related attitudes and behaviors and rejects unethical behaviors (Treviño, 1990; Treviño et al., 1998; Victor & Cullen, 1988). Schein (1996) defined culture as a "set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds and that determines how it perceives, thinks about, and reacts to its various environments" (p. 236).We argue that polices are important, but they are less effective without a positive organizational culture, or "a social force that is invisible yet very powerful" (Schein, 1996, p. 231), especially because students tend not to report when they are mistreated.

Conclusions

This research supports the view that exhibiting ethical competencies (ethical skills and abilities) is key to a positive supervisory relationship. This requires both supervisor and student to: (a) be committed to roles, responsibility, and accountability; (b) adhere to research ethics as outlined and communicated in each discipline; and (c) be ethical in nonresearch/social interaction events (e.g., respect and inclusiveness), especially because doctoral supervision is a power scene. Both supervisors and students reported the prominence of actions and inactions to be ethical. We believe that preparing doctoral supervisors to be effective leaders starts when professors are still doctoral students. As such, we suggest forming new programs that are geared towards preparing new doctoral supervisors, and our findings can be used for such programs.

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