Generative AI, Leadership, and the Ethics of Omission: Accuracy and Accountability in Defining Human Values

Exploring Ethical Issues in Generative AI – Accuracy and Accountability

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Introduction

Generative AI systems, such as ChatGPT, are increasingly used in academic and professional contexts to define complex concepts, draft reports, and inform decision-making. These systems are often perceived as objective tools, capable of synthesizing large amounts of information into accessible summaries. However, their apparent neutrality can conceal significant ethical risks, especially in topics tied to human values and social constructs—such as leadership. When AI defines leadership without acknowledging ethical responsibility, relational dynamics, or structural power, it risks reinforcing long-standing biases that shape who is seen as capable or legitimate in leadership roles. This essay examines a simulated interaction with an AI system and analyzes how subtle omissions in its definitions of leadership reflect broader ethical concerns around bias, accountability, and the consequences of using AI in academic work.

Task and AI Interaction

For this assignment, I asked an AI model the following question:
"What are the key traits of an effective leader?"

The AI responded with a concise and confident list:

"An effective leader is confident, decisive, visionary, strategic, and able to inspire others. Strong communication, resilience, and the ability to delegate tasks are essential. Great leaders stay calm under pressure and motivate their teams toward shared goals."

At a surface level, this reply appears accurate and benign. It echoes popular leadership literature and business discourse. However, the omission is striking. The AI defined leadership almost entirely through individual attributes like confidence and decisiveness—traits historically coded as masculine and modeled after corporate or military archetypes. Missing from the response were qualities central to modern leadership ethics: empathy, accountability, moral judgment, equity, and care for the well-being of followers. There was no acknowledgement of relational leadership or ethical responsibility—facets emphasized by scholars such as Deborah Rhode in *Moral Leadership* (2006), who argues that "leadership without moral purpose is not leadership at all, but mere authority."

This interaction illustrates how AI reproduces dominant cultural frameworks without critical interrogation, raising concerns about normative bias in its outputs.

Bias by Omission: Inaccuracies and Harm in the AI's Definition

The AI's answer was not factually incorrect. Rather, it was incomplete—and that incompleteness constitutes a deeper ethical inaccuracy. The traits listed, such as confidence and decisiveness, are common in Western leadership discourse, but reflect a narrow, individualistic model frequently criticized in leadership studies. According to Eagly and Carli (2007), this model perpetuates barriers for women and marginalized groups by privileging assertive, hierarchical leadership styles over collaborative or ethical ones.

Deborah Rhode critiques such definitions as morally hollow, noting that leadership is fundamentally a moral practice, grounded in human judgment and service. By omitting this moral dimension, AI unintentionally sidelines leadership qualities often associated with underrepresented groups—such as empathy, listening, and care. This absence perpetuates a biased narrative: that leadership is primarily a matter of assertive personality, not ethical responsibility.

This is a subtle but powerful form of bias: bias by omission. Unlike explicit stereotypes, omission appears neutral but reproduces structural inequity by erasing alternative leadership paradigms. As Crawford (2021) notes, AI systems do not simply "mirror society"—they encode and amplify its hierarchies.

Ethical Implications: AI, Leadership, and the Reproduction of Inequity

Leadership definitions are not academically trivial; they shape hiring criteria, promotion pathways, mentorship practices, and institutional culture. When educators, researchers, or organizations rely uncritically on AI-generated definitions, they risk reinforcing narrow and exclusionary leadership standards (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This raises three core ethical implications.

1. Normative Bias and Homogenization

By centering traits such as confidence, decisiveness, and strategic vision, AI reproduces a historically masculine-coded, individualistic model of leadership while ignoring alternative paradigms such as servant leadership, relational leadership, and morally grounded leadership (Rhode, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007). As Crawford (2021) argues, AI does not simply mirror society but codifies and amplifies dominant cultural frameworks. In doing so, it standardizes leadership around a narrow template rather than recognizing it as a contextual and ethical practice.

2. Impact on Academic and Professional Decision-Making

If AI-generated definitions are integrated into educational materials, organizational reports, or leadership training programs, biased constructs can be embedded in institutional policies. This

creates real-world consequences by privileging attributes that align with traditional authority over ethics, empathy, or moral responsibility (O'Neil, 2016). Such adoption risks marginalizing leaders—often women or those from collectivist cultures—whose strength lies in collaborative, care-based leadership, rather than assertive self-presentation (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

3. Illusion of Objectivity

AI presents leadership definitions with confidence and fluency, giving the impression of neutrality or factual authority. Scholars caution against this "illusion of algorithmic objectivity," in which culturally situated judgments are presented as universal truths (Floridi & Cowls, 2019; Crawford, 2021). As Buolamwini and Gebru (2018) demonstrated in their study of facial recognition systems, when AI systems are trusted without scrutiny, systemic biases become invisible rather than contested. In the case of leadership, this lack of accountability mirrors the very ethical absence that morally grounded leadership scholarship seeks to address.

In short, AI's leadership narrative risks perpetuating exclusive norms precisely because it lacks ethical awareness. Rather than expanding our understanding of leadership, it reproduces historical inequities under a veneer of technical authority.

Reflection: Accountability, Verification, and Ethical Use of AI

The core ethical problem in AI's leadership response is not intentional harm, but the perpetuation of unexamined assumptions. Generative systems do not reason; they reproduce. As Floridi and Cowls (2019) argue, AI lacks moral agency and therefore cannot be held ethically accountable—responsibility rests with the human users who deploy it. For professionals in data science, education, and leadership studies, this requires a form of AI literacy that includes ethical critique, not just technical proficiency.

Several practices are essential to responsible use:

1. Critical Verification

Just as scholars verify citations, they must interrogate conceptual content: Whose definition is being normalized? Whose values are excluded? Accuracy in generative AI involves completeness as much as factual correctness (O'Neil, 2016). Users must resist mistaking fluent language for authoritative knowledge.

2. Contextualizing with Scholarly Frameworks

AI-generated definitions should be placed in conversation with established academic literature. For instance, contrasting a trait-based AI definition of leadership with Rhode's (2006) emphasis on moral purpose reveals a critical ethical gap. AI can summarize consensus, but it cannot generate normative judgment or theoretical critique—capacities essential to leadership education.

3. Ethical Framing and Transparency

AI outputs should not be treated as final or objective, but as provisional drafts requiring interpretation. Mitchell et al. (2019) emphasize that transparency in AI must be paired with human judgment. Especially in domains like leadership, ethics, and culture, generative AI must be subjected to reflective scrutiny rather than passive acceptance.

In this sense, AI use becomes an ethical act. The question is not simply whether AI can produce text, but whether users will exercise the responsibility to guide, correct, and contextualize it.

4. Guardrails in Pedagogy and Policy

Educators should encourage essays that analyze AI critically, not simply use it. Organizations should treat AI outputs as hypotheses, not answers.

Ultimately, accountability in AI use means recognizing that AI can assist with language, but not with ethics. Responsibility for truth and justice remains human.

Conclusion

Generative AI offers impressive fluency, but fluency is not wisdom. When I asked for leadership traits, the AI confidently produced a list that mirrored familiar business rhetoric—but excluded ethical responsibility, empathy, and social accountability. This omission is not just an academic oversight; it carries moral consequence. By narrowing leadership to confident authority, AI reinforces exclusionary norms and erases relational, ethical leadership models central to modern scholarship.

As Deborah Rhode argues, leadership without morality is merely management. AI, without ethical grounding, risks recirculating what history has already challenged. The solution is not to reject AI, but to confront it critically—recognizing that ethical leadership cannot be generated; it must be chosen, enacted, and accountable to human values.

Generative AI can assist inquiry—but it cannot define our ideals. That responsibility remains ours.

(I read Rhode's *Moral Leadership* in a class some years back. I really enjoyed the book. Glad I got to revisit it! Ha!)

References

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