The Influence of Board and Coach on the Ethical Climate Perception of Soccer Players

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Introduction
Recent scandals illustrate that soccer offers a setting in which many ethical issues occur. For example, the testimony of a former British soccer player, who was systematically sexually abused by his youth coach, provided inducement for many people involved in soccer to report about sexual harassment, and subsequent cover-ups (Bennhold, 2016). The often passive attitude of organizations' leaders regarding these issues contrasts with the potential positive impact of ethical leadership in sport (Burton et al., 2017). Ethical leadership can be understood as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate and new conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Kaptein, 2017, p. 12). An ethical leader ideally impersonates three roles, namely being a moral person (i.e., being honest, reliable, ...), a moral manager (i.e., promoting ethical behavior, through ethics communication, fair rewarding, reinforcement, and empowerment), and a moral entrepreneur (i.e., creating new and innovative ethical norms) (Kaptein, 2017).

Despite the academic popularity of ethical leadership, little remains known about the interplay of organizational ethical leadership with other levels of ethical leadership. Due to the substantial social distance between the board of directors as organizational leaders, and most organizational members, research suggests that at least part of the ethical influence of the board of directors takes place indirectly (Hansen et al., 2013). Scholars tend to speak about a trickle-down (or cascading) effect in this regard, in which (part of) the effect of organizational ethical leadership occurs indirectly, via supervisory ethical leadership (Hansen et al., 2013).

Given this, the present study examines the influence of player-perceived board ethical leadership on the player-perceived ethical climate of the soccer club. We hereby put focus on the potential mediating role of the supervisory level of player-perceived coach ethical leadership, since many scholars have already pointed out that soccer coaches play a major part in stimulating the ethical behavior of their players, and the ethical climate in their soccer clubs (e.g., Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009; Chow et al., 2009).

Theory
Central to the concept of ethical leadership is social learning theory, which points to the fact that people are most likely to observe and imitate the attitudes and behaviors of people close by (Brown et al., 2005). Seen from this perspective, leaders act as role models for their followers. However, several scholars have also pointed to the fact that the social distance between organizational leaders and most organizational members may limit this social learning/role modelling influence (Hansen et al., 2013; Mayer et al., 2009). Therefore, they propose that (part of) the influence of organizational ethical leadership runs via supervisory ethical leadership. We believe that the same process may be present in amateur soccer clubs, as the considerable social distance between the board of directors and the soccer players may lead to a more abstract and critical view of the players on the ethical leadership of the board (Tumasjan et al., 2011). The coach may act as a critical go between in this regard, since it has already been extensively indicated that the coach is a major influence when it comes to player-related ethical behavior in the context of sport organizations (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009; Chow et al., 2009). Consequently, we propose the following main research hypothesis:

The influence of player-perceived board ethical leadership in amateur soccer clubs, is mediated by (trickles down via) player-perceived coach ethical leadership.

However, until now, it remains unclear how the influence or effectiveness of ethical leadership can be measured. Several options are present, such as counting incidents or studying organizational documents (De Waegeneer, 2015).
Nonetheless, we support the idea that the concept of ethical climate is a very powerful tool to measure the influence of ethical leadership. Although ethical climate represents perceptions on ethical behavior, and on the handling of ethical issues in an organization, it is also strongly related to actual ethical behavior (Arnaud & Schminke, 2012). Moreover, the theoretical strength of ethical climate is shaped by the consideration of all four necessary steps to come to ethical behavior (Arnaud, 2006). These ethical climate steps refer to Rest’s (1986) steps of moral development: moral sensitivity (i.e., being aware of an ethical issue), moral judgment (i.e., applying normative frameworks to judge the issue), moral motivation (i.e., considering ethical motives compared to other motives), and moral character (i.e., implementing a response) (Arnaud, 2006).

Methodology
In cooperation with the amateur soccer federation in Flanders (Belgium), all associated adult players were asked to participate. These players were requested to complete an online questionnaire, including validated scales to measure board and coach ethical leadership (ELS by Brown et al., 2005), and the four steps of the ethical climate (ECI by Arnaud, 2006) of their soccer club. Also, control variables, such as age, gender, organizational tenure, and level of play, were measured. In total, 438 players (n = 438) completed the questionnaire. Afterwards, these data were analyzed, using SPSS software, and Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro for mediation and regression analyses. All control mechanisms for regression and mediation analyses (such as bootstrapping) were implemented, as suggested by Field (2009).

Results
Correlations between the four steps of ethical climate are very high (r’s up to .71, p < .01), leading us to work with the average score for ethical climate. Regression analysis shows that player-perceived board ethical leadership positively influences the player-perceived ethical climate of the soccer club ($\beta = .36$, SE = .03, p < .01). Moreover, mediation analysis indicates that the total effect of player-perceived board ethical leadership ($b = .42$, SE = .03, $t = 15.52$, p < .01) runs partly (for 21 %) indirect via player-perceived coach ethical leadership. Considering the control variables, level of play has a positive effect on player-perceived coach ethical leadership ($\beta = .05$, SE = .02, p = .01), whereas gender ($♂ = 0$, $♀ = 1$) has a significant effect on player-perceived ethical climate ($\beta = .23$, SE = .07, p < .01).

Discussion
This study provides much-anticipated empirical work on ethical leadership in sport, by revealing that the influence of board ethical leadership on amateur soccer players partly trickles down via coach ethical leadership. Consequently, we show that coaches are of considerable importance in the process of ethical leadership in amateur soccer clubs, due to their proximity towards both the players and the board of directors. The social distance between the board and the players may contribute to the impact of the coaches, although an ample direct ethical influence of the board on the players remains present. Moreover, through highlighting the important mediating/go between role of the coaches, this study offers amateur soccer clubs a meaningful incentive to highly value their coaches. This could be put into practice by offering them a pivotal role within the management of the club, while simultaneously investing in the development and training of their ethical leadership skills.