Analyzing the Dynamics of Moral Disengagement, Unethical Behavior, and Workplace status

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Abstract

Purpose: The aims of this study is to explain the effect of moral disengagement on workplace status also the effects of unethical pro organizational behavior on workplace status and how it influenced or moderates by moral identity. It also explains the relationship of unethical pro organizational behavior that mediates the relation of moral disengagement and workplace.

Design/Methodology: This study is a quantitative based research in which the selection of employee of the organization for the structural study. Process Macro is used to find the reason for the unethical pro organizational behavior towards workplace. Moral

disengagement is the like hood act of employee which he does without guilt. Through this study or research we can find the interest of employee and their perception towards moral disengagement and how their moral identity influences the unethical pro organizational behavior. So, the enhancement of moral identity or self-making decision it influence the unethical pro organizational behavior and increased the workplace status.

Findings: The moral disengagement effects the employee's performance and influence their unethical behavior towards the organization which also leads positive impact or relation on workplace behavior. Moral identity somehow moderates the relationship of moral disengagement and unethical pro organizational behavior to improve the performance of organizational employees on workplace.

Results limitation: The conclusive study of different organizations and employee the results shows close- findings or precise impact of moral disengagement on workplace status, influenced by moral identity also effects the unethical pro organizational behavior, but not all employees honestly answered the study which create biasness.

Objectives: The main objective of this research is to identify the moral disengagement of employee towards workplace status and how moral identity influence the relation between moral disengagement and unethical pro organizational behavior and how unethical pro organizational behavior effects the moral disengagement and workplace status and how to improve this impact in future studies.

Keywords: Moral disengagement, Moral identity, Unethical pro organizational behavior, workplace status, social behavior.

Research type: Quantitative

Introduction

In recent years, organizational dynamics have been paid more attention particularly to concern with the ethical considerations that underpin workplace interactions. Acting ethically is important to fostering a harmonious work environment but also to ensure a sustainable success. Although, instances of unethical behavior continue, uplift concerns about the underlying factors that drive such conduct. Among all these factors, moral disengagement has accumulated significant attention in contemporary organizational research (Bandura,1999). Defined the cognitive process moral disengagement is the mental process which allows employees to justify the ethical questionable behavior without experiencing guilt or self-censure. Workplace status, which reflects the employee's standing and influence within an organization, significantly shaped by moral disengagement. Employees with higher workplace status often hold great and influence,

which leads to increased opportunities to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). UPB refers to action that may benefit the organization contravene ethical standards or norms (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). While these behaviors, though seemingly advantageous and might seem helpful in short term, they can lead to long-term ramifications, such as damage including reputational damage and internal conflicts. These behaviors further influenced by organizational culture, pressure to confirm to unethical practices, and leadership styles that fail to emphasize ethical accountability (Crawford et al., 2019).

The link between moral disengagement and workplace status becomes more complex when moderated by moral identity. Moral identity, define as referral to how central being a moral person is to someone's self- concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002), plays a crucial role to in shaping to reduce the effects of moral disengagement by encouraging ethical behavior and lowering the chances of engaging in UPB. Contrarily, high moral identity can mitigate the effects of moral disengagement by fostering a stronger commitment to ethical principles, thereby reducing the likelihood of engaging in UPB. Conversely, individuals with a weaker moral identity are more likely to justify the unethical actions, leading to a higher propensity that enhance workplace status. The moderating role of personality traits, such as moral identity, align with border research showing how individual differences response to workplace pressures (Fatima et al., 2020). Moreover, workplace dynamics, such as hierarchical structures and reward systems, may amplify or dampen the effects of moral disengagement. Competitive environments, where promotions and recognition may experience increased incentives to rationalize unethical behavior to achieve their goals. This idea aligns with theories that links external pressure with internal cognitive justifications, increased likelihood of moral disengagement (De Clercq et al., 2021).

Furthermore, unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) serves plays important role as a mediator in between moral disengagement and workplace status. This mediation suggested that moral disengagement indirectly effects on workplace status through UPB. For example, an employee who engages in UPB due to moral disengagement might initially gain experience in workplace status due to perceived loyalty or effectiveness. However, such behavior can create a strained relationship and long-term organizational health. Research studies highlighting the idea that detrimental effects of unethical behaviors despite their immediate organizational benefits (De Clercq et al., 2021).

These interrelationships highlights need for organizational leaders to address not just obvious unethical behavior but also the subtle process that enable them. Moral disengagement often goes under the radar, as employee may see their actions as necessary or justified under organizational norms. To counter this, interventions targeting moral identity, ethical leadership and organizational culture are essential for restraining the prevalence of UPB and its consequences. For example, fostering a strong ethical climate

can reinforce the importance of moral values and reduce the rationalization that leads to moral disengagement (Crawford et al., 2019).

This study aims to examine the complex relationships between moral disengagement, unethical pro- organizational behavior, moral identity and workplace status within organizational setting. By employing a quantitative approach and leveraging the Process Macro tool, the research seeks to uncover how these factors interact. In doing so, it contributes by exploring employee's cognitive and moral framework influence their behavior and workplace outcomes. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for addressing broader issues like employee well-being, organizational reputation, and sustainable success. For organizational leaders, understanding these dynamics is essential for creating ethical workplaces and mitigate the risks associated with UPB. By highlighting the role of moral identity as a moderator and the mediating effects of UPB, this research offers practical insights for promoting ethical behavior without compromising workplace status. Future studies can build on these findings by exploring additional factors, such as organizational justice, emotional intelligence, and cross-cultural perspectives, to better understand these dynamics in different organizational contexts.

Literature Review
Moral Disengagement and Workplace Status

Moral disengagement is the mental process that allows individuals rationalize unethical behavior, enabling them to act in ways contrary to societal norms without feeling guilt (Bandura, 1999). In the workplace, this often ties to actions aimed at achieving or maintaining workplace status. Employees may engage in rationalizations that justify unethical behaviors, such as manipulating others or ignoring policies, to enhance their value or authority within the organization. Research indicates that individuals in position of power are more to prone to moral disengagement as they rationalize unethical actions to protect or boost their argument (Moore et al., 2012).

Workplace status, which refers to an employee's influence or standing of an employee within an organization, can be shaped by such morally disengaged behaviors. For example, employees who used deceit or manipulation to secure promotions or recognition may experience temporary rise in status. However, relying on moral disengagement creates a precarious foundation, leading to strained workplace relationships and loss of genuine respect from peers. This underscores the dual-edged nature of moral disengagement; it can help elevate workplace status in short term but can ultimately harm a person's reputation and workplace dynamics.

Hypothesis 1: Moral disengagement is positively related to workplace status.
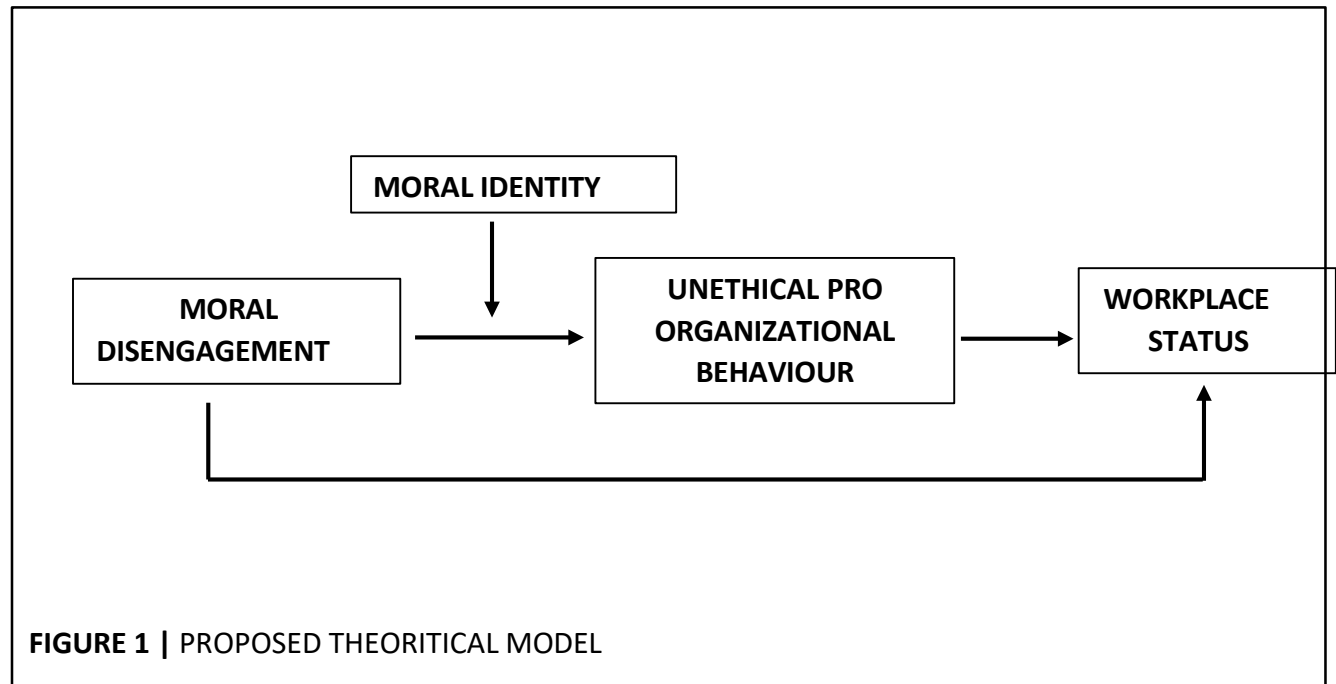
FIGURE 1 | PROPOSED THEORITICAL MODEL

Moral Disengagement and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) refers to actions intended to benefit the organization that violet ethical norms (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Moral disengagement plays a crucial role in facilitating UPB by allowing individuals to suppress moral concern and justify unethical actions as serving for the organization's benefit. For instance, employees may falsify reports or bend rules to meet organizational targets, rationalizing these actions as necessary for the company's success (Trevino et al., 2014).

This studies shows that moral disengagement reduces the guilt or discomfort associated with unethical behavior. Employees who disengaging morally, feel less remorse, enabling a higher frequency in UPB while framing their actions justified by perceived loyalty to the organization (Tillman et al, 2018). This highlights the need to understand the importance of understanding cognitive processes like moral disengagement, as they underpin the occurrence of UPB within organizations.

Hypothesis 2: Moral disengagement is positively related to unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior and Workplace Status

The relationship between UPB and workplace status is complex. Employee who engage in UPB often achieve short-term status gains due to perceived commitment and focus on results. For instance, an employee who exaggerate sales figures to secure a promotion may be rewarded with increased status within the organization. However, this status is usually unstable, as the unethical basis of such behavior can lead to long-term issues, such as mistrust or reputational harm if their actions are discovered (Effelsberg et al., 2014).

Organization that prioritize reward results over ethical behavior may unintentionally encourage UPB as a means of gain workplace status. This can create a cycle where employees view unethical behavior as acceptable route to career advancement (Umphress et al., 2010). To prevent this, the interplay between UPB and workplace status thus require careful management to ensure that they promote ethical behavior while discouraging actions that compromise integrity.

Hypothesis 3: Unethical pro-organizational behavior is positively related to workplace status.

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior as a Mediator

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) often acts as bridge between moral disengagement and workplace status. Employees who disengage morally are more likely to engage in UPB, which in turn influence their workplace status. For instance, employees who justify unethical actions as beneficial to their organization may receive accolades or promotions or recognition, thus linking their moral rationalizations to status gains (Ahmad et al., 2015).

This mediating role highlights how moral disengagement indirectly shapes workplace dynamics. While moral disengagement provides the cognitive justifications, UPB serves as the practical means through which employees achieve their desired goals (Trevino et al., 2014). Recognizing this mediation is essential for organizations seeking to address the root causes of these behaviors and negative effects on long-term performance and culture.

Hypothesis 4: Unethical pro-organizational behavior mediates the relationship between moral disengagement and workplace.

Moral Identity as a Moderator

Moral identity, which refers to how central moral traits are to an individual's self-concept,

plays a critical moderating role in the relationships involving moral disengagement and UPB. Individuals with a strong moral identity are less likely to disengage morally and, as a result, are less prone to UPB. This is because their strong ethical self-concept acts a buffer against cognitive rationalizations that justify unethical actions (Aquino & Reed, 2002).

On the other hand, individuals with a weaker moral identity may find it more likely to moral disengage, increasing their chances to engaging in UPB to achieve workplace status. Research shows that moral identity not only mitigates the direct effects or moral disengagement but also reduces the mediating impact of UPB, highlighting its value as a protective factor in promoting ethical workplace behavior (Detert et al., 2008). By encouraging and fostering strong moral identities among employees, organizations can effectively curtail the prevalence of moral disengagement and its related behaviors, creating a more ethical and sustainable work environment and its associated behaviors.

Hypothesis 5: Moral identity moderates the relationship between moral disengagement and unethical pro- organizational behavior, such that the relationship is weaker for individuals with high moral identity.

Methodology

This research design to examine the relationships between moral disengagement, unethical pro- organizational behavior (UPB), moral identity, and workplace status. A survey approach was chosen because of its effectiveness in gathering large-scale, real-time data directly from respondents. The goal was to test the proposed relationship using reliable measurement scales and statistical techniques to ensure methodological rigor and robustness of findings.

The study involved 116 participates from different sectors, including corporate organizations, institutes and educational setting in Pakistan. The participants represented a mixture of administrative staff, middle manager and junior executives, ensuring a varied perspective on workplace dynamics.

Due to practical constraints, convenience sampling was used, where participants were chosen based on their willingness and availability, which allowed the researchers to capture a range of perspectives. Out of 120 survey distributed, only 116 complete responses received, giving a high response rate of 96.7%.

The sample included both male and female participants, with high level of education, professional experience, and organizational roles. The average age of participant was between 20 to above 37 years, with an average organizational tenure of 4.5 years. About 10% of participants held bachelor's degree, while 56% completed their post graduated education. Most responders were employed in mid-level roles, which mean they are actively engaged in organizational processes.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed in online format. The survey included questions about demographic information, as well as items related to the study variables: moral disengagement, unethical pro-organizational behavior, moral identity, and workplace status. The description which was on top of questionnaire, explaining the study's objectives, ensuring anonymity, and requesting honest responses.

Measures

Data were analyzed by using SPSS and PROCESS macro introduced by Hayes. Descriptive statistics, including reliability, mean, standard deviation, and correlations which were computed to understand the relationships between variables. The study employed established scales with demonstrated validity and reliability to measure the core construct:

Moral Disengagement (MD):

Moral disengagement measured using a 24-item scale adapted from (Bandura et al., 1996) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Sample include: "It is alright to fight to protect your friends". The Cronbach's Alpha value is .935, which indicates high internal consistency.

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB):

The unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) assessed through using a 7-item scale from (Umphress et al., 2011) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) in which sample item include "If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good". The Cronbach's alpha value is .692, indicates high significance.

Workplace Status (WS):

It is assessed using a 5-item scale from (Djurdjevic et al., 2017) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) in which sample item include "I have a great deal of prestige in my organization". The Cronbach's alpha value is .733, indicate significance.

Moral Identity (MI)

Moral identity assessed through using a 13-item scale from (Aquino, K., & Reed II, A. 2002) on a 5 point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Sample include: "It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics". The Cronbach's alpha value is .860, which is highly significance.

Results

TABLE 1: Results of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Measurement model	χ^2	Df	χ^2/Df	CFI	TLI	IFI	RMSEA
MD-UPB-WS-MI (4-factor model)	1822.35	1121	1.63	0.71	0.70	0.72	0.07
MD-UPB-WS-MI (1-factor model)	3600.40	1176	3.06	0.49	0.47	0.49	0.13

Correlation and Descriptive statistics

Table 2 shows bivariate correlation, descriptive statistic and alpha reliabilities. Moral disengagement reflects a positive and significant correlation with unethical pro-organizational behavior ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$), it suggests that those who have high level of moral disengagement they are more likely involved in unethical pro-organizational behavior, also showed a significant correlation with workplace status ($r = 0.28$, $p = < 0.01$) and the strongest correlation towards moral identity ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$). UPB was weak and non-significant towards workplace status ($r = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$), and moral identity ($r = 0.15$, $p > 0.05$). Workplace status and moral identity moderately and significantly correlates ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$), which shows that individuals who have high workplace status they tend to exhibit a stronger moral identity.

TABLE 2: Correlations, descriptive statistics, and alpha reliabilities

Sr. No.	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Moral Disengagement	3.42	0.76	(0.93)			
2	Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior	3.15	0.81	0.37**	(0.69)		
3	Workplace Status	3.65	0.89	0.28**	0.09	(0.73)	
4	Moral Identity	4.10	0.85	0.57**	0.15	0.41**	(0.86)

N = 116; Cronbach alpha reliabilities are in parenthesis. *p <0.05, **p <0.01.

TABLE 3: Direct and indirect effects using bootstrapping

Standardized direct path coefficients of the hypothesized model

Path	Estimate	SE
H1 MD ☐ WS	0.22**	0.08
H2 MD ☐ UPB	2.32***	0.37
H3 UPB ☐ WS	-0.01	0.09

Bootstrap results for indirect effects (Mediator)

Indirect Effect (Bias Corrected Confidence Interval)

Paths	Effect	Boot SE	LLCI 95%	ULCI 95%
H4 MD ☐ UPB ☐ WS	-0.004	0.03	-0.0766	0.0583

N = 300. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Direct and Indirect effects

We utilized Process Macro by Hayes to conduct direct and mediation analysis (**Table 3**). Mediation hypotheses were tested by using the bootstrap technique with confidence-interval method. The direct path model supported hypotheses 1, that moral disengagement is positively related to workplace status (b = 0.22, p < 0.01), in the absence of mediator (UPB). On the other hand, the link between moral disengagement and UPB is strong and significantly positive effect (b = 2.32, p < 0.001), supporting hypotheses 2. The relationship of UPB with workplace status (b = -0.01, p = 0.8996) is not significant, proves hypotheses 3 wrong. **Table 3** demonstrate that the bootstrap results for indirect effects (hypothesis 4) were not significant. The indirect effect between moral disengagement to workplace status (b = - 0.004, SE = 0.03, p < 0.001, 95% CI: [-0.0766, 0.0583] through UPB is not significant.

Moderation analysis

Table 4 presents the results for moderation testing, proposes the moderating role of moral identity between moral disengagement and unethical pro-organization behavior Hypothesis 5. Using the Process Macro for regression analysis, the results support hypothesis 5. The findings confirmed the moderating role of moral identity between moral disengagement and UPB (b = -0.56, p <0.001, CI [-0.76, -0.36], ΔR^2 = 0.01), aligned with proposed model.

We plotted significant interaction for high and low (mean ± SD) values of moderator. Figure 2 indicates that moral identity moderate the link between moral disengagement and UPB is stronger at low level (β = 0.69, p <0.001, CI [0.49, 0.89]) and moderate levels (β = 0.44, p <0.001, CI [0.28, 0.59]). However, at high levels of moral identity, the effect of moral disengagement on UPB becomes non-significant (β = 0.01, p = 0.937, CI [-0.19, 0.21]).

TABLE 4: Moderated regression analysis (moderator: moral identity)

Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior					
Predictors	**R^2**	**Estimate**	**SE**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Step-1	0.33				
Constant		-4.91***	1.31	-7.51	-2.31
Moral Identity		2.32***	.37	1.59	3.04
Moral Disengagement		1.95***	.38	1.19	2.71
Step-2	ΔR^2 0.18				
Moral Disengagement **x** Moral Identity		-0.56***	.10	-0.76	-0.36

Conditional effect of X on Y at values of the moderator: Slope Test

Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior				
Moderator	**Effect**	**SE**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Moral Identity -1 SD (-1.01)	0.69***	0.10	0.49	0.89
Moral Identity M (0.00)	0.44***	0.08	0.28	0.59
Moral Identity +1 SD (1.01)	0.01	0.10	-0.19	0.21

N= 116. Unstandardized regression coefficients. *p <0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p <0.001
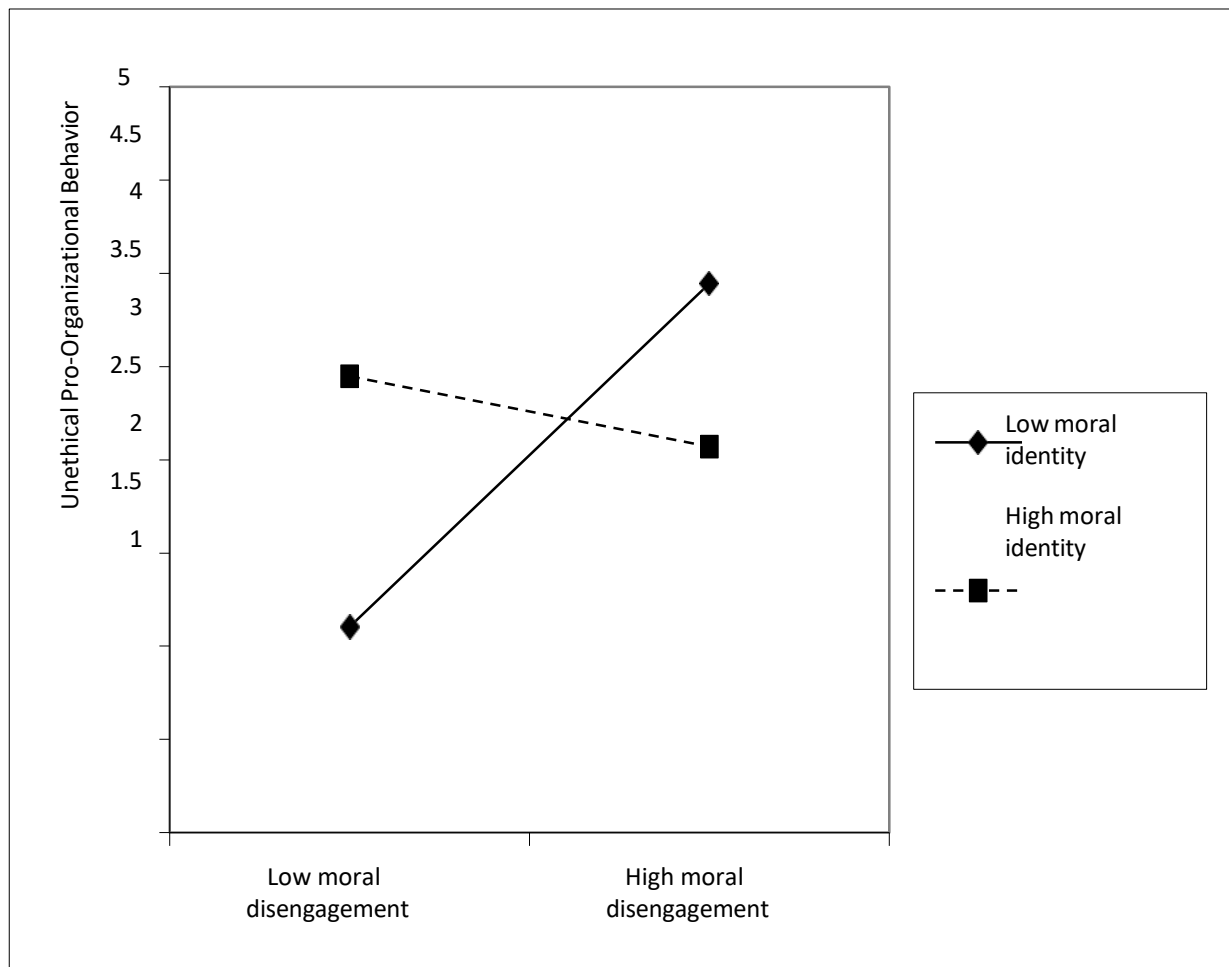
Figure 2. Interactive effects of moral disengagement and moral identity on Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

Discussion

This study explores how moral disengagement, unethical pro-organization behavior (UPB), workplace status and moral identity are connecting, offering insights into their dynamics and implications within organizational settings. The findings hold theoretical and practical significance are important for understanding how employee think and act in organization.

The study shows that moral disengagement is linked positively to workplace status Hypothesis1. Employee often justify unethical actions often leverage such justifications to enhance their organizational standing. This align Bandura's (1999) framework of moral disengagement explain how people convince themselves their

actions are acceptable, even they go against societal norms. By doing so, employees can adopt behaviors that, gaining short-term success but risk trust and reputation in the long run. Moore et al. (2012) also highlighted this double edge nature of moral disengagement, highlighting its capacity to temporarily boost status at the cost of ethical workplace dynamics.

Hypothesis 2 positively linked moral disengagement and UPB, which shows the results validate. These unethical actions such as bending rules or misreporting often justified as necessary for organizational benefit (Trevino et al., 2014). These findings resonate with Umphress and Bingham's (2011) idea of UPB shows how employee rationalize their actions that contravene ethical norms to benefit the organization. Over the time, such behavior changes to normal, creating an organizational culture that tolerates unethical practices. To prevent this, companies should have built ethical guidelines towards performance reviews and encourage accountability.Unexpectedly, UPB does not significantly have impact on workplace status, failed to support hypothesis

Although unethical actions might appear to demonstrate commitment to organizational goals. They do not consistently lead to enhance workplace status. The findings align with Effelsberg et al. (2014), who caution against overvaluing on short-term gains from unethical pro-organizational behavior due to risk of long-term reputational harm.

Mediation analysis also does not support hypothesis 4, as unethical pro-organizational fails to mediate the relationship between moral disengagement and workplace status. This suggest that the moral disengagement's direct influence on workplace status bypasses unethical pro-organizational behavior's role. Organization should consider addressing moral disengagement directly rather than focusing solely targeting the mitigation unethical pro-organizational behavior.

The study confirms hypothesis 5: demonstrating that moral identity weakens the relation between moral disengagement and UPB. Employees with a strong moral identity are less likely to engage in UPB, as their ethical value guide their actions (Aquino & Reed, 2002). In contrast, individuals with weaker moral identities are more likely to justify unethical behavior. Detert et al. (2008) also emphasize the importance of moral identity in promoting ethical behavior within organizational settings. This perception suggested that organizations should invest in aimed at strengthening employee's moral identities, such as ethics training programs and values-based leadership development. Organization can strengthen employee's moral identity across the workforce, organizations can create a culture where ethics training and leadership programs that prioritize value-based decision-making.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should address in future research like; self-reported data, convenience sampling, cross-sectional design, exclusion of relevant variables, and regional focus. The study relies on participant's self-reported data that introduces potential biases, like social desirability or inaccuracies in respondent's responses. People might try to represent themselves in a positive light by hiding

unethical actions or overstate positive behaviors to align with perceived norms (Bandura, 1999). The sample was chosen based on convenience, which means the result might not represent all organizations or industries. The findings are more specific to the participants and may not apply to all organizational settings or industries, especially in different cultural contexts (Ahmad et al., 2024). Cross-sectional nature of study restricts and making it difficult to know if one thing caused another. For example, it remains unclear if moral disengagement causes unethical behavior or if they influence each other over the time. (Trevino et al., 2014). The study focuses on a limited number of variables. It doesn't include other important influence like organizational justice, emotional intelligence, and peer influence which could give a fuller picture (Detert et al., 2008). The research was done in Pakistan, so the findings might not be applying to all countries where different cultural norms could lead to variations in moral disengagement and UPB dynamics (Effelsberg et al., 2014).

Future studies can expand on this research by focusing on these areas: promoting ethical leadership, strengthen organizational culture, implementing regular ethics training, revising the reward systems, encouraging open communication, evaluation and monitoring workplace dynamics, and tailor interventions for moral identity. Employ longitudinal design follow people overtime can better show how moral disengagement, UPB, and workplace status allowing for stronger casual inferences and an understanding of long-term trends (Bandura, 1999). Future studies also should explore how cultural and societal norms impact moral disengagement and UPB across different countries. This comparison can help identify universal and culture-specific trends (Ahmed et al., 2024). Other factors like emotional intelligence, organizational justice, and team dynamics should include future research to provide a more holistic understanding of unethical workplace behavior (Detert et., 2008). Research should evaluate strategies like ethics training programs, mentoring, and leadership development on reducing moral disengagement and improve employees' ethical thinking (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Investigating different industries, such as technology, healthcare, and education, to identify certain jobs or sectors face unique ethical challenges (Effelsberg et al., 2014). Explore the role of various leadership styles, like ethical or servant leadership, influence workplace, in mitigating UPB and promoting ethical behavior (Trevino et al., 2014). Assess the influence of digital tools and AI monitoring and performances tracking impact ethical behavior. These tools might prevent unethical actions or inadvertently encourage it through excessive surveillance (Umphress & Bingham, 2011).

Managerial Implications

The study's findings provide actionable for organizational leaders and trustworthy workplace. Managers should model ethical behavior as their behavior sets the tone for the organization. Leadership style like servant leadership is particularly effective in discouraging UPB (Effelsberg et al., 2014). Organization should avoid focusing on results, as this may encourage employees to engage in UPB. Instead recognizing honest efforts is just as important like outcomes (Trevino et al.,2014). Continuous training on

ethical decision-making can reduce moral disengagement and help employees to understand the ethical values (Aquino &Reed, 2002).

Organization should build a strong ethical climate by emphasis core values and reward employees not just for results but also achieving them ethically (Ahmad et al.,2024). Foster an environment where employees feel comfortable reporting unethical practices without fear of retaliation. Whistleblowing mechanism should be transparent because transparency is key to build trust (Bandura,1999). Evaluate and monitor workplace status by regular assessments of the organizational climate through surveys or feedbacks to detect area where moral disengagement or UPB might occur. Use tools like surveys or feedback systems to address issue before they escalate (Umphress & Bingham, 2011).

Develop programs that encourage employees to align their personal values with ethical practices, reinforcing the protective effects of a strong moral identify (Detert et al., 2008).

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