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Discussability ethical values, constructive controversy and innovative work behavior in teams

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Abstract: This study investigates the dynamic interplay between the shared ethical values emphasizing discussability, constructive controversy and innovative work behavior (IWB) in teams. We use a longitudinal design to evaluate in a sample of 98 organizational teams the co-evolution of discussability ethical values, constructive controversy and innovative work behavior over time. We use a latent growth curve modeling approach to test the mediating role of constructive controversy in the relation between discussability ethical values and innovative work behavior. Results show that the slope and intercept of discussability ethical values positively co-evolve with the slope and intercept for constructive controversy. Moreover, the slope and intercept of constructive controversy positively co-evolve with the slope and intercept of innovative work behavior. These results show how dynamics of team-level ethical values shape innovative trajectories over time and highlight the pivotal role of discussability as an ethical value that fosters open dialogue and constructive controversy, ultimately enhancing IWB in teams.

Keywords: *ethical culture, discussability, constructive controversy, innovative work behavior.*

Introduction

Team creativity and innovation are impacted by the openness to change of the organizational context in which teams operate (Mohammed et al., 2023; Curşeu et al., 2022) and shared ethical values are conducive for innovative work behavior (Khorakian et al., 2019). At the other end of the spectrum, organizational misconduct (i.e., market manipulation) impedes innovation and several macro-level mechanisms such as short-term strategic focus, reduced agency and reduced equity value were shown to disincentivize innovative behaviors (Cumming et al.,

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2020). Organizational misconduct however is inherently tied to weak ethical organizational culture (Greve et al., 2010; Kaptein, 2009), therefore cultural values are essential for explaining the association between ethical misconduct and innovation in organizations (Pučėtaitė et al., 2016; Riivari et al., 2019). Our study starts from the notion that teams are the innovative building blocks of modern organizations (Kilcullen et al., 2023; van Knippenberg, 2017) and building on interactionist models of creativity and innovation (Curşeu et al., 2022; Zhou & Hoever, 2014) we set out to investigate the micro foundations of the link between ethical organizational culture and innovative work behaviors in teams. We use the integrative model of cognitive diversity (van Rijswijk et al., 2024) to argue that constructive controversy reflects divergent process gains that explain the interplay between discussability ethical values and innovative work behavior in organizational teams. In line with the interactionist models of group creativity (Zhou & Hoever, 2014) we argue that shared openness to discuss ethical issues (discussability ethical values) reflect an organizational context that fosters constructive controversy and ultimately fosters innovative work behavior in teams. In other words, we build on the notion of creative trajectories to argue that discussability ethical values (as indicators of an organizational context open to idea sharing and exploration) and constructive conflict co-evolve to impact emergent innovation in organizational teams.

Constructive conflict and controversy are driving forces for innovative behavior at work (Tjosvold & Yu, 2007; Vollmer & Seyr, 2013; O'Neill & McLarnon, 2018; Curşeu et al., 2022) as they foster information elaboration and exploration of diverse viewpoints (van Knippenberg, 2017). Empirical evidence shows that constructive controversy promotes innovation at both the individual level (Chen, Lui, & Tjosvold, 2005) and the team level (Tjosvold & Yu, 2007) and an underlying assumption is that when exposed to divergent ideas, group members experience cognitive conflict that challenges their implicit theories, opinions and task-related information (Nemeth, 1986; Curşeu et al., 2012; Curşeu et al., 2022). Such horizontal cognitive differentiation in groups motivates epistemic curiosity and the search for new information that are essential for innovative work behavior (Vollmer & Seyr, 2013; van Rijswijk et al., 2024). Moreover, horizontal cognitive differentiation fosters divergent process gains (van Rijswijk et al., 2024) and collective information exploration that ultimately increases group innovative performance (Curşeu et al., 2012; Tjosvold & Yu, 2007; Toader & Kessler, 2018). Because dissent or more broadly innovative behavior are considered "discretionary behaviors" (Janssen, 2000) and are not typically included in prescribed job descriptions or explicitly defined employee roles, it becomes important to understand what factors shape willingness to engage in constructive controversy in groups.

Various antecedents to constructive controversy have been extensively investigated in the literature so far, ranging from individual factors (Wang et al., 2010) to group-level factors (Al-Ghazali & Afsar, 2021) and broader cultural factors (Curşeu & ten Brink, 2016; Tjosvold et al., 2022), but little attention has been paid to organizational values, in particular values related to team ethical culture as antecedents to constructive controversy. Previous research shows that constructive controversy has a positive association with team creativity especially when the organizational context is open to innovation (Curşeu et al., 2022). Team ethical culture refers to a shared set of ethical values that shape interpersonal behavior in teams and organizations (DeBode et al., 2013) and organizational teams have been shown to vary substantially in their shared ethical values even within the same organizational context (Cabana & Kaptein, 2021). In line with the interactionist models of group creativity (Zhou & Hoever, 2014) and the differentiation view of ethical organizational culture (Cabana & Kaptein, 2021), we argue that team level differences in discussability ethical values (openness to share, discuss and correct ethical issues and dilemmas) reflect contextual forces that shape the willingness to engage in constructive controversy and ultimately innovative work behavior in teams. In doing so we answer the call for more refined perspectives on the consequences of ethical organizational

culture (Roy et al., 2024) as well as the call for longitudinal exploration of constructive controversy (Tjosvold et al., 2022) in relation to ethical values and present one of the first empirical attempts to use latent growth modeling in a longitudinal design to test the mediating role of constructive controversy in the relationship between discussability ethical values and innovative work behavior in teams.

Theory and hypotheses

Interactionist models of group creativity emphasize the synergistic role of contextual variables for creative processes, as actors (groups or individuals) that operate in social settings that are conducive for innovation are more likely to engage in creative endeavors (Zhou & Hoever, 2014). At the individual level, previous research shows that willingness to try new things as a key driver of radical innovation is related to contextual, rather than personal factors (Eubanks et al., 2016), while at the group level communal sharing relational climate fosters group creativity (Mohammed et al., 2023) and organizational contexts open to innovation strengthen the positive association between minority dissent and group creativity (Curşeu et al., 2022). Openness to change in organizational settings is a positive predictor for the strength of the ethical organizational culture (Manole et al., 2024), therefore openness to change is a process common to both ethical values as well as creative endeavors in teams (Curşeu et al., 2022). Cultural values and symbols shape creative processes (Zou et al., 2023) and literature points out cultural antecedents for minority dissent (Curşeu & Ten Brink, 2016), creative performance as well as normative influences (Nemeth, Brown & Rogers, 2001; Shahinpoor & Matt, 2007; Stone et al, 1994) showing that in social or organizational contexts in which disagreement is socially accepted, team members have a higher likelihood of engaging in constructive disagreements during group interactions. We aim to extend the literature on the antecedents of constructive controversy by investigating the role of cultural values of discussability, defined as willingness to share, discuss and correct ethical issues and dilemmas at work (DeBode et al., 2013), as an antecedent of constructive controversy and innovative work behavior in teams.

Ethical organizational culture can be understood as the collection of shared norms and interpretive frameworks through which employees evaluate appropriate conduct in everyday organizational life (Kaptein 2009). Such cultural systems provide behavioural guidance, shape responses to ethical dilemmas, and influence how employees interpret the consequences of their actions (Kaptein, 2011; Roy et al., 2024; Blom & Curşeu, 2025a). The Corporate Ethical Virtues Model (CEVM, Kaptein, 2009) includes eight virtues that reflect the overall organizational focus on ethical concerns and literature has shown that such a global focus on ethical organizational virtues enforces employee ethical behaviors (Kaptein, 2011). Sharing cultural ethical values in teams lowers ethical burden, reduces stress and increases work engagement due to fewer emerging (ethical) dilemmas faced by employees (Curşeu et al., 2020). The Team Ethical Cultures framework, (Cabana & Kaptein, 2021) posits that shared ethical virtues in teams provide clear standards, behavioral expectations and reduce experiences of psychologically taxing conflicts, such as ethical dilemmas. Discussability is a key value described in the CEVM (Kaptein, 2009) and refers to openness to discuss within teams ethical issues and difficult problems with moral implications. Teams in which dissent and constructive controversy are socially accepted and recognized as a problem-solving approach have superior performance as dissent fosters information search and elaboration and the strategic process is more exhaustive and comprehensive (Shahinpoor & Matt, 2007; Samba et al., 2018). Discussability is a key set of cultural values that emphasizes openness to express and discuss sensitive organizational issues (DeBode et al., 2013) and teams sharing such cultural values are more likely to engage in open debates and discussions. Previous empirical results reveal a strong positive association between openness to discuss ethical issues and innovative behavior in organizations (Pučėtaitė et al., 2016; Riivari et al., 2019), yet the mechanisms that explain this relationship were not extensively explored so far.

Shared discussability values in teams create a safe space in which members can exchange, analyze and discuss experiences, including moral dilemmas and other sensitive task-related issues (Blom & Curşeu, 2025b; Riivari et al., 2019; Pučėtaitė et al., 2016). Bird and Waters (1989) also argue that continuous avoidance of moral conversations reinforces an amoral organizational culture that leads to higher moral stress and decreases moral authority of normative expectations. All in all, shared discussability ethical values is integral part of a cooperative mind set in which team members feel free to engage in open discussions and feel safe to express their views and opinions.

The emergence of productive disagreement depends strongly on how team members perceive the relationship between their goals. When objectives are viewed as mutually supportive, divergent viewpoints are more likely to be explored rather than suppressed (Tjosvold et al., 1986; Toader & Kessler, 2018). Under competitive conditions, however, disagreement is more likely to become defensive and less likely to generate collective learning. Indeed, meta-analytic evidence supports this claim showing that cooperative goals are conducive while competitive goals are detrimental to constructive controversy (Tjosvold et al., 2022). The underlying assumption here is that ethical conflicts focused on competing goals are disruptive as members aim to prove their position through winning arguments (win lose approach), while in a cooperative mind-set the discussions of ethical issues are based on persuasion (Nielsen 1996) and constructive controversy emerges as a form of dialogue in which differing viewpoints are considered with an open mind (Tjosvold et al., 2022).

Teams characterized by strong discussability norms create conversational spaces in which sensitive concerns can be raised without fear of social sanction (Riivari et al., 2019). Such openness encourages the exchange of alternative interpretations, facilitates critical reflection, and allows ethical concerns to become part of collective sensemaking processes (Pučėtaitė et al., 2016). When discussability ethical values are shared, team members do not perceive a significant amount of competition or interpersonal risk associated with sharing divergent viewpoints. On the contrary, in team cultures with low openness to discuss ethical issues, criticism is not encouraged or accepted and employees figuratively close their eyes and ears to what they want to see or hear as the organizational climate is perceived as being punitive for open expression of disagreements. In line with these arguments, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1. *Discussability has a positive co-evolution with constructive controversy.*

The literature so far has extensively theorized the role of constructive controversy for innovation, both at the individual level (Chen, Lui & Tjosvold, 2005) as well as at the team level (Tjosvold & Yu, 2007) and organizational level (Tjosvold et al., 2022), yet little attention has been paid to shared ethical values in teams as possible antecedents of such constructive controversy Openly discussing dilemmas and engaging in constructive controversy, where divergent views are considered with an open mind, has many similarities with minority dissent, a key driver of innovation and creativity in teams (Curşeu et al., 2012; Nemeth, 1986). Constructive controversy reflects therefore a high level of horizontal cognitive differentiation, that is conducive for divergent process gains, fosters task synergy and ultimately increases innovative performance in teams (Van Rijswijk et al., 2024). Research on group level information processing (leading to innovation) shows that in addition to individual cognitive processes and knowledge shared by team members, the way teams process information depends on the nature of interpersonal interactions among team members (Grand et al., 2016; Curşeu, 2006; Curşeu & Schruijer, 2008, Curşeu & Pluut, 2018; Rapp et al., 2021). To produce highly differentiated and innovative cognitive structures, team members must contribute to group discussions with their unique, differentiated and sometimes divergent knowledge (Curşeu et al. 2012; Toader & Kessler, 2018) and thus constructive controversy is a form of divergent process gains (van Rijswijk et al., 2024) and key prerequisite for information elaboration (Rapp et al.,

2021; Grand et al., 2016) that ultimately fosters innovative work behavior and performance (Toader & Kessler, 2018; Tjosvold et al., 2022).
To summarize, developing creative solutions and generating innovation can be understood as the result of a collective information transformation process in which knowledge, experience, information, ideas from different perspectives have to be dynamically integrated into a joint (innovative) solution. Such a process is dynamic as the constructive controversy varies in time (Tjosvold et al., 2022), therefore we expect that when constructive controversy emerges, it will stimulate innovative work behaviors. Cross-sectional studies showed that constructive controversy has a positive effect on innovativeness (Chen et al, 2005; Tjosvold & Yu, 2007), and building on the call for more dynamic models presented in Volmer and Seyr (2013) we expect that in a longitudinal perspective, constructive controversy positively co-evolve with innovative work behavior.
Hypothesis 2. *Constructive controversy co-evolves positively with innovative work behavior.*

As fast-paced environments demand effectiveness from teams and exhaustive knowledge that is often not present within each team, the need-to-know what others outside the team know is paramount (Curşeu & Pluut, 2018). We argue that constructive controversy is an important prerequisite for the emergence of team cognition as it allows the integration of knowledge and insights stemming from within as well as from outside the team. Team cognition emerges when teams transform dispersed individual knowledge into collective cognitive structures (Curşeu et al., 2012). This transformation depends on the interplay of local, global and contextual team dynamics (Curşeu, 2006) that allows the information possessed by individual members and the information collected from external sources to be transformed through interaction processes that enable ideas to be questioned, refined, and recombined into novel collective cognitive structures (Rapp et al., 2021; Grand et al., 2016; Curşeu, 2006). When engaging in constructive controversy, explicit communication behavior rather than generic personal predispositions need to be considered, therefore constructive controversy is an open expression of horizontal cognitive differentiation in teams that fosters divergent process gains by enriching the knowledge repertoire of the team (Curşeu et al., 2022; van Rijswijk et al., 2024).
Recent studies explored various group processes that foster the emergence of collective cognitive structures that drive innovative behaviors in teams. Zoethout *et al.* (2017) showed that conversational transactivity (building on each other's arguments during debates and being open to dissenting opinions) is an important antecedent to the emergence of team learning behavior, or transactive memory systems. The literature also shows that effective learning requires a dialogic space between team members in which there should be a balance of communicative behaviors such as sharing, co-construction and constructive controversy. Therefore, teams are considered not only as essential working units but also as important learning units or social systems with collective information processing capabilities (Curşeu & Pluut, 2018).
Research to date has mostly focused on a static perspective on team processes and evaluated the association between constructive controversy and innovative work behavior in stable environments or predominantly in cross-sectional designs (for a meta-analytic overview see Tjosvold et al, 2022). Little attention is shown to the coevolution between constructive controversy and innovative work behavior in time. Collective cognition emerges from the coevolution of individual cognitive structures and processes in time (Grand et al., 2016; Curşeu, 2006; Curşeu & Schruijer, 2008; Curşeu et al., 2010) and we expect that openness to discuss ethical issues is intertwined with constructive controversy that in turn evolves jointly with the innovative work behavior as reported by members.
Hypothesis 3. *The elevation and slope of constructive controversy mediate the association between the elevations and slopes of discussability and innovative work behavior.*

Methodology

Sample and data collection

The online survey was distributed to employees in a large company at three points in time separated by roughly six months intervals between 2022 and 2023, as variance in ethical values is low for shorter time intervals (Kaptein, 2011). We approached more than 280 organizational teams and a total of 1804 participants (1013 men) completed the survey at three different times. Participants were asked to provide an ID for their team and responses were aggregated at the team level for further analyses. From the final sample a total of 1137 provided full data on the study variables in the first wave, 513 in the second and 807 in the third wave, while 394 participants had complete data on waves 1 and 2, 541 in waves 1 and 3, 331 in waves on waves 2 and 3 and 272 had complete data across all three waves. The number of respondents per team ranged from 2 to 18 in the first wave (M=8.31, SD=4.17), from 2 to 14 in the second wave (M=4.77, SD=3.32) and from 2 to 15 in the third wave (M=4.86, SD=3.15). Unfortunately we did not have data on the team size and as such we cannot estimate the response rate per team. Because the referent of our level of analyses were teams, scores were matched between teams and not between individuals for the three evaluation moments and a total of 98 teams had complete data on all variables for all three evaluation moments reported by at least two group members. As excluding groups with low response rate does not improve the statistical power (Biemann & Heidemeier, 2012) and it is not recommended for the evaluation of group level variables (Maloney et al., 2010), we used data from all groups that had at least two respondents at each point in time. In these teams, different group members may have completed the surveys for the three moments, reducing the problems associated with common method bias (Podsakoff, et al., 2003). Participants were asked to complete the surveys distributed online, their participation was anonymous, they gave written consent for participating in the study, could withdraw from the study at any time, and the study was approved by the Ethical Review Board of the Open Universiteit, the Netherlands.

Measures

Constructive controversy was evaluated with a six-item scale presented in Tjosvold and Yu (2007) aimed at evaluating the extent to which group members engaged in open discussions of dissenting opinions on task-related issues ("We use our opposing opinions to understand the problem") and responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .917 at time 1, .924 at time 2 and .916 at time 3, indicating excellent reliability of the scale. We used the aggregated group level scores for constructive controversy and we computed the within group agreement index (RWG, James, Demaree & Wolf, 1984) in order to support this aggregation. The ICC2 ranged between .76 and .80, while the average within group agreement scores were in line with the recommendations to support aggregation (at time 1 M_{RWG}=.93, SD=.07, at time 2 M_{RWG}=.95, SD=.05 and at time 3 M_{RWG}=.95, SD=.04) (Newman & Sin, 2020).

Discussability as a set of ethical values was evaluated using four items selected from the Corporate Ethical Virtues Scale (Kaptein, 2008) and further validated in DeBode et al. (2013) and Huhtala et al. (2018). The four items evaluated the extent to which group members perceived the ethical culture as open to raising and discussing critical issues related to moral dilemmas and ethical concerns ("In my immediate work environment, there is sufficient opportunity to discuss moral dilemmas."). Answers were noted on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = totally agree to 6 = totally disagree). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .943 at time 1, .951 at time 2 and .946 at time 3, indicating excellent internal reliability of the scale. Similar to constructive controversy, the ICC2 ranged between .65 and .79, supporting the group level

reliability of the discussability scores, aggregation that was also supported by the within group agreement scores (at time 1 M_{RWG}=.84, SD=.11, at time 2 M_{RWG}=.86, SD=.10 and at time 3 M_{RWG}=.86, SD=.15) (Newman & Sin, 2020).

Innovative work behavior was evaluated with a 9-item scale from Janssen (2000) that evaluated three core components of innovative work behavior, namely idea generation ("I create new ideas for improvements"), seeking support for the innovations from relevant stakeholders in the organization ("I mobilize support for innovative ideas") and implementing innovations ("I turn innovative ideas into useful applications"). Answers were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never to 7 = always) Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .948 at time 1, .952 at time 2 and .946 at time 3, indicating excellent internal reliability of the scale. The ICC2 ranged between .73 and .79, while the within group agreement scores supported the aggregation of IWB at the group level of analysis (at time 1 M_{RWG}=.95, SD=.04, at time 2 M_{RWG}=.94, SD=.05 and at time 3 M_{RWG}=.95, SD=.04) (Newman & Sin, 2020).

Psychological safety was used as control variable and was evaluated at time 1 with six items from the Edmondson (1999) scale ("My colleagues are able to bring up problems and difficult issues"). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .72, ICC2 was .79 and the within group agreement index supported the aggregation of the scores at the group level (M_{RWG}=.96, SD=.02).

Results

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and correlations).

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and correlations

	Average	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.Discussability T1	4.47	.51	1								
2.Discussability T2	4.45	.72	.50**	1							
3.Discussability T3	4.50	.64	.34**	.22*	1						
4.Constructive controversy T1	5.16	.65	.47**	.41**	.06	1					
5.Constructive controversy T2	5.13	.88	.22*	.52**	.16	.37**	1				
6.Constructive controversy T3	5.27	.77	.15	.03	.43**	.14	.39**	1			
7. IWB T1	3.88	.71	.16	.25*	.05	.44**	.24*	.18	1		
8. IWB T2	4.01	.93	.07	.40**	.14	.20*	.51**	.19	.52**	1	
9. IWB T3	4.00	.86	.07	.08	.41**	.01	.36**	.56**	.42**	.51**	1
10.PS T1	5.87	.41	.52**	.28**	.33**	.60**	.21**	.31**	.25**	.04	.06

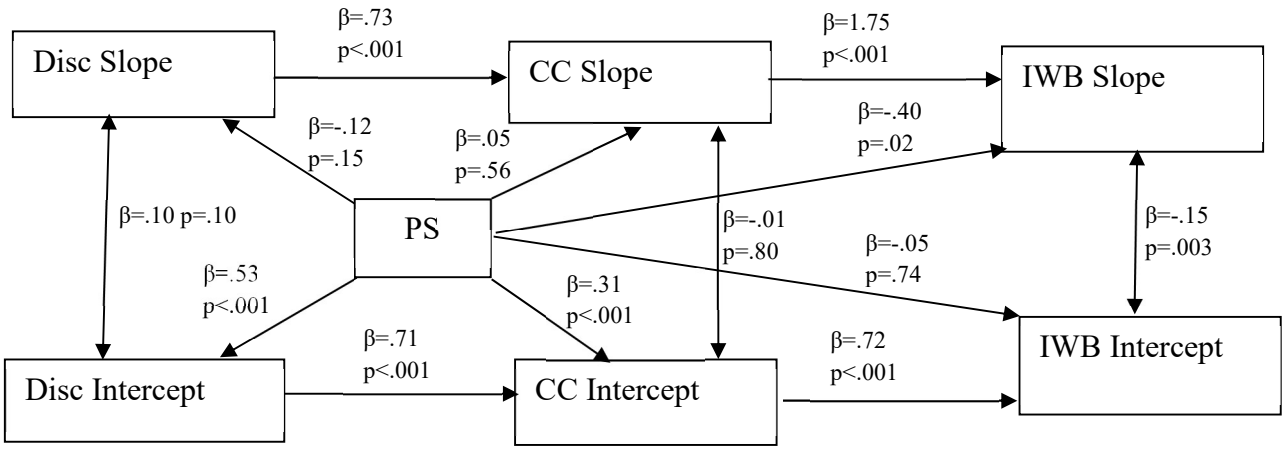
Notes: T1= time 1; T2 = time 2, T3 = time 3, PS=psychological safety; N=98 teams;
*p<.05; **p<.01.

(Source: Authors' own work)

Because we had different group members filling in surveys at different points in time, we carried out a sample attrition analysis and no significant differences were observed across the variables between the members that filled in surveys at different points in time and those that dropped out (had missing data for at least one point in time). The within group agreement was substantial and the reliability of the group scores was acceptable and we also explored the sequential mean stability across the three measurements and none of the paired t test comparisons were significant. Given this pattern of results, we proceeded with the hypotheses tests using latent growth curve modelling (with an assumed linear growth pattern) and analyzed the data using the AMOS 27 software. Latent growth curve modelling can be used to estimate covariances between the slope and intercept of different variables over time (Ferrer et al., 2004). We had three evaluation instances for each of the variables in the model and we allowed the error terms of the three successive evaluations to covary in each of the time intervals to account for common method biases in the evaluation sets collected at the same time. We then estimated to what extent the slope and intercept of discussability predict the slope and intercept

for constructive controversy (H1), which in turn were used as predictors for the slope and intercept of innovative work behavior (H2). Finally, we estimated the indirect association between the slope and intercept of discussability and IWB as mediated by constructive controversy (H3).

Figure 2: General results of latent growth curve modelling



Notes: Disc = discussability; CC = constructive controversy; IWB = innovative work behavior; PS = psychological safety; standardized path coefficients are shown in the model.
* p<.01, ** p<.05 *** p<.001

(Source: Authors' own work)

The absolute fit indices showed a good fit of the model with the data Chi-square = 27.80, df=17, p = 0.05, and RMSEA = 0.05, while the incremental fit indices showed that the model cannot be substantially improved CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.94, NFI=.95. We can therefore conclude that the hypothesized relationships match the covariances observed in the data.

Latent growth modelling is an elegant way of testing the covariance of different variables evaluated at different points in time, both in terms of their elevation (intercept) and time trend (slopes). Concerning the relation between openness to discuss ethical issues and constructive controversy, both the intercept (B=.77, SE=.09, p<.001) as well as the slope (B=.73, SE=.17, p<.001) were significant. These results fully support Hypothesis 1 showing that both in terms of elevation of group scores as well as evolution in time across the three evaluation moments, openness to discuss ethical issues was positively associated with constructive controversy. The relation between constructive controversy and IWB was also significant both for intercept (B=.53, SE=.14, p<.001) as well as the slope (B=1.32, SE=.36, p<.001) providing support for Hypothesis 2. Finally, the significant indirect association coefficients for the intercept (standardized indirect effect = .48) as well as for the slope (standardized indirect effect = 1.22) provided support for the third hypothesis of our study. The standardized indirect effects showed that when the intercept of openness to discuss ethical issues increases by one standard deviation, the intercept of IWB increases by .48 standard deviations due to the increased constructive controversy, while an increase in the slope of openness to discuss ethical issues by one standard deviation, indirectly increases the IWB slope by 1.22 standard deviations via constructive controversy (Kline, 1998). Although in practical terms, it is difficult to provide a clear set of recommendations, we can only say that it is certainly worth trying to improve discussability, as any increment in discussability will have a proportionally positive impact on the increment of IWB through constructive controversy.

In order to check the robustness of our findings we ran the latent growth curve modelling with psychological safety as control variable. The model fit indices slightly changed (Chi-square =

35.93, df=20, p = 0.02, and RMSEA = 0.05, while the incremental fit indices show that the model cannot be substantially improved CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.92, NFI=.94) yet the incremental fit indices remained in the acceptable range. Psychological safety had a significant positive association with the intercept of discussability (B=.76, SE=.08, p<.001), the intercept of constructive controversy (B=.39, SE=.11, p<.001) as well as a negative and significant association with the IWB slope (B=-.17, SE=.07, p=.02). Overall psychological safety had a significant indirect association with the IWB intercept (standardized indirect effect = .49) as well as with the intercept of constructive controversy (standardized indirect effect = .37). The inclusion of psychological safety as a control variable did not change the main pattern of results reported in the initial latent growth modelling analysis.

Discussion

Our study builds on the notion that teams are key innovation actors in organizations (Kilcullen et al., 2023; van Knippenberg, 2017) and extends the literature showing that the erosion of ethical norms harms organizational innovation (Cumming & Verdoliva, 2022; Pučėtaitė et al., 2016; Riivari et al., 2019) by using a latent growth curve approach to investigate the mediating role of constructive controversy in the relationship between shared discussability ethical values and innovative work behavior in teams working in a large organization. We also expand on the role of teams in mean-ends decoupling (Cabana & Kaptein, 2021) and show that constructive controversy in teams is one of the micro foundations that explain the link between ethical organizational culture and innovation. The latent growth modelling is aligned with the co-evolution arguments used to explain the emergence of group cognition (Grand et al., 2016; Curşeu & Schruijer, 2008; Curşeu, 2006; Curşeu et al., 2010) and our results provide initial empirical insights into the complex relationships between openness to discuss ethical issues, constructive controversy and innovative work behavior in teams, both in terms of their elevation as well as their slope in time.

We expand on the Team Ethical Cultures framework (Cabana & Kaptein, 2021) and the Corporate Ethical Virtues Model (Kaptein, 2009, 2011) by showing that shared discussability ethical values create a group climate in which constructive controversy is welcomed, and the value of dissent as a complexity enhancing (Curşeu et al., 2012; Stone et al., 1994) and strategy elaboration (Samba et al., 2018) mechanism that fosters innovation is recognized by team members. Constructive controversy is indicative of horizontal differentiation in teams (van Rijswijk et al., 2024) as it reflects openly expressed differences of opinions that supports knowledge elaboration and cognitive complexity. Shared ethical values have therefore broader implications that extend beyond shaping ethical behavior in teams. We show that both in terms of elevation (intercept) and in their temporal co-evolution (slope) across the three evaluation moments openness to discuss ethical issues drives constructive controversy. These results remained significant after controlling for psychological safety. Psychological safety has a positive association with the elevation of discussability and constructive controversy and this result is in line with recent cross-sectional evidence showing that a climate of psychological safety fosters constructive controversy, which in turn foster innovative behaviors in teams (Gao et al., 2024). An interesting pattern emerged as psychological safety has a direct and negative association with the slope of IWB, meaning that psychological safety evaluated at time 1 leads to a decreasing innovation trend in teams. Such an effect could reflect a lock in as teams with an initial high level of psychological safety tend to preserve the status quo and do not engage in risk taking and innovative behaviors later on. However, psychological safety impacts on the elevation of IWB indirectly by fostering the discussability and constructive controversy.

All in all, we extend previous research that documented the positive association between openness to discuss ethical issues and innovation (Pučėtaitė et al., 2016; Riivari et al., 2019) and also highlight the dynamic change in this relationship over time. Shared discussability

ethical values coevolves in groups with engagement in constructive controversy and ultimately with innovative work behavior. Therefore, next to the implications for ethical behavior, openness to discuss ethical issues also fosters controversy, a key group process that drives information elaboration and enriches the emergence of complex cognitive structures in groups (van Rijswijk et al., 2024). Openness to discuss ethical issues encourages members to engage in constructive feedback and criticism and see mistakes as an opportunity to learn from rather than to punish culprits and when such behaviors are enacted team can realize their innovative potential (Pučėtaitė et al., 2016; Riivari et al., 2019). Our results stress the relevance of group level processes as mechanisms that explain the link between ethical organizational culture and innovative work behaviors. Shared ethical values have therefore consequences that span beyond ethical behavior and impact on key organizational processes like innovation and creative processes. We therefore join voices (Pučėtaitė et al., 2016; Riivari et al., 2019) calling for more research that explores the consequences of ethical organizational culture using theoretical models that go beyond the Corporate Ethical Virtues Model (Kaptein, 2009, 2011) and address organizational outcomes at different levels of analysis (Roy et al., 2024).

Our results are aligned with previous research showing that constructive controversy is positively related to performance and innovative work behavior (Tjosvold et al., 2022; Volmer & Seyr, 2013), and our results extend this line of research by documenting the coevolution in time of the two constructs. We answered the call for latent growth models used in constructive controversy research (Tjosvold et al., 2022) and document the positive co-evolution of shared discussability ethical values with open minded discussion of ideas in teams as drivers of innovative work behavior. The co-evolution however, does not mean we have established causality and in line with Volmer and Seyr (2013) we call for further exploration of constructive controversy through experimental research in order to establish causality. This is important because insights and understanding of operation and possible control of this construct can support organizational processes such as decision-making, problem solving, learning and innovation (Chen et al., 2005: Tjosvold & Yu, 2007). It could also be argued that constructive controversy is a key process for the emergence of a strong ethical organizational culture as social influence processes shape the emergence of ethical preferences in groups (Curşeu et al., 2020), therefore the link between ethical values and constructive controversy is more complex and experimental investigations can shed more light into the interplay between ethical culture and constructive controversy in organizations.

Limitations and future research

Our study makes a substantial contribution to contextual models of group creativity and innovation (Zhou & Hoever, 2014) by exploring the co-evolution of contextual (shared discussability ethical values) and group level factors (constructive controversy) as drivers of innovative work behaviors in teams. Our study supports the synergistic interplay between the contextual and group factors as drivers of innovative behaviors in teams, yet such results cannot be generalized as we have collected data in a single organization (although we had board representation in terms of regional divisions of this organization). Follow-up research could test the model in various contexts, including different cultural contexts and sectors. Our design is based on three data waves and such a design does not allow us to test alternative, non-linear growth curves, yet future research could address such issues in designs with more data collection points. As previous research shows that task conflict can have an inverted U-shaped association with innovative behavior in teams (De Dreu, 2006) it becomes important to understand whether the co-evolution of constructive controversy and innovative work behavior fits a non-linear growth pattern.

Although we have used a longitudinal design, we cannot draw causal conclusions based on our analyses, therefore future studies should focus on experimental interventions to validate causal

links between openness to discuss ethical issues, constructive controversy and innovative work behavior. An in-depth investigation of the constructive controversy as a mechanism that explains the link between shared discussability ethical values and innovative work behavior offers rich insights into innovative group processes, further research could also investigate other group and organizational outcomes. For example openness to discuss ethical issues and constructive controversy could be important drivers of learning behaviors and as such they are key prerequisites of a learning organization. Moreover, future research could further explore the role of constructive controversy for the moral agency of groups, as previous research emphasized that groups are moral agents that impact on how organizations deal with moral dilemmas (Curşeu et al., 2020). Finally, further research on applicability of our findings in various cultural, geographical and industrial contexts can provide more generalizable insights into their relevance and impact on organizational performance.

Practical implications

The role of shared ethical values is particularly relevant in public organizations, as their core mission is focused on promoting social justice and the well-being of citizens. Innovation in such contexts requires an ethical framework that ensures social inclusion and minimizes negative externalities. In order to foster innovative work behaviors, managers and team leaders have to facilitate a work environment that is open for discussing difficult ethical issues and dilemmas and to create conditions for constructive controversy to emerge. A climate of psychological safety is conducive for increasing openness to discuss ethical issues as well as constructive controversy, yet rather high levels of psychological safety can also generate lock in effects and decrease innovative efforts in teams. Employees are expected to exhibit prescribed work behavior to meet performance standards imposed by organizational work roles, yet they are rarely required to exhibit innovative work behavior (Janssen, 2000). Our study shows that discussing ethical and moral dilemmas through constructive controversy also stimulates individual employees to exhibit more innovative work behavior. Although discussability ethical values are open to change, transforming an organizational culture into an environment of openness and constructive dialogues requires a multilayered approach (Blom & Curşeu, 2025a,b; Wei et al., 2023; Tjosvold et al, 2022). Besides encouraging critical thinking, fostering a shared team culture in which failure is seen as a valuable learning opportunity and experimentation is seen as innovation, is a key innovation driver (Tjosvold et al., 2022). A climate of psychological safety in which employees feel free to take interpersonal risks is paramount for generating a set of cultural values that encourage open sharing and discussion of ideas (Blom & Curşeu, 2025a; Gao et al., 2024). This means leaders need to cultivate an environment that encourages open communication, active listening and creating an environment where new ideas are welcomed and taken seriously and requires a systematic review of procedures and policies that allow for experimentation and expression of dissent (Blom & Curşeu, 2025b). Such transition requires a deep understanding of interpersonal dynamics unfolding in teams and the ability to deal resiliently with the challenges associated with the complexity of controversy and dissent. Open controversy and dissent challenge viewpoints and under some circumstances dissent can be taken personally and can threaten group members' personal or professional identity. Under such circumstances dissent triggers relationship frictions that are detrimental for performance. In addition to developing managers who are open to diverse views and opinions, these managers will need to possess skills in dealing with controversy and see it as a catalyst for innovation, as this together provides a strong foundation for innovative team dynamics**.** In addition, embracing diversity requires not only building diverse teams but also fostering an inclusive environment where all voices are valued and heard.

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