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The Cognitive Mechanisms Behind Exploitative Leadership: Moral Disengagement and UPOB in the Workplace

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Abstract

This study presents a new mechanism for how exploitative leadership could influence unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB). This study examines how exploitative leadership affects followers' moral disengagement from the perspective of social cognitive theory. In addition, it demonstrates how exploitative leadership directly impacts UPOB and how moral disengagement plays a mediating role. The survey collected data from 208 Saudi employees, and hypotheses were tested with hierarchical regression. The results show that exploitative leadership was positively related to UPOB, and moral disengagement fully mediated this relationship. This study suggests managers can take steps to mitigate the negative effects of exploitative leadership that cause moral disengagement and undesirable work behavior. The authors discuss the findings, contributions, limitations, and future directions.

Keywords: Exploitative leadership, Moral disengagement, Unethical pro-organizational behavior, Social cognitive theory

Introduction

Over the past several decades, scholars have examined many forms of destructive leadership, including abuse of authority [1], authoritarianism [2], and hubristic behavior [3]. Among these negative styles, exploitative leadership represents a particularly pervasive and self-serving variant that incorporates core features of dark leadership [4]. These destructive forms of leadership generally involve leaders prioritizing personal goals that conflict with organizational objectives or that undermine follower well-being [5, 6]. Yet, despite its prevalence and potential consequences, exploitative leadership has received comparatively limited scholarly attention [7].

Across both organizational studies [8] and broader psychological research [8-10], there is extensive evidence that individuals who behave unethically tend to be evaluated less favorably than those who behave ethically [11-13]. Employees engaging in unethical actions often experience reprimands [14, 15], social exclusion [16], or even dismissal. Conversely, employees who behave ethically are generally perceived as more competent leaders and higher performers [17, 18]. Frequently, unethical acts emerge because employees attempt to advance their own interests—such as concealing mistakes, stealing office resources, or misrepresenting their performance to secure promotions or rewards. From this standpoint, it is understandable why such behaviors are viewed negatively.

However, not all unethical behavior stems from selfish motives; employees may also engage in unethical actions to protect or benefit their organization. Umphress and Bingham [19] termed such behaviors *unethical pro-organizational behavior* (UPOB). Examples include distorting facts to enhance the organization's image, exaggerating the quality of products or

services, or withholding damaging information from the public [20]. The central dilemma of UPOB lies in the tension between promoting organizational performance and violating ethical norms—raising the broader question of whether UPOB can ever be considered beneficial under certain conditions.

Despite the relevance of these issues, prior research has not examined how or when exploitative leadership may shape UPOB. Both constructs—exploitative leadership and UPOB—are emerging scholarly domains, and empirical evidence remains scarce. Moreover, several theoretical perspectives overlap across the two fields, including social cognitive theory, social exchange theory, and the construct of moral disengagement (e.g., Cheng *et al.* [21]; Mishra *et al.* [22]). In this study, we propose moral disengagement as a mediating mechanism linking exploitative leadership to UPOB. Should empirical results support this proposition, future research would be encouraged to explore alternative theories and constructs in each domain. Addressing this gap is essential given that UPOB may stem from motives such as personal gain [23], harming competitors [24], or retaliating against the organization itself [25].

Guided by social cognitive theory, this research examines how exploitative leadership fosters UPOB indirectly through moral disengagement. According to this theory, unethical behavior emerges when individuals cognitively deactivate moral self-regulation—a process known as moral disengagement [26]. Because exploitative leadership is inherently a salient workplace stressor [7], employees who feel exploited may psychologically detach from moral standards and subsequently engage in UPOB.

In summary, the objective of this study is to explore how exploitative leadership influences UPOB. Specifically, we analyze: (1) the effect of exploitative leadership on moral disengagement, (2) the link between moral disengagement and UPOB, (3) the direct effect of exploitative leadership on UPOB, and (4) the mediating role of moral disengagement in this relationship. The conceptual model guiding this research is presented in **Figure 1**.
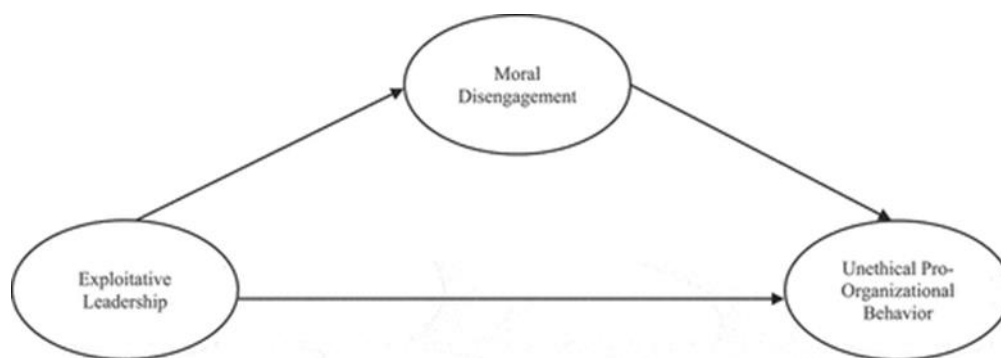

Figure 1. The hypothesized model

Contributions of the study (Paraphrased)

The findings of this research enrich the existing literature in several key ways. First, the results extend current understanding of exploitative leadership by demonstrating that it serves as a meaningful antecedent of unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB). This evidence clarifies how exploitative leadership contributes to the emergence of UPOB within organizations. Second, the study deepens theoretical insight into the mechanism linking these two constructs. By showing that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and UPOB—consistent with social cognitive theory—the research explains *why* employees under exploitative leaders may engage in unethical behaviors intended to benefit the organization. Third, by integrating insights from both exploitative leadership and UPOB research streams, this study positions these areas as complementary and mutually reinforcing, creating new avenues for future scholarly exploration.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Unethical pro-organizational behavior

The foundational work of Umphress and Bingham [19] forms the basis for understanding UPOB. They define UPOB as voluntary actions undertaken to enhance the effectiveness, success, or image of an organization or its members—such as leaders—while simultaneously violating core societal norms, ethical principles, or laws. Two defining components underlie the UPOB framework. The first is its unethical nature, which stems from its violation of hypernorms—universal standards of moral conduct tied to justice, legality, and broadly accepted societal expectations. Actions are considered unethical not because they breach local or organizational rules but because they infringe upon these broader, fundamental standards [19].

The second defining feature is its pro-organizational intent. UPOB is not mandated by supervisors nor included in formal job duties. Rather, employees engage in it voluntarily with the intention of supporting or protecting the organization or its members [20]. This includes both acts of commission (e.g., exaggerating product quality, presenting misleading positive information) and acts of omission (e.g., withholding damaging information from customers or the public).

UPOB has been examined through various social and cognitive theoretical lenses, including social learning [27], social identity [28], social exchange [29], and social cognition [30]. Transitions in moral cognition provide a central explanatory framework for why UPOB occurs [22]. Much of the literature treats UPOB as an outcome, focusing on its triggers and predominantly examining "bright" leadership styles such as transformational leadership [31, 32] and ethical leadership [27]. However, research has not sufficiently incorporated dark leadership styles, making the inclusion of exploitative leadership a necessary next step in the UPOB literature.

The broader spectrum of destructive leadership reflects numerous leadership failures that impede followers' work-related needs—including respect, fairness, honesty, safety, and dignity. Such deficits hinder personal development and threaten an employee's sense of worth [33, 34]. Mackey *et al.* [35] further emphasize that employees' emotional responses often contribute to these negative outcomes, creating disruptions within the workplace [36]. Consequently, subordinates may question their capabilities and professional value [37, 38], leading to decreased self-esteem and lower satisfaction with personal growth opportunities [39].

In contrast, ethical leadership—characterized by integrity, fairness, and concern for followers' development [40]—tends to enhance job satisfaction and stimulate positive organizational outcomes [41]. Environments that promote accountability may also buffer followers from the harmful effects of unethical leadership, helping reduce turnover intentions and emotional strain such as anxiety or burnout [42]. Nonetheless, supervisors do not always model organizational values accurately. As a result, employees may attempt to uphold or defend the organization through ethically questionable means, including engaging in UPOB [39]. Senior leaders, such as CEOs, may play an important role in shaping climates of accountability that foster employee commitment. In such contexts, employees may be motivated to contribute to organizational success—even if that contribution sometimes manifests through UPOB.

Exploitative leadership and moral disengagement

Although research on exploitative leadership has expanded in recent years, much of the existing work has concentrated on affective processes [43] and relational mechanisms such as attachment and dependence [44]. Considerably less attention has been given to cognitive mechanisms, particularly those involving moral reasoning, which may explain how exploitative leadership contributes to unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB). Addressing this shortcoming, the present study investigates moral disengagement as a key cognitive pathway linking exploitative leadership to UPOB.

Within the framework of social cognitive theory, moral disengagement refers to a set of rationalization processes that allow individuals to justify unethical acts while psychologically distancing themselves from their moral standards [45]. Bandura *et al.* [26] classified these mechanisms into three categories:

1. **Reconstructing unethical behavior** to make it appear morally acceptable,
2. **Distorting responsibility or minimizing harm**, and
3. **Devaluing or blaming victims** of the unethical behavior [46].

Because these cognitive processes collectively facilitate unethical actions, scholars often conceptualize moral disengagement as a unified construct [47].

Prior research consistently shows that moral disengagement is a fundamental mechanism through which destructive leadership shapes followers' unethical behavior [30, 48]. For example, Valle *et al.* [30] demonstrated that abusive supervision increases employees' moral disengagement, which subsequently fosters unethical or illegal conduct. More recently, Cheng *et al.* [21] found that exploitative leadership similarly contributes to moral disengagement. Despite these findings, studies on exploitative leadership remain predominantly emotional in focus, leaving its cognitive effects underexplored [43, 44].

Employee behavior is shaped both by leader influence and by individual characteristics. Unethical leaders often elicit unethical responses from followers [49], whereas ethical leaders activate followers' moral identity and encourage the internalization of ethical values, which reduces the likelihood of unethical actions [49]. However, individual reactions differ widely. As research by Mitchell & Ambrose [50], Tepper *et al.* [51], and Holtz & Harold [52] shows, some employees respond to mistreatment with retaliatory unethical behavior, while others—particularly those with stronger moral identities—are less prone to such reactions [53]. Moral identity itself is shaped by personal development, social environment, and self-concept and plays a central role in determining ethical conduct [53].

Leaders who model ethical values help cultivate an ethical climate, which in turn promotes employees' ethical behavior. By contrast, exploitative leaders may erode this environment and foster the cognitive rationalizations that underpin moral disengagement. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1. Exploitative leadership is positively associated with moral disengagement.

UPOB and moral disengagement (Paraphrased)

Social cognitive theory has been widely applied to explain the psychological foundations of UPOB [47]. According to this perspective, moral disengagement functions as a cognitive mechanism that enables individuals to deactivate or suspend their

moral standards, thereby permitting unethical behavior [26]. Although the concept has been criticized for not fully capturing the nature of unethical conduct, it remains one of the most influential explanations for how employees justify harmful actions. Moral disengagement plays a critical role in the development of UPOB by allowing employees to reinterpret unethical actions as morally acceptable when performed for the organization's benefit [54]. Empirical studies consistently show that moral disengagement predicts a wide range of unethical workplace behaviors [47]. For example, employees with strong organizational identification may view UPOB as morally justified because they perceive it as advancing organizational welfare [46]. Furthermore, reduced self-regulation—specifically the inability to restrain motivational impulses—can also contribute to morally disengaged reasoning [55].

Individual differences matter as well. Certain personality traits have been shown to increase susceptibility to moral disengagement [56]. Employees who strongly identify with their in-group may also feel less responsible for the welfare of out-group members, making them more willing to engage in UPOB [46]. Similarly, individuals high in psychological entitlement may engage in UPOB as a way of protecting their inflated self-concept or securing what they believe they deserve [55].

Contextual factors such as workplace politics can also activate moral disengagement. In highly political environments, employees may perceive favoritism or manipulation of organizational rules and may adopt UPOB as a survival strategy [54]. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that neutralization—a process of obscuring or dismissing moral obligations—creates fertile ground for UPOB [19]. By reducing moral self-sanctions, moral disengagement facilitates behaviors intended to benefit the organization, even when they violate broader ethical standards.

Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 2. *Moral disengagement is positively associated with unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB).*

Exploitative leadership and UPOB

Exploitative leaders are fundamentally self-centered, treating subordinates as instruments for advancing their personal objectives. Williams [57] characterizes self-serving leadership as behavior in which leaders use their authority exclusively to benefit themselves. In leader–follower relationships, exploitative tendencies can arise in various forms. Schilling [58] identified several such behaviors, including egocentric actions, manipulation of followers for personal advantage, and excessive pressure placed on subordinates. These patterns align with Schmid *et al.*'s [7] observations that exploitative leaders frequently overload followers and manipulate them for self-gain.

Prior research drawing on social cognitive theory has attempted to uncover the origins of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPOB). Findings consistently indicate that moral disengagement is a central cognitive mechanism facilitating UPOB [22]. Moral disengagement consists of cognitive strategies that allow individuals to override internal moral standards, detach morality from harmful actions, and minimize personal accountability [30]. From this perspective, individuals engage in UPOB when moral self-sanctions are deactivated, a process described by Bandura *et al.* [26].

Existing studies have largely focused on situational and attitudinal predictors of UPOB. For example, Fehr *et al.* [59] demonstrated that supervisors' participation in UPOB can cascade downward, influencing subordinates to engage in similar behaviors. Subordinates typically learn appropriate workplace conduct by observing how supervisors enact their roles. However, less attention has been directed toward individual dispositional factors. Castille *et al.* [60] argued that individuals high in Machiavellianism—a core "dark" personality trait—exhibit a stronger inclination toward UPOB.

Hypothesis 3. Exploitative leadership is positively associated with UPOB.

The mediating role of moral disengagement

Prior scholarship has consistently shown that moral disengagement serves as a pivotal psychological mechanism explaining how morally questionable leadership prompts subordinates to behave unethically (e.g., Valle *et al.* [54]; Zhang *et al.* [48]). Numerous studies support this proposition. Valle *et al.* [54] found that abusive supervision fosters employees' moral disengagement, which subsequently encourages deviant behaviors. Similarly, Zhang *et al.* [48] demonstrated that moral disengagement plays a significant mediating role in the link between narcissistic supervisory behavior and employee deviance.

Hypothesis 4. Moral disengagement mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and UPOB.

Methods

Design

This study adopts a quantitative, causal research design. Data were collected from 208 employees working in both public and private organizations across Saudi Arabia using self-administered questionnaires. Hierarchical regression and bootstrapping procedures were employed to test the hypotheses. Given the unavailability of comprehensive national employment statistics, a non-probability convenience sampling technique was applied. This approach was deemed appropriate for exploratory causal investigation.

Participants

The sample consisted of full-time employees from different regions of Saudi Arabia, representing both public and private sectors. The online survey enabled broad geographical reach and facilitated diverse participation, enhancing the study's generalizability. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Respondents were informed about the study's objectives, their rights, and data protection measures.

A total of 212 usable questionnaires were obtained, and after applying listwise deletion to address missing data, the final sample comprised 208 participants. This method was selected under the assumption that data were missing completely at random, ensuring sufficient statistical power [61]. In line with J. F. Hair *et al.*'s [62] recommendations—which suggest a minimum of 120 cases and a ratio of at least 15 respondents per variable—the sample size was deemed satisfactory.

Participants ranged in age from 20 to over 40 years old. The demographic distribution indicated that 86.1% of respondents were male and 13.9% were female. **Table 1** provides detailed demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Variables	Frequency ($N = 208$)	Percentage (%)
Age		
20 to 29	127	61.1
30 to 39	67	32.2
40 and above	14	6.7
Gender		
Male	179	86.1
Female	29	13.9
Education		
High school graduate	43	2.7
Bachelor's degree	129	62.0
Graduate degree	36	17.3
Work experience		
Less than a year	43	2.7
1–3 years	64	3.8
4–10 years	77	37.0
More than 11 years	24	11.5

Measures

All instruments in this study were originally developed in English and were translated into Arabic using the translation-back-translation procedure recommended by Brislin [63] to ensure conceptual and linguistic equivalence. Unless specified otherwise, participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

Exploitative leadership was evaluated using Schmid *et al.*'s [7] 15-item measure. Example items included: *"My leader assumes that my work can be used for their own benefit"* and *"My leader treats employees primarily as tools to achieve personal goals."*

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPOB) was assessed using a 6-item scale from Umphress *et al.* [20]. Sample items included: *"I misrepresent facts to make my organization appear better"* and *"I exaggerate my organization's achievements to help the organization."*

Moral disengagement was measured using Moore *et al.*'s [47] 8-item scale. Illustrative items include: *"Borrowing something without permission is acceptable if I intend to return it"* and *"Given the way people misrepresent themselves, inflating one's own qualifications is not a serious offense."*

Control variables incorporated participants' gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age, educational attainment, and years of work experience. A complete list of items and their sources is provided in Appendix A.

Data analysis

Hypotheses were tested using hierarchical multiple regression in SPSS 28. Interaction effects were examined using the PROCESS macro (v3.4) with a bootstrapping approach (5,000 resamples), and asymmetric 95% confidence intervals were generated to assess the significance of mediation and moderation effects [64].

Hierarchical regression was selected because it allows for the estimation of the unique contribution of each predictor while statistically controlling for other variables [62]. This method also enables the assessment of incremental variance explained by each predictor, providing a clearer understanding of the relationships among exploitative leadership, moral disengagement, and UPOB.

Results

To check for common method bias (CMB), Harman's single-factor test [65] was applied. A substantial CMB effect is indicated when a single factor accounts for the majority of covariance among the variables [66]. Principal component analysis with varimax rotation revealed eight factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, collectively explaining 64.15% of the variance. The largest single factor explained only 28.21%, which is below the 50% threshold commonly used to flag CMB concerns [66]. These findings indicate that common method variance is unlikely to bias the results, as multiple factors emerged and none accounted for the majority of variance [67]. Further, correlations among study variables **(Table 2)** were within acceptable limits, supporting the conclusion that observed associations are not artificially inflated. Based on this combination of empirical evidence and alignment with prior research, concerns regarding CMB can be considered minimal.

Table 2. Reliability, convergent and discriminant validity results

Variables	CR (rho_a)	CA	AVE	1	2	3
1. Exploitative Leadership	0.96	0.96	0.63	**0.79**	0.25	0.25
2. Moral Disengagement	0.66	0.66	0.42	0.20	**0.65**	0.73
3. UPOB	0.73	0.73	0.42	0.22	0.52	**0.65**

Notes: $N = 208$, *$|t| \geq 1.65$ at p 0.05 level; **$|t| \geq 2.33$ at p 0.01 level; ***$|t| \geq 3.09$ at p 0.001 level. UPOB= Unethical pro-organizational behavior; Below the diagonal are the values of the Fornell-Larcker. Above the diagonal are the values of the heterotrait—monotrait ratio (HTMT). CA = Cronbach's alpha; CR (rho_a) = Composite reliability. AVE = Average variance extracted. The square root of AVE boldly highlighted on the diagonal.

The study addressed potential common method variance (CMV) by implementing multiple procedural remedies alongside a formal CMV assessment. The survey employed counterbalancing techniques, distributing antecedent, outcome, and control variables throughout the instrument to minimize order effects. To detect inattentive responses, items prompting participants to "please respond with strongly disagree" were included. Additionally, the marker variable technique was applied [68] by randomizing item order and introducing a seven-item measure of participants' preference for the color blue, such as *"I prefer blue to other colors"* [69]. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale. Partial correlations were calculated both with and without controlling for the marker variable. The analysis showed that controlling for participants' attitudes toward blue did not alter the significance of the relationships among study variables, indicating that CMV was unlikely to bias the results.

Reliability analyses were conducted to assess the consistency and stability of the measures. **Table 3** presents the results, including reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity for all constructs. Several items for moral disengagement (items 6, 7, and 8) exhibited low factor loadings and were removed. Nonetheless, all constructs demonstrated acceptable reliability levels [70]: exploitative leadership [0.60–0.86], moral disengagement [0.63–0.70], and UPOB [0.62–0.70]. Both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (ρ_a) exceeded the 0.70 benchmark, except for moral disengagement (0.66). Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios were below the 0.85 threshold, supporting discriminant validity. Convergent validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, revealing that the average variance extracted (AVE) for exploitative leadership exceeded 0.50 (0.63), while moral disengagement and UPOB fell slightly below this threshold (0.42). Importantly, the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than its correlations with other constructs, further supporting discriminant validity.

Table 3. Correlation analysis

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Exploitative Leadership	2.70	1.10	—	0.20**	0.22**	0.002	−0.09	0.01	0.08
2. Moral Disengagement	2.20	0.77	0.20**	—	0.52**	−0.11	−0.14*	−0.02	−0.13
3. UPOB	2.33	0.82	0.22**	0.52**	—	−0.07	−0.08	−0.02	−0.08
4. Age	1.50	0.62	0.00	−0.11	−0.07	—	0.31**	0.43**	0.60**
5. Gender	0.14	0.34	−0.09	−.14*	−.08	0.31**	—	0.27**	0.08
6. Education	1.97	0.61	0.01	−.02	−0.02	0.43**	0.27**	—	0.34**
7. Work Experience	2.40	0.94	0.08	−.01	−0.08	0.60**	0.08	0.34**	—

$N = 208$. Note: UPOB = Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior; SD = standard deviation. Gender: 0 = Male, 1 = Female; Work Experience (in years); Education: 1 = High School graduate, 2 = Bachelor's degree, 3 = Graduate degree. Below the diagonal are correlations among the constructs; Above the diagonal are the correlations after controlling for the marker variables (attitude towards the color blue). ** $p<.01$ *$p<.05$.

Table 4 summarizes the hypothesis testing outcomes. The findings indicate that exploitative leadership significantly contributes to moral disengagement, as evidenced in Model 2 (b = 0.10, p < 0.01), confirming Hypothesis 1. Moral disengagement, in turn, emerged as a strong predictor of Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior (UPOB) in Model 5 (b = 0.64, p < 0.01), providing support for Hypothesis 2 and underscoring its role as a key psychological mechanism driving UPOB. Additionally, Model 4 demonstrates a direct positive effect of exploitative leadership on UPOB (b = 0.15, p < 0.01), validating Hypothesis 3 and highlighting the influence of exploitative leadership on employees' engagement in actions that, while unethical, are intended to benefit the organization.

Table 4. Summary of the hierarchical regression results (unstandardized coefficients)

Variables	Moral Disengagement			Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior		
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Constant	2.13**	1.82**	2.5**	2.1**	1.3**	1.15**
Age	−0.02 (.15)	−0.01 (.11)	−0.01 (.12)	−0.002 (.12)	−.00 (.11)	0.002 (.11)
Gender	−0.33 (.16)	−0.29 (.16)	−0.19 (.18)	−0.15 (.18)	−0.02 (.16)	−0.003 (.15)
Education	0.09 (.09)	0.09 (.09)	.04 (.11)	0.04 (.10)	−0.01 (.09)	−0.01 (.09)
Work Experience	−0.11 (.07)	−0.12 (.07)	−.06 (.08)	−0.08 (.08)	−0.01 (.07)	−0.02 (.07)
Exploitative Leadership		.12**(.04)		.15** (.05)		0.09 (.04)
Moral Disengagement					0.53** (.07)	0.51** (.07)
R^2	0.04	0.08	0.01	0.06	0.25	0.26
ΔR^2	-	0.04	-	0.05	0.19	0.10
F	1.98	3.26**	0.62	2.50*	13.33**	11.34**
df	203	202	203	202	202	201

$N = 208$. Note: Gender: $0 =$ Male, $1 =$ Female; Work Experience (in years); Education: $1 =$ High School graduate, $2 =$ Bachelor's degree, $3 =$ Graduate degree; Std. error is reported between parentheses.

**p < .01

*p < .05

To test Hypothesis 4, which posits that moral disengagement mediates the effect of exploitative leadership on UPOB, we employed Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro. The analysis revealed that moral disengagement fully mediates this relationship (b = 0.06, SE = 0.03, 95% BCa CI [0.01, 0.12], with the confidence interval excluding zero). This finding supports Hypothesis 4 and emphasizes the critical role of moral disengagement as a mechanism through which exploitative leadership influences employees' engagement in unethical behaviors intended to benefit the organization **(Figure 2)**. Overall, the results in **Table 4** offer a comprehensive view of the direct and indirect pathways linking exploitative leadership, moral disengagement, and UPOB.
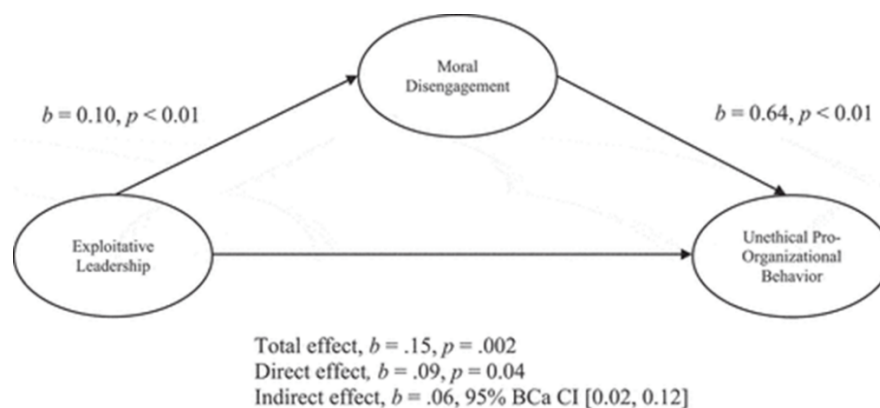

Total effect, *b* = .15, *p* = .002
Direct effect, *b* = .09, *p* = 0.04
Indirect effect, *b* = .06, 95% BCa CI [0.02, 0.12]

Figure 2. The unstandardized coefficients for the indirect relationship between exploitative leadership and unethical pro-organizational behavior through moral disengagement (*N* = 208)

Discussion

Although research on exploitative leadership and UPOB has expanded, these two areas have largely been studied independently, leaving the connection between them underexplored. This study addressed this gap by examining how and why exploitative leadership contributes to UPOB through the lens of social cognitive theory. Employees who perceive political maneuvering within the workplace often assume that their colleagues are also engaging in such behaviors [30]. Consistent with this expectation, our findings indicate that exploitative leadership is positively associated with moral disengagement. Exposure to exploitative leaders appears to initiate a cognitive shift in followers, culminating in moral disengagement. Furthermore, moral disengagement was found to positively predict UPOB.

These results suggest that employees may deactivate their internal moral standards and resort to UPOB as a pragmatic strategy to navigate challenging work environments [30]. Similarly, exploitative leadership was found to directly contribute to UPOB. Given that exploitative leadership can act as a workplace stressor, depleting employees' resources, engaging in UPOB may serve as a coping mechanism to protect these remaining resources. Notably, moral disengagement fully mediated the link between exploitative leadership and UPOB, reinforcing the predictions of social cognitive theory [26]. In situations of perceived threat or resource loss, moral disengagement enables employees to rationalize engaging in UPOB.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study offer several theoretical contributions.

First, the study extends the literature on exploitative leadership by identifying a previously underexplored outcome: UPOB. Prior research has demonstrated that exploitative leadership negatively affects employee attitudes and behaviors, such as job satisfaction, emotional commitment, burnout, and turnover intentions [7, 71]. However, little attention has been paid to its influence on UPOB. By linking exploitative leadership to UPOB, this study broadens the understanding of how dark leadership affects employees and responds to calls for further empirical research in this domain [7]. Simultaneously, the study contributes to the UPOB literature by highlighting a dark leadership antecedent.

Second, the research elucidates the underlying mechanism connecting exploitative leadership to UPOB. Whereas previous work has largely focused on the direct effects of exploitative leadership [7, 71], this study demonstrates that moral disengagement serves as a critical mediator in this relationship. Drawing on social cognitive theory, the findings show that exploitative leadership increases moral disengagement, which in turn fosters UPOB. This aligns with prior research indicating that morally disengaged employees are more likely to engage in deviant workplace behaviors [48]. Overall, the study confirms that social cognitive theory is an effective framework for understanding the cognitive processes through which exploitative leadership influences unethical behaviors.

Practical implications

The findings also carry several practical implications for organizations.

First, since exploitative leadership can drive employees to engage in UPOB, organizations should take proactive steps to minimize exploitative behaviors among leaders. This includes selecting and promoting leaders with low tendencies toward self-interest or dark personality traits, such as narcissism or Machiavellianism. Leadership development programs should emphasize the importance of interdependence, empathy, and ethical decision-making to curb self-serving behaviors.

Second, given that moral disengagement facilitates UPOB, organizations should foster ethical engagement among employees. Creating a supportive work environment and offering initiatives that reinforce ethical behavior can help employees resist engaging in unethical pro-organizational acts. Examples include employee well-being programs, access to psychological counseling, and interventions that promote resilience and resource replenishment in the face of workplace stressors.

Third, organizations should enhance their recruitment and talent management processes by incorporating personality assessments to identify candidates with strong ethical and social exchange orientations. For employees who exhibit high potential but are susceptible to moral disengagement, targeted training and mentoring programs can help cultivate a positive ethical perspective, ensuring that pro-organizational behaviors align with ethical standards.

Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample consisted solely of full-time employees in Saudi Arabia, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or organizational contexts. Future studies should consider replicating this research across diverse countries and industries to determine whether the observed relationships hold in different environments.

Second, although data were collected over a five-week period, the study's correlational design limits the ability to draw definitive causal conclusions. Future research would benefit from employing longitudinal or experimental designs to more rigorously assess causal relationships between exploitative leadership, moral disengagement, and UPOB.

Third, potential moderating factors were not examined in this study. Variables such as the quality of leader-member relationships (e.g., leader-member exchange) or perceptions of organizational politics could influence the strength or direction of the relationships observed. Including such boundary conditions in future research could provide a more nuanced understanding of when exploitative leadership is more likely to trigger moral disengagement and UPOB.

Finally, measurement limitations should be noted. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for constructs like moral disengagement and UPOB fell below the recommended threshold of 0.50. While the results remain meaningful, they warrant caution, and replication is needed to confirm the reliability and validity of these findings. Subsequent studies could refine measurement tools to ensure stronger psychometric properties.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that exploitative leadership fosters moral disengagement among employees, which in turn increases the likelihood of engaging in Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPOB). By applying the perspective of social cognitive theory, this research elucidates the underlying mechanism through which exploitative leadership affects employee behavior. Specifically, moral disengagement serves as a key mediator, linking self-serving leadership to unethical actions aimed at benefiting the organization.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting a previously underexplored outcome of exploitative leadership—UPOB—and demonstrating the critical mediating role of moral disengagement. The findings offer a foundation

for future research exploring dark leadership and unethical workplace behaviors, as well as practical guidance for organizations seeking to minimize the negative consequences of exploitative leadership.

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