

# *The Sound of Silence – A Space for Morality?* The Role of Solitude for Ethical Decision Making

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**ABSTRACT.** Building on research and measures on solitude, ethical leadership theories, and decision making literatures, we propose a conceptual model to better understand processes enabling ethical leadership neglected in the literature. The role of solitude as antecedent is explored in this model, whereby its selective utilization focuses inner directionality toward growing authentic executive awareness as a moral person and a moral manager and allows an integration between inner and outer directionality toward ethical leadership and resulting decision-making processes that will have an impact on others' perceptions of leader authentic ethical leadership. Thus it is proposed that utilization of solitude positively predicts executive-level *authentic* ethical leadership action and in turn, ethical decision making *perceived* fairness and integrity. We also propose two moderators, strengthening the hypothesized (positive) association between solitude and ethical leadership; these are the executive's ability for moral reasoning and a motivation for socialized (as opposed to personalized) power.

**KEY WORDS:** ethical leadership, solitude, business ethics, ethical decision making

## **Introduction**

This article's primary task is identifying and describing executive capacities to selectively utilize solitude as a space to authentically orient oneself as a moral person and a moral manager, thus increase authentic ethical leadership and in turn others' perceptions of fairness and integrity in executive decisions. The attention to the role of solitude in energizing processes of ethical leadership is largely neglected in the current ethical leadership literature, although it is consistent with the call for more research on antecedents of ethical leadership.

Our model comes at a time when executives face increasingly complex demands (Waddock, 2007, 2008) when there is a documented shift from the industrial to a new "knowledge era" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) are coupled with societal and markets concerns for increasing integration of financial, social, environmental, and technical concerns that were not part of the executive performance areas (Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang, in press; Paine, 2003). Our model also emerges from the growing lack of trust in the answers research on ethics provides to respond to the fact of numerous executive corruption scandals – epitomized in the Enron case – dominating the scholarly and popular press and literature (Trevino et al., 2003) for at least the first decade of this century, and academic research revealing an abundance of immoral or amoral leadership (Khuntia and Suar, 2004; Trevino et al., 2003).

While scholars have repeatedly stressed the need for more intentional ethical leadership by executives (Brown and Trevino, 2006), it is perhaps meaningful to wonder if the contextual pressures of the shift away from the industrial era to the globalized and technologically inter-connected fast pace "knowledge era" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) is *itself* a key factor that significantly handicaps executive time and space available for authentically reflection on morality and ethics concerns. Outside the need to further research individual personality level predictors which is of course necessary, little research has been done on processes that enhance psychological mechanisms that facilitate the executive capacity for maintaining control to keep "swimming against the tide" (the contextual "press" to the reduction of time for concern for ethics), and instead facilitate substantial

(authentic and systematic) incorporation of broader ethics perspectives in executive decision making (Trevino et al., 2003).

Indeed, as an outcome of the macro-level economic, technological and cultural shifting landscape of the twenty-first century, the context of executive work in most business sectors and geographical regions is characterized by conditions of *excessive* action and sociality and the lack of extended, isolated periods of reflection (Jett and George, 2003; Thomas and Ayres, 1998). These contextual pressures on executives are coupled with pressures from a conventional “status quo” in business generated over the past decades of the previous century, promoting an idealized image of the busy executive. This image creates a normative pressure on rising new executives toward valuing being busy for the sake of being busy; ongoing physical traveling across continents and world zones, ongoing political action to negotiate business interests, ongoing valuing of the idea of lobbying for the interests of the firm (Bishop, 1990; Larmer, 1996). On the other hand, it is well known to scholars that successful executive decision making and governance that effectively embrace complexity is the one succeeding to transcend narrow, myopic, reactive decision on pressing problems and isolated matters or concerns, to achieve complex and integrative strategic solutions (Waddock, 2007, 2008), allowing long lasting and truly effective dealing with problems in a way that increases shareholder value with a long lasting perspective and incorporates a panoply of stakeholders and often competing values. The key challenge with this latter is that it would optimally require considerable amount of time, or the existence of “mental spaces” that facilitate reflection for this sort of information analysis that would translate to relevant decisions.

We suggest that the only way to effectively transcend the contextual “press” against such a mental space is to understand processes that enable the temporary voluntary disconnection from the social and situation needs that executives themselves can selectively utilize when it is necessary to create mental spaces for the examination of information and incorporation of ethical concerns in their process of deciding how to lead. In this article we are calling attention to the notion of solitude as a process enhancing ethical leadership. In agreement with definitions of solitude as a voluntarily activated state

conducive to reflection and disconnection from immediate social and time pressures (e.g., McDonald, 2005; Senge, 1990), we argue that this voluntary and selective utilization of solitude positively predicts ethical leadership under conditions shaped by the moderating role of other variables. We propose that the process whereby solitude is utilized in favor of increasing congruence between authenticity components of action and external demands allows ethical leadership to translate to ethical decisions, perceived as guided by integrity and fairness. We also argue that this process is significantly moderated by an executive’s ability for moral reasoning and his/her need for socialized power.

This article proceeds by describing how the executive role and contemporary business context increased pressures for immediate action and responses to needs and expectations, where access to mental spaces to disconnect from social and time pressures and reflect on ethics are minimal or, inexistent. It is argued that these contextual forces challenge executives’ ability for maintaining an authentic concern for morality and how to include ethics concerns in executive decision making. We continue by offering and defining the concept of solitude and beneficial effects. A theoretical model is then introduced. By drawing upon research on ethical leadership and decision making to draw connections between solitude, ethical leadership, and ethical decision making literatures and offer perception related measures of the constructs involved in the model. It is proposed that the intentional use of solitude enhances ethical leadership which then influences the effectiveness of executive’s decision making, and moderating variables further strengthen the hypothesized positive relationship between solitude and ethical leadership. Finally, we delineate implications for research and practice.

### **Ethical leadership research in context: where is the space for executive morality?**

During the past decade, ethical leadership has been found a key component of exceptional strategic (for review, Yukl, 2002) and truly transformational (Avolio et al., 2004; Bass, 1990; Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999) leadership. Despite these advances,

empirical understanding on variables that predict intentional and authentic concern for ethics in the executive agenda is significantly behind (Trevino et al., 2003). Ethical leadership researchers have distinguished intentional from unintentional forms of ethical conduct. The *intentional* presence or absence of ethical conduct has been theorized as the polar opposite constructs of moral versus immoral management (Carroll, 1999) or ethical versus unethical personal and/or managerial executive behavior and decision making (Trevino and Youngblood, 1990). Some empirical findings reveal very rare cases of intentionally immoral leadership among executives (Trevino et al., 2003). Ethical leadership researchers have conceptualized this neglect of ethics as amoral (Carroll, 1987), or ethically neutral leadership (Trevino, 1990; Trevino et al., 2003). However, scholars also highlighted that increasingly there is more immoral or amoral leadership cases in nowadays business practice (Larmer, 1996; Trevino et al., 2000).

We suggest that it is reasonable to contextual conditions shaping the exercise of the executive role that reduce the capacity of executive to find space to integrate concerns on morality which characterize ethical leadership as action. Executive role demands today as well as popularized status quo idealized images of what a good executive is all about, “press” for fast and direct decisions – assumed to also represent the notion of timely response – to planned and unforeseen business challenges as a direct effect of the globalized business context requiring action 24/7. Executives are pressed to be continuously available for communications with multiple stakeholder groups, including markets and media – via phone, cell-phone, wireless mobile device (e.g., BlackBerry), e-mail or “open door” policies in the office. Moreover, advances in information technology have increased the number of ways that executives are obliged to use in order to remain in constant contact with others for information exchange and communication (e.g., Czerwinski et al., 2000; Jett and George, 2003; Speier et al., 1999). In the context of today’s business there is hardly any mental space to disconnect and reflect on how to combine effectiveness and ethical role modeling. Further, perceived pressures for accuracy and timeliness in the required action–reaction times inevitably lead to stress and impede ethically focused

decision making, due to the negative effect of stress on decision making. Ongoing action is the condition that executives are experiencing systematically (Fiol and O’Connor, 2003), while only few management scholars distinguish qualitatively between any kind of executive action and *timely* action (Torbert et al., 2004) and is critiqued for not systematically focusing on pedagogies aiming in the valuing of reflection as a means for producing timely action.

When ethical concerns take place “on stage”, under conditions of stress and time pressures, it is easy to expect that a more direct area of focus of the executive concern will be on the degree to which one’s actions and decisions are *perceived* as ethical to followers. In the ethical leadership literature, authentically ethical role modeling is important as it is assumed that stakeholders, such as shareholders and employees, look at executives and perceive *over time* if they *genuinely* are concerned about morality and thus are able for ethical decision-making processes, which allows them to be perceived both as a moral person and a moral manager. In Trevino et al.’ (2003) study, they specifically stated that leaders who take account of stakeholders’ benefits and feelings thoroughly before making any decisions, are perceived as moral leaders *and* moral persons.

Second, executives’ decision making and action time is taking place not only “on stage” but also under conditions of excessive sociality. The emphasis on lobbying for executive success often further overloads more executive agendas with time to communicate and impact stakeholders and markets. Although certain amount of communication is essential for leadership, an excess of it does not allow the development of cognitive and emotional distance to others’ necessary for ethical leading actions, and this can lead to conformity behaviors *vis-à-vis* the demands and expectations of the most powerful stakeholders which don’t allow intentionally ethical lead. Expected and urgent scheduling of meetings, conversations, negotiations and social interactions throughout the day thwart any opportunities executives might have for extended, isolated periods of reflection (Jett and George, 2003; Thomas and Ayres, 1998) and also impose a huge burden of relational expectations and demands, especially resulting by the most influential and powerful stakeholder groups, such as the shareholders. Even in terms of the cognitive side of information processing

from the part of a human being's brain capacities it is difficult to balance effectively sharply conflicting, or opposing interests each set of which is linked with shareholders' goals and maintain at the same time ethical leadership.

Thus, the highly complex demands of an executive role – consisting of leading the organization, relating and understanding multiple stakeholder needs and demands and understanding the ethical interrelationships between isolated decisions and at the intersection of business and society – cannot be effectively dealt with when an executive is always in action and involved in excessive sociality.

Lastly, the consideration of potential avenues for executive decisions under a broader frame of awareness of one's own self-authenticity as a leader is almost impossible to expect unless a person (an executive) is able to distance away from the complex context to insure herself that she is doing right things in the right way for the right reasons as expected (Trevino et al., 2003). By this is meant here, they have space and time to effectively grapple with complex factors and information beyond a narrow and isolated focus and achieve a broader awareness of implications and potentialities linked to decisions and achieve a balanced respect of both internal stakeholders' and external societal and environmental impacts of their business decisions before taking actions (Fulmer, 2004). Indeed an ability for "broad awareness" (Brown et al., 2005; Trevino et al., 2003) is seen as the essence of ethical leadership. Indeed, ethical leadership is conceptualized as referring to both decision making and personal and interpersonal action (Trevino et al., 2003), demonstrating broad ethical awareness and concern for results beyond the bottom-line interests. This includes concern for the good of various stakeholders in the organization, for the community, and for society at large (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Brown et al., 2005; Trevino et al., 2003).

Although the need to disconnect and reflect is essential for authentically ethical decision making it is the executive herself who needs to tap to inner processes for activating this reflection space. Therefore, we argue that executive capacity for creating and utilizing reflection spaces – captured by the construct of solitude – increases the likelihood for intentionally moral executive action and decision making via allowing a space to "grapple with com-

plexity" and connect to authentically ethical moral reasoning and decision making. Below, we define solitude based on the psychological literature and examine its beneficial role.

### **Solitude defined**

Based on the literature, we define solitude as a voluntarily activated state for the purpose of enhancing the quality of individual reflection and mental experience which has an inner- and/or an outer-directed focus. Solitude is an individual choice (voluntary and desired) and not a socially imposed or enforced state. It is activated by temporary withdrawal from social action, often facilitated by conditions of increased anonymity, and/or limited demands for social interaction. Voluntary activation is an important property, and is allowed via selectivity of when social disengagement (disengagement from the demands and pressures originating in the immediate social milieu, or imposed by narrow time horizons) should occur. Thus, voluntary activation is synonymous with the exercise of judgment upon utilizing solitude positively for the purpose of inner- and outer-directed action – not for its own sake, or due to inability to cope.

Our definition of solitude closely follows the literature on the concept, and aims to increase clarity and reduce ambiguity as to its applicability in the area of ethical leadership. We follow Long and Averil (2003) conceptualization of solitude as a state of relative social disengagement from the demands and expectation of other people, or of a press to act with no reflection due to pressure to make decisions. Usually, it is characterized by decreased social inhibitions and expectations and increased freedom to engage with one's mental and physical activities. Reviews of philosophical definitions of solitude (Koch, 1994) define it as space for mental disengagement, "an experiential world in which other people are absent...and...the full range of disengaged activities, from reflective withdrawal to complete immersion in the tumbling rush of sensations, find their places along the spectrum of solitudes" (p. 15). In the philosophical definitions, there are three features associated with solitude: physical isolation, social disengagement and reflection. In line with these definitions, we do not see aloneness as a

necessary condition of solitude; rather, conditions that combine limited pressure for interaction with increased opportunity for anonymity are seen as critical for the experience of solitude. Empirical studies on managerial and executive reflection (for example, Bruch and Ghoshal, 2004; Heifetz and Linsky, 2002; Seibert and Daudelin, 1999) found that respondents cited such contexts of solitude for the experience of solitude as a mental space for reflection on critical aspects of authentically performing their role.

Second, our definition focuses on the positive and constructive experience of solitude. The emphasis on a person's capacity for positively activating solitude episodes for the purpose of reflection significantly underlies its distinctiveness from the concept of loneliness (Barbour, 2004; Winnicott, 1958), as even the commonly accepted definitions of solitude are confusing; a dictionary definition gives "the state of being or living alone; seclusion; solitariness". This confusion is compounded by the fact that psychological literature considers loneliness as a negative condition for the self. Loneliness is the generalized lack of satisfying personal, social or community relationship. It is an enduring condition of emotional distress that arises when a person feels estranged, misunderstood or rejected by others or lacks appropriate social partners for desired activities that provide social integration and opportunities for emotional intimacy (Anderson, 1998). According to Koch (1994), loneliness is an intrinsically painful emotion whereas solitude is not an emotion, but an open state. Empirical findings show that a negative experience of solitude can induce loneliness (Long et al., 2003).

Finally, in this adopted definition, the capacity for a positive experience of solitude is not guided exclusively by inner directionality, but by the integration between inner and outer directionality, the use of reflection for inner cognitive and emotional self-regulation, intending to impact one's intended action. Thus, we are following psychological literature with rich empirical data on the utilization of capacity for solitude in a variety of ways that integrate inner- and outer-directed focus (Long and Averil, 2003). Specifically, related empirical studies show that people often gain from solitude a better understanding of their authentic selves and moral values (inner direction); this capacity for self-

understanding is utilized to solve problems, contemplate future decisions and behaviors utilizing their moral perspective, increase intimacy and authenticity *vis-à-vis* communication in key relationships (outer direction) (Long, 2000; Long et al., 2003; Pedersen, 1997, 1999). Long and Averil (2003) highlighted as a key benefit of solitude the ability to experience positive freedom of choice, which can transcend constraints and expectations.

The above definition regarding the effects and the focus of voluntary activation of solitude is in line with phenomenological definitions offered by Moustakas (1961, p. 102), seeing solitude as "the ideological 'shelter' and the situation at which the individual is found during the process of recognition and acceptance of existence discriminating from others in order to *live authentically and be effective in his relations with them* [emphasis ours]. The individual 'enters' in a situation of solitude when he feels the need to make the right choices". According to this point of view, solitude... [is]... a necessity for authentic *communication* [emphasis ours] and overall emphasis (on morality) in decision making. Our definition is also in line with Koch's view – based on philosophical reviews (1994) – on a broader role of solitude as having five distinct benefits: (a) freedom from social norms and constraints that control interpersonal life, (b) attunement with self, (c) attunement with nature, (d) reflection including introspection, recollection, contemplative analysis, and (e) creativity.

Storr (1988) argued that by separating us from our usual social and physical environments, solitude can remove those people and objects that define fixed identities. In that sense, solitude facilitates moral perspective, and coming to terms with ethical aspects of executive decisions actions to increase fairness and integrity.

In contrast to our adopted definition of solitude, another perspective expressed by some psychological literature, which we do not adopt here defines the role of solitude *exclusively* for self-development, or as a stress buffer in condition of depression for example. According to this view, solitude enables the opportunity to engage in self-selected activities, relatively free of social encumbrances and expectations (e.g., Burger, 1995; Larson, 1990; Larson and Lee, 1996). They have argued that we need time alone for reflection and insight and that solitude is

an important tool for personal, spiritual and mental self-restoration, allowing “psychological detachment...for the purpose of cultivating the inner world of the self; it is an act of emotionally isolating oneself for self-discovery and heightened awareness of one’s deepest feelings and impulses” (Hollenhorst and Jones, 2001, p. 57).

This understanding of solitude with a focus on inner directionality is an older romanticized view of the concept, assuming a negatively charged link between solitude and loneliness. It is not consistent with current solitude research focus on beneficial and intentional use of solitude (Long and Averil, 2003).

### **Solitude in ethical decision making – a predictor of ethical leadership**

As discussed, solitude is beneficial for executives to have the space to reflect moral aspects; however, existing ethical leadership research has not yet examined the role of solitude as an antecedent variable. On the basis of Trevino et al.’s (2003) definition of ethical leadership – moral person and moral manager, we posit that the beneficial effects and dynamics of solitude are twofold.

#### *The effect of solitude in being a moral person*

First, voluntarily and positively utilizing solitude activates a process that enhances reflection on how the self engages authentically in relationships with others. It increases understanding of executive’s moral perspective on how to maintain effective relationships without being subject to demands, pressures and expectations. This process is guided by the dynamics of solitude as a mechanism for creating some physical, cognitive and emotional distance from relational stimuli. It serves as a *neutralizer from social pressures to conform uncritically to direct expectations of influential persons or groups*. The selective use of solitude can relieve momentarily from the expectation and often assumed role responsibility to influence and/or to conform to pressures posed by most power stakeholders, such as shareholders. Storr (1988) has suggested that by extracting us from our customary social and physical contexts or at least

altering our very direct and close experience of them, solitude can remove those people and objects that define and confirm executives’ closest or more rigid identities, facilitate reflection and activation of secondary and broader, yet equally important identities. This can then allow effective ethical balancing of business and society aspects of executive decision making. It is theorized that such processes facilitate the reaffirmation and integration of more than one important identities – an executive as citizen, moral person, and ethical role model- and this process of (identity) integration is enabling the adoption of broader ethics perspectives in executive action (Akrivou, 2008), whereas the lack of mental space for such reflection is pushing for identifying with fewer and narrow identities, which may result in serving shorter term interests posed by fewer groups.

In Avolio et al.’s (2004) study of authentically moral leaders, they clearly proposed three key moral elements: *moral capacity*, *moral efficacy* and *moral courage* to deal with potential moral dilemmas and challenges. Empirical work focused on these three elements are closely related to ethical leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2008), particularly the process of internalized self-regulation allows initial inner directionality in solitude to be performed as ethical leadership. Self-regulation involves processes such as altering own conditioned behaviors, resulting in resisting temptations and re-examining norms, conventions and expectations to enhance moral capacity (Baumeister and Vohs, 2002). It selects a morally superior response from numerous options, filters irrelevant information, and is responsible for response selection and enactment (Baumeister and Vohs, 2002). Self-regulation is thus the process through which authentically ethical leadership behavior increases moral efficacy and capacity, via the harmonizing the inner self, schemas, values, emotions and cognitions with the publically adopted communication and actions. As an enhancer of moral courage via self-regulatory processes, solitude helps executives manage potential painful emotions and inner tensions which may decrease their energy, increase their focus and commitment to vision and goals, facilitate the alignment of action with personal values, and identify a mental perspective from which clear vision and goals emanate (Bruch and Ghoshal, 2004). Bruch and Ghoshal argued that effective leaders are able to process their painful emotions and

inner tensions and conflicts. Most of the strategies they highlighted include a process of self-reflection and a state of solitude. The authors stressed that the leader, by reflecting and visualizing their former success and the ways in which they overcame certain obstacles, can reinforce their self-confidence, their sense of competence and strengthen their inner moral courage.

*Proposition 1:* The higher an executive's capacity for (voluntary positive utilization of) solitude, the more likely the executive will act as a moral person (positive association).

#### *The effect of solitude in being a moral manager*

Acting as a moral manager involves grappling not only effectively but ethically with complexity, we describe how more complex dynamics activated via solitude enhance an executive's capacity for the kind of cognitive work that effectively navigates the immense complexity of information and demands involved in executive decision making with ethics. Balancing business performance and ethics, shareholders' profits and other stakeholders' interests, and short-term profitability goals and long-term sustainability demands are some examples. That is, balancing strategy and ethics allows an executive to positively and convincingly impact perceptions that he/she is able to act as a moral manager and this includes others understanding that truly this concern for ethical management is authentic.

This process we describe here is guided by complex processes of meta-cognition (Kolb and Kolb, 2009) – the systematic and in depth examination of one's own cognitive processes and the ability for re-wiring or redirecting one's cognitive effort accordingly. We suggest that this sort of meta-cognitive processes is enabling the integration between an executive's own moral awareness (moral person) with executive action as a moral manager and that this kind of integration is entirely difficult outside spaces for reflection and mental disconnection from social, and time pressures and pressures from structured processes of power that are de facto part of today's executive role context. This sort of activation is when it is very difficult to distinguish

the inner from the outer focus of the experience of solitude, and this is of vital importance for executive-level ethical leadership when an executive action is at the same time a meeting between person and role (Gosling and Case, 2010), a very personal way in which an executive chooses to confront and interpret morality and ethics including the appreciation of the subjectivity involved in any personal understanding of an issue, and an impersonal response to the executive role as requiring the effective and efficient dealing with specific problems and complex issues pressing for a solution. Although it has been theorized by literature that this sort of integration implied here is emanating from an executive's self system (Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang, in press; Rooke and Torbert, 2005) we suggest that also the ability to activate solitude enables the integration between the person and manager moral awareness and concern, at least in executive leadership where the level of complexity of the issues to deal with is particularly high and the press from stratified interest groups a basic assumption that rules away the possibility of thinking about ethics as if acting on a "tabula rasa".

To summarize solitude utilized to enhance the executive's ability to act as a moral manager and effectively grapple complexity and ethics involves effectively balancing conflicting stakeholder interests, reducing isolated focus in certain perform variables (for example, looking to bottom line) alone but ability to enhance triple bottom line, and setting short-term and long-term goals at the same time.

*Proposition 2:* The higher an executive's capacity for (voluntary positive utilization of) solitude, the more likely the executive will act as a moral manager (positive association).

*Proposition 3:* The higher an executive's capacity for (voluntary positive utilization of) solitude, the more likely the executive will be perceived as integrating action as a moral person and as a moral manager (positive association).

Empirical measures for two aspects of ethical leadership in Propositions 1 and 2 are Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) internalized moral perspective (moral person) and balanced processing (moral manager) sub-scales in their authentic leadership measure. Based on their work, these sub-scales were found

positively related to ethical leadership concepts. Specifically “internalized moral perspective” reflects the hypothesized “moral person” effects (Proposition 1) in terms of an executive’s exhibiting honesty, integrity and openness and a desire to do the right thing (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Second, the “balanced processing” reflects the hypothesized “moral manager” effects (Proposition 2).

For the testing of Proposition 3 the measure that can be used for the empirical testing of is the ethical leadership scale (ELS) by Brown et al. (2005) which is applied in most of the existing ethical leadership studies and is an evaluation of leaders’ ethical behaviors. As suggested by the key theorists of ethical leadership (for review, see Brown and Trevino, 2006), it is useful also to test the related dimensions expressing concern for moral dimensions of leadership included in the authentic and transformational leadership constructs (see Avolio et al., 2004; Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; Brown and Trevino, 2006; Gardner et al., 2005). Also the measure proposed for the testing of Propositions 1 and 2 could be considered to be used for the empirical testing of Proposition 3 in combination with the Brown et al. (2005) scale.

For the measurement of solitude in all the propositions of this article, we suggest the use of the measure in the work of Long and Averil (2003) consistent with their conceptualization of solitude we adopt.

#### *Moral reasoning and socialized power: two moderating variables*

We have described complex dynamics of self-regulation via which, in combining an inner and outer focus, solitude is used as an enhancer of a person’s ability to act as a moral person and as a moral manager with enhanced leader authenticity, and strategically impact the adoption of broader ethics agendas while grappling effectively with complexity. The degree to which a person is able to tie inner reflection and subsequent action in the social world with effective processes of impact in the social world – thus the degree to which he/she is able to effectively and harmoniously tie self-regulation processes – is critically dependant on moderating variables that

impact the degree of effectiveness between inner processes of sense-making and motivation.

The ability of the individual for higher-order moral reasoning will enhance an executive’s ability to transform the beneficial effects of solitude into leadership fundamentally grounded in integrity. High moral development facilitates any reflection and sense-making process to fundamentally question and integrate reflection of an ethical nature. In addition, high order moral reasoning signifies that complex business problems of ethical nature will be given both effective and sophisticated ethical responses (Loevinger, 1976). Established measures of adult development and moral reasoning can be used to check this proposition (for example, Kegan, 1994; Lahey et al., 1988; Loevinger, 1976; Perry, 1970). It has been proposed that high moral utilization may be a more appropriate variable for empirical testing as a moderator between variables and ethical leadership (Brown and Trevino, 2006), as it demonstrates a high ability to utilize moral reasoning in decision making.

*Proposition 4:* An executive’s degree of moral reasoning and/or moral utilization will positively moderate the (positive) relationship between solitude and ethical leadership.

*Proposition 4a:* An executive’s degree of moral reasoning and/or moral utilization will moderate the positive relationship between solitude and ethical leadership as a moral person.

*Proposition 4b:* An executive’s degree of moral reasoning and/or moral utilization will moderate the positive relationship between solitude and ethical leadership as a moral manager.

The need for power has consistently been proposed as a moderator in leadership constructs; a higher need for power among the three social motives is theorized and empirically found to correlate with effective leadership behaviors (McClelland, 1975; McClelland and Boyatzis, 1982). The presence of socialized power, as hypothesized, extends the beneficial outcomes of solitude to enhance ethical leadership. It is theorized that socialized power insures that leadership behaviors are focused in bringing about benefits for other stakeholders rather than being manipulated or used for the sake of power. In the opposite case, when a high need for



personalized power is present, leadership is seen as a means for other purposes rather than the promotion of broader ethics agendas – for example, to promote self-interest, or to reflect on how to be perceived as ethical leaders without an authentic concern for being moral managers (McClelland, 1985). Therefore, we propose this variable as a moderator of executive's ethical leadership.

*Proposition 5:* An executive's ability for socialized power will positively moderate the (positive) relationship between solitude and ethical leadership.

*Proposition 5a:* An executive's ability for socialized power moderates the positive relationship between solitude and ethical leadership as a moral person.

*Proposition 5b:* An executive's ability for socialized power moderates the positive relationship between solitude and ethical leadership as a moral manager.

#### *Ethical leadership in decision-making processes*

It has recently been emphasized that ethical leadership improves key qualities of executives' decision making related to the incorporation of ethical concerns (Messick and Bazerman, 1996). In general, executives make judgments and decisions about other people and influence followers' ethical performance unconsciously (Hambrick et al., 2005). In the psychological processes of ethical decision making, executives first need to undertake the right "work" involved in being ethical (moral person and moral manager), then to convince followers in terms of the legitimacy and moral values of their decisions. The latter is related to being perceived as ethical. Specifically, a genuine concern for acting as a moral person helps an executive to respect on fair ethical perspective, and overcome biases as well as psychological barriers in the decision-making process, particularly when they are facing difficult moral dilemmas that require fairness and integrity (Akrivou, 2008; Caldwell, 2009). On the other hand, followers in organizations are usually willing to accept and trust decisions made by executives who appear as a moral manager, but there are problems if appearing ethical is not complemented by a genuine concern for being ethical. With an empirical study of 73 SMEs in Netherlands, De

Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) highlighted that ethical leadership with regard to morality and fairness is a key variable in influencing followers' perception of leaders' decision making effectiveness. Den Hartog's (2009) recent study provided more evidence to support the argument that followers' perceptions of an executive's ethical leadership has a significant impact on their trust and commitment in those ethical decisions in terms of fairness and integrity.

Thus, we make an argument that ethical leadership as an effect of solitude plays an essential role in improving the effectiveness of organizational ethical decision making in terms of followers' perception of fairness and integrity.

*Proposition 6:* Ethical leadership will positively enhance the perceived fairness and integrity dimensions of executive decision making.

For measuring the effectiveness of executives' ethical decision making, we suggest using Den Hartog's (2009) perceived fairness and integrity scale which aims to examine followers' perception of executives' decision making behaviors.

We have argued that selective executive access to solitude enables the increase of ethical leadership behaviors which further improves the perceived effectiveness of executives' ethical decision making. The increased benefits of solitude in ethical leadership *behaviors* are manifested through personal actions, interpersonal relationships with followers and stakeholders, and executive decisions; such is the current conceptualization of ethical leadership in specialized literature (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Brown et al., 2005; Trevino et al., 2000, 2003). The underlying dynamics of this process are dual. First, solitude acts as a reflection space that helps neutralize external pressures to conform or respond to isolated contextual demands without prior reflection on the ethical perspectives of decisions. Second, solitude acts as a mental space for the activation of self-regulatory processes, via which authentic and intentionally ethical executive behavior is more likely to occur. We have proposed that the process whereby solitude acts to enhance ethical leadership behavior is moderated by the executive's capacity for moral reasoning and need for socialized power, as shown in Figure 1.

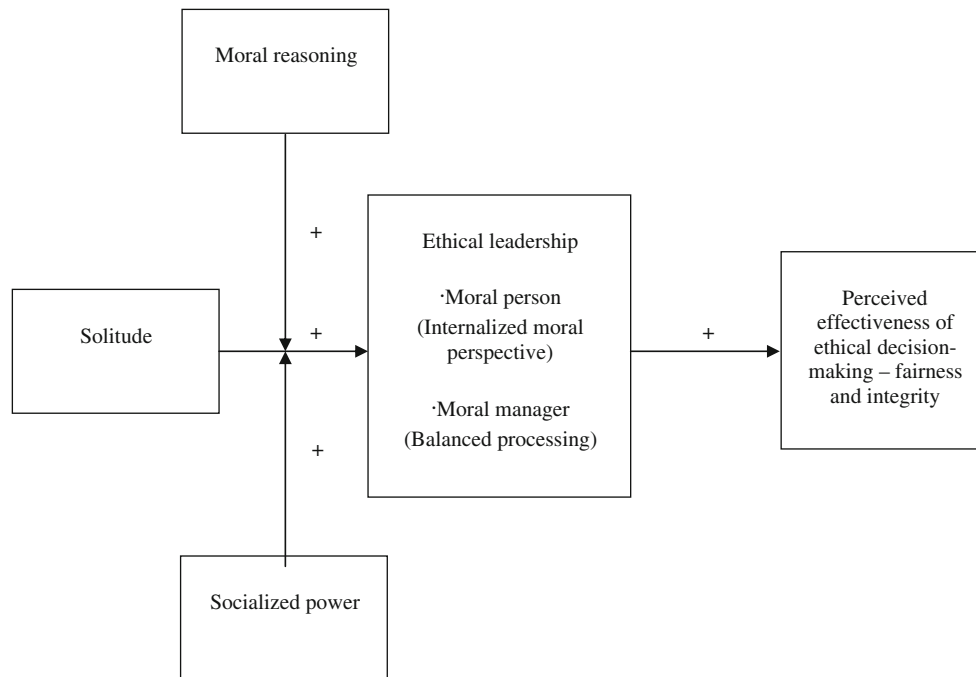


Figure 1. A model for the role of solitude for ethical leadership and ethical decision making.

## Discussion and implications

The aim of this article is to offer additional insights on solitude as antecedent of ethical leadership that allows integration of the ethical leadership capacity of acting both as a moral person and a moral manager. Indeed, ethical leadership leading researchers are currently adopting a social scientific approach and are focused on investigating descriptive and predictive approaches in ethics and leadership (Brown and Trevino, 2006). Still underdeveloped, this kind of research has predominantly focused on personal leader antecedents, such as traits and motivation, or moral character and values (Trevino, 1986; Trevino et al., 2003). The current focus has been on how individual characteristics of the (ethical) leader are impacting followers' perceptions of their leaders as ethical figures – or not – and also on how the characteristics of the leader are shaping the followers' own behaviours, and accepted norms and culture in the organization, via the process of leader role-modeling. Most of ethical leadership research on antecedents focuses on how ethical leadership is perceived by followers (Trevino et al., 2003). This is partly due to the influence of a prominent relationship-based approach to leadership is that pro-

vided by Hollander (1964, 1978), who adopted a view of leadership as a relational process, a two-way influence and a social exchange relationship between leaders and followers.

We are hoping to add to academic understanding of processes neglected in the existing literature responding to ethical leadership researchers' calls for more research on antecedents beyond the work described above. To this aim, we have expanded research on the examination of solitude, beyond personal psychological antecedents that are often tested in leadership research. We have looked at solitude as a dynamic, voluntarily activated variable and its role in the dynamics of intentional increase of ethical leadership by executives that not only enable the incorporation of ethics concerns in executive leadership but also enable process with an integrative focus on acting both as a moral person and a moral manager.

Of course this article is not without limitations, nor does it provide a complete understanding of how executives with different psychological traits utilize solitude as a space for morality. In this direction more work on determinants of solitude – such as personality traits and contextual variables – will be helpful; for example it may be very helpful to

understand how introverted versus extraverted personalities behave toward solitude. One could imagine that introverts will have a greater propensity toward solitude, but on the other hand, it would be questionable if this would also disable the capacity toward a selective and voluntary – relatively brief – activation. As we highlighted in our definition of solitude it is a selective capacity for brief disengagement from the demands and pressures originating in the immediate social milieu, or imposed by contextual pressures in order to allow the examination of ethical aspects of decisions and integrate leader authenticity. Also, the relationship between solitude and narcissism is worth of examination, particularly when considering executives who may have narcissism as a personality trait (Raskin and Terry, 1988), which may well hinder them to “disengage from the stage”, or at least utilize solitude in very different ways to these hypothesized in this article, for example to generate decisions that increase attention and applause (Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007).

We hope to fill existing gaps in the literature of ethical leadership, on antecedents that enable understanding of ethical leadership as not impeding timely executive decision making and action. As research on executive-level ethical leadership is still significantly behind, this work offers a model for examining the power of the action-reflection dynamic processes as the totality of space that is involved in the production of executive truly transformation action; in a way moving opposite to the press in the currently established view by part of the academic and popular literature on how concern for action is the primary issue around executive ability to bring about results. This aiming to re-examine a misunderstanding in our current understanding of the importance of action, we hope, contributes in the direction of paying proper attention to what is meant by literature on timely action (Torbert et al., 2004). We underline the primordial role of reflection as an integral part of timely transformational action, and ethical decision-making processes. Research reviewed above has shown that executives can become more ethical and achieve better moral effectiveness by understanding the meaning of solitude, which adds to ethical leadership literature by providing more propositions that solitude as antecedent helping better isolate processes

being and being perceived ethical. With our model we hope to contribute to research in this direction.

Leadership researchers have acknowledged systematically the need for more research on factors and processes that facilitate or hinder ethical dimensions of leadership (Bass, 1998). Our proposed model suggests that: (1) increased use of solitude by executives will enhance capacities for ethical leadership, and reduce the degree of ethical neutral leadership behavior of an executive as a moral person and a moral manager; (2) the process by which solitude enhances ethical leadership is significantly moderated by an executive’s degree of moral reasoning and need for socialized power.

Finally, we would like to note here that our focus on solitude does not imply a lack of appreciation of (ethical) leadership as an essentially relational phenomenon (e.g., Uhl-Bien, 2006). As described by Hogg (2005, p. 53), “Leadership is a relational term – it identifies a relationship in which some people are able to persuade others to adopt new values, attitudes and goals, and to exert effort on behalf of those values, attitudes, and goals”. Besides, the relational perspective (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995) and social learning perspective (Bandura, 1977) are the origins of ethical leadership theory. Although our approach appears to compete with relational approaches to leadership, this is not the case. At first, it may seem odd to speak of solitude as a “vital social phenomenon” (Long and Averil, 2003). In our discussion and conceptualization of solitude we suggested that it constitutes a powerful mental and emotional space where both distance and care are harmoniously co-activated. Further enabling the authentic exercise of executive morality *in relationships*, this model places great emphasis on the authenticity elements of dealing with social and relational demands. Intentionally opening a space in solitude does not mean less sociality and relatedness, but instead less amoral sociality via increased authenticity in relationships. This increases the ability of executives to act as a moral person, which includes role-modeling ethics (Trevino, 1986; Trevino et al., 2000) and the strategic incorporation of ethics in business success, by acting as a moral manager (Trevino et al., 2000; Weaver et al., 2005). Through distance and reflection, and the recognition and resolution of conflicting pressures and demands, the individual’s range of nonconformity

behaviors is enhanced. Furthermore, executives that selectively exercise the state of solitude through introspection, self-discovery and self-management, find it easier to realize and clarify their concerns about meeting moral standards and obligations to others, and about the consequences of their own action. This contributes to what Winter and Barenbaum (1985) call “responsibility disposition”, which according to House and Aditya (1997) should be predictive of a leader’s integrity, a key factor of how ethical leadership is perceived by followers (Trevino et al., 2000, 2003).

A further observation is that positively experiencing solitude is inherently social in the sense that it relies upon the human capacity to reflect upon and interpret one’s own experiences. As argued by Long and Averil (2003), the ability for self-reflection and for considering our own thoughts arises from our development of the ability to represent the thoughts of others. From this perspective, the mental experience of solitude is inevitably as social as any other psychological experience.

There are a number of limitations in our model. First of all, the issue of frequency of solitude episodes and the possibility of a “dark side” of solitude needs to be more explicitly addressed (Long and Averil, 2003). As empirically found by solitude researchers, a high frequency of solitude has certain dangers related to ever-increasing disengagement and in continuation of stress, eventual chronic social withdrawal. So the question of the amount of time for which the executive voluntary activation of solitude has beneficial effects for ethical leadership must be answered. It would be reasonable to assume that there is a critical threshold of solitude frequency, above which solitude ceases to be beneficial, and that this threshold differs from person to person. As a stress buffer, solitude can serve as an attractive contrast to anxiety for those suffering from social anxiety, but in general, for most individuals its potential benefits outweigh its dangers (Long and Averil, 2003).

As far as leadership practice is concerned, if the propositions mentioned in our model are empirically supported then some very useful implications will arise. Organizations should include the capacity or propensity for solitude in leadership development to increase broader ethical awareness reflection (Densten and Gray, 2001). In addition, and in order to optimize the effects of capacity for solitude,

learning and development programs for executives should be designed to develop their learning skills to enhance integrative learning and move away from the obsessive emphasis on specialized learning; programs should enhance meta-cognitive processes of learning (Kolb and Kolb, 2009) for the substantial development of executive integrity (Akrivou, 2008; Kolb, 1984, 1986). Organizations might further re-examine the value of existing policies that allow constant social interaction, e.g., “open door” policies, and facilitate the use of solitude for reflection, contemplation and connection to the inner self, values, emotions, and identity that enhance authentic ethical broader awareness.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002, p. 204) suggest that leaders need a sanctuary, a place of reflection and renewal, where they can listen to themselves and reaffirm their deeper sense of self and purpose. “In turbulent seas of a change initiative, you need to find ways to be steady and stabilize yourself. First, you must establish a safe harbor where each day you can reflect on the previous day’s journey, repair the psychological damage you have suffered, renew your stores of emotional resources and reorient your moral compass.” With this article we have introduced a model, whereby solitude can be utilized by executives as a mental space for a dynamic process linking an action and reflection continuum that is proposed as a means of enhancing authentic integrative processes of ethical executive leadership and providing a pathway toward increasing others’ trust on the integrity and fairness of executive decisions and action – trust that seems to be quickly fading away during the past decades.

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