

Ethical Leadership and Employee Ethical Behaviour: The Mediating Roles of Ethical Climate and Organizational Identification in a Law Enforcement Institution

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Excellent Service;
Boarding Pass; Ticket
Discrepancy; Infant and
Child Category; Check-in

Ethical behavior among employees is a critical issue in law enforcement institutions because unethical actions may undermine public trust, institutional legitimacy, and organizational accountability. Despite the implementation of ethical standards and oversight mechanisms, ethical violations remain a persistent challenge, highlighting the need to understand the organizational and individual factors that promote ethical conduct. This study aims to examine the effects of ethical leadership, ethical climate, and organizational identification on employee ethical behavior, while investigating the mediating roles of ethical climate and organizational identification. This research employed a quantitative explanatory approach involving 234 employees of an Indonesian law enforcement institution selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The results demonstrate that ethical leadership, ethical climate, and organizational identification have positive and significant effects on employee ethical behavior. Furthermore, ethical leadership significantly influences ethical climate and organizational identification, while ethical climate also strengthens organizational identification. The mediation analysis confirms that ethical climate and organizational identification significantly mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behavior. These findings highlight that ethical behavior is shaped not only by individual awareness but also by ethical organizational systems and employees' psychological attachment to institutional values. This study contributes to the ethical behavior literature by providing empirical evidence from a law enforcement context and offers practical implications for strengthening integrity-based leadership and organizational ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Ethical behavior is a fundamental requirement for public institutions, particularly law enforcement institutions, where authority is closely associated with public accountability, legal enforcement, and institutional legitimacy. Ethical violations may undermine public trust in government institutions and contribute to corrupt practices and other negative organizational outcomes (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2019). In the context of law enforcement, unethical behavior may occur in forms closely related to corruption and abuse of authority. Lee et al. (2022), in their study of unethical behavior among South Korean police officers, used indicators such as abuse of authority or position, misuse of state facilities, and procedural dishonesty. These indicators are relevant because law enforcement employees operate with significant authority, discretion, access to sensitive information, and frequent interactions with external stakeholders (Ali 2018; van der Meer et al. 2024).

In Indonesia, integrity issues within law enforcement institutions remain a major public concern. Several ethical and legal violations involving law enforcement officials, including those in leadership positions, indicate that ethical behavior continues to be a significant institutional challenge. Cases involving a high-ranking police official in an obstruction of justice case, former leaders of the anti-corruption agency who violated ethical standards, and a structural official within the prosecutor's office who met with a litigant and accepted bribery demonstrate that ethical risks may occur not only at the employee level but also among officials holding strategic positions (Antikorupsi.org, 2022; BBC, 2021; Hukum Online, 2022; Kompas, 2023). This concern is further reinforced by Indonesia's Corruption Perceptions Index score of 34 out of 100 in 2025, which placed Indonesia 109th among 182 surveyed countries (Transparency International Indonesia, 2026). At the national level, the 2024 Integrity Assessment Survey also indicated that several law enforcement institutions remained within different integrity risk categories (KPK, 2025), despite having formal oversight mechanisms, including inspectorates, supervisory boards, ethics commissions, and internal reporting systems.

Preliminary interviews involving five informants were conducted to explore ethical behavior issues and identify factors perceived to influence employees' ethical behavior. The findings confirmed that ethical behavior remains a relevant and important issue within law enforcement institutions. The informants indicated that ethical violations continue to occur and may negatively affect public trust, institutional credibility, and task performance quality. The interviews also identified ethical leadership, ethical climate, and organizational identification as the three most influential factors shaping employees' ethical behavior, followed by moral identity, public service motivation, person-organization fit, peer influence, and organizational justice. These findings provided an empirical basis for examining how leadership, organizational ethical conditions, and employees' identification with the institution contribute to ethical behavior in law enforcement settings.

Theoretically, ethical behavior can be explained through the person-situation interactionist model, which views ethical decision-making as the result of interactions between individual and organizational factors (Trevino, 1986; Trevino & Stuart A., 1990). Based on this perspective, this study examined ethical leadership and ethical climate as organizational factors, while organizational identification was positioned as an individual factor reflecting employees' attachment to the institution. Ethical leadership is important because leaders provide moral guidance, serve as role models, and shape employees' perceptions of appropriate conduct. Brown et al. (2005) defined ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, as well as the promotion of such conduct through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making processes.

Ethical climate is also important because it provides employees with a shared understanding of appropriate actions when facing ethical dilemmas. Cullen et al. (1989) explained that ethical climate functions as a normative framework that guides employees in interpreting and responding to moral issues. In law enforcement institutions, ethical climate should not only emphasize compliance with laws, codes of ethics, procedures, and professional standards but also strengthen employees' moral awareness so that individual ethical judgments remain aligned with institutional values and public interests. Previous research in Indonesia's public sector has shown that ethical leadership positively influences ethical climate and employee ethical behavior, while ethical climate partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee ethical behavior (Firmansyah & Rachmawati, 2025).

Furthermore, organizational identification is relevant because employees who strongly identify with their organization tend to perceive the organization's success, reputation, and values as part of their own identity. Based on Social Identity Theory, individuals categorize themselves into various social groups, including organizational membership (Mael & Ashforth, 1989). In the

context of law enforcement institutions, organizational identification may strengthen employees' commitment to institutional values and ethical standards.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it examines ethical behavior within a specific and sensitive context, namely an Indonesian law enforcement institution. Second, it extends existing ethical behavior models by integrating ethical leadership, ethical climate, and organizational identification within a single framework. Third, unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on ethical leadership and ethical climate, this study incorporates organizational identification as an individual factor and mediating mechanism, thereby explaining how employees' attachment to the institution may translate organizational values into ethical behavior.

This study aims to examine the factors influencing employees' ethical behavior in a law enforcement institution through the roles of ethical leadership, ethical climate, and organizational identification. By positioning ethical leadership and ethical climate as organizational factors and organizational identification as an individual factor, this study is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of ethical behavior models and practical implications for strengthening integrity, accountability, and public trust in law enforcement institutions.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative explanatory research design to examine the relationships among ethical leadership, ethical climate, organizational identification, and employee ethical behavior. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed during the second quarter of 2026. All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The study population consisted of employees of an Indonesian law enforcement institution. The sample included 234 employees who met the research criteria, including a minimum of two years of work experience and prior participation in training related to the code of ethics and organizational conduct. A non-probability sampling method using purposive sampling was applied, with respondents selected based on their relevance to the research context.

Employee ethical behavior was measured using 13 items adapted from previous studies, including Guerrero-Dib and Portales (2020), Halbusi, Ismail, et al. (2021), and Lee et al. (2022). The indicators covered responsibility, honesty, compliance with regulations, rejection of gratification, appropriate use of authority and organizational resources, confidentiality, and reporting of violations.

Ethical leadership was measured using 10 items adapted from the Ethical Leadership Scale developed by Brown et al. (2005), which has been applied in previous studies, including Al Halbusi et al. (2023) and Yang et al. (2023). The indicators included moral role modeling, ethical work practices, fairness and moral consideration in decision-making, employee care and appreciation, enforcement of ethical standards, trust in leaders, and an ethical process orientation.

Ethical climate was measured using 10 items adapted from the Ethical Climate Questionnaire developed by Victor and Cullen (1988) and applied in previous studies on organizational ethical climate, including Al Halbusi et al. (2021) and Mehra and Narwal (2025). The indicators represented five dimensions: caring, law and code, rules, independence, and instrumental climate.

Organizational identification was measured using the six-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992), which has been widely applied in organizational identification research. The instrument has also been adopted in recent studies, including Farooq et al. (2022) and Lorenz (2025). The scale assessed employees' sense of belonging, pride, and psychological attachment to the organization.

The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The analysis included measurement model assessment to evaluate indicator validity, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. The structural model was subsequently evaluated using path coefficients, R^2 values, effect sizes, and bootstrapping analysis to examine the direct and indirect relationships among variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile

The demographic profile shows that most respondents were in the productive and experienced age groups. The largest group was employees aged above 30 to 40 years old, accounting for 101 respondents or 43.16%, followed by those aged above 40 to 50 years old with 97 respondents or 41.45%. Respondents aged above 20 to 30 years old represented 8.97%, while those above 50 years old accounted for 6.41%. In terms of education, most respondents held a bachelor's degree, representing 123 respondents or 52.56%, followed by postgraduate degree holders with 97 respondents or 41.45%. Respondents with diploma education accounted for 5.56%, while graduates of official academies represented 0.43%. Regarding work tenure, most respondents had worked for more than 10 to 20 years, representing 117 respondents or 50.00%, followed by those with more than 5 to 10 years of service at 32.05%. Respondents with five years or less of service accounted for 11.97%, while those with more than 20 years of service represented 5.98%. Overall, the respondent profile indicates that the data were obtained from employees with relatively mature age, adequate education, and substantial work experience.

Measurement and Structural Model Results

The measurement model was evaluated through indicator validity, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. The outer loading results showed that two ethical climate indicators, namely EC9 and EC10, did not meet the required loading criteria and were therefore removed from the model. EC9 refers to the statement that employees are expected to do anything for the organization regardless of the consequences, while EC10 refers to the statement that employees prioritize personal interests above all else. Both indicators represented the instrumental dimension of ethical climate. After removing these indicators, all remaining indicators met the validity and reliability requirements.

Table 1. Measurement Model Assessment

<i>Construct</i>	<i>AVE</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>	<i>Composite reliability (rho_a)</i>	<i>Composite reliability (rho_c)</i>
<i>Ethical Leadership</i>	0,677	0,947	0,948	0,954
<i>Ethical Climate</i>	0,663	0,927	0,929	0,940
<i>Organizational Identification</i>	0,652	0,893	0,899	0,918
<i>Ethical Behaviour</i>	0,704	0,965	0,966	0,969

Source: Primary data processed in 2026

As shown in Table 1, all constructs met the criteria for convergent validity and construct reliability. The AVE values were above the minimum threshold of 0.50, ranging from 0.652 for organizational identification to 0.704 for ethical behaviour. This indicates that each construct was able to explain more than half of the variance of its indicators. In addition, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability values for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Therefore, the measurement model was considered acceptable, and the analysis proceeded to the structural model assessment.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity Measurements

<i>Fornell-Larcker Criterion</i>				
	<i>EL</i>	<i>EC</i>	<i>OI</i>	<i>EB</i>
<i>EL</i>	0,823			
<i>EC</i>	0,527	0,814		
<i>OI</i>	0,718	0,646	0,808	
<i>EB</i>	0,585	0,662	0,649	0,839

<i>Table 3 HTMT Ratio</i>				
	<i>EL</i>	<i>EC</i>	<i>OI</i>	<i>EB</i>
<i>EL</i>				
<i>EC</i>	0,559			
<i>OI</i>	0,776	0,706		
<i>EB</i>	0,608	0,696	0,691	

Source: Primary data processed in 2026

As shown in Table 2, the square root of AVE for each construct, shown in bold on the diagonal, was higher than its correlations with other constructs. This indicates that the Fornell-Larcker criterion was met. In addition, all HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of 0.90, ranging from 0.559 to 0.776. These results confirm that discriminant validity was achieved, meaning that ethical leadership, ethical climate, organizational identification, and ethical behaviour were empirically distinct constructs.

Structural Model Assessment

The explanatory capability of the structural model was evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2). As shown in Table 3, Ethical Climate had an R^2 value of 0.278, indicating that Ethical Leadership explained 27.8% of the variance in Ethical Climate. Organizational Identification had an R^2 value of 0.614, meaning that Ethical Leadership and Ethical Climate explained 61.4% of the variance in Organizational Identification. Meanwhile, Ethical Behaviour had an R^2 value of 0.540, indicating that Ethical Leadership, Ethical Climate, and Organizational Identification explained 54.0% of the variance in Ethical Behaviour.

The Q^2 values for all endogenous constructs were above zero, namely 0.256 for Ethical Climate, 0.506 for Organizational Identification, and 0.326 for Ethical Behaviour. These results indicate that the model had predictive relevance.

Table 4. Structural Model Assessment

Construct	R^2	Q^2
<i>Ethical Climate</i>	0,278	0,256
<i>Organizational Identification</i>	0,614	0,506
<i>Ethical Behaviour</i>	0,54	0,326

Source: Primary data processed in 2026

Furthermore, the f^2 results reveal that Ethical Leadership had a large effect on Ethical Climate (0.385) and Organizational Identification (0.511), but a small effect on Ethical Behaviour (0.039). Ethical Climate had a medium effect on Organizational Identification (0.257) and Ethical Behaviour (0.195), while Organizational Identification had a small effect on Ethical Behaviour (0.054). Overall, the structural model demonstrates adequate explanatory and predictive capability, with Ethical Climate and Organizational Identification playing important roles in explaining Employee Ethical Behaviour.

Hypothesis Testing Results

The proposed hypotheses were examined through the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS 4. A hypothesis was accepted if the t-statistic was greater than 1.96 and the p-value was less than 0.05.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t-statistic	p-value	Result
H1	<i>Ethical Leadership -> Ethical Behaviour</i>	0.194	2.863	0.004	Supported
H2	<i>Ethical Climate -> Ethical Behaviour</i>	0.395	4.022	0.000	Supported
H3	<i>Organizational Identification -> Ethical Behaviour</i>	0.254	2.428	0.015	Supported
H4	<i>Ethical Leadership -> Ethical Climate</i>	0.527	5.869	0.000	Supported
H5	<i>Ethical Leadership -> Organizational Identification</i>	0.522	5.832	0.000	Supported
H6	<i>Ethical Climate -> Organizational Identification</i>	0.371	3.843	0.000	Supported
H7	<i>Ethical Leadership -> Ethical Climate -> Ethical Behaviour</i>	0.208	2.724	0.006	Supported
H8	<i>Ethical Leadership -> Organizational Identification -> Ethical Behaviour</i>	0.133	2.107	0.035	Supported
H9	<i>Ethical Climate -> Organizational Identification -> Ethical Behaviour</i>	0.094	2.231	0.026	Supported

Source: Primary data processed in 2026

The statistical results indicate that all proposed hypotheses were empirically supported. Ethical leadership was found to have a positive and significant direct effect on employee ethical behaviour, ethical climate, and organizational identification. Ethical climate also showed a positive and significant effect on employee ethical behaviour and organizational identification, while organizational identification had a positive and significant effect on employee ethical behaviour.

Furthermore, the mediation results demonstrate that ethical climate and organizational identification serve as significant mediating mechanisms in the proposed model. Ethical climate mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical behaviour, indicating that ethical leadership promotes ethical behaviour partly by strengthening the organization's ethical climate. Organizational identification also mediates the effects of ethical leadership and ethical climate on ethical behaviour. These findings suggest that ethical behaviour is influenced not only directly by ethical leadership, ethical climate, and organizational identification, but also indirectly through the mediating roles of ethical climate and organizational identification. Overall, all direct and indirect relationships in the model were empirically supported.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that ethical leadership, ethical climate, and organizational identification are significant determinants of employee ethical behavior in a law enforcement institution. Ethical leadership was found to directly enhance employee ethical behavior by providing moral guidance, demonstrating ethical role modeling, and reinforcing ethical standards in decision-making processes. Furthermore, ethical leadership significantly contributed to the development of ethical climate and organizational identification, indicating

that leaders play a central role in shaping employees' perceptions of ethical expectations and strengthening their psychological attachment to the institution. Ethical climate also had a significant effect on employee ethical behavior, demonstrating that a strong organizational environment based on legal compliance, professional standards, fairness, and moral values can reduce ethical ambiguity and encourage employees to act responsibly. In addition, organizational identification positively influenced ethical behavior, suggesting that employees who strongly identify with their institution are more likely to internalize organizational values and demonstrate behaviors that support institutional integrity. The mediation analysis further confirmed that ethical climate and organizational identification functioned as important mechanisms linking ethical leadership to ethical behavior, as well as linking ethical climate to ethical behavior. These findings extend previous ethical behavior research by integrating organizational and individual perspectives within a law enforcement context, where ethical conduct is essential for maintaining accountability, legitimacy, and public trust.

Future research is recommended to expand this study by examining additional contextual and individual factors that may influence employee ethical behavior, such as moral identity, public service motivation, organizational justice, psychological safety, and perceived organizational support. Future studies may also employ longitudinal research designs to investigate how ethical leadership practices, ethical climate development, and organizational identification evolve over time and dynamically influence ethical behavior. Comparative studies involving different law enforcement institutions, public sector organizations, or cross-country samples are encouraged to improve the generalizability of the findings. In addition, future research may consider mixed-method approaches by combining quantitative analysis with qualitative investigations to gain deeper insights into how employees experience ethical dilemmas and apply ethical values in daily professional practices. These research directions may contribute to the development of more comprehensive ethical management models and provide practical recommendations for strengthening integrity systems within public institutions.

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