

Ethical Leadership and its Impact on Employee Well-being: A Systematic Literature Review and Agenda for Future Research in Education

Alina George Sutari¹, Dr. Prasad Jeevan Pathak²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Ramcharan School of Leadership, Faculty of Business and Leadership, Dr. Vishwanath Karad MIT World Peace University, Pune, India

Email ID: alina.sutari@mitwpu.edu.in

²Associate Professor, School of Business, Faculty of Business and Leadership, Dr. Vishwanath Karad MIT World Peace University, Pune, India

Email ID: prasad.pathak@mitwpu.edu.in

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KEYWORDS

Ethical Leadership, Employee Well-being, Systematic Literature Review, Educational Institutes, Job Satisfaction, Burnout, Leadership Ethics.

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This systematic literature review (SLR) investigates the existing body of scholarly work on the relationship between ethical leadership and employee well-being. Recognizing the increasing global emphasis on cultivating ethical practices and fostering a thriving workforce, particularly within the demanding context of educational institutes, a compelling need emerged to synthesize and evaluate the current state of research to identify critical gaps and future directions.

Design/methodology/approach: The review adheres to a rigorous SLR protocol. A comprehensive search of the Scopus database, using keywords related to ethical leadership and well-being constructs, was followed by a multi-stage filtering process based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. This process resulted in a final sample of 73 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025 for in-depth thematic analysis.

Findings: The findings highlight prevailing trends in the existing literature, including dominant methodological approaches and commonly employed theoretical frameworks. It uncovers conceptual limitations in how employee well-being is often addressed and signals a need for broader and deeper exploration of the topic. The study emphasizes the importance of diversifying research methods, expanding geographical representation, and examining the underlying processes that connect ethical leadership with employee well-being in educational settings.

Originality/value: This paper provides a comprehensive, up-to-date map of the ethical leadership and well-being literature. It moves beyond previous reviews by offering a granular analysis of methodological trends and proposing a clear, actionable research agenda specifically tailored to address the need for fostering employee well-being within educational institutes.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the dual pressures of maintaining high ethical standards and ensuring workforce sustainability have become paramount for organizations worldwide. Ethical leadership, defined as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005), has emerged as a critical antecedent to positive organizational outcomes. Concurrently, the concept of employee well-being—encompassing not just job satisfaction but also psychological health, engagement, and a sense of purpose—is now recognized as a vital



component of organizational success and resilience (Guest, 2017).

While a growing body of research has examined the link between ethical leadership and employee outcomes, these findings are fragmented and have not been systematically synthesized with a specific focus on their applicability to the unique educational context. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) provides a robust methodology for synthesizing evidence and identifying a field's research trends and gaps (Xiao & Watson, 2019). Recent studies, such as the methodological mapping of agile project success literature by Kane and Pathak (2024), have confirmed the utility of this approach for bringing clarity to a research domain. Therefore, this paper employs an SLR to: (1) comprehensively map the current research landscape, detailing its geographical, methodological, and theoretical contours; (2) identify the predominant themes and conceptual models used to link ethical leadership to well-being; and (3) pinpoint significant research gaps to propose a clear and compelling agenda for future scholarly inquiry, with a specific emphasis on the under-researched context of educational institutes

2. METHODOLOGY

To ensure a comprehensive, transparent, and reproducible review, this study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, guided by the principles of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement (Page et al., 2021). The specific sequence of database filtering and the two-step manual screening process was patterned after the application of the SLR method in the study by Kane and Pathak (2024).

2.1. Search Strategy and Database Selection

The Scopus database was selected for its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature across social sciences, business, and psychology. The search was designed to identify articles focusing on the intersection of ethical leadership and well-being. A structured search query was developed, combining keywords for the primary concepts with a broad array of terms related to employee well-being. The complete search string used is detailed in **Appendix B**. This initial search yielded **66,299** documents.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The initial search results were systematically filtered using the multi-stage process detailed in Table 1.

Filter #	Filter Name	Parameter	Description/Details	Search Count	Result
1	Date Range	2020-2025	Recent data of last 5 years	35,499	
2	Publication Type	Article	Research Articles and Conference Papers to be short listed	27,375	
3	Publication Stage	Final	This will ensure that the final Published articles are referred	26,324	



4	Keywords	Psychological Well-Being, Mental Health, Well-Being, Mental Stress, Wellbeing, Burnout, Stress, Physical Well-being, Education, Physiological Stress, Stress, Psychological, Workplace, Leadership, Emotional Well-being, Gender, Ethical Leadership, Psychological Distress, Burnout, Professional, Job Stress, Fatigue, Emotional Stress, Professional Burnout, Psychological Well-Being, Job Satisfaction	This will ensure to further shortlist the data to be more accurate	20,487
5	Subject Area	Business, Management and Accounting, Social Sciences, Multidisciplinary, Psychology		8,361
6	Language	English	This is to refer Articles in English Language	7,993
7	Open Access	All Open Access	Open access Articles are shortlisted so that we can refer the complete articles	4,508
8	Citation	More than 10	This will ensure that the cited research papers are selected for analysis	1,349

Table 1: Multi-stage Filtering Process

Following the automated database filtering (Steps 1-5), the remaining 7,993 articles underwent a rigorous manual screening. This involved the "two-step elimination process" where titles, and subsequently abstracts, were analysed in detail to exclude studies that were not directly related to the central research question. This final step resulted in a corpus of **73 studies** deemed highly relevant for detailed analysis.

3. RESULTS: A DESCRIPTIVE AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The analysis of the 73 selected articles provides a clear snapshot of the current state of research in this domain.

3.1. Descriptive Overview of the Literature



The methodological and geographical characteristics of the reviewed literature reveal distinct patterns and significant imbalances.

Geographical Distribution: As shown in Figure 1, the geographical distribution of studies reveals a strong focus on Asia (60.3%), with a significant portion of studies not specifying their location or being global reviews. This highlights a major gap in research from European, African, and Latin American contexts.

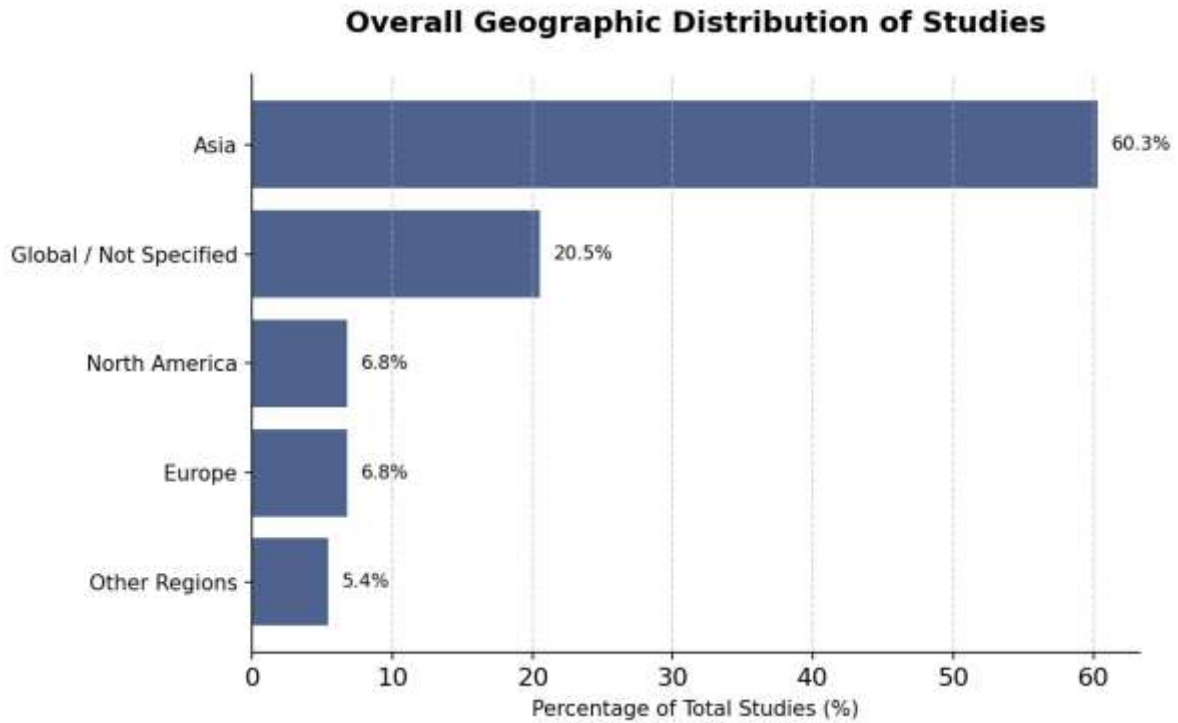


Figure 1

Within the 44 studies conducted in Asia, research is primarily led by scholars in China and Pakistan indicating a need for broader representation from other nations on the continent.

Methodological Approaches: The literature is overwhelmingly dominated by quantitative methods. As seen in Figure 2, 64.4% of studies do not specify their sampling technique.

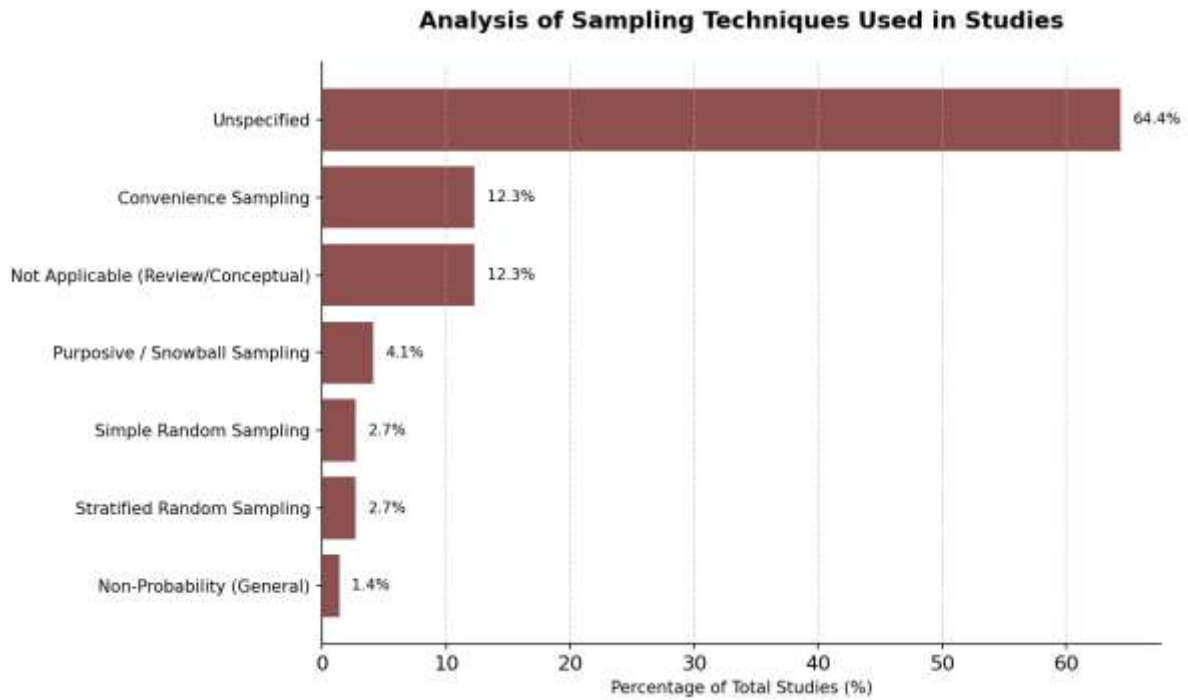


Figure 2

Furthermore, as Figure 3 illustrates, survey questionnaires (72.6%) are the data collection method of choice, with a lack of qualitative or experimental research.

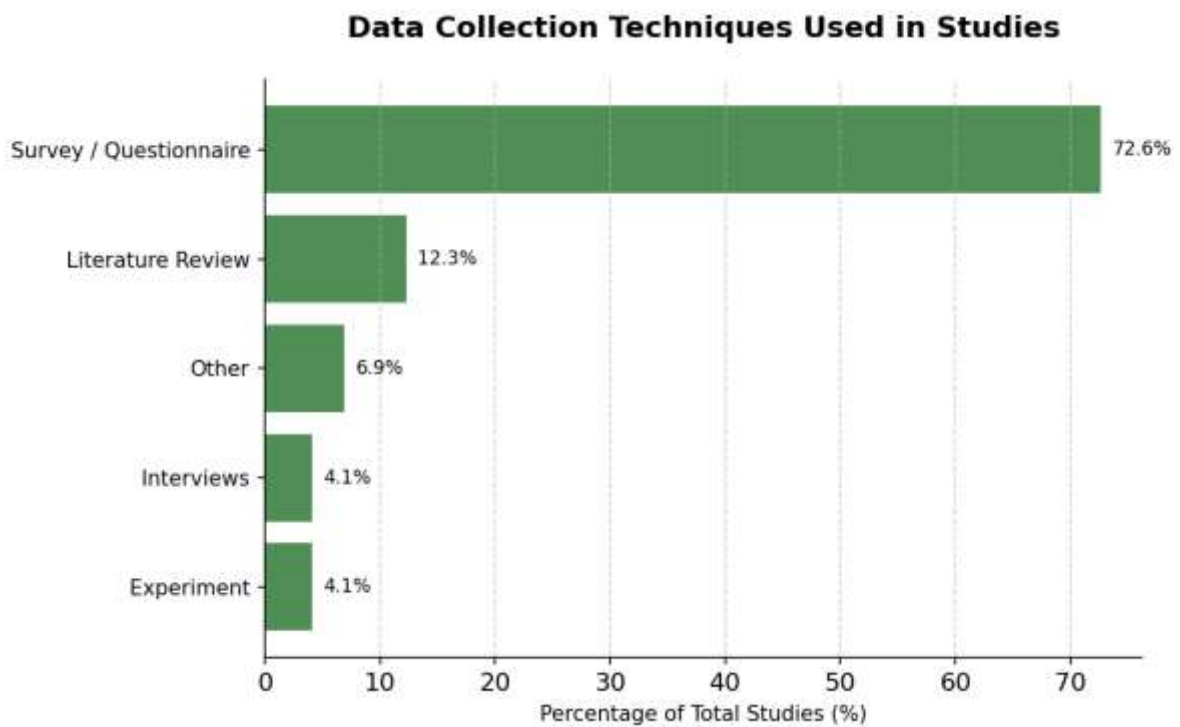


Figure 3



3.2. Dominant Theoretical Frameworks

The analysis revealed a reliance on a few core theories to explain the relationship between ethical leadership and employee outcomes:

- **Social Learning Theory (SLT):** The most prevalent framework, suggesting that employees learn and model the behaviours of ethical leaders, who act as credible role models.
- **Social Exchange Theory (SET):** Also highly common, this theory posits that when leaders treat employees ethically and with respect, employees reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviours like trust, commitment, and enhanced performance.
- **Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model:** This model is frequently used to frame ethical leadership as a crucial job resource that helps employees cope with job demands, mitigate burnout, and increase work engagement.

3.3. Thematic Synthesis of Research

A detailed thematic analysis of all 73 papers was conducted to extract key variables, mediating and moderating factors, and contextual details. The complete synthesis is provided in **Appendix A**.

4. DISCUSSION: IDENTIFIED RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This systematic review reveals several critical gaps in the literature, which present clear opportunities for future research, particularly within the context of educational institutes.

4.1. Conceptual Gaps

- **Moving Beyond Job Satisfaction:** The most significant conceptual limitation is the field's over-reliance on **job satisfaction** as the primary well-being outcome. As noted by academic advisory panels, this is a dated construct that fails to capture the complexity of the modern employee experience. The study by Kaimeng et al. (2022), for instance, provides a valuable model linking ethical leadership to job satisfaction via communication mechanisms. However, to truly understand well-being in a high-stress environment like education, future research must adopt a more holistic framework, measuring outcomes such as **burnout, work engagement, psychological safety, and work meaningfulness**.
- **Exploring the Mechanisms:** The mechanisms linking ethical leadership to well-being need further exploration.

4.2. Methodological Gaps

- **Need for Methodological Diversity:** The dominance of quantitative, cross-sectional surveys is a major weakness. There is an urgent need for **qualitative studies** to understand the lived experiences of employees under ethical leaders, and for **longitudinal studies** to establish causality more definitively. It is noteworthy that the methodological imbalances identified in this review mirror the findings of Kane and Pathak (2024) in their analysis of the agile project management literature. This parallel suggests that the identified gaps may represent a broader trend across management and social science research, reinforcing the urgent need for more diverse methodological approaches.
- **Rigor in Sampling:** Future studies must employ and clearly report more rigorous sampling techniques to enhance the validity and generalizability of findings.

4.3. Contextual Gaps

- **The Critical Need for Research in Education:** The most critical contextual gap is the lack of research specifically focused on **educational institutes**. This sector's unique combination of high emotional labour, mission-driven work, and societal importance makes it a critical area for study. Research is needed to understand how ethical leadership by principals, deans, and other academic leaders can mitigate teacher burnout, increase engagement, and ultimately contribute to better student outcomes.
- **Geographic and Cultural Diversity:** The concentration of research in a few countries necessitates more studies in under-represented regions like Europe, Latin America, and Africa to test the cross-cultural applicability of existing theories.



5. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review of 73 recent studies has comprehensively mapped the current landscape of research connecting ethical leadership and employee well-being, revealing several distinct trends. The researchers observed that:

- A significant geographical concentration of research in Asia (60.3%), with limited scholarly attention paid to contexts in Europe, Africa, and the Americas.
- Thematically, the field is underpinned by established frameworks such as Social Learning Theory and Social Exchange Theory.
- Methodologically, the literature is dominated by quantitative approaches, with surveys and questionnaires being the primary data collection technique in nearly three-quarters of the studies (72.6%).
- While purposive sampling was appropriately used in the few qualitative studies targeting experts, convenience sampling was the most commonly identified specific technique.
- These descriptive findings point to significant and actionable gaps in the current body of knowledge.
- The methodological imbalance highlights an urgent need for more qualitative and mixed-methods research to uncover the rich, contextual "how" and "why" behind the established quantitative relationships.
- Furthermore, the conceptual scope of well-being in the literature is often narrow. Many studies rely on "job satisfaction" as a proxy, a traditional construct that does not fully capture the modern challenges of burnout, engagement, and the search for meaning that define holistic employee well-being.

In conclusion, the primary contribution of this study is the identification of a clear, evidence-based agenda for future scholarly inquiry. There is a need for researchers to move beyond the current methodological and geographical confines. This unbolts a critical area for exploration, particularly advocating for in-depth, context-sensitive investigations to enrich the understanding of ethical leadership's multifaceted impact

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