



CHAPTER 1

Navigating Dilemmas and Ethical Orientations

Introduction

This chapter introduces the reader to the topic of navigating ethical dilemmas and ethical orientations. It defines ethical dilemmas and processes of conformity and resistance. It also explains the ethical orientation processes (EOPs) model, which encompasses all seven chapters.

Moreover, this chapter clarifies important epistemological positions between sociological leadership and individual leadership research. It also elucidates the difference between academic freedom and freedom of speech.

Navigating Dilemmas and Ethical Orientations

This section explores ethical orientations based on an article published in the area of social responsibility by Noble (2010). The focus is on processes of organizational and societal inequality and not on individual leadership styles. According to Noble's definition of ethical orientations, these processes pertain to individuals and their collective ethical orientations when they face ethical dilemmas. Dilemmas have no name and cannot be explained in a few words, while ethical issues can be recognized, and there is already a social agreement that the problem is an ethical issue. An issue addresses the right or wrong of a single value and can occur in any context. Issues can present claims from both single and collective stakeholders, and it is assumed that individuals can do the "right thing" if they choose to.

The ethical situation differs for those individuals who identify ethical dilemmas because they lack guidance, policies, or courses of action. Ethical dilemmas do not offer formal policies or rules to guide an individual's decisions, and in these situations, individuals with a "proactive leadership orientation" (Noble, 2010) have a long pathway to lead collective ethical dilemmas, which are processes of resistance toward a societally recognized issue. These ethical processes focus



on how and why things emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time. According to Langley et al. (2013), a process illuminates the role of tensions and contradictions that underlie its maintenance and reproduction in organizations and societies.

Table 1: Dilemmas characteristics

Dilemmas possess six characteristics
They are hard to explain and raise questions about whether the identified ethical content is a personal agenda or motivation and its impact on organizations and societies, affecting inequality. They challenge philosophical notions of integrity and the reasons individuals may feel uncomfortable with a situation. A dilemma cannot be expressed in a few words or shared with other people because it is not formulated as an issue for broader understanding.
A dilemma is specific to the ethical situation identified and does not exist outside of a specific context, as an issue does. A dilemma engages questions such as: What really matters in our societies? Whose interests count?
Dilemmas are controversial and may be perceived as important by some individuals and not by others. A dilemma can be so difficult to understand that some talented individuals redirect their integrity and devalue the experience. For example, such individuals may claim that it is merely personal motivation or an agenda and lacks ethical content. Dilemmas generate different perspectives on free speech and are challenging to lead in organizations and societies. It is a common political tactic to deflect ethical experiences to obscure a lack of integrity in personal conduct when individuals are confronted with dilemmas.
A dilemma involves and affects more than one individual, while an issue is claimed by a single stakeholder or group.
Individuals cannot choose what is right or wrong; it involves a system of competing values and collective identities.
It is not about individual intentions toward an outcome. Organizations can deny actions to resolve the situation.

Noble's (2010) concept of ethical orientations relates to sense-making, wherein individuals identify ethical content in unexpected situations according to their collective identities. Three categories of ethical leadership orientations were indicated through the sense-making process: proactive leaders, institutional leaders, and technical leaders. Noble's study discusses the significance of these three ethical orientations, focusing on the extent to which individuals and organizations drive ethical dilemmas. Collective identities are crucial to understanding ethical orientations because they form the basis upon which processes of resistance are led in organizations and societies.



While ethical issues are easy to identify because they have been previously labeled as ethical content, dilemmas are difficult to recognize. Not all individuals perceive ethical content in the same situation and possess different ethical orientations, which impacts the leadership of collective identities through processes of resistance and conformity.

Ethical orientations are not dependent on norms and moral principles; they are guided by the extent to which individuals lead dilemmas toward issues. Ethical orientations, as defined in this book, fall outside the scope of studies in deontological, consequentialist, virtue, and care ethics.

Table 2: Ethical orientations

Ethical orientations processes (EOPs)	Deontological orientations	Consequentialist orientations	Virtue orientations	Care orientations
Guided by the extent to which individuals lead dilemmas toward issues with processes of resistance in their organizations and societies.	Duties, rules, and obligations regardless of outcomes.	Evaluates actions based on the results for well-being or harm.	Focuses on character traits such as courage, integrity, and compassion.	Prioritizes relationships, empathy, and responsibility for others' vulnerability.

Although EOPs shares some common points with other definitions of ethical orientations, the focus is on dilemmas and leading processes of resistance.

Deontological orientations are seen in EOPs as a responsibility of causal capacity (discussed in the next sections); consequentialist orientations are viewed in EOPs as actions of decision-making and sense-making; and virtue and care orientations are examined in EOPs within collective identities and individualization processes rather than within the workings of the self, personal traits, emotions, and individual empathy.



Leading Processes of Conformity and Resistance

Collinson and Tourish (2015) argue that critical leadership studies (CLS) encourage “students to consider the ethical dilemmas of leadership practice in much greater depth than is normal in mainstream approaches” (p. 16). Moreover, CLS suggests that the power dynamics discussed in Chapter 3 and the career dimensions of time and space discussed in Chapter 4, as well as the global value chains (GVCs) discussed in Chapter 6, are interconnected topics in CLS. For example, GVCs interact with regionalization, which are local economic dynamics of “local labour markets, product markets, supply chains, and cultures and histories that all facilitate and constrain leadership dynamics” (p. 19). As such, the leading processes of conformity and resistance are not solely about the self; they focus on how individuals collectively lead dilemmas toward an understanding of issues.

Differentiating CLS from critical management studies (CMS) is also important, as it represents a shift in CMS. Collinson and Tourish (2015) argue that the difference relies on “emphasizing that leaders and leadership dynamics (not just managers and management) exercise significant power and influence over contemporary processes. Whilst CMS concentrates primarily on management (and negates leadership), the field of CLS suggests that power is also a central feature of leadership dynamics” (Gordon, 2002, p. 27). A body of research on academic freedom exists in CLS, with an understanding of leadership power dynamics as fundamental to its examination (e.g., Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Collinson, 2011; 2014; 2020). CLS views this research as being in its infancy, and it is very different from the theoretical paradigms of leadership focused on the self. The concept of leadership in CLS is important to differentiate from the self and is collective. This distinction is crucial in CLS, as CLS research sees leadership and power relations as problematic in structures, although how these authors interface with the self is not always clear, as it is in CMS. For CLS authors, power can be (re)conceptualized in multiple structural forms (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). Therefore, CLS explores “the dialectical nature of leadership power dynamics and highlights the fundamental tensions, dilemmas, paradoxes and contradictions, which can also characterize the ways leadership power is enacted” (Collinson & Tourish, 2015, p. 29) in organizations and societies.

In practice, this can be illustrated with empirical data from my own work (Noble, 2002–2025 Data Archival access under permission) to explore processes of conformity and resistance across different chapters. In this book, the EOPs model illustrates how individuals’ sense-making and decision-making actions of respon-



sibility, discussed in the next section of this chapter, involve power threads and contribute to structural, economic, political, ideological, and discursive forms.

The three guiding principles of the dynamics of conformity and resistance, discussed by authors such as Collinson and Tourish (2015) and Knights and Willmott (1999), are applied across chapters and explained in Chapters 1 and 3. The three guidelines from Collinson and Tourish (2015) are “romanticism,” “foregrounding power,” and “followership.” A summary of these guiding principles is as follows: “Romanticism” is suggested to be explored through a focus on various global and local organizational contexts and on alternative organizations (Parker et al., 2014). According to these authors, the self, as understood through psychological approaches, tends to romanticize individual leaders while underestimating the dynamics of power. Power is naturalized, with no consideration of context or its potentially harmful effects on those in subordinated positions (Willmott, 2015). The same applies to ethical orientation processes with regard to how leadership has been debated romantically by psychologists, with fallacies of power. This guideline must be clear, and the EOPs model discusses the impact on economic inequalities, not the self.

In the same vein, the second guideline which Collinson and Tourish (2015) termed “foregrounding power,” challenges power dynamics of resistance and conformity processes in “ways in which white men and specific masculinities continue to pervade leadership decision-making, the conditions and consequences of leaders’ hubris, the downsides of followers conformity, the processes and consequences of follower resistance and the dynamics of leadership and followership” (p. 35). Moreover, the authors also suggest that “few CEOs are women. Even fewer are Supermen” (p. 35).

Regarding the third guideline, “followership,” the authors suggest a clear rejection of functionalist approaches that underestimate or take power differentials for granted (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). The authors emphasize knowledgeability, which rejects common-sense judgment and favors sense-making proactivity, related to ethical orientation processes (top) and the category of proactive individuals from Noble (2010).

These guidelines will be discussed across chapters and developed within different topics that are useful for readers to develop new perspectives on the processes of conformity and resistance. EOPs are practiced in different contexts and can significantly shape organizational contexts and societies characterized by multiple inequalities, as depicted by social class mobility, gender, and ethnicity, integrated in the dimensions of time and space as discussed in the topic of careers in Chapter 4.



Therefore, for those readers who do not clearly understand how chapters are interconnected, the “glue” between chapters lies in the discovery of ethical dilemmas and processes of conformity and resistance. These processes are often found in situations and contexts in organizations and societies, and it is how individuals lead these processes with their collective responsible EOPs.

In this book, the terms “leaders,” “managers,” “influencers,” and “followers,” which have been discussed in a wide range of literature on management (e.g., Ladkin, 2010), are in general used interchangeably with the terms “individuals” or “people.” It avoids confusion with the leadership studies of the self and is used collectively.

Leading collective processes of resistance and conformity begins with individuals’ awareness, but the concept elaborated in this chapter includes responsibility and, therefore, is not on the self and how individuals relate to others in the collective, with processes of individualization discussed in Chapter 2.

Leadership has been the most widely taught subject in business schools (Collinson & Tourish, 2015) with a focus on the self, individual leadership, and leadership styles. Despite the widespread nature of the discipline of leadership, the World Forum’s Future of Jobs Report (2023) report found that curiosity and social awareness are among the subjects expected to be in growing demand in the workforce due to inadequate training. This is not surprising, as the kind of leadership taught focuses on individual skills and traits, and many authors confuse these concepts with epistemologically significant differences.

Curiosity and social awareness are the focus of the EOPs model and dynamics, discussed in more depth in Chapter 5. These are not skills and traits but rather how individuals relate to others with responsibility, which establishes their ethical orientations to spot dilemmas (not issues) in our economies, societies, and education. It is certainly about what makes us humans – not through skills and traits, but through our collective identities and necessities as humans to resist conformity imposed by forms of power such as technology. It is how we relate to each other that prompts us to identify organizational and societal dilemmas, and the EOPs model guides us toward creative actions that will benefit societies and generations with sustainability.

The EOPs framework does not adopt psychological assumptions and approaches but can critically comment on their forms when these confer privileges on the role of the powerful individual in the mainstream leader-centric paradigm (Jackson & Parry, 2018). This position does not adhere to leaders’ abilities and skills or draw on traits, styles/skills, situational/contingent, charisma, transformational/transactional, leader-member exchange, servant, spiritual, or authentic



leadership. Moreover, this book is not about inspirational leadership, which is usually taught in mainstream courses (Pfeffer and Fong, 2005; Rosenfeld and Khurana, 2008; Cunha et al., 2024), focusing on leaders' personal and political fallacies and narcissistic syndromes. Collinson and Tourish (2015) argue that leading "follower compliance and conformity, as well as resistance and dissent, are important features" (p. 2) in critical studies. Corroborating with these authors and others from CMS (e.g., Knights and Willmott, 1999), leading processes of conformity and resistance are presented in this book through topics analyzed within the EOPs framework and discussed in the next sections.

There exists a type of literature that reviews ethical leadership focusing on legal compliance, but these perspectives are often normative and behavioral (e.g., Nieuwenboer et al., 2025).

The literature on leadership is extensive, and this book is not about ethical leadership or organizational psychology, which do not inform the EOPs framework. Some authors recognize that there is something more than what psychology research can offer (e.g., Waldinger and Schulz, 2023; Pinker, 2005, 2025), but there is limited understanding of these limitations when applied to collective ethical leadership. Haidt (2007), another psychologist, refers to moral emotions that do not contribute to EOPs because it is clearly not about choices of morality and judgment. EOPs considers that we do not exist in conditions of our own choosing and embraces awareness of responsibility, which is discussed in the next section. Other authors write about leaders and their relationships with followers by focusing on culture, charisma, and performance leadership (e.g., De Hoogh et al., 2004; Den Hartog and De Hoogh, 2024). These authors who discuss leadership (e.g., Ladkin, 2010; Wilson, 2016; Schyns et al., 2019) focus on skills exhibited through representations of paradoxical behaviors. Power is certainly seen as central in leading modern organizations and societies (Clegg et al., 2006), but the focus of these authors is on the self, leaders' influence, and personal strategies (e.g., Yukl, G., 2008, 2012; Keltner, D., 2016). Pfeffer (2010, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b) teaches the rules of power by mapping a path for one's own achievement of success through the right presence and networks, advising against resenting those who hold authority. The author claims that those who do not know the rules of power will lose it to someone who does, and that power leading to success requires uncomfortable matters. He asserts that it is not through hard work and loyalty that people get promoted in their jobs, and that those with less talent may be promoted through corporate politics. Therefore, he encourages bold moves and advises against waiting for permission, direction, or being told what to do. Pfeffer says that power favors those who present themselves upfront by acting with an attitude of authority and advises not to



suffer from imposter syndrome. Instead, he encourages one to master power by stopping acting like a fraud.

These are, in fact, personal and political common-sense encouragements, perhaps useful for management trainers, but do not inform the literature on EOPs. It is perhaps because of this disgraceful grapevine between psychologists that work falling outside their scope is projected without reflection as personal and political, which obliges me as an academic author to include a table explaining what is academic freedom and what is freedom of speech.

The empirical data presented throughout this book utilize ethnographic research methods applied to the exploration of ethical dilemmas. Brannen's (2025) ethnographic study presents an interesting compendium that problematizes cultural settings, but the author does not address the investigation of dilemmas and structural inequality, which is a topic I am developing for a future publication. Until recently, individuals were rarely asked what constitutes an ethical situation for them. It is very difficult to spot ethical content in critical situations, but when individuals become aware of such harmful content, they rarely engage in the process of reporting such concerns for fear of being misunderstood or unable to handle the trouble (Toffler, 1986).

Studies on EOPs embrace the literature of ethnographic methods and techniques of data collection (TDC) in ways that enable the discovery of ethical content. TDC is often overlooked and can change the interpretation of data, which is an area of future research development. It is astonishing that very few researchers have investigated ethical daily routines in organizations (e.g., Toffler, 1986; Noble, 2004), which requires an understanding of various stakeholders in potentially harmful situations. These studies conducted in-depth qualitative interviews and daily empirical observations, which involved attending organizational board meetings, daily work practices, and private social meetings. This type of ethnographic immersive method requires determination, patience, strong empathy, and even silence from the researcher when they do not like what they hear and see. Ethical ethnography is complex and has been overlooked because not all researchers are capable of performing ethnographic TDC.

As an experienced researcher and author of how the public and private arenas shape the lives of those who work for corporations, ethnographic TDC that explores ethical dilemmas operates similarly. It requires that the researcher is trusted by the interviewees, possesses physical presence and prestige among the organizations studied, and has a "perceived" collective identity with those individuals. Collecting ethical empirical data of this kind is not described by issues or in empirical cases of corruption, which some authors summarize in



their social media accounts (e.g., Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2025). The research of ethical dilemmas is neither a journalistic investigation which can unfold the secret practices (e.g., the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), located in Basel, Switzerland, which is said to be liable for any money transaction without governmental control).

Ethical dilemmas and processes of conformity and resistance are found in trivial incidents and routines that seem unimportant, with a multitude of complex and paradoxical accounts from individuals in organizations and societies. Accounts and narratives derived from in-depth interviews collected over time are “more than simple chronicles of events; they give shape to the forward movement of time” (Sennett, 1998, p. 30). The case studies and accounts presented in this book are from in-depth interviews I collected over the past two decades in various organizations and countries. The data archival has been verified by senior academics of my research affiliations for its veracity, and the data were collected by following the same processes of my community of academic freedom. Some of the content from TDC and research methods has already been published (Noble, 2004; 2014), but over the years, I have realized that there is much unsaid that is useful for other researchers. Future research is already planned to develop TDC to investigate ethical dilemmas in organizations and societies. The next sections discuss the role of causal capacity, which applies to the EOPs model.

Ethical Situations in EOPs

The word “ethics” is derived from the Greek understanding of “ethos,” which has an open meaning related to customs, habits, character, and the sentiment of community. Toffler (1986) argues that ethical situations are more pervasive and complex than generally recognized because these concerns “involve factors that make the right and wrong less patently clear” (pp. 11–12). The results of judgment and behavioral studies often lead to a lack of responsibility for causal capacity regarding what is contextually regarded as immoral, which is not necessarily illegal for others. In policy studies, normalizing what is immoral and criminal takes a long road. For example, acid attacks on women were only recently considered a crime, with the research agenda in policy studies led by Hanson-Defusco et al. (2024).

Ethical situations in business and organizational studies are usually considered non-existential and decontextualized, creating an incongruent paradox of questionable ethical processes. Such ethical situations are often related to issues of hiring, firing, demotion, promotion, feedback appraisals, discrimination, and re-



ward systems. Other common situations in organizations involve environmental issues and corruption, as described within the field of corporate responsibility. These include issues with the discontinuity of products and services affecting customers and environmental dangers that deal with external conditions.

Organizations embrace issues in what “they will be supported, and where, in the eyes of the organization, they will be seen to be transgressing” (Toffler, 1986, p. 25), but organizations do not support dilemmas and their leadership. The code of ethics for issues reflects organizational culture in what is popularly defined as “the way we do things around here” (Toffler, 1986, p. 24). These are patterns of shared basic assumptions learned by groups of individuals (Schein, 2010), and, accordingly, individuals who work in such organizations are accountable to those codes of ethics. This kind of accountability, usually described for environmental issues in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and others, is certainly not what is discussed in ELO because the focus is on dilemmas.

Affected individuals and societies are impacted by unethical situations that are not labeled and cannot be described in a few words. One of the difficulties in determining responsibility for causal capacity is that individuals only report their own competing values, with many absences that limit the scope of the empirical data and its interpretation (e.g., Toffler, 1986). Therefore, the importance of ethnographic research methods in ethical studies, as discussed in the previous section, is paramount.

Responsibility for causal capacity serves as an umbrella for ethical dilemmas and is not limited to common issues discussed in business ethics, which involve a “complex web of ideals, ethical principles, legal obligations, moral guidance, norms, virtues, professional duties, exemplars of good and bad behavior, wisdom, religious injunctions, and homespun adages for living well” (Badaracco, 2024).

Responsibility for causal capacity in business ethics relies on three concepts: role, causal, and capacity responsibility (Hart, 2012; Gunnemann et al., 1972; Toffler, 1986). Role responsibility relates to ethical situations at work and is specific to job descriptions or the activity in business. It seems straightforward, but many roles are not part of a formal job description, and these implicit roles fall outside of formal job descriptions. Causal responsibility relates to individual competing values regarding what causes harm to others and to oneself. Capacity responsibility means the individual assumes a commitment to act in problematic situations. Capacity responsibility is not necessarily spatially bound to physical proximity and can apply to remote work contexts. It is the commitment toward collective actions that exposes the ethical dilemma and how it was led toward a