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Religiosity as a Buffer Against the Impact of Abusive Supervision on Employee Unethical Behavior: A Moderated Mediation Model

Abstract

Aim of study – This research seeks to examine the mitigating effect of religiosity on the relationship between abusive supervision and unethical behavior in employees, with moral disengagement serving as a mediating factor. Drawing on social cognitive theory, the study proposes an overarching moderated mediation framework to analyze this complex dynamic.

Methodology – The testing of the model was based on hierarchical data obtained from 70 work units in the services sector. Within this framework, 70 supervisors evaluated the unethical conduct of employees, while 700 employees assessed the abusive supervision they experienced and reported on their own moral disengagement and religiosity. For the analysis of both the measurement and the hypothesized models, multilevel modeling techniques in the Mplus software were utilized.

Results – The study's findings indicate a direct positive link between abusive supervision and employees' unethical behavior, with moral disengagement mediating this relationship. Furthermore, the research discovered that abusive supervision leads to unethical behavior in employees through moral disengagement only in instances where their religiosity is low.

Originality – This research delves deeper by elucidating the role of moral disengagement in the dynamic between abusive supervision and unethical behavior. Diverging from prior research, this study uniquely highlights the moderating role of religiosity, showing its potential to weaken the impact of abusive supervision on unethical behavior in employees through moral disengagement.

Keywords: Abusive supervision, moral disengagement, religiosity, unethical behavior, multi-level modelling

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Introduction

Unethical behavior in the workplace has led to significant organizational failures in recent decades, evidenced by the collapses of major corporations like WorldCom, Enron, and Tyco International (Javaid et al., 2020, Newman et al., 2020). Research has identified various determinants of such unethical behavior among employees. Key factors include reward systems (e.g. Mawritz et al., 2024, Hu et al., 2024), peer influence (Sufi et al., 2024), individual factors such as overqualification, emotional states like shame and anger (Liu et al., 2024), creativity, honesty-humility, and moral identity (Mishra et al., 2024, Guo et al., 2023), and other personality traits associated with the dark triad (Harrison et al., 2018). Moreover, recent studies have also highlighted the role of organizational culture (see Cabana and Kaptein, 2024, Kaptein, 2011), and external factors such as the political environment and social status (Jung et al., 2023) in shaping employees' unethical behavior. In comparison, scholars have also examined the influence of different leadership styles on employees' unethical behaviors (Tsai, 2024, Gan et al., 2023, Jiang et al., 2022); little attention has been paid to abusive supervision, which is a negative side of leadership.

Because of its negative nature, abusive supervision seems to have strong relevance for the study of unethical behavior in the workplace. For example, Hannah et al. (2013) and Guo et al. (2020) illustrate that abusive supervision fosters unethical behavior, particularly among highly proactive employees. Yan et al. (2024) demonstrated that abusive supervision positively impacts employees' pro-organizational unethical behavior through the mediation of moral disengagement and status challenges, respectively. Although these studies have developed a good understanding of the relationship between abusive supervision and unethical behavior, we still need to explore alternative mechanisms and boundary conditions to develop a nuanced understanding of the

complex nature of the relationship between abusive supervision and employees' unethical behavior. Specifically, the critical analysis of these studies shows that the studies on abusive supervision primarily focused on the outcomes of employees' pro-organizational unethical behavior and ignored its influence on personal unethical behavior. Secondly, a multilevel approach is required for this investigation, which is very little used in studying this relationship.

To address these limitations, this study examines the impact of abusive supervision on employees' unethical behavior, considering the mediation of moral disengagement and the moderating role of religiosity. We collected multilevel data from both supervisors and employees and employed robust multilevel structural regression modeling techniques to test our hypotheses. Using Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, we argue that individuals adopt the behaviors that are prevalent within their environment. Followers who are subject to abusive supervision may perceive that they cannot follow ethical principles, which may influence them to become morally disengaged and demonstrate unethical conduct. We consider two dimensions of moral disengagement: displacement of responsibility and attribution of blame. Displacement of responsibility refers to attributing responsibility for one's actions to authority figures who may have tacitly condoned or explicitly directed behavior (Kelman and Hamilton, 1989a). In the attribution of blame, responsibility is assigned to the victims themselves, who are described as deserving whatever befalls them (Bandura, 2002 p.110). Disengagement allows an individual to intentionally demonstrate such behavior while maintaining a positive self-regard. We argue that because abusive supervision creates a hostile environment, followers in that environment can easily justify their unethical behavior by passing the blame onto their supervisor. In this way, abusive supervision may influence followers' unethical conduct through the mediation of moral disengagement.

It is possible that not all employees are involved in unethical behavior. For example, Guo et al. (2020) showed that abusive supervision may stimulate unethical behavior among a specific group of employees but does not trigger such behavior among others, depending on their level of proactive personality. Similarly, our study infers that employees' personal factors, such as their personal religiosity, restrain them from acting unethically, even if they encounter abusive supervision. Therefore, we contribute to the literature by explaining the boundary condition of religiosity, which may dampen the effect of abusive supervision on unethical behavior via moral disengagement.

This research seeks to make several important contributions to the literature of unethical behavior and has various implications. According to a recent systematic literature review on abusive supervision (Fischer et al., 2021), to date, only a few studies have examined how abusive supervision impacts employees' unethical behavior (Guo et al., 2020, Hannah et al., 2013). We extend the previous work (Guo et al., 2020, Hannah et al., 2013) by testing the direct and indirect impact of abusive supervision on employees' unethical behavior within the framework of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). First, we present the mediating role of moral disengagement (displacement of responsibility and attribution of blame). We argue that abusive supervision weakens employees' self-regulating mechanisms, which, in turn, increases their unethical behavior. Second, we explain the moderating role of religiosity. We demonstrate the conditions under which an individual does not engage in unethical behavior even though abusive supervision exists in the organization. This study has implications for organizations by suggesting how the negative effects of abusive supervision can be contained.

In addition, [our research has the potential to contribute to the stream of research on abusive supervision. The prior studies in this stream have](#) examined the effect of abusive supervision on

employees' job satisfaction (Zhao et al., 2018), feedback seeking (Shen et al., 2019), and organizational citizenship (Klasmeier et al., 2021). It also creates various negative outcomes, such as deviance (Cho et al., 2023), work-to-family conflict (Wu et al., 2012), counterproductive work behavior (Low et al., 2019), workplace aggression (Burton and Hoobler, 2011), and knowledge-hiding behavior (Agarwal et al., 2022), and paid little attention to the employees' personal unethical behavior. Our study establishes the relationship between abusive supervision and employees' personal unethical behavior while also explaining the mediating mechanism of moral disengagement and the moderating role of employees' religiosity.

This research was conducted in a South Asian country. Multi-source and multi-level data were collected from employees working in Pakistan's services and manufacturing sectors. A multilevel modeling technique was used to test the measurement and hypothesized models.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Abusive Supervision and Employees' Unethical Behavior

Abusive supervision is defined as “the sustained display of hostile, verbal, and nonverbal behaviors of leaders excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000 p. 178). Unethical behavior refers to an “act that is harmful to others and runs counter to ethical norms that are widely accepted in a community” (Jones, 1991). Recent research has shown that abused employees often indulge in retaliation because being humiliated by a leader causes them to develop negative emotions such as aggression (Lian et al., 2014). Abusive supervision has been linked to individual-level follower deviance as well as group-level counterproductivity (Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007). Guo et al. (2020) associated abusive supervision with the employees' unethical behavior. Supervisors frequently encounter demanding performance goals, and the pressure to meet these targets is often transmitted down the organizational hierarchy (Saleem et al., 2024). This downward pressure can

manifest as abusive supervision, where supervisors impose excessive stress on their subordinates. Bardes (2009) and Zhang et al. (2022) suggest that such top-down pressure can foster an environment where unethical behavior becomes a coping mechanism for employees attempting to meet unrealistic expectations. Abusive supervision creates threats to the employees (Greenbaum et al., 2017), and they feel performance pressure and, as a result, find ways to show their better performance by using unethical tactics.

Abusive supervision often emphasizes employees' past mistakes and failures, questions their competence, withholds recognition for their achievements, and publicly assigns blame for any failures (Ryan, 2012, Priesemuth et al., 2014). Employees perceive supervisors appointed by top management as strong representatives of the organization. Consequently, they interpret the actions of their supervisors as reflective of the organization's stance. In retaliation against the perceived organizational injustice, employees may engage in unethical behaviors such as stealing organizational resources, wasting work hours, and procrastinating and counterproductive work behavior (Mingzheng et al., 2014). These behaviors represent various forms of personal unethical conduct. So, we posit that:

Hypothesis 1: Abusive supervision is positively related to employees' unethical behavior.

Social Cognitive theory of moral disengagement

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory posits that moral disengagement allows individuals to commit increasingly harmful transgressions without feeling guilt by absolving themselves of self-sanction. Moral agency, central to this framework, is the extent to which individuals act according to and are accountable for their moral judgments. Moral standards, internalized throughout development via observation, instruction, and reprimand, guide moral conduct (Bandura, 1989).

The anticipation of self and social sanctions incentivizes alignment with these standards (Bandura,

1986). Social cognitive theory provides a basis to determine the effect of abusive supervision on employees' unethical behavior. Bandura's (1986) posit that both internal and contextual influences impact the inhibition of immoral behavior. Moral behavior is influenced by the interaction between personal factors (e.g., religiosity), environmental factors (e.g., abusive supervision), and behavior, forming a triadic model called reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986). This model typically inhibits transgressions in those with adopted moral standards. We posit that individuals with higher intrinsic religiosity have higher moral standards, which saves them from showing moral disengagement, even if they are facing a hostile environment in the form of abusive supervision. As a result, these individuals may have less tendency toward unethical behavior.

Bandura (1990) identified eight mechanisms of moral disengagement, grouped into four loci. These include reconstrual of conduct (behavior locus) via moral justification, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling; minimizing the impact of conduct (outcome locus); diffusing or **displacing responsibility** (agency locus); and **victim-blaming** or dehumanization (victim locus). These mechanisms enable individuals to transgress moral standards without experiencing remorse. In our study, we specifically focus on the agency locus (displacement of responsibility and victim locus (victim blaming) due to their relevance to abusive supervision.

The mediating role of Moral Disengagement

Bandura (1986), in his work on moral disengagement, presents individuals as moral agents who “refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards” (Bandura, 1999 p. 193). Moral disengagement refers to a process that enables individuals to engage in behaviors that are contrary to their own moral standards (Luo and Bussey, 2023, p. 1). We posit that agency locus (displacement of responsibility) and victim locus (victim blaming) are important factors that can be developed easily from abusive supervision and affect the employees' unethical behavior.

We argue that abusive supervision causes employees to engage in the displacement of responsibility. In the displacement of responsibility, individuals blame authority figures, so when employees see their leaders behave abusively, they can easily blame them to justify their unethical behavior (Detert et al., 2008). In the context of an abusive work environment, employees frequently encounter hostile and coercive behaviors from their supervisors, which create a perception that unethical actions are necessary to comply with superiors' demands or to survive within the organization. This dynamic is grounded in Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which explains that individuals can disengage their moral standards by shifting responsibility for their actions onto others. When supervisors impose unreasonable expectations or model unethical behavior, employees may feel compelled to follow suit, believing they are merely executing orders and, thus, are not personally culpable for the unethical outcomes (Zhang et al., 2022). This displacement of responsibility enables employees to rationalize unethical behaviors (Kelman and Hamilton, 1989b), such as falsifying reports or manipulating data, as actions taken under duress rather than personal choices, thereby alleviating feelings of guilt and facilitating continued unethical conduct. Similarly, employees may refrain from reporting others' violations of company policies and rules, attributing their inaction to the perceived pressure from their supervisors. Additionally, employees might misuse company resources, justifying their behavior by observing their supervisors engaging in similar actions. By displacing responsibility, employees find it justifiable to mimic these behaviors, further entrenching unethical practices within the organization (Vaughan, 1996). Similarly, in the attribution of blame, employees can easily transfer responsibility to their supervisors and justify their unethical behavior by saying that they deserve that behavior (Moore et al., 2012).

Blame attribution, another significant mechanism of moral disengagement, involves shifting the blame for unethical actions onto the victims themselves. Under abusive supervision, employees are often subject to harsh criticism and dehumanization, which fosters an environment where blaming others becomes a coping strategy. This phenomenon is explained by Bandura's (1990) theory of moral disengagement, where individuals justify their harmful actions by devaluing and blaming their victims. Moreover, Ashforth and Anand (2003) suggest that leaders are the legitimate agents of the organization because they are role models. Nowadays, organizations may face the legal burden of court proceedings, so leaders need to control their employees' unethical behavior (Ruhnka and Boerstler, 1998). Furthermore, Beu and Buckley (2004) suggest that employees justify their behavior by passing the blame onto their leaders and claiming that they are just following their orders. A further study suggests that leaders have the ability to influence the proximity of ethics and humanize the victims (Jones and Ryan, 1997). In workplaces where supervisors frequently criticize and demean subordinates (Liang et al., 2022), employees may internalize these attitudes and take revenge on the organization by misusing the organizational resources. They may believe that the victims of their unethical actions, such as organizations, deserve such treatment because the organization has appointed such abusive supervisors over them. This attribution of blame helps employees to detach from their moral standards, enabling them to engage in unethical behaviors such as harassment, bullying, or sabotage without feeling personal responsibility (Priesemuth et al., 2014). By dehumanizing their victims and viewing them as deserving of mistreatment, employees can carry out unethical actions with reduced moral conflict and self-reproach. We argue that a supervisor's abusive behavior increases employees' moral disengagement because it causes the latter's self-regulatory mechanisms to weaken (Detert et al., 2008). Thus, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 2: Abusive supervision is positively related to employees' moral disengagement (displacement of responsibility and blame attribution).

According to Bandura (1991), the process of moral disengagement plays an important role in unethical behavior because it enables an individual to intentionally demonstrate such behavior while maintaining a positive self-regard. The studies have shown a positive association between moral disengagement and employees' unethical behavior (Moore et al., 2012, Yan et al., 2024). Displacement of responsibility allows employees to view their actions, such as falsifying reports or ignoring policy violations, as compliant responses of their supervisor rather than personal choices, thereby reducing feelings of guilt and enabling persistent unethical behavior (Priesemuth et al., 2014, Bandura, 1986). In environments where supervisors frequently criticize and dehumanize subordinates, employees may internalize these attitudes and justify their unethical actions by blaming the victims, thus disengaging their moral standards (Bandura, 1991, Priesemuth et al., 2014). Together, these mechanisms of moral designment, highlighted by social cognitive theory, illustrate how abusive supervision can create a permissive context for unethical behavior by altering employees' perceptions of responsibility and culpability. Moreover, research suggests that employees' self-resources are weakened when they are threatened or victimized by their unethical leader (Bandura, 1991). Abusive supervision increases employees' propensity for moral disengagement, which, in turn, increases their unethical behavior. Thus, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 3: Moral disengagement mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and employees' unethical behavior.

Moderating Role of Religiosity

Durkheim (1954) defines religion as a unified system of practices and beliefs about holy things, that is, those in which a large number of people believe (Curran and Renzetti, 1998). In

sociology, the theory of functionalist religion is praised because religion imposes sanctions against the antisocial/unethical behavior of individuals: It is the source of social harmony because it reduces conflict among people (Light et al., 1989). Scholars suggest that an individual's motivations, decisions, satisfaction, and purpose are influenced by religion (Zimbardo and Ruch, 1979). According to Weaver and Agle (2002), religious self-identity influences individual ethical attitudes and behavior.

We propose that abusive supervision moderates both paths of the mediation process (abusive supervision → employees' moral disengagement & moral disengagement → unethical behavior) existing in the relationship between abusive supervision and employees' unethical behavior. We argue that although abusive supervision weakens employees' self-regulating mechanisms, which, in turn, increases their moral disengagement, not all abused employees become morally disengaged, especially those with high intrinsic religiosity. The social cognitive theory states that individuals imitate behaviors present in their environment through social interaction with their leaders (Trevino and Brown, 2004). (Bandura, 1986) mentioned that personal factors (e.g., personal moral standards, religiosity) interact with environmental factors (i.e., abusive supervision) to influence moral behavior. We argue that individuals with high intrinsic religiosity evaluate the behavior of their leaders with some moral standards, and these employees do not involved in unethical behavior (Tang and Tang, 2010) due to abusive supervision, because their moral standards are higher due to intrinsic religiosity.

Highly intrinsic religious individuals are more deliberate, dutiful, and self-disciplined in their actions (Aydemir and Eğilmez, 2010). Before performing any action, they think about their perceived responsibilities and moral obligations (Kennedy and Lawton, 1998), so we expect that when they perceive abusive supervision, they are less likely to become morally disengaged.

Research indicates that highly intrinsic religious individuals have integrity and believe that everyone is accountable for their own actions (Vitell et al., 2007). As Murtaza et al. (2020) indicate, highly religious employees react less to workplace incivility. This type of incivility occurs when an organizational member behaves rudely and disrespectfully and uses unprofessional language, often in the context of abusive supervision. Therefore, we infer that highly religious employees are less reactive to abusive supervision. Moreover, research indicates that highly intrinsic religious people wish to maintain an image of being trustworthy and responsible (King and Roeser, 2009). So, we suggest that when they perceive abusive supervision, they are less likely to become morally disengaged.

As stated above, highly religious people refrain from moral disengagement as a result of abusive supervision. We further argue that not all employees engage in unethical behavior as a result of moral disengagement. Here, we propose that religiosity also moderates the second path of the mediational mechanism (moral disengagement → unethical behavior). Those individuals with high intrinsic religiosity are less likely to adopt unethical behavior. The social cognitive theory states that unethical behavior is avoided through self-condemnation and when individuals' self-regulatory abilities are working correctly. Individuals suffer when they are involved in behavior that clashes with their moral standards (Bandura, 1999). Research indicates that highly religious individuals fear "God's punishment" (McCabe and Trevino, 1993). Therefore, we expect that although they may feel morally disengaged, they will refrain from involvement in unethical behavior. Thus, we propose that they are less likely to engage in unethical behavior as a result of moral disengagement:

Hypothesis 4: The indirect effect of abusive supervision on unethical behavior via moral disengagement is negatively moderated by religiosity in such a way that the effect is lower when religiosity is high and higher when religiosity is low.

Insert Figure 1 here

Method

Sample and Procedure

We collected data from different work units of multiple organizations in Pakistan, working in various industries, including education, banking, insurance, technology, and manufacturing. A survey method was used to collect the data. We used well-defined existing English-language instruments for developing the questionnaire, which was also in English. Our sample consisted of employees working in various positions in different organizations and who had qualifications ranging from undergraduate to Ph.D. As English was the medium of instruction for their university education, we did not need to translate the questionnaire into the local language.

We created supervisor-subordinate dyads by following the method of previous studies (Mayer et al., 2012). An advantage of using dyadic data is that it reduces self-sourced bias. Supervisors rated the unethical behavior of a work unit (employees), while employees rated their supervisors' abusive behavior. Other variables, such as moral disengagement and religiosity, were also reported by employees. In addition, we collected demographic data on both supervisors and subordinates.

To conduct the survey, we contacted various identified contacts in different organizations to make appointments with supervisors and subordinates from different units. We personally

visited the organizations and distributed the questionnaires among the employees and their respective supervisors. Within each work unit, questionnaires were given to the supervisor and ten of their subordinates. Both sets of questionnaires were clearly coded by departmental name to ensure that the responses of the subordinates and their supervisors could be matched. We asked respondents to complete the questionnaire within one week. Respondents were asked to put their completed questionnaires in a sealed envelope in order to ensure confidentiality. Participants were assured that the information they provided would not be shared with anyone else. After a week had passed, we again personally visited the selected work units to collect the completed questionnaires.

We distributed questionnaires in 110 work units; from these, we received completed questionnaires from 83 departments. In this way, we collected responses from 754 employees and 83 supervisors, reflecting a response rate of 86%. After matching the supervisor-subordinate responses and removing incomplete questionnaires, the final data set contained 70 departments (comprising 700 employees and 70 supervisor respondents). Out of 70 supervisors, 57 (81.43%) were men, and 13 (18.57%) were women. In terms of age, 8.57% of the supervisors were between 31 and 42, 52.86% between 43 and 54, and 38.57% over 5. Regarding years of experience, 14.29% had 1–5, 38.57% had 6–10, 37.14% had 11–15, and 10% had 16–20.

Out of the 700 subordinates of the aforementioned supervisors, 432 (61.71%) were men, and 268 (38.29%) were women. In terms of age, 32.71% were between 18 and 30, 42.86% between 31 and 42, 23.86% between 43 and 54, and .57% were over 54. Regarding years of experience, 39.71% had 1–5, 43.43% had 6–10, 15.71% had 11–15, and 1.15% had over 15. Concerning the level of education, 11% (77) had a bachelor's degree, 52% (364) had a master's degree, 32% (224) had an MPhil degree, and only 5% (35) had a Ph.D. degree.

Measures

All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “1=strongly disagree” to “5= strongly agree.”

Abusive Supervision

The abusive supervision independent variable was measured with a 5-item scale adapted from Tepper (2000). The sample item included: “My supervisor ridicules me.”

Employees’ Unethical behavior

The unethical behavior dependent variable was measured with a 17-item scale adapted from Akaah (1996). Departmental supervisors reported their group’s unethical behavior. Our study followed the guidelines of previous studies (Mayer et al., 2012). The sample item included: “Employees do not report others’ violations of company policies and rules”.

Moral disengagement

There are eight dimensions of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). However, we include only two dimensions (displacement of responsibility and attribution of blame) that are more relevant to the study of the effects of abusive supervision on employees’ unethical behavior. *Displacement of responsibility* was measured with a 3-item scale developed by Moore et al. (2012). The sample item was: “Employees should not be held accountable for doing questionable things when they were just doing what an authority figure told them to do”. *Attribution of blame* was measured with a 3-item scale adapted from Moore et al. (2012). The sample item was: “Supervisors who get mistreated have usually done something to bring it upon themselves”.

Religiosity

Intrinsic religiosity was assessed using the Religious Orientation Scale developed by Allport and Ross (1967). This scale originally included 20 items, measuring both intrinsic and

extrinsic religiosity, with nine items dedicated to intrinsic religiosity. For our study, we adopted the 9-item scale focusing on intrinsic religiosity. However, during confirmatory factor analysis, only five items demonstrated factor loadings greater than 0.50 (Kline, 2023), leading to the exclusion of the remaining four items. This adjustment was necessary because our data was collected exclusively from Muslim employees, and some general religiosity items did not align well with the Islamic context. The sample question item was, “I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life.”

Data Analysis

Scale Validation

As we used existing instruments that had been established in the Western context, it was important to examine their reliability and validity in the Pakistani context. The research data were multilevel. The data on abusive supervision, moral disengagement, and religiosity were treated as level 1 (measured at an individual level), while the data on the unethical behavior of employees, as reported by their departmental managers, were treated as level 2 (measured at the departmental/unit level). We performed multi-level confirmatory factor analysis (MCFA) in Mplus. By following Anderson and Gerbing (1988) we developed multiple measurement models. The single-factor measurement model did not produce a good fit with the data ($\chi^2 = 14475.27$, $df = 495$, $\chi^2/df = 29.24$, CFI = 0.56, TLI = 0.53, RMSEA = 0.20). Two-factor MCFA was also produced with the data ($\chi^2 = 13594.76$, $df = 615$, $\chi^2/df = 22.11$, CFI = 0.00, TLI = -0.11, RMSEA = 0.17). In comparison to these models, four-factor MCFA produced a good fit ($\chi^2 = 2117.08$, $df = 590$, $\chi^2/df = 3.59$, CFI = 0.88, TLI = 0.86, RMSEA = 0.06). In this model, the factor loading of all items on their respective factors was between 0.86 and 0.88, which is higher than the recommended value of .50 (Kline, 2011).

We further examined convergent validity and discriminant validity by following the guidelines of Fornell and Larcker (1981). We assessed the convergent validity of our four variables by computing the average variance extracted (AVE) values for each (given in Table 1). The AVE values of all variables were greater than the recommended value of 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Therefore, these instruments enjoyed high convergent validity. To assess discriminant validity, we used the heuristic proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), verifying that all the constructs differed from each other in that the square root of AVE for each one was greater than their inter-construct correlations (see Table 1). The reliability of all instruments was measured by Cronbach's alpha, which ranged from 0.94 to 0.98 (see Table 1). In addition, we calculated the intraclass correlation coefficient 1 (ICC1), which ranged from 0.08 – 0.66 (see Table 1).

Table 1 here

Descriptive statistics and correlation among the variables are given in Table 1, from which we see that correlations among all variables are at a moderate level.

Hypotheses Testing

We used a multilevel modeling technique to test our hypothesized model in Mplus. Before testing the hypothesized model itself, we tested to see if this model had a good fit (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988, Sindhu et al., 2021). The hypothesized model produced a good fit with the data ($\chi^2 = 3324.11$, $df = 908$, $\chi^2/df = 3.66$, $CFI = 0.83$, $TLI = 0.82$, $SRMR = 0.06$, $RMSEA = 0.06$). Hypothesis 1 predicts that abusive supervision positively influences an employee's unethical behavior, which is supported by our results ($b = .48$, $p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 2 predicts that abusive supervision positively influences employees' moral disengagement (displacement of responsibility

and attribution of blame), which is also supported by our results ($b = .35, p < 0.01$) (see Table 2). Hypothesis 3 predicts that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and employees' unethical behavior, which is also supported by our results (indirect effect = 0.17, $p < 0.01$).

Hypothesis 4 posits that the indirect effect of abusive supervision on employees' unethical behavior via moral disengagement will be negatively moderated by religiosity. To test this hypothesis, the moderation of religiosity was observed on the first path (abusive supervision to moral disengagement) and the second path (moral disengagement to unethical behavior). The results revealed that religiosity significantly moderates only the relationship between abusive supervision and moral disengagement (first path: interaction value = $-.14, p < 0.01$). However, religiosity could not moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and unethical behavior (second path: interaction value = $-.10, p > 0.05$; see Table 2).

Tables 2 and 3 about here

The above table shows that the magnitude of the indirect effect of abusive supervision on unethical behavior via moral disengagement differs across low and high levels of religiosity. The effect of low levels of religiosity ($b = 0.60, p < 0.05$; see table 3) is greater than that of high levels of religiosity ($b = 0.18, p > 0.05$). This implies that less religious people are more morally disengaged compared to highly religious individuals.

Discussion

This study aims to investigate the impact of abusive supervision on employees' unethical behavior by mediating moral disengagement. Additionally, it examines the moderating role of religiosity in the indirect relationship between abusive supervision and employees' unethical behavior via moral disengagement. The results indicate that abusive supervision directly increases the employees' unethical behavior. Furthermore, the study found that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and employees' unethical behavior. These findings align with Hannah et al. (2013), who demonstrated that abusive supervision negatively affects employees' ethical intentions. However, our study differs by showing moral disengagement as the mediating factor, whereas Hannah et al. identified moral courage and identification as mediators. We also extend the research of Guo et al. (2020), who found that abusive supervision has a curvilinear effect on employees' pro-organizational unethical behavior, moderated by proactive personality. Our study adds that mediational mechanisms, specifically moral disengagement, also play a role in this relationship and are further moderated by religiosity. Additionally, we build on the work of Xiong et al. (2021), who revealed that abusive supervision positively influences unethical pro-organizational behavior through the mediation of status challenge, with the indirect effect moderated by leader-member exchange (LMX). Our study offers an alternative explanation by highlighting moral disengagement as a mediating mechanism and religiosity as a moderating factor.

We also confirm the findings of Yan et al. (2024), who demonstrated that abusive supervision positively influences employees' pro-organizational unethical behavior through moral disengagement. However, our study differs by examining religiosity as a moderating factor, whereas Yan et al. (2024) identified Chinese traditionality as the moderator. Additionally, while

Yan's study focused on pro-organizational unethical behavior, our research centers on employees' personal unethical behavior.

In conclusion, this study provides novel contributions by highlighting the significant impact of abusive supervision on employees' unethical behavior, mediated by moral disengagement and moderated by religiosity. The findings emphasize the need for organizations to address abusive supervision and its ethical implications. By understanding the role of religiosity further aids in developing tailored interventions to promote ethical behavior among employees.

Academic contribution

We contribute to the literature by investigating the impact of abusive supervision on employees' unethical behavior through the mediation of moral disengagement. The literature on behavior ethics explains how employees' unethical behavior is influenced by individual and situational characteristics (Moore et al., 2012, Paterson and Huang, 2018, Valle et al., 2018) but lacks an overarching theory to help identify the potential boundary conditions under which an individual does not engage in unethical behavior. Given that recent literature has shown that people who have certain individual characteristics are more likely to behave unethically (Valle et al., 2018), it is important to provide theoretical justification to help researchers highlight the conditions that influence the individual propensity to engage or not engage in unethical behavior.

Although previous studies comprehensively explain how abusive supervision influences the employees' unethical behavior (Hannah et al., 2013, Paterson and Huang, 2018), it remains unknown under which circumstances abusive supervision does not create unethical behavior. We contribute to the literature in two main ways. First, we explain the mediating role of moral disengagement in abusive supervision and unethical behavior by using social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which states that employees learn their behavior from their environment. If a

leader behaves abusively, employees justify their own behavior by saying that they are just following their leader's example. Social cognitive theory underlines that followers' actions in the moral domain are influenced by their leaders' imposed contingencies, which affects followers' engagement in ethical or unethical behavior (Brown et al., 2005). Our results reveal that moral disengagement fully mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and unethical behavior. They contribute to the literature by showing that abusive supervision influences employees' unethical behavior through the moral agency (Bandura, 1999) that activates their moral disengagement, which, in turn, increases their unethical behavior. Employees process moral agency influence when they experience abusive supervision because leader contingencies directly or indirectly influence follower behavior (Hannah et al., 2013). Thus, based on social cognitive theory, our study demonstrates that abusive supervision increases employees' moral disengagement through various self-reactive processes, such as their perception of ethical and unethical behavior and their self-control standards.

Second, we explain the moderating role of religiosity on abusive supervision and employees' unethical behavior. We demonstrate that when individual religiosity is high, people do not become morally disengaged or adopt unethical behavior, even if they encounter abusive supervision, because of their personal disposition related to their religious beliefs. They believe that engaging in unethical behavior is a sin and, therefore, when circumstances and external factors are unfavorable, they do not become morally disengaged or adopt unethical behavior. Our results show that religiosity fully moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and unethical behavior. This implies that, in Pakistan, when highly religious people are victims of abusive supervision, they experience lower moral disengagement and do not involve in unethical behavior. Prior studies at the individual level have shown that when religiosity is combined with high levels

of anger at God or questioning God, this can worsen the destructive effects of negative circumstances on subjective well-being (Exline et al., 2011). Therefore, consistent with these studies, we explain that when highly religious people in Pakistan are morally disengaged, they are less involved in unethical behavior.

Managerial implications

The findings of this study offer several important implications for managers and organizations. Firstly, the positive influence of abusive supervision on employees' unethical behavior underscores the critical need for organizations to address and mitigate abusive supervisory practices. Managers should be trained in ethical leadership and conflict resolution to prevent the development of abusive behaviors. Ethical training should be given to managers so that they know the negative consequences of abusive supervision and how to demonstrate ethical behavior so that their subordinates clearly understand what behavior is appropriate. Organizations should use such training to help managers interact with their subordinates on a daily basis or at least two or three times a week, especially with those who have a higher chance of engaging in unethical behaviors (Dang et al., 2017, Zhang and Liao, 2015).

Secondly, the study supports the notion that abusive supervision increases moral disengagement among employees, particularly through mechanisms like displacement of responsibility and attribution of blame. Organizations should, therefore, focus on creating a supportive and respectful work environment that discourages such disengagement. Establishing clear ethical guidelines and a robust system for reporting and addressing unethical behavior can reduce the likelihood of moral disengagement among employees.

Thirdly, the mediating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between abusive supervision and employees' unethical behavior highlights the importance of addressing the psychological mechanisms that facilitate unethical behavior. Managers should engage in regular one-on-one meetings with employees to provide support and address any concerns related to supervisory practices. Providing access to counseling and employee assistance programs can also help employees cope with stress and reduce moral disengagement and unethical behavior. Supervisors should ensure that employees are treated fairly and feel comfortable about voicing their problems, which reduces their psychological distress (Tepper et al., 2011). Supervisors can encourage the ethical behavior of employees by rewarding positive behavior and punishing negative conduct.

Lastly, the moderating effect of religiosity on the relationship between abusive supervision and moral disengagement suggests that individual differences in religiosity can influence how employees react to abusive supervision. While religiosity did not significantly moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and unethical behavior, the initial moderation effect implies that personal values and beliefs can buffer against some negative impacts of abusive supervision. Organizations could benefit from promoting a diverse and inclusive workplace where employees' personal values, including religiosity, are respected and supported. This approach can enhance employees' resilience against unethical influences and foster a more ethically conscious organizational culture.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this research makes several contributions, the results need to be interpreted with caution due to limitations. First, one of the strengths of this study is that supervisors reported

employees' unethical behavior, and employees reported their supervisors' abusive behavior. However, there is still the possibility of common method bias because employees also reported their own moral disengagement and individual characteristics (religiosity). In future research, we suggest that employees' moral disengagement should be reported by both supervisors and employees. There is also a possibility of projection bias because unethical managers may think that their employees are unethical, and vice versa. Unethical employees may have the same assumption about their managers. Therefore, future studies should also address the issue of projection bias (Boman et al., 2016) during their data collection. Second, we proposed that employees behave unethically due to their leaders' abusive behavior. However, there is a possibility that leaders demonstrate abusive behavior because of employees' unethical behavior, so this viewpoint also needs to be explored.

Third, our study's design is cross-sectional, which does not support testing the causal mediational relationship. To overcome this limitation, we suggest using a longitudinal design or diary method in future research.

Fourth, we have explored the potential mechanism of moral disengagement in the relationship between abusive supervision and unethical behavior, but the literature also highlights some other possible mechanisms, such as moral identity, agreeableness, the conscientiousness of employees, and the leader's moral characteristics.

Moreover, in this study, we have focused on the negative consequences of abusive supervision such as unethical behavior. For future research, we suggest that the positive impact of abusive supervision should also be explored (Decoster et al., 2013).

Conclusion

This study investigates the impact of abusive supervision on employees' unethical behavior, highlighting the mediating role of moral disengagement and the moderating role of religiosity. Utilizing hierarchical data from 70 work units in the service sector, the results reveal a direct positive relationship between abusive supervision and unethical behavior, mediated by moral disengagement. Specifically, abusive supervision increases employees' moral disengagement, which in turn, leads to unethical behavior. Furthermore, the study identifies religiosity as a significant moderator in the path from abusive supervision to moral disengagement, although it does not significantly moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and unethical behavior.

These findings align with social cognitive theory, suggesting that employees under abusive supervision may adopt unethical behaviors observed in their environment, particularly when moral disengagement mechanisms like displacement of responsibility and attribution of blame are activated. The study also extends the literature by showing that high religiosity can buffer the impact of abusive supervision on moral disengagement, thus reducing unethical behavior. This underscores the importance of fostering ethical work environments and considering individual differences, such as religiosity, in mitigating the negative effects of abusive supervision. These insights provide valuable guidance for organizations aiming to promote ethical behavior and address the detrimental impacts of abusive supervision.

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Figures

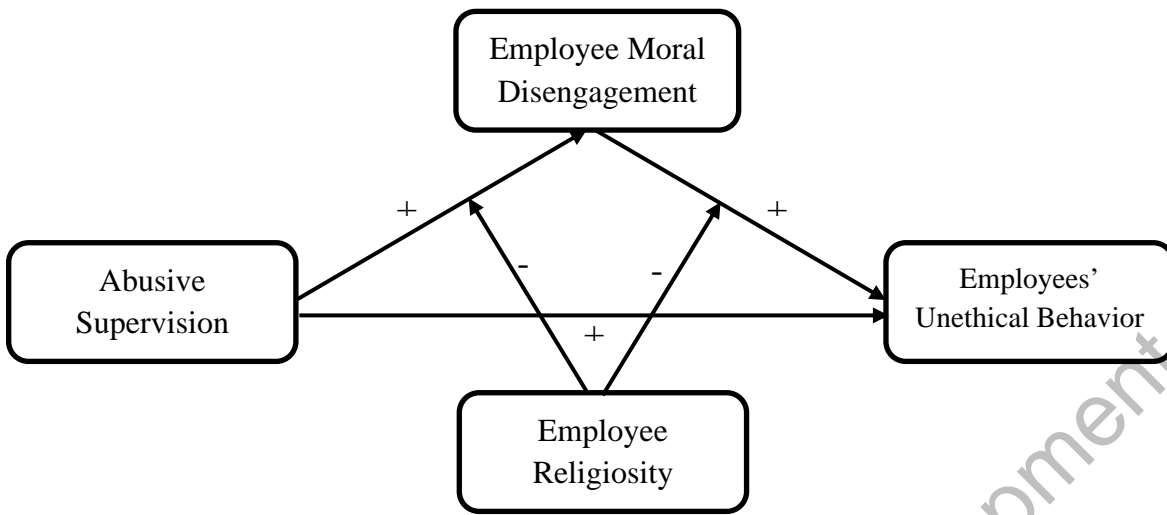


Figure 01: Theoretical Model

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Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation among Variables

Variables	Mean	S.D	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	α	ICC1
Abusive Supervision	3.7	.88	.61	.78							.95	.62
Moral Disengagement	3.8	1.09	.60	.67**	.77						.94	.66
Unethical Behavior	3.6	.91	.73	.65**	.72**	.85					.98	-
Religiosity	2.5	1.25	.90	-.26**	-.26**	-.18**	.95				.97	.08
Gender	1.3	.48	-	-.08*	-.08*	-.05	.01	-			-	-
Age	1.9	.76	-	-.05	-.07	-.09*	.01	-.02	-		-	-
Experience	1.7	.74	-	.04	.06	.06	-.04	.04	.11**	-	-	-

Notes: employees sample (n) = 700, supervisor's sample (N) = 70; **Correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *Correlations are significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); diagonal values are square root of AVEs.

Source: Table created by the author

Table 2 Direct and indirect effects of independent variables on dependent

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable				
	Moral Disengagement	Unethical Behavior			
	Direct Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	Mediation
Abusive Supervision	.35***	.48*	.17*	.65***	26%
Moral Disengagement	-	.48**	-	-	-
Religiosity	-.11*	.07	-	-	-
Abusive supervision \times Religiosity	-.14**	-	-	-	-
Moral disengagement \times Religiosity	-	-.10	-	-	-

Note: n = 700, N = 70; *, **, *** significant at 0.05, 0.01, and 0.001, respectively; table values are standardized effects.

Source: Table created by the author

Table 3 Moderated Mediation Analysis

Independent variable	Mediator	Level of Moderator	Indirect effect on unethical behavior	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Abusive Supervision	Moral Disengagement	Low religiosity	.60*	.09	1.11
		High religiosity	.18	-.14	.49

Note: n = 700, N = 70; * significant at 0.05; table values are unstandardized effects.

Source: Table created by the author

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