IMPROVING TRUST THROUGH ETHICAL LEADERSHIP: MOVING BEYOND THE SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY TO A HISTORICAL LEARNING APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The complex nature of trust and its evolving relative concepts require a more idealistic and simpler review. Ethical leadership is related to trust, honesty, transparency, compassion, empathy, results-orientedness, and many other behavioral attributes. Ethical leadership and good leadership are the same, because they represent practicing what one preaches or showing a way to the accomplishment of set goals. The outcomes and findings of many research papers on trust and ethical leadership report positive correlations between ethical leadership and trust. Improving trust from different rational standpoints requires moving and looking beyond the popular theoretical framework through which most results are derived in order to create a new thinking perspective. Social learning theory strongly emphasizes modelling while the new historical learning approach, proposed by the author, is defined as an approach that creates unique historical awareness among individuals, groups, institutions, societies, and nations to use previous experience(s) or occurrence(s) as a guide in developing positive opinion(s) and framework(s) in order to tackle the problems and issues of today and tomorrow. Social learning theory is seen as limited from the perspectives of balancing the equation between leadership and trust, the non-compatibility of the values of different generations at work, and other approaches and methods that support the historical approach. This paper is argumentative, adopts a writer’s perspective, and employs a logical analysis of the literature. The main contention is that a historical learning approach can inform an independent-learning to improve trust and its relatives (e.g. motivation and performance), because independent learning can positively shape the value of integrity, which is an integral part of ethical leadership. Historical learning can positively shape leadership in every perspective, because good leadership can develop based on history and past experience; this in return helps in improving trust at every level.

Keywords: trust, ethical leadership, social learning theory, and historical learning approach.

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INTRODUCTION

Trust as the currency of relationships has been widely studied in many disciplines. In the fields of management, public administration, political science, and business studies the relationship of trust with other concepts and variables has been studied and analyzed from different perspectives. The results and findings also differ by perspective. However, it is often common to find research articles and reports that examine the relationship between ethical leadership and trust or other social and psychological variables (participation and motivation, for example), adopting the framework or theoretical modelling of the social learning approach.

However, to focus on trust is to look for and explore perspectives that help improve trust. Trust from any perspective is essential, not just by itself, but in relation to other variables like job satisfaction, performance, motivation, and participation (Yozgat & Meşekiran, 2016). A careful review shows that leadership has a strong influence on trust. The main aim of this paper is to emphasize another theoretical perspective in the study of the relationship between ethical leadership and trust. A simple realistic approach emphasizes looking beyond the social learning approach, which is often used by researchers to study the relationship between ethical leadership and trust or other variables, and then exploring a historical learning perspective on how trust can be improved through ethical leadership. The thesis of this paper is guided by the conceptual figure below:

![Figure 1: Opinion and Conceptual Setting](image-url)
Ethical leadership and trust are reciprocally related to each other, depending on the chosen perspective and their scientific study is often premised on the social learning theory. According to Schwartz (2015a) most studies of the benefits of ethical leadership are premised on social learning theory (see Bandura, 1986). The key concept that the above framework informs is that ethical leadership goes beyond institutional and local areas, into personal, institutional, local, societal, national, and global areas, which in return shape trust at different levels.

Experts have failed to address deeply scientific questions such as what are the limits of the social learning theory from a contemporary thinking perspective? The limits of the social learning theory have not often been studied from the perspective of ethical leadership and trust, but from a behavioral or cognitive perspective in psychology. Studying the relationship between ethical leadership and trust through the adoption of the social learning approach tends to create a narrow view. The historical learning approach on the other hand, can create a broader view that goes beyond personal and institutional levels of analysis. The historical learning approach can inform ethical leadership in multiple areas, which can improve trust from multiple perspectives.

**Method**

The present paper is an opinion paper that adopts an argumentative strategy. Analysis is premised on the writer’s opinion and a review of literature. It is important to state that the opinions, analyses, and findings of the authors reviewed in the literature are neither disrespected nor disproved, but used to illustrate some examples that relate to the present topic of discussion.

**What is Ethical Leadership?**

Ethical leadership implies trusting more, being more committed and exerting extra effort, being less cynical, exhibiting less counterproductive behavior, being more willing to report problems, and bullying less (Schwartz, 2015b). Ethical leadership is defined by the value of integrity. Various institutional, national, and global challenges affirm the importance of ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

The challenge of ethical leadership has become a pressing topic for all stakeholders in our present world; ethics, values, leadership, and trust are timely issues of immense importance, especially during the recovery from a substantial downturn in the national and global policies (Fulmer, 2004). The empirical study of the ethical aspects of leadership is not an old field of scientific analyses (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvado, 2009). To say a thing is good is also to say that the particular thing is desirable and acceptable; automatically, the task becomes that of working out modalities in order to realize that which is good. Numerous writings abound about ethics and leadership from a normative or philosophical view suggest what leaders should do. However, many studies about ethics and leadership have remained underdeveloped and fragmented, leaving scholars and practitioners with limited answers to even the most basic questions, such as “What is ethical leadership?” (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Balanced leaders are ethical, because they are able to span boundaries, listen to diverse constituencies, and willing to be affected by different positive opinions; such leaders are enriched by complexity and diversity, not overwhelmed by it, and their
decisions acknowledge and respect the often conflicting values and expectations of diverse constituencies (Fulmer, 2004). According to Lamboo, Lasthuizen, and Huberts (2008), the qualities of an ethical leader are role modelling, strictness in the application of norms and sanctioning misbehaviours, and openness in discussing ethical problems and dilemmas. Ethical leadership goes along with the principles of integrity, selflessness, objectivity, accountability, openness, acceptability, and honesty (Fawcett & Wardman, 2008). To summarize, ethical leadership concerns the whole idea of leaders acting ethically and selflessly.

**Defining Trust**

Trust is a concept or variable means different things to different people. It can include trust in individuals, such as politicians, or in public, religious, and global institutions. According to Lawton and Doig (2006) and Osifo (2013), trust is learned via various dimensions: trust between individuals, trust towards the activity of professionals, trust inside and within organizations, trust in political actors, or trust within a community. Trust is relevant in every aspect of the society and institution because of its general developmental benefits and in use in building relationships.

Saying we trust you implies that you have ideal intentions toward us, and that you are competent to do that which we have trusted you to do. Basic intentions differ in what would be considered ideal toward the trustor. One of these is concealed interest, which is grounded in the belief that the potentially trusted person has an interest in building a relationship with the trustor, an interest that gives the trusted person the potential of trustworthiness. Other related background is on moral commitment of the potentially trusted person, or in the trustee’s psychological or character disposition to be a person of good reputation (Hardin, 2006). Trust in a diverse sense goes with the ability of institutions and leaders to guarantee satisfaction. It is viable to define trust as a determined confidence just as trustworthiness is part of moral value. Trust is connected to the positive expectation that will not be abused; here the relevant history of the trustor’s trust in a trustee is the trustor’s perception of the trustee’s trustworthiness (Six & Huberts, 2008).

However, the aspect of trust that is most often explored by researchers and scholars is the one that relates to the public or citizens. Public trust doctrine is simple, but a powerful legal concept that obliges institutions to manage public resources in the best interest of their citizens and by not compromising the benefits of future generations applies (Lucas, 2009; Osifo, 2014). According to DiPiazza and Eccles (2002), the two key elements of public trust are the spirit of transparency and the culture of accountability.

**Examining the Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory strongly emphasizes modelling (Bandura, 1986). According to Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) a social learning perspective on ethical leadership proposes that leaders affect the ethical conduct of followers through modelling. It suggests that followers will come to behave in a like manner to their leader through imitation and observational learning (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1986) further argues that the four conditions necessary for effective modelling are attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation.
The background base of the social learning approach is tied to the Emic-Etic dichotomy. Emic focuses on the investigation of leadership within the cultural context in which it occurs. Etic approaches attempt to generalize leadership theory (in most instances Western-based theory) to other cultures and examine similarities and differences. Therefore, national cultures and leadership theory are linked, and cultural contingencies must be examined to see how they might affect leadership in a complex world (Scandura & Dorfman, 2004). The social identity theory builds on the social learning approach because of its emphasis on leadership context and outcomes (Kalshoven & Den Hartog, 2009).

Social learning theory states that when there are role models in the work environment, individuals will try to emulate these models. Such role models include the leader and other employees in the work group. Employees in a work group are influenced similarly as they witness sanctions for inappropriate behaviour and rewards for good behaviour. Thus, employees will tend to model the behaviours of their supervisor and other employees to make sure that their behaviour is in accordance with accepted behavioural norms and not deviant. Leaders desire to affect subordinates through social exchange processes. Social exchange is premised on the norm of reciprocity, which stipulates that if one exchange partner does something beneficial for the other, that generates an obligation to reciprocate good faith behaviour (Mayer et al. 2009).

Via social learning, the basics of role modelling are visualized and understood; prosocial behaviour guided by moral reasoning can be employed by a leader to guarantee followers’ satisfaction, motivation, and commitment. Above all, social learning can offer leadership a futuristic gaze (Kalshoven & Den Hartog, 2009). Ethical leadership literatures have been able to put forward behavioural dimensions of ethical leadership in organizations leaning on the social learning approach. Brown and Treviño (2006), acting as a guide for De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008), distinguished three dimensions of ethical leadership: fairness, power sharing, and role clarification. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) related the content of these dimensions to doctrines of people-oriented behaviour, integrity, ethical guidance, and concern for sustainability (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011). According to Kalshoven and Den Hartog (2009), self-conception in relation to group membership involves a psychological “merger” of self and group in which self-conception is contingent on group prototypes.

**A Look at Historicism**

Historicism primarily aims at awareness creation. Historicism is the branch of philosophy that emphasizes that historical awareness is essential for understanding a particular aspect, field, thing, or phenomenon critically. In most contexts, historicism often serves as a research approach or method. To study the background and growth of a particular thing or phenomenon such as institution or leadership, historicism can help to gain insight into organizational culture, emerging events, and futuristic prospects. According to Schein (2004) organizational culture, which is guided by leadership, is also shaped by history.

Greater attention to historicism that informs genuine open inquiry to all fields has been stressed because in public administration, the ahistorical and atemporal field that emphasizes technical rationality has limited capacity to tackle real questions facing societies (Adams, 1992). Qualitative and quantitative variables are crucial to the
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historical method of research, because they cut across every area of study by focusing on evolvement, development, challenges, theories, attributes and many others (Osifo, 2015). Historical research method involves finding, using, interpreting, and correlating information within primary and secondary sources with the aim of comprehending previous occurrences or events. Collecting historical data is realized via methodical and comprehensive research in primary and secondary sources (Elana, Akrivi, Costas, Georgios, & Constantin, 2009).

Business ethics as a field of study, for example, has evolved through time and across disciplines into an area that is relevant to business. To historically study the development of business ethics, it is crucial to begin with a definition of business ethics in a global context and then move to managerial perspectives and organizational context analyses. To critically attempt a historical overview of ethics, one basic requirement would include the description of thousands of years of philosophy, social, cultural influences as well as the religious writings on this topic (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2008.) According to Popper (2002), historicism has its strengths and weaknesses because of pro-naturalistic doctrines (comparison with astronomy, observational basis, social dynamics, historical laws, historical prophesy versus social engineering, interpreting versus planning social change, and conclusion of the analysis) and anti-naturalistic doctrines (generalization, experiment, novelty, complexity, inexactitude of prediction, objectivity and valuation, holism, intuitive understanding, quantitative methods, and essentials versus nominalism).

However, a theoretical emphasis on historicism attempts to look at factors that have influenced past events and re-evaluate how they could be useful in present and future situations, a look, for example, into factors that led to past natural disasters and world wars. One example would be to examine how the act of good leadership has positively influenced related variables like trust in the past (Osifo, 2012); the aim in this regard is to develop or create consciousness among leaders that would help them adopt the positive factors and reject the negative factors. Other factors and variables that are crucial from a historical perspective are time, performance, patience, commitment natural rights, justice, and deterrence or sanction (Strauss, 2009). Historical learning is essential to theoretical formulation and building, because classical scholars like Plato, Descartes, and Locke used it as a knowledge base (epistemology) as observed in rationalism (nature of knowledge that is from reason) and empiricism (experience as the source of knowledge) (Edgar, 2012).

Moving beyond the Social Learning Approach

Numerous arguments could emerge in favor of moving beyond the social learning approach to a historical learning perspective when conceptualizing, problematizing, operationalizing, and measuring the relationship between ethical leadership and trust. Since my arguments are based on trust improvement, emphasis should be based on the following aspects: balancing the trust and leadership equation, the non-compatibility of different generations at work, and other theories and methods that support the historical viewpoint.
Balancing the Trust and Leadership Equation

To begin this aspect of my argument, it is useful to present a clear relationship between the areas of leadership and the layers of trust. Table 2 below shows this relationship:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of Leadership</th>
<th>Layers of Trust</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual or self-leadership</td>
<td>Individual or self-level based trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional or group leadership</td>
<td>Institutional or group level based trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local or regional leadership</td>
<td>Local or regional trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National or societal leadership</td>
<td>National or societal level based trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International or global leadership</td>
<td>International or global level based trust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Arguing from the relationships in the above table, it is obvious that the various areas of leadership agree with every layer of trust. According to Starks (2004), leadership should help in creating dynamic strategies to help the improvements of individual’s judgement, citizens’ thought (trust) and wellbeing, national visions, and global set standards. Leadership that improves trust is ethical leadership, which often begins with self-leadership (leading self in terms of emotions, thinking, and practices) to operational leadership (people leadership) then to business leadership (opportunity leadership), and finally, strategic leadership (leading change) (Self Leadership International, 2016).

If we take a deeper look at the social learning approach from the context of the above equation balancing between leadership and trust, we can observe that this approach is limited in many regards because social learning might not be a suitable theoretical framing for analyzing the different areas of leadership in agreement with layers of trust, because “role models” could be missing or very far from the different contexts. Another point is that leaders could fail in the expectations to serve as role models to subordinates and others. Consequently, historical learning could become the best approach to study how leadership could develop in the various areas in order to help trust improvement from different layers’ standpoint, because according to Schwartz (2015), different factors (natural and behavioral) could negatively influence a leader at some points and situations to act unethically.

Historical learning could become an independent-learning approach to leadership, because individuals, group/institutions, local, national, and international communities could then be able to learn early ahead of time. Some of the crucial things leadership in every area and level could learn ahead of time are sanctions, negative benefits and consequences of past bad leadership, and reward and positive benefits and consequences of past good or ethical leadership. Leadership in every area and level could historically learn from every decision and factor that led to the first and second world wars in order to positively affect trust at all levels by shaping leadership in every area and level. It is the responsibility of the historical learning approach to create consciousness of ethical leadership by creating frameworks and patterns that influence the study of variables such as “time” in the analyses of phenomena in social science and humanities research.

Serving as a theoretical framework, the historical learning approach could help to create a deeper insight into understanding, studying, predicting or hypothesizing,
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interpreting, and analyzing other variables like motivation and performance through a layered perspective and reveal how leadership in general could influence these variables and other phenomena.

**Non-Compatibility of Different Generations at Work**

Presently, we have five generations at work. The generations are the traditionalist (1922-1945), baby boomers (1946-1964), generation X (1965-1980), generation Y or millennial (1981-2000), and generation Z (1995-2008). Studies have shown that different areas of conflict exist between the different generations due to the non-compatibility of values. It is becoming difficult for traditionalists to serve as role models to Xers for example, a position that is gradually making the social learning approach less relevant.

The traditionalists are known to have values relating to commitment and sacrifice, hard work, obeying rules and regulations, work before pleasure, and honor. The baby boomers are known to have values relating to teamwork and orientation, optimism, personal gratification, engagement, and personal development. The Xers are known to have values relating to techno-literacy, diversity, fun and informalism, self-dependence, fun seeking, informalism, and practicality. The millennials are known to have values relating to determinism, participation in civic duty, confidence, achievement orientation, and diversity. Finally, the generations Z are known to have values relating to techno comfort, socializing and interacting through social media, insecurity, and unpredictability.

Historical learning could help in bridging the ideas and values differences between different generations, especially serving as a base for newer generations of X, Y, and Z to learn about ethical values and dynamics of ethical leadership. The newer generations (X, Y, and Z) often see the older generations (traditionalists and baby boomers) as outdated in terms of values and ideas. If proposing a paradigm that could help improve trust and ethical leadership is taking for granted, we then risk having a future without morals, trust, and neither good management nor leadership principles.

**Other Theories and Methods that Support the Historical View Point**

This final aspect of my argumentation concerns how other theories and methods represent the historical viewpoint. In moving beyond the social learning approach to a historical learning approach, it is useful to look at some theories and methods that support the historical view point. A deeper look at the theory of responsibility and other research findings show that “responsibility” often stands as a third variable between leadership and trust. The components of responsible conduct have strong historical backgrounds. According to Cooper (2006), components of responsibility include individual attributes, organizational structure, organizational culture, and societal expectations. The eras of French and American revolutions have been mostly associated with awakening of “responsibility” from a historical perspective because of the emergences of multiculturalism and globalisation as ways of defining values (e.g. a common set of values between individuals of different cultures and traditions) (McKeon, 1957; Winter, 1966).

Historicism is based on the case study approach and comparative method. According to the Encyclopaedia of the New American Nation (2016), case study and
comparative analyses show that “dictatorship” is a common factor in every authoritarian government in the past such as Adolf Hitler in Germany, Juan Perón in Argentina, and Francisco Franco in Spain. Dictatorship was a major influencer of World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and other world conflicts. Historicism also has a strong base of case and comparative analyses in literary studies because of the politics of literary culture and case of romantic historicism (Chandler, 1998).

A focus on the theory of technical rationality shows that attention is premised on the historical roots of administration, governance, and development (Adams, 1994; White & Adams, 1994). Path-dependence and complexity theories also have strong bases in historicism, because input, output, feedback, review, lag, environment, and interaction feed on history and previous experience. According to Broom (1986), the historical model is suitable for analysing public relations’ structure and processes because organizational functions are influenced by the internal and external environment.

**Historical Learning as the Base for Future Ethical Leadership and Trust Research**

For the purpose of theory building and future studies in ethical leadership, trust, and other related or relevant issue/topics, I would define historical learning as “an approach that creates unique historical awareness among individuals, groups, institutions, societies, and nations to use previous experience(s) or occurrence(s) as guidance to develop positive opinion(s) and framework(s) in tackling the problems and issues of today and tomorrow.” The definition in every sense is broad and holistic because it creates multiple perspectives to the study, analysis, and interpretation of social, economic, political, administrative, behavioral, and other scientific phenomena.

Historical learning should become the new focus, just as social learning theory has been the base for the study, analysis, and interpretation of social, economic, political, administrative, behavioral, and other scientific phenomena in research since it was authored by Albert Bandura. I am therefore, highly recommending that studies in the future, which study, analyze, and interpret social, economic, political, administrative, behavioral, and other scientific phenomena should lean instead on the historical learning approach. Topics such as the following should become the new tradition: ethical leadership and global trust: a historical learning construct, developing ethical leadership across borders: a historical learning perspective, and a historical learning approach in understanding trust and leaders. The above topics and many others could become the new bases for the study of research phenomena in many fields and disciplines.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper tried to address the question regarding the limits and weaknesses of the social learning approach by looking at the relationship between ethical leadership and trust. It argued that if trust is to be improved through ethical leadership, then the popular theoretical framework (social learning approach) through which most studies and result are premised and derived must be reviewed, because trust and its relatives (e.g. motivation and performance) are complex and dynamic. A historical learning approach was defined as an approach that creates unique historical awareness among individuals, groups, institutions, societies, and nations to use previous experience(s) or
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occurrence(s) as guidance to develop positive opinion(s) and framework(s) in tackling the problems and issues of today and tomorrow.

Argumentation was further justified by balancing the trust and leadership equation, the non-compatibility of different generations at work, and re-examining other theories and methods that support the historical viewpoint. It was discovered that the historical learning perspective can create an independent-learning perspective, because “modelling” that is advocated by the social learning approach could be absent and not suitable in some contextual analyses; modelling could be missing or far away, and leaders might fail in the expectation(s) to serve as role models. This paper does not aim to condemn the social learning theory, but to make arguments for looking beyond the theory, because social learning could be tied to historicism from some perspectives or deeper examination. The social learning theory is very limited, because it does not specify far learning, complexities of human behavior, personality, human, and biological differences. Future considerations should include how to scientifically make the historical learning approach a valid theory through grounded theory or social constructivism. Another consideration is how research phenomena (e.g. variables) could be conceptualized, problematized, operationalized, and measured through the historical learning approach.
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