The Impact of Ethical Leadership on Organizational Citizenship Behaviors: Moderating Role of Organizational Cynicism

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Abstract

This research explores how ethical leadership (EL) influences organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) and examines whether organizational cynicism (OC) alters this relationship. The study surveyed 400 faculty members and their assistants at Sohag University in Egypt, using a stratified random sampling method. Data were analyzed employing simple regression, hierarchical regression with moderation (HRMA), and simple slope techniques. The results demonstrate that ethical leadership positively impacts OCB both directly and indirectly. Furthermore, organizational cynicism weakens this link, with employees exhibiting higher cynicism showing a reduced influence of EL on their citizenship behaviors compared to those with lower cynicism. These findings provide insights into the role of ethical leadership in fostering positive workplace behaviors and highlight the mitigating effect of organizational cynicism.

Keywords: Organizational citizenship behaviors, Ethical leadership, Organizational cynicism

Introduction

Successful organizations continuously seek ways to optimize and retain human resources to achieve their strategic objectives. Ethical leadership (EL) is recognized as a critical mechanism for enhancing human resource effectiveness. Within an organization, EL promotes a culture of innovation and creativity, elevates employee morale, improves performance capabilities, and increases enthusiasm for work [1].

Previous research has examined the outcomes of EL on employees, highlighting positive effects on job satisfaction, emotional commitment, and workplace integration [2-7]. These studies consistently show a strong positive correlation between employee perceptions of EL and favorable workplace outcomes.

Other studies have explored the behavioral impacts of EL, demonstrating its association with increased organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) and in-role performance, while reducing counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) [8-15]. In essence, stronger perceptions of EL are linked to higher engagement in OCBs and in-role behaviors and lower engagement in CWBs. However, organizational and behavioral constraints can limit the effectiveness of EL, reflecting real-world challenges that may influence research outcomes [7, 16].

Organizational cynicism (OC) represents one such constraint, potentially diminishing the positive influence of EL on employee behaviors [17]. Studies confirm that high levels of OC are associated with lower job satisfaction, reduced commitment, decreased OCBs and in-role behaviors, and higher CWBs [17-21].

Research has also highlighted the importance of mediator and moderator variables, such as workplace friendships, traditions, ostracism, and cognitive and affective trust, in shaping the EL–OCB relationship [11, 15, 22]. Ignoring these factors can lead to incomplete or skewed results.

Despite these insights, few studies have investigated the moderating role of organizational cynicism on the EL–OCB relationship, especially within higher education settings. This study aims to address this gap by examining how OC modifies the influence of EL on OCBs among faculty members and their assistants at Sohag University. Additionally, the study provides recommendations for mitigating the adverse effects of OC and maximizing the positive impact of EL on organizational citizenship behaviors.

This research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it highlights leadership as a critical driver of OCBs and outlines pathways by which OC can reduce EL's positive influence. Second, it provides practical guidance for higher education institutions seeking to counteract organizational cynicism and improve employee behaviors. The study addresses the following key questions: What is the level of ethical leadership at Sohag University? What is the level of OCBs among faculty and their assistants? How prevalent is organizational cynicism among staff? What is the relationship between EL and OCBs in this context? Does OC moderate the EL–OCB relationship?

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Ethical leadership (EL)

Ethical leadership refers to behaviors demonstrated by leaders that align with the agreed-upon principles between leaders and their team members to achieve common organizational goals. It involves guiding, motivating, and empowering subordinates, encouraging them to reach their full potential with determination, and creating a work environment characterized by satisfaction, engagement, and high performance [23]. Various scholars have defined ethical leadership in different ways. Khuong and Nhu [24] describe it as a leadership style where leaders exhibit honesty, loyalty, purposefulness, social justice, humility, patience, integrity, and virtue-based decision-making, while influencing employees to act ethically. Similarly, Brown and Treviño [25] define ethical leadership as the demonstration of morally appropriate conduct, reinforced through interpersonal interactions and two-way communication, to promote ethical behaviors among followers. According to this perspective, ethical leaders establish normative standards for behavior, consistently act according to ethical principles, justify their decisions to subordinates, reward ethical conduct, and penalize unethical actions, all while considering the ethical implications of their choices. This study adopts this definition, recognizing ethical leaders as individuals who set organizational norms and encourage ethical decision-making among employees.

Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs)

Organizational citizenship behaviors are voluntary actions by employees that go beyond formal job requirements, are not directly recognized by formal reward systems, and contribute to overall organizational effectiveness [26]. These behaviors include proactive contributions as well as the voluntary abstention from actions that could potentially harm the organization, even when the employee has the right to act otherwise [27]. Positive OCBs involve willingly assisting colleagues or supervisors to enhance workplace functioning, whereas abstention behaviors reflect the employee's ability to tolerate suboptimal work conditions and refrain from harmful actions.

OCBs are multidimensional. Altruism involves voluntarily helping colleagues to address work-related challenges or prevent potential problems, while conscientiousness reflects an individual's commitment to exceeding formal job responsibilities through initiative, diligence, and enthusiasm. Sportsmanship describes the capacity to accept inconveniences or burdens of the job without complaint, demonstrating resilience and a positive attitude. Courtesy refers to respectful and considerate behavior toward colleagues and superiors, including acknowledgment of their decisions and actions. Civic virtue encompasses active participation in organizational life through constructive suggestions, problem-solving initiatives, and responsible expression of opinions. Some dimensions, such as altruism and civic virtue, are primarily directed toward assisting individuals (OCB-I), while others, including sportsmanship, conscientiousness, and courtesy, are intended to enhance overall organizational effectiveness.

The Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Organizational Citizenship Behaviors

Neubert *et al.* [28] conducted one of the earliest studies examining the influence of ethical leadership on organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) and employee commitment. Their research highlighted the mechanisms through which ethical leaders shape employee behaviors, revealing a strong positive relationship between ethical leadership and OCBs. The study also underscored the critical role of ethics in workplace management. Subsequent research [22, 29-31] further investigated

the effects of ethical leadership behaviors on OCBs, proposing that employees tend to develop stronger organizational attachment and demonstrate greater citizenship behaviors when guided by highly ethical leaders.

Similarly, Ali *et al.* [32] found a positive association between ethical leadership and individual-level OCBs, corroborating earlier findings by Khan *et al.* [33], which reported a comparable positive relationship. These results have practical implications for public sector management, suggesting that the demonstration of ethical leadership can foster the development of citizenship behaviors among employees. In addition, studies by Wang and Sung [34] and Yang and Wei [15] explored the relationship between ethical leadership, workplace jealousy, and OCBs directed toward individuals (OCB-I), demonstrating that ethical leadership enhances employee engagement in citizenship behaviors. Other research [28, 29] also confirms a robust positive correlation between ethical leadership and OCBs.

Social learning theory [35] provides a theoretical basis for this relationship, asserting that employees acquire social behaviors by observing ethical leaders. Through mechanisms of reward and corrective feedback, employees internalize ethical conduct and align their behaviors with organizational norms. Employees tend to view ethical leaders as role models who embody honesty and integrity, encouraging followers to adopt citizenship behaviors as a positive behavioral choice. Accordingly, ethical leadership fosters a climate in which employees voluntarily enhance OCBs within the organization. Based on this rationale, the first hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a positive relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behaviors among faculty members and their assistants at Sohag University.

Organizational Cynicism as a Moderator between Ethical Leadership and In-Role Behaviors

Organizational cynicism (OC) has emerged as a significant barrier to organizational effectiveness, potentially diminishing efficiency and threatening the viability of enterprises over time [36-38]. Prior research has identified several antecedents of OC, including perceived organizational lack of integrity, employees feeling undervalued, disrespect toward employee dignity, self-interest among organizational leaders, meaningless work, lack of credibility, and exclusion from decision-making processes [39]. Collectively, these factors foster negative attitudes and behaviors toward the organization.

The literature has conceptualized OC through various lenses [40, 41]. The first perspective emphasizes individual traits, suggesting that employees tend to be self-interested and unreliable. The second focuses on occupational cynicism, in which cynicism is profession-specific, often directed at fields perceived as failing to meet idealistic expectations. The third dimension addresses cynicism toward organizational change, wherein employees view organizational initiatives as serving only the self-interest of certain actors. The fourth form, central to the present study, is organizational cynicism directed at the organization itself, reflecting employees' enduring negative perceptions of the organization's integrity and trustworthiness.

OC has been shown to reduce OCBs and weaken in-role performance, potentially increasing counterproductive work behaviors [40, 42, 43]. Disruptions in social exchange relationships can lead employees to disengage psychologically and adopt behaviors harmful to the organization. Hartog [44] further emphasized that individual personality traits and contextual factors, including organizational culture, influence ethical leadership and employee behaviors. Leaders who demonstrate ethical conduct can enhance positive behaviors such as OCBs, reduce negative behaviors like CWBs, improve overall organizational performance, strengthen employee commitment, and mitigate organizational cynicism.

Moreover, there is substantial evidence suggesting that ethical leadership fosters organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). However, the presence of organizational cynicism (OC) can constrain this relationship. Employees with high levels of cynicism may either refrain from or reduce their engagement in citizenship behaviors, as their perception of the organization as lacking integrity leads them to believe that their contributions outweigh the benefits received. In essence, OC may act as a moderating factor, weakening the link between ethical leadership and OCBs. Employees with heightened cynicism often experience a perceived imbalance in social exchange with the organization, stemming from the belief that the organization manipulates or misrepresents reality.

Social exchange theory [45-47] posits that social behavior results from a reciprocal exchange aimed at maximizing benefits and minimizing costs. Similarly, psychological contract theory [48] conceptualizes an unwritten set of mutual expectations between employees and employers, encompassing informal arrangements, shared beliefs, and reciprocal obligations. When employees perceive organizational injustice or exploitation, they may experience frustration, distrust, and disengagement, leading to reduced participation in OCBs and behaviors consistent with organizational cynicism. Previous studies [17, 18, 40, 43, 49-54] have consistently reported a negative relationship between OC and OCBs, with conscientiousness being particularly affected [21]. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Organizational cynicism moderates the positive relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behaviors, such that the relationship is weaker among employees with higher levels of cynicism compared to those with lower levels.

Methods

Study population and sample

Data were collected from faculty members and their assistants at Sohag University in Egypt to enhance the generalizability of the findings across various job roles. Participants voluntarily completed surveys at their workplace, which they could also take home for their spouse to complete, and returned both surveys within five days. A total of 407 matched questionnaires were received, yielding a response rate of 86.46%. After removing seven incomplete pairs, 400 matched responses were retained for analysis. The average participant age was 42 years (SD = 1.33, range 21–60), with 61% male and 39% female. Regarding experience, 25.25% had less than 5 years, 42.5% had 5–10 years, and 32.25% had 10 years or more. The sample included 20.25% demonstrators, 23.26% teaching assistants, 24% lecturers, 15.5% assistant professors, and 17% full professors, ensuring representation across university roles.

Measures

Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Established scales with verified reliability and validity were employed. Ethical leadership (EL) was measured using the 14-item scale by Brown *et al.* [25], encompassing six dimensions: justice, role clarification, power sharing, integrity, moral orientation, and guidance toward subordinates, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90. A sample item is: "Listening to what workers have to say sets an example and reflects ethical behavior." Organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) were measured using the 14-item scale by Podsakoff *et al.* [26], which includes dimensions of altruism, courtesy, conscientiousness, civic virtue, and sportsmanship, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.659. A sample item is: "Encouraging colleagues when they are enthusiastic about work." Organizational cynicism (OC) was assessed using Brandes *et al.* [55] eight-item scale, covering belief, passion, and behavior, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82. A sample item is: "I feel anxiety, distress, tension, and discomfort when I think of the university." Control variables included age, gender, experience level, and job type.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 20. To test the hypotheses, simple regression, hierarchical regression moderated analysis (HRMA), and simple slope analysis were applied.

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis **(Table 1)** revealed that the single-factor model fit the data significantly worse than the three-factor model, indicating that common method variance was not a concern. All three constructs demonstrated acceptable convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 1. Results of confirmatory factor analysis

		X^2	df	X^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	ΔX^2	Δ df
Baseline Model	Three Factors	254.4	138	1.84	.07	.93	.92	.06		
Model 1	Two Factors: Ethical leadership and OCB were combined into one factor	424.18	144	2.94	.14	.87	.85	.13	169.78***	6
Model 2	one Factors: All variables were combined into one factor	1465.07	153	9.57	.20	.73	.62	.18	1040.89***	9

Note. N = 400. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, CFI = comparative fit index, TLI = Tucker–Lewis index, SRMR = standardized root mean square residual, OCB = Organizational citizenship behaviors.
*** p <.001.

Characterization of study variables

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha values, and the correlation matrix for all study variables. Ethical leadership demonstrated a positive correlation with organizational citizenship behaviors, whereas organizational cynicism showed a negative correlation with both organizational citizenship behaviors and ethical leadership.

Table 2. Meta-data of the variables, simple linear correlation coefficients, and stability coefficients

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation coefficients

			1	2	3
Ethical Leadership	2.321	.649	.90		
Organizational Citizenship Behaviors	2.90	1.14	.863	.695	
Organizational Cynicism	3.412	1.245	−.487	−.846	.82

Note. N = 400. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability coefficients appear on the diagonal in parentheses ***p <.001

Results of testing H1

In order to test *H1*, we used simple regression analysis and the results are presented in **Table 3.**

Table 3. The results of simple regression analysis of OCB on EL

Predictor	Beta	B	R	R^2	T.Value	F
Ethical Leadership	.863	.869	.863	.745	1.667	0.00*
Constant					.075	
The coefficient of determination (Adj.R^2)					.745	
F value					4595.93	
Sig.F					0.00*	

Note. N = 400, OCB = Organizational Citizenship Behaviors and EL = Ethical Leadership
*** p <.001

Table 3 indicates that the parameter estimates confirm a strong positive relationship (R = 0.869) between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behaviors. The adjusted R² value shows that ethical leadership accounts for 74.5% of the variance in organizational citizenship behaviors. The overall model significance (Sig. F) was p < 0.001, providing support for Hypothesis 1 (H1).

Results of testing H2

As presented in **Table 4**, when the moderator variable is included, the combined model explains 84.3% of the variance in organizational citizenship behaviors, indicating that the moderator alone accounts for approximately 9.8% of the variance. These results demonstrate that organizational cynicism significantly moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behaviors, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2 (H2). The overall model significance (Sig. F) was p < 0.001, confirming the robustness of the model.

Table 4. Results of HRM analysis to show the relationship between EL, OC and organizational citizenship behaviors

Predictors Variables	The dependent variable (Organizational citizenship behaviors)		
	R2	ΔR^2	F
Ethical Leadership (EL)	.745	000	4595.92*
Organizational Cynicism (OC)	.843	.098	8.620*
The interaction of Ethical leadership with organizational cynicism	.893	.05	2.388*
Sig F	23.988*		

Note. N = 400. *** p <.001

To provide additional support for Hypothesis 2 (H2), a simple slopes analysis was conducted to examine the effects of low versus high organizational cynicism on organizational citizenship behaviors, as presented in **Figure 1**. The results revealed that the positive association between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behaviors is notably weaker among employees exhibiting higher levels of cynicism (R = .325, p < .001) than among those with lower levels of cynicism (R = .674, p < .001). Furthermore, a Z-test was applied to assess whether the difference in correlation coefficients between the two levels of the moderator variable was statistically significant. The outcome (Z = 14.65) confirmed a significant disparity, thereby providing strong evidence in favor of Hypothesis 2.
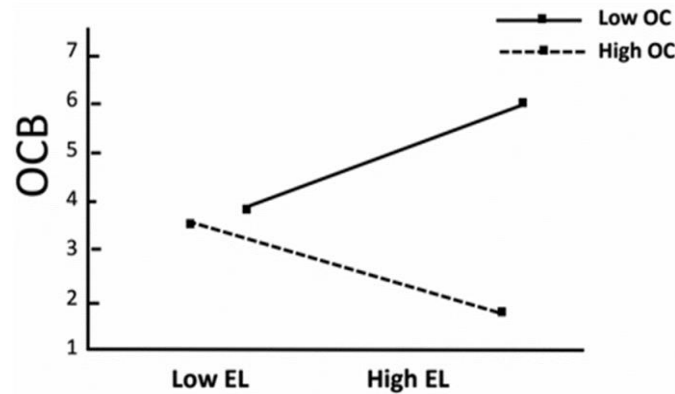
Figure 1. The moderating effect of OC on the relationship between EL and OCB

Discussion

The results of Hypothesis 1 indicate a significant positive relationship between ethical leadership (EL) and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). This finding aligns with social learning theory [7, 35], which suggests that employees acquire social behaviors by observing ethical leaders and internalizing the reinforced behaviors through rewards and corrective feedback. Ethical leadership fosters behaviors such as altruism, conscientiousness, cooperation among peers, and mutual respect, which collectively enhance organizational effectiveness. By promoting an environment of civility, ethical leaders encourage employees to voluntarily contribute beyond their formal duties, thereby developing the dimensions of OCBs [56]. Our findings are consistent with Ali *et al.* [32], showing that the presence of ethical practices, including justice, integrity, and fairness, is positively associated with OCBs. Similarly, studies by Brandon [29], Khan *et al.* [20], and Wang and Sung [34] corroborate the positive impact of EL on OCBs. However, our results diverge from Kott [57], who found no significant correlation between ethical behavior and work-related behaviors such as OCBs and CWBs, and partially differ from Leung [58], who observed that ethics primarily influenced altruism. These discrepancies may be attributed to differences in measurement tools and organizational contexts.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) can be interpreted through social exchange theory [45-47] and psychological contract theory. Employees with high organizational cynicism (OC) perceive the organization as lacking integrity and attempting to exploit them, which disrupts the social exchange relationship and breaches the psychological contract. This perception can trigger frustration, loss of trust, and decreased motivation, ultimately leading to a reduction in OCBs. Conversely, employees with low cynicism maintain trust in the organization, allowing EL to more effectively encourage positive behaviors.

Moreover, organizational cynicism negatively affects specific dimensions of OCBs, particularly altruism and conscientiousness. Cynical employees tend to view their colleagues and the organization as self-serving, which fosters negative behaviors and undermines the promotion of positive behaviors [50].

Implications

The findings underscore the importance of ethical leadership in fostering positive workplace behaviors, particularly organizational citizenship behaviors. They also highlight that the presence of organizational cynicism can diminish the effectiveness of ethical leadership, reinforcing prior research on social exchange, psychological contracts, and behavioral integrity in leadership contexts.

At Sohag University, the study identified relatively low levels of both ethical leadership and OCBs. Given the demonstrated benefits of EL, university administrators should prioritize developing and implementing ethical leadership practices across faculties and departments. Providing ethics-focused training, workshops, and seminars can raise awareness about ethical conduct and reinforce its importance. Faculty members and their assistants should be encouraged to uphold ethical principles, which may strengthen their engagement, loyalty, and willingness to take on additional responsibilities.

The moderate presence of OCBs among university staff suggests a need for targeted interventions to identify factors limiting these behaviors. By implementing strategies to encourage voluntary positive contributions and reinforcing commitment to organizational goals, the university can enhance overall performance and cohesion.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, it employs a cross-sectional design, which captures data at a single point in time, limiting the ability to establish causal relationships among the examined variables. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to better track the dynamic interactions and cause-and-effect relationships over time. Second,

the study focuses exclusively on faculty members and their assistants at Sohag University, without including administrative staff. While there are likely similarities in perceptions across roles, the findings cannot be generalized to staff in private universities or to other public institutions, given the unique context of Sohag University. Third, Sohag University was chosen as the study site due to the limited research available on ethical leadership, organizational citizenship behaviors, and organizational cynicism in this context, which constrains broader applicability.

Despite these limitations, the findings, implications, and observed trends offer a foundation for future studies. Notably, the low levels of perceived ethical leadership among employees highlight the need for further research to explore this phenomenon in greater depth and to verify its positive organizational outcomes [13, 25, 59]. Similarly, the observed levels of organizational cynicism suggest that future investigations should examine its root causes and strategies for mitigation [60, 61].

Given that organizational cynicism demonstrated a moderating role between ethical leadership and OCBs in this study, future research could extend this line of inquiry by testing whether similar moderation occurs in relation to negative work behaviors, such as counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs). Additionally, researchers are encouraged to explore other potential moderators in the relationship between ethical leadership and work behaviors, including factors such as employees' self-esteem within the organization [62], abusive supervision, and organizational control mechanisms [63]. These extensions would provide a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which ethical leadership fosters positive employee behaviors and mitigates negative outcomes.

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