

A Missing Link Between Job Autonomy and Unethical Behavior

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Abstract. *The purpose of this paper is to theoretically address a surprising omission in literature by proposing a cognitive mechanism that sanctions individual-level unethical behaviors. This secondary literature-based qualitative study fills a theoretical gap by employing an extensive review of substantive empirical and theoretical literature of the last 15 years. However, those who consider their moral identity necessary for their self-concept are less likely to behave unethically. This proposed process, along with the path suggested by previous studies, in which individuals are having job autonomy feel unconstrained by rules before engaging in unethical behaviors. So, it proposes an underlying cognitive mechanism between job autonomy and unethical behavior. This study implies that it clarifies job autonomy's role in promoting the negative outcome of employees' unethical behaviors and informs organizational policymakers about the importance of satisfying the need for job autonomy.*

Keywords: *unethical behavior, job autonomy, moral disengagement, moral identity*

JEL Classification: D23, M12, M51, O15

Abstrak. *Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah secara teoritis untuk mengatasi kelalaian dalam literatur dengan mengusulkan mekanisme kognitif yang memberikan sanksi pada perilaku individu yang tidak etis tingkat individu. Studi kualitatif berbasis literatur sekunder ini mengisi kesenjangan teoretis dengan menggunakan tinjauan luas literatur empiris substantif dan teoritis dari 15 tahun terakhir. Namun, mereka yang menganggap identitas moral mereka diperlukan untuk konsep-diri mereka cenderung berperilaku tidak etis. Proses yang diusulkan ini, bersama dengan jalur yang disarankan oleh studi sebelumnya, di mana individu memiliki otonomi kerja merasa tidak dibatasi oleh aturan sebelum terlibat dalam perilaku yang tidak etis. Jadi, ia mengusulkan mekanisme kognitif yang mendasari antara otonomi kerja dan perilaku tidak etis. Studi ini menyiratkan bahwa ini menjelaskan peran otonomi kerja dalam mempromosikan hasil negatif dari perilaku tidak etis karyawan dan menginformasikan pembuat kebijakan organisasi tentang pentingnya memuaskan kebutuhan akan otonomi kerja.*

Kata Kunci: *perilaku tidak etis, otonomi pekerjaan, moral disengagement, identitas moral*

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Introduction

The primary motive for commercial business organizations is profit maximization. This, at times, also becomes the primary motive for engaging in unethical behaviors and practices (Tabish, 2009). If given a chance, most people are likely to commit unethical behaviors (De Cremer et al., 2010). Unethical behavior in this paper is defined as the action of any member of an organization that goes against generally accepted moral norms of society (Kaptein, 2008; Treviño et al., 2006) and the organization, thereby harming the interest of the organization and its members (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). This definition includes employee behaviors such as misreporting in financial documents, lying to customers, sabotage, theft, slacking off, and using organizational resources for personal benefit, all of which can cause harm to the organization and its members.

For organizational leaders as well as business ethics scholars and practitioners, the widespread and pervasive unethical practices warrant the questions: What makes ordinary people, in the normal course of their work lives, engage in acts that violate the dominant norms, values, and beliefs of the society whose membership they value? Many explanations and models have been formulated to understand ethical decision making within the context of business organizations, yet a lot needs to be investigated (Schwartz, 2016). Given the prevalence of unethical and illegal activities and their associated costs to society and other direct stakeholders, there is no doubt about the importance of understanding and curbing causes and triggers of unethical behaviors. Although several causes of ethical behavior have been investigated and identified, academicians and organizational practitioners still need to fully understand why ordinary individuals who may be concerned about being moral engage in unethical behavior (Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014).

In addition to expanding our understanding of why and where unethical behaviors can take root within organizations, such as in the presence of entitled unethical leaders (Joosten et al. 2014), we must now focus on the relatively less investigated areas of identifying and testing the psychological or cognitive processes due to which even those individuals who want to value morality end up transgressing moral boundaries. There is still considerable ambiguity and inconsistency in business ethics literature about the cognitive mechanisms that lead to lapses in moral judgment and subsequent unethical behaviors (Johnson & Buckley, 2015). Also, the relationship between satisfaction of any of the three psychological needs or the core job characteristic, autonomy, with unethical behaviors has not been examined, to the researcher's knowledge, in the country and organizational context where the current study was undertaken. Numerous quantitative and qualitative empirical studies have been undertaken to test exactly which variable or factor actually has a bearing on individuals' ethical decision making (Craft, 2013; Lehnert et al, 2015; cited in Schwartz, 2016). However, there is little work done on job-related characteristics, or dimensions of the work itself, that may lead to unethical behavior. In fact, there is little empirical evidence explaining the relationships between job characteristics and their motivational and behavioral outcomes, and also the underlying processes through which job characteristics influence outcomes (De Cooman et al., 2013). The theoretical and empirical research on unethical behavior has at best demonstrated inconsistent findings (Craft, 2013; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). This inconsistency can

be due to the research methods employed (for instance, self-report surveys, student samples, scenarios/vignettes) and due to the quality and diversity of measurement instruments (Casali, 2011; Mudrack & Mason, 2013). The current study will attempt to establish a cognitive mechanism through which the core job characteristic of job autonomy leads to unethical behavior, based on an extensive review of unethical decision making literature.

If satisfaction of the need for job autonomy is linked to unethical behavior in Pakistani organizations, which the current study will attempt to establish, the findings will be very useful in determining within organizational contexts when and how much autonomy should be given to particular individuals. The right extent of job autonomy will ensure that they are intrinsically motivated (as claimed by self-determination theory), feel a sense of responsibility (as claimed by Job Characteristics Model), and yet not feel unconstrained by rules (as suggested by Lu et al. 2017) or develop exonerative moral justifications (as suggested by Moore et al. 2012) to engage in unethical behaviors. The findings will be relevant for human resources managers at the top and middle organizational levels, and for HR specialists, especially job analysts, recruitment specialists, and compensation specialists/managers, head hunters/executive recruiters, and recruitment firms.

Unethical acts by organizations have been linked to small-scale individual-level unethical behaviors in the workplace (Welsh, Ordonez, Snyder, & Christian, 2014). Major unethical transgressions by corporations start out as small infractions that, left unchecked, escalate over time until they can no longer be kept secret. The phenomenon known as the slippery slope of unethical behavior (Welsh et al., 2014) suggests that when individuals engage in small-scale unethical behaviors, and get away with small infractions, they start committing increasingly larger unethical acts, which even they may not have contemplated at the start of their descent on the slippery slope. The regression from smaller unethical behaviors by individuals that snowball into larger unethical practices by entire groups of people within organizations point to the need to investigate the cognitive processes that sanction unethical behaviors on individual levels. Once the underlying cognitive mechanism which sanctions unethical behavior is understood within the workplace, organizations can take measures to subvert the processes by targeting mediating and/or moderating constructs through human resource management interventions and organizational policies. Welsh et al. (2014) have suggested some individual and contextual factors that can reduce or increase the slippery slope effect. When it comes to individual differences, those with a strong moral identity are less likely to slide down the slippery slope of unethical behavior, whereas those who are utilitarian, Machiavellian, or low in moral development are more vulnerable to the slippery slope effect (Welsh et al., 2014). Code of conduct, ethical priming, and monitoring, and ethical climate are contextual factors that can reduce or prevent the slippery slope effect.

A central principle of social psychology asserts that individuals try to retain a positive self-image privately and publicly. It follows that people engage in unethical behavior to a certain degree to be able to benefit from the transgression, and yet still continue to uphold their moral self-image. Mazar et al. (2008) suggest that when individuals have the opportunity to behave immorally, they attempt to strike a balance between the desire to obtain a valued

reward and the inclination to appear moral to the self and to others. This makes their ethical decisions and actions inconsistent over time and across situations.

Modern organizations provide numerous possibilities for pursuing self-interest through unethical means. A struggle theory for business ethics (Kaptein, 2015) posits that to become ethical and sustainably behave in ethical ways requires tremendous struggle by organizations. When existing embedded ethical norms slowly start to fade away making way for new ones that are not yet entrenched, an ethics gap arises between what should be done what is actually being done (Kaptein, 2015). The factors responsible for the ethics gaps have been identified in the burgeoning body of business ethics literature as moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999a; Moore et al., 2012), deinstitutionalization (Westphal & Zajac, 2001), rationalization and socialization (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), deterioration of ethical culture (Sims & Brinkmann, 2003), reduced quality of business ethics programs (Kaptein, 2008), and decoupling (Mac Lean & Benham, 2010; Stevens et al., 2005). The struggle theory of ethics has also presented an array of factors behind the reasons for the ethics gap. An ethics struggle requires tremendous effort to obtain something of value in the presence of opposing forces that are hard to resist or conquer. Two such forces that drive people towards unethical behavior are pressures (forces that push towards unethical behavior) and temptations (forces that pull towards unethical behavior). Organizations by their very nature present various kinds of pressures and temptations to engage in unethical behavior (Kaptein, 2015).

Method

This literature-based review paper presents the results of a secondary database qualitative study (not meta-analysis). Accessing the databases Emerald, JSTOR, and Elsevier to chronologically identify the enablers and drivers of unethical behavior and subsequently establish the empirical and theoretical connections between any unexplored enabler and unethical behavior, carried out an extensive review of the last 15 years' substantive empirical and theoretical literature. The keywords used for searching relevant empirical and theoretical papers were "ethics," "cognitive mechanism," "moral disengagement," "moral identity," "business," "moral," "cognitive models," "autonomy," "job characteristics," "rules," "slippery slope," "management," "psychological path," "feeling unconstrained by rules," and "ethical decision making."

Results and Discussion

Substantive Review of Recent Literatures

A substantive review of recent empirical studies on unethical behavior unearthed a number of factors leading to unethical behavior such as individual factors or moral capacity. Individual factors that influence unethical behavior have been established in numerous empirical and meta-analytic studies. A review by Kish-Gephart et al. (2010) has identified cognitive moral development (CMD), external locus of control, Machiavellianism, and relativist moral philosophy. A later review by Treviño, et al. (2014) identified moral attentiveness (chronically perceiving and considering moral aspects in one's experience)

stemming from social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986), moral conation (ability to become responsible and motivated to act morally in adverse and challenging situations), and moral identity (self-conception surrounding certain moral characteristics) stemming from social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Others factors are ego strength, field dependence (Treviño, 1986), values, and personal experience (Schwartz, 2016).

Besides that, the other factor is situational context. Situational factors have been organized into three components by the Integrated-Ethical Decision Making model (I-EDM; Schwartz, 2016), namely the issue, organizational infrastructure, and personal factors (Schwartz, 2016). Taking Jones (1991) 'issue-contingent model' forward, Schwartz (2016) has specified three components for the ethical issue variable, which affects all stages of EDM. Ethical issue refers to any circumstance that needs a volitional choice to be made having positive or negative ramifications for others. The issue factor consists of the dimensions of issue intensity (Butterfield et al., 2000), issue importance (Robin et al., 1996), and issue complexity (Street et al., 2001; Warren & Smith-Crowe, 2008).

The second component of the situational context in I-EDM (Schwartz, 2016) is the organizational infrastructure, an umbrella concept, which refers to all organizational factors that influence its ethical effectiveness (Treviño et al., 2006; Tenbrunsel et al., 2003). Valentine et al. (2013) refer to it as ethical context, incorporating both ethical climate (Victor & Cullen, 1988) and ethical culture (Treviño et al., 1998; Treviño, 1990). Rules are ethical codes that guide ethical (or other) decisions in organizations and institutions in society (Mulder et al., 2015). As unethical behavior by definition refers to violating generally acceptable norms or rules (Kaptein, 2008; Trevino et al. 2006), it follows that when people don't pay heed to rules, they may commit an unethical action.

The third component of the situational context variable of I-EDM is the personal situation, usually involving personal gain (cited in Schwartz, 2016). An individual who is ethically vulnerable either because of poor finances, or financial obligations, and having no job alternatives (Brown, 2013) will be more tempted to behave unethically even at the risk of personal costs (job, bonus, promotion) according to (Treviño, 1990).

Additionally, interpersonal influence of peers, leaders and managers also influences unethical behaviour (Treviño et al., 2014). Peers set ethical standards for behaviour by action or inaction (Moore & Gino, 2013). For instance, cheating by in-group members makes other in-group members also cheat (Gino & Pierce, 2009). People's unethical behaviour varies according to current organizational norms. Pierce & Synder (2008) concluded that inspectors immediately regulated their own unethical behaviour to conform the different norms of organizations they visited. Talking to colleagues about ethical matters was found to reduce unethical behaviour, whereas discussing self-interest increased it (Gunia et al., 2012).

Leaders are important influencers of unethical behaviour. Leaders at different organizational levels are responsible for developing the ethical infrastructure and organizational climate (Arnaud & Schminke, 2012). Moreover, leaders themselves are more likely to behave unethically because a sense of entitlement based on the label of being a leader helps them justify their unethical actions. Several experimental studies by De Cremer et al. (2009) Van

Dijke, et al. (2014), Van Dijk & De Cremer (2006) that shows that being labelled a leader makes individuals more self-serving, which in turn makes them take more tangible resources for themselves.

Moral Identity refers to a self-conception surrounding certain moral characteristics (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Self-concept refers to what we think we are. It is based on what traits we usually think we possess or don't possess. For instance, an individual's self-concept consists of traits like being honest, diligent, responsible, and social. An individual can possess any number of traits of different kinds. Traits can be broadly classified as being moral and non-moral in nature. For instance, being compassionate, honest, kind, and generous fall in the category of moral traits. Conversely, being clever, bold, inquisitive, charming, or funny fall in the category of non-moral or pragmatic traits, as they are not unequivocally connected to moral values and principles. For any aspect identity to influence behavior, it has to be active in the working self-concept (Perugini et al., 2011). An identity that is more important will be more active in the self-concept, but other identities may also become more or less salient due to the influence of contextual cues. If the moral aspect of the self-concept is activated, there is evidence that the individual will act morally (Aquino et al., 2009). Yet, if another identity, says a banker, is salient, individuals acted dishonestly for personal gain (Cohn et al., 2014). Thus, identity is important for behaving morally, as it reduces conscious deliberation (Moore & Gino, 2015).

Moreover, cognitive processes are influencing unethical behavior. When the eliciting situation exists, there will be moral awareness or lack of moral awareness in the individual. Moral awareness involves recognizing that one must decide or act to resolve a situation, which could affect the welfare, expectations, or interests of oneself or other people in a way that will violate one's moral standards (Butterfield et al., 2000). An individual becomes morally aware due to moral capacity and/or an innate capacity to identify ethics problems (Hannah et al., 2011) and/or organizational infrastructure (ethics codes, ethics training, policy communications (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003). Moral awareness results from moral attentiveness, mindfulness, and moral imagination (Schwartz, 2016).

Lack of moral awareness means the individual does not realize or overlooks the ethical aspects of the situation (Schwartz, 2016). It is also known as unintended amoral awareness (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). Reasons for lack of moral awareness include moral fading, moral blindness, non-moral decision frames, moral myopia, and moral disengagement (Schwartz, 2016).

According to moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1999b), an extension of the social-cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986), moral disengagement is a dissonance-reducing cognitive process through which people convince themselves that ethical standards are not relevant in a particular situation. It involves the de-activation of the moral self-regulatory processes that usually discourage unethical behavior. People want to perceive themselves positively consistent with their moral values (Mazar et al., 2008). They attempt to reduce the tension or ethical dissonance they experience when they act to pursue self-interest in ways that violates their own moral standards. This is do by rationalizing beneficial unethical behavior

by cognitively misconstruing its nature and consequences to avoid negatively revising one's self-concept (Mazar et al., 2008; Shalvi et al., 2011), and freeing oneself from self-sanctions and guilt (Detert et al., 2008). Since it is easier to justify minor misdemeanors as compared to major ethical transgressions (Mazar et al., 2008), moral disengagement occurs when people slide down the slippery slope of unethical behavior over a period of time (Welsh et al., 2014). As past behavior is a good indication of future choices, those who have committed small indiscretions may morally disengage in the future to justify unethical actions. Gradually worsening ethical choices, instead of abrupt unethical transgressions, routinize unethical behavior and make it seem acceptable without much consideration (Welsh et al., 2014).

When a situation has ethical dimensions, one's moral standards become active. Moral self-sanctioning mechanisms, which are self-regulatory processes, (guilt, self-sanctions) stop the individual from acting unethically. But, one or more of the eight cognitive distortion mechanisms of moral disengagement de-couple the link between self-regulatory mechanisms and unethical behavior (Moore et al. 2012). Moral disengagement is also referred to as moral justification (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Morally disengaged reasoning results from many individual-level antecedents. They have been identified as traits of empathy and cynicism (Detert et al., 2008), moral identity (McFerran et al., 2010), social dominance orientation (Rosenblatt, 2012), and task self-efficacy (Shepherd et al., 2013). The other factor is affective processes and emotions influencing unethical behavior. A number of emotions such as, envy (Tai et al., 2012), anger, shame, fear (Kish-Gephart, et al., 2009; Motro et al., 2018; Polman & Rutan, 2012; Umphress & Bingham, 2011) empathy, and guilt influence unethical behavior, sometimes in unexpected ways (Schwartz, 2016).

Next is self-regulation and ego-ego depletion. Processes of cognitive self-regulation stop individuals from behaving unethically, but when self-control depletes, these processes become ineffective (Schwartz, 2016). Self-control involves overcoming the dominant inclination to respond, and involves regulating thoughts, feelings, and actions (De Ridder, et al., 2012). Self-control helps resist tempting unethical behaviors, like pinching office supplies. It is finite resource and gets used up over time, especially when practiced in the past, unless moral identity was strong (Baumeister, & Heatherton, 1996).

Recently, Belle & Cantarelli (2017) found that the slippery-slope effect, being around increasingly dishonest people, time pressures, challenging performance-related goals, greed, aversion to loss, egocentrism, depletion of self-control, self-justification, and social influences (when in-group members behave unethically, or individuals are aware of others who benefit from unethical behavior) are causes of unethical behavior. However, this recent review was did not identify any job-related characteristics, such as autonomy.

The current investigation builds on the findings of Lu et al. (2017) that a relatively newly identified psychological state, feeling unconstrained by rules, (Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014), which arises from the experience of job autonomy, leads to unethical behavior. The study further proposes that individuals experiencing job autonomy, in addition to feeling unconstrained by rules, are also able to morally disengage i.e. exonerate their ethical transgression through moral reasoning, and convince themselves that moral standards do

not apply in the situation (Bandura, 2002) to justify committing the unethical act while still maintaining their moral self-image. However, this is more likely for people having a low self-importance of moral identity, and less likely for those having a high self-importance of moral identity.

Hackman & Oldham (1976) have conceptualized job autonomy as the degree to which people freely decide how to do their work. It also refers to as job control or decision latitude (Karasek, 1979). Fodchuk (2007) refers to it as the degree of freedom and control that employees have in their jobs. Overall, the concept of job autonomy now involves employee discretion over where, when, in what sequence, and using what means they can perform their job tasks (Kubicek et al., 2017). Historically, job autonomy has been linked it to positive work outcomes such as performance, job satisfaction, well being (Kubicek et al., 2017), fewer accidents, errors, injuries, and unsafe behaviors (Nahrgang et al., 2011), and reducing conflicts stemming from contradictory role demands and work-family balance (Michel et al., 2011; Ng & Feldman, 2015). While theoretical and empirical research since the 1970's has focused on job autonomy's positive consequences for employee well-being and motivation, a small body of recent empirical research has argued that job autonomy also has a dark side, that too much of it is damaging for employees (Warr, 2013). Kubicek et al. (2017) present empirical evidence from several studies suggesting that job autonomy may not be entirely a valuable resource and may at times adversely impact well being.

The Vitamin model (Warr, 1990, 1994) was an early challenger of the notion that job autonomy was always beneficial, suggesting that once a certain tipping point is reached, even beneficial job characteristics cease to benefit employees (called constant effect), and may in fact be harmful (called additional decrement). An intrinsic mechanism causes job autonomy to constrain rather than encourage action by making autonomy a necessity, rather than a nicety, thereby reducing employee well being. Empirical evidence has also linked job autonomy to negative outcomes, such as increased task insecurity and burnout (Kubicek et al., 2017).

The nature of the work setting also has a bearing on the effects of job autonomy. If the work setting is externally controlled and well regulated (as in the 1980's), a higher level of autonomy is beneficial. However, in indirectly controlled and very flexible work settings job autonomy brings along uncertainty and ambiguity (Johlke & Iyer, 2013). In such environments, employees are not just given the opportunity to make decisions, but are in fact compelled to do so. They don't find autonomy to be helpful, but rather something that makes them expend more effort, and which obstructs the completion of tasks (Warr, 2013). The autonomy paradox (Mazmanian et al., 2013) contends that more autonomy makes employees work harder, and the more time they spend at work; the more their organizations control them. The more autonomy employees have in deciding when and where they can work, the more effort they put in their work (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Having work time and workplace autonomy disguises the fact that workplace norms, socialization practices, and values increase organizational control over employees (Putnam et al., 2014).

Another factor influencing whether job autonomy will be beneficial or harmful for

work outcomes is individual differences (Van Yperen et al., 2014). Whether an employee's reaction to job autonomy will be positive or negative depends on their need for autonomy (Kubicek et al., 2017). It is the strongest predictor of intrinsic or autonomous motivation, and there is much empirical evidence to support its predictive power. In several studies involving managers, autonomy supportive behaviors lead to enhanced satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs, subsequently leading to more trust and positive employee attitudes (Deci et al., 1989); higher job satisfaction, better performance ratings, enhanced persistence, more receptiveness to organizational change, and improved psychological acceptance (Baard et al., 2004; Deci et al. 2001; Gagné et al., 2000; Kubicek et al., 2017). In addition, for people with a high versus low need for autonomy, job autonomy's influence on its outcomes will be different. Work time and workplace autonomy was more beneficial for employees with a higher need for autonomy (Van Yperen et al., 2014). When there is a high need for autonomy, just having a perception that there is an opportunity to choose where and when a task will be performed, without actually availing the opportunity, becomes an effective resource to deal with job demands; however, this is not the case for employees with a low need for autonomy (Van Yperen et al., 2016). Later, Lu et al. (2017) found that employees who felt unconstrained by rules due to job autonomy were less prone to behaving unethically if they gave more importance to having job autonomy, as compared to those who placed less value on having job autonomy. Based on this empirical evidence, it is evident that having job autonomy may bring about mixed or unexpected results, as the presence of high autonomy may bring about the too-much-of-a-good-thing effect (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013), and may in fact turn out to be counterproductive.

It has been asserted that organizational members are tempted to behave unethically when they have authority to carry out their duties, along with an opportunity to misuse that authority (Pitesa, & Thau, 2013). Job autonomy is a job characteristic that pertains to the degree to which the job performer can decide how, when, and where to do the job (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980). Experiencing job autonomy makes individuals feel in charge of what they are doing. De Cremer et al. (2009) suggested that within contemporary organizations those in charge tend to behave unethically because of a sense of entitlement. For instance, De Cremer et al. (2009) attributed the tendency among leaders of taking more for themselves while giving less to others to social cognitive processes, which allow them to perceive their actions less unethical and continue to view themselves as a moral individuals. De Cremer et al. (2009) likened the social cognitive process to moral rationalization (Bandura, 1999a). Moral rationalization is a cognitive process that helps people in believing that their actions are not breaching their own moral standards (Tsang, 2002).

The likelihood of the experience of job autonomy leading to moral rationalization or disengagement is high. An empirical survey of that compared the standards of business ethics of Pakistan with USA, China, and Jamaica found that businessmen in Pakistan rationalized their unethical behaviors by giving various justifications that are reminiscent of moral disengagement mechanisms (Tabish, 2009). For instance, Pakistani business professionals considered paying bribes to be the cost of doing business, a neutral phase to make unethical behavior seem less harmful or morally acceptable. This was termed euphemistic labeling by

moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1990). In the same study, American businessmen justified bribery for themselves by responding that it is an acceptable practice in other countries. This is called diffusion of responsibility in moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1990). Pakistani respondents did not consider it unethical for a company to continue selling a hazardous product in spite of knowing the potential harm it could cause, as long as there was a demand for it. They believed that the company was not to blame as the demand was consumer-driver and was the consumers' choice. This is akin to blaming the victim in moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1990). Similarly, the buyer beware mentality was also depicted most strongly among Pakistani businessmen out of all the four surveyed countries when they responded that a company may not disclose that one of its auto parts supplier was supplying a defective part that could potentially be fatal, if the disclosure was likely to hurt sales. This paper suggests that when the tendency to morally disengage already exists in the wider culture and thus works settings, the experience of job autonomy is likely to further enable moral disengagement.

Moral disengagement has been selected as a mediator between job autonomy and unethical behavior because Bandura (1986, 2002) describes it has an inhibitory cognitive process that deactivates the link between self-regulation and one's immoral actions. Also, Moore et al. (2012) assert that moral disengagement is the most powerful predictor of unethical behavior as compared to other competing morally relevant constructs in the same conceptual domain, such as Machiavellianism, trait empathy, and moral identity.

Secondly, it is particularly suitable for predicting unethical behaviour in organizational settings because organizations provide many opportunities to get morally disengaged (Moore et al. 2012). Their hierarchical structure enables displacement of responsibility. Teamwork allows diffusion of responsibility. Being an organizational member creates the perception of being part of an in-group, thus giving a reason to justify unethical behaviour, and mentally downplaying the harm being caused to non-members outside the organization. Organizations are also known to allow people to develop amoral judgment frames and shut off moral schemas (Moore et al. 2012). Johnson & Buckley (2015) further endorse that time; place or population does not bind moral disengagement.

Moral disengagement increases unethical behavior, regardless of other individual differences (Aquino et al., 2007; Detert et al., 2008). Propensity to morally disengage is linked to traits such as external locus of control, moral personality, cynicism, and moral identity (Detert et al., 2008; Duffy et al., 2005). Certain situations promote moral disengagement and unethical behavior, such as those that provide opportunity for legitimate justifications or rationalizations for acting unethically while still appearing to be moral (Shalvi et al., 2012). Moral disengagement influences corruption in organizations by initiating and expediting unethical decision making, and reducing the decision makers' awareness about the ethical dimensions of the decision (Moore, 2008). Kish-Gephart et al. (2014) concluded that when a situation offers opportunities for personal gain or involves self-interest, the individual reasons in a morally disengaged manner to benefit the self. Other studies suggest that when employees are primed to think creatively or feel positive emotions, they find novel justifications for their self-serving actions (Gino & Ariely, 2012; Vincent et al., 2013). In entrepreneurs, the

association between unethical behavior and motivation for financial gains is mediated by moral disengagement, whereas motivation for self-realization is negatively linked to moral disengagement (Baron et al., 2015).

Welsh et al. (2014) concluded that when changes in financial incentives increase gradually instead of abruptly, moral disengagement mediates the relationship between gradual versus abrupt changes and unethical behavior, moderated by prevention focus. This showed that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between the slippery slope effect and unethical behavior. Furthermore, moral disengagement predicted and mediated the relationship between authenticity and unethical behavior in weak situations more as compared to strong situations (Knoll et al., 2016).

The social-cognitive model of moral identity (Aquino & Freeman, 2012) connects moral identity with the business context by conceptualizing it as an individual difference as well a psychological construct that can be triggered by situational stimuli such as subtle primes and business-oriented contextual signals. Moral identity may serve as a cognitive line of defense against pressure exerted by organizational demands for engaging in immoral acts (Weaver, 2006). Those with a strong moral identity are less likely to slide down the slippery slope of unethical behavior, whereas those who are utilitarian, Machiavellian, or low in moral development are more vulnerable to the slippery slope effect (Welsh et al. 2014). Moral identity has a significant negative relationship with moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008). It also has an indirect negative effect, through moral disengagement, on unethical decision-making (Detert et al., 2008). Aquino et al. (2007) concluded that if an individual has a high self-importance of moral identity, it would reduce the potency of any moral disengagement mechanisms that would rationalize their harmful actions directed at others. When moral identity is strong, individuals can resist the temptation of self-interested behavior even when they are psychologically feeling powerful. Moral identity was found to self-regulate and reduce unethical behavior when its salience was high among high-status employees (Galperin et al., 2011). In a quantitative survey of 600 Australians, empathy and moral identity positively influenced consumers' ethical beliefs and promoted ethical behavior, whereas cynicism reduced ethical behavior (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014). In an empirical study, data from separate field and lab experiments showed that due to ego depletion (personal resources were exhausted due to constant self-control), leaders behaved unethically, if their moral identity was weak, whereas those with a strong moral identity did not behave unethically due to self-regulatory ego depletion (Joosten et al. 2014). In another study it was concluded that ethical leaders who consider their moral identity important have a different impact on productively deviant workplace behavior from those whose moral identity is not important (Skubinn & Herzog, 2016). A meta-analysis of 111 studies from diverse academic disciplines such as business, education, sociology, marketing, and developmental psychology showed that an individual's willingness to engage in prosocially and ethical behaviors, and unwillingness to behave antisocially, is strengthened by moral identity (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). Lu et al. (2017) strongly suggested that the moderating role of moral identity should also be investigated in the relationship between the experience of job autonomy and unethical behavior.

Critical Review and Synthesis of Literature

Within the stream of business ethics research on intentional unethical behaviors, Shalvi et al. (2015) have presented a framework that integrates and expands the growing body of research evidence on unethical behaviors' antecedents and consequences. This framework is a good starting point to understand how ordinary people commit moral transgressions without thinking any less of them. Temptation may lead an individual to violate socially accepted principles or rules or commit a moral transgression (Shalvi et al., 2015). As committing a moral violation threatens one's moral self, formulating self-serving justifications to excuse for or compensate for the violation determines the enormity of the unethical action. Ambiguous situations, with unclear rules, are very conducive for developing self-serving justification (Schweitzer & Hsee, 2002). Shalvi et al. (2015) framework implies that the likelihood to morally disengage is a good indication of the possibility of formulating justifications, rendering moral disengagement an important, yet not explicitly depicted, part of the process that leads to unethical behavior.

Shalvi et al. (2015) framework is in line with the struggle theory for business ethics by Kaptein (2015), in that it supports the notion of temptation as a force that pulls people towards unethical behavior. The struggle theory may seem to be augmenting Shalvi et al. (2015) by identifying authority within an organization to perform requisite tasks and the opportunity to abuse it as a temptation to violate ethical norms. Shalvi et al. (2015) did not elaborate on the nature of temptations. Besides authority, another temptation within organizations postulated by Kaptein (2015) in the struggle theory of business ethics is conformity. Conformity refers to following orders because it is simply the way things are done in the organization, regardless of their being ethical or not. This idea has striking similarity to the moral disengagement mechanism, diffusion of responsibility (Bandura, 2002), although the struggle theory does not explicitly refer to it. However, the struggle theory of business ethics (Kaptein, 2015) is silent about the role of job characteristics in pulling or pushing towards unethical behavior. The struggle theory posits that authority and the corresponding opportunity to misuse it is a temptation to behave unethically (De Cremer et al., 2009; Pitesa & Thau, 2013), but does not refer to job autonomy as a temptation or pressure.

So far, there is little empirical evidence linking job characteristics to moral disengagement, which is a perplexing omission, because many high-profile corporate scandals exposed the abuse of autonomy by top executives to pursue self-interested goals through unethical means. For instance, the global financial crisis of 2008 perpetuated by sub-prime mortgage lending has been partially attributed to the free reign individual financiers who had over mortgaged lending. In a study of organizational and job characteristics influencing sexual harassment through moral disengagement, while Claybourn (2011) used the Job Characteristics Inventory (JCI) to measure job characteristics dimensions such as task identity, variety, feedback, autonomy, friendship opportunities, and dealing with others, only the sub-scales related to interpersonal workplace interactions were used, which were friendship opportunities and dealing with others. The author did not give a reason for omitting the other dimensions of job characteristics, while clearly recognizing the dearth of empirical experimental evidence about the causal relationship between job characteristics and moral disengagement. The current

study partially addresses this gap by theoretically establishing the relationship between one of the core job characteristics, job autonomy and moral disengagement.

However, in a study of Pakistan's contemporary administrative culture based on secondary data from scholarly literature, official documents magazines, and newspapers. Islam (2004) has argued that the reason behind corrupt practices, nepotism, and excessive obedience to the hierarchical chain of command by administrative personnel is the high uncertainty avoidant, collectivist, high power distance, masculine culture of the country. This conclusion is supported by a social-cognitive model of unethical behavior within organizations developed by Galperin et al. (2011).

This socio-cognitive model of unethical behavior by Galperin et al. (2011), grounded in the social-cognitive theory of Bandura (2001), contends that organizational members having a higher status engage in unethical behaviors, as they are distant and isolated from the rank and file (out-group). The underlying mechanism is that having a high status group identity becomes more salient and suppresses the high-status individual's moral identity. This identity displacement makes the high status employees more isolated from the rest, which also makes them less concerned about the needs and interests of others (out-group) as compared to their own needs and interests. The suppression of the moral identity also reduces awareness of moral issues, lessening the need to self-regulate unethical behavior, resulting in ethical transgressions. Moderators of the relationships at the individual level are also presented.

While this model explains in considerable depth the underlying mechanism by which high status differentiation results in unethical behavior, it downplays some important factors. The presence of moral disengagement (dehumanizing of the out-group by the high-status in-group members) and also use the concept of moral disengagement as one of the many ways through which high-status employees overcome the cognitive dissonance they experience when the high-status identity becomes more salient than their moral identity, their socio-cognitive model does not make explicit the importance of moral displacement as one of the strongest predecessor of unethical behavior, which it certainly is (Moore et al., 2012).

Also, Galperin et al. (2011) are vague about whether high-status employees whose behavior their model is explaining possess power or not. Power refers to the ability to exercise control over one's and others' resources without the interference of other social factors (Galinsky et al., 2003), and has the potential to bring about negative behaviors in the presence of a weak moral identity (DeCelles et al., 2012). Since power distance is high in the local context of the current study (Islam, 2004), it is necessary to understand the processes that connect power and unethical behavior.

Pitesa & Thau (2013) present a model in which power plays a role in when and why employees make (un)ethical decisions by following their own preferences instead of social influences. Their model is grounded in the situated focus theory of power (Guinote, 2007), which posits that more powerful individuals' attention is more focused on themselves, and less on others because they are less dependent on others. Drawing on this premise, Pitesa

& Thau (2013) found experimental evidence that across the three main paradigms of social influence (informational, normative, and compliance), power makes individuals more self-focused, increasing the likelihood of their behaving according to their own preferences and paying less attention to social influences. While this is a credible explanation grounded in empirical evidence, this model does not take into account any individual differences that may interact with power. This gap was somewhat well addressed by DeCelles et al. (2013) argue that the experience of power has a weak influence on self-interested behavior if the individual's moral identity is strong. In a lab experiment, Pitesa & Thau (2013) found evidence that a weak moral identity decreases the likelihood of acting in self-interest even when a person is feeling powerful. They predicted the underlying mechanism through a mediated-moderated model, which demonstrated that whereas experiencing power enhanced the moral awareness of individuals with a strong moral identity, it reduced the moral awareness of those with a weak moral identity. Thus, moral identity is an important moderator in the pursuit of self-interest even when there is power over the control of resources.

While power and autonomy are two different concepts, both involve the common factor of control over something—resources people need or one's job, respectively. Since autonomy is a core job characteristic (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), its presence and absence can be expected to be a factor influencing most individuals' (un)ethical decisions as shown by Lu et al. (2017), and must therefore be given more attention. Within the current study's local context, most empirical research has focused on types of unethical practices within different industrial sectors (Ahmad et al., 2011; Ahmed & Saeed, 2012; Mehmood, 2016; Islam, 2004; Nawaz & Ikram, 2013; Ram et al., 2011). Cognitive and psychological processes underlying ethical infractions have received little attention by local researchers. It is vital to investigate these mechanisms by employing established measures of known factors as well as developing new measures suitable for the local population. Initially, correlational studies need to be conducted as a starting point for predicting cognitive and psychological mechanisms behind unethical behaviors, followed by experimental designs to establish causal relationships.

Broader Literature Gap

Many explanations and models have been formulated to understand ethical decision making within the context of business organizations, yet a lot needs to be investigated (Schwartz, 2016). Although several causes of ethical behavior have been investigated and identified, academicians and organizational practitioners still need to fully understand why ordinary individuals who may be concerned about being moral engage in unethical behavior (Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014). We must now focus on the relatively less investigated areas of identifying and testing the psychological or cognitive processes due to which even those individuals who want to value morality end up transgressing moral boundaries. There is still considerable ambiguity and inconsistency in business ethics literature about the cognitive mechanisms that lead to lapses in moral judgment and subsequent unethical behaviors (Johnson & Buckley, 2015).

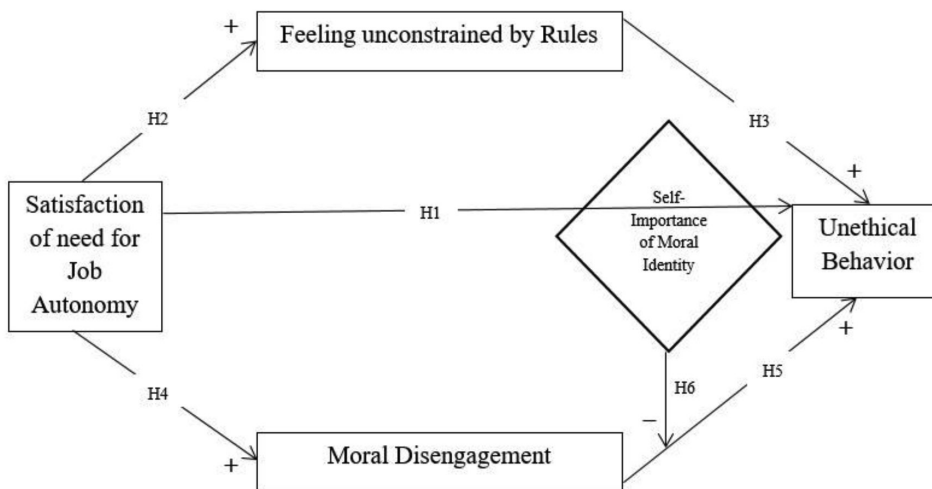
Also, the relationship between the core job characteristic, autonomy, and unethical behaviors has not been examined, to the researcher's knowledge. Numerous quantitative and qualitative empirical studies have been undertaken to test exactly which variables or factors actually have a bearing on individuals' ethical decision making (Craft, 2013; Lehnert et al., 2015; Schwartz, 2016). However, there is little work done on job-related characteristics, or dimensions of the work itself, that may lead to unethical behavior. In fact, there is little empirical evidence explaining the relationships between job characteristics and their motivational and behavioral outcomes, and also the underlying processes through which job characteristics influence outcomes (De Cooman et al., 2013). This paper corroborates the contention of Lu et al. (2017) that the presence of core job characteristics, job autonomy, usually related with positive outcomes of job satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), and creativity, performance, and motivation (Lu et al., 2017), also leads to the negative outcome of unethical behavior, through the path of moral disengagement.

Discussion

After the critical review of the literature, including the underlying theories and bodies of empirical evidences, this paper proposes a cognitive mechanism that depicts the possible causal connections between job autonomy and unethical behavior. It builds on a causal path found between the experience of job autonomy and unethical behavior by Lu et al. (2017) utilizing the Job Characteristic Model by Hackman & Oldham (1980) framework. Lu et al. (2017) expanded the construct of job autonomy demonstrating through multi-stage experimental studies that job autonomy is a double-edge sword. Besides generating the psychological state of feeling a sense of responsibility, Lu et al. (2017) argued that the experience of job autonomy also makes the individual experience the psychological state of feeling unconstrained by rules. This particular psychological state leads to unethical behavior.

Building on this path proposed by Lu et al. (2017), this paper also proposes that feeling unconstrained by rules is not a sufficient condition for making ethical transgressions, because people want to appear moral to themselves and to others, even when pursuing self-interest. To uphold their moral self, they attempt to justify their unethical actions by morally disengaging from their actions. There is greater likelihood that the dehumanization (Vaes et al., 2012), displacement of responsibility, and diffusion of responsibility mechanisms of moral disengagement may be activated. However, those who give more importance to their moral identity are less likely to engage in unethical behaviors. Aquino et al. (2007) concluded that if an individual has a high self-importance of moral identity, it would reduce the potency of any moral disengagement mechanisms that would rationalize their harmful actions directed at others. When moral identity is strong, individuals can resist the temptation of self-interested behavior even when they are psychologically feeling powerful (Galperin et al., 2011). Figure 1 shows the proposed cognitive mechanism and sanction for the unethical behavior.

Figure 1. Proposed Cognitive Mechanism and Sanctions for Unethical Behavior



Conclusion

This literature-based review paper set out to theoretically propose a cognitive mechanism which allows ordinary individuals to self-sanction unethical behavior in their workplace, although they want to appear moral in their own eyes. An extensive qualitative review of the last 15 years’ empirical and theoretical research suggests that individuals descend down the slippery slope of unethical behavior if their minor ethical transgressions go unchecked over time. When individuals descend down the slippery slope of unethical behavior, they also morally disengage from their unethical behaviors. However, those who have a high self-importance of moral identity are less likely to be morally disengaged. Also, when employees’ psychological need for job autonomy is satisfied, they feel unconstrained by rules, which in turn leads to unethical actions. Based on these findings, this paper suggests that feeling unconstrained by rules is not a sufficient condition for behaving unethically. The psychological or cognitive mechanism which self-sanctions unethical behavior, along with making one feel unconstrained by rules, also involves moral disengagement from one’s unethical actions, when the need for job autonomy is satisfied. However, the descent down the slippery slope of unethical behavior is curtailed by the individual difference, self-importance of moral identity.

In the light of this study’s findings, there are serious HR policy implications for organizational decision makers. Line and HR managers should be careful about selecting employees with stronger moral identities, develop HR interventions that make the moral identity salient, give appropriate importance to rules and ethical dimensions of issues to prevent moral disengagement, and by creating proper organizational structures and systems provide less opportunities for rationalizing unethical decisions and actions. These measures will help in avoiding inadvertent encouragement of unethical behavior by managers and leaders. Future studies should empirically test the suggested cognitive mechanism in private and public sector organizations.

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