Research article

Moral disengagement and unethical decision making: Systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

The development of technology and a complex business environment poses an increased risk of unethical behavior among individuals and organizations. The concept of moral disengagement, introduced by Bandura (1999), has become a framework for understanding the psychological mechanisms that enable individuals to relinquish their moral standards and engage in unethical actions without feeling guilty. Research: This study investigates the relationship between moral disengagement and decision-making without ethical review by systematically reviewing empirical and theoretical studies on planned behavior theory. Analysis results indicate that a high level of moral disengagement increases the likelihood of unethical behavior, which can lead to negative consequences for organizations, including damage to reputation and a decline in stakeholder trust. Therefore, understanding and preventing moral disengagement is very important. To create an ethical and responsible organization, answer. Research confirms the need for a development strategy that is culture-based, organization-based, and grounded in moral values and integrity, to support ethical behavior at all levels of the organization.

Keywords: Moral disengagement, unethical behavior, ethical decision-making, organizational culture, moral integrity.

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Abstrak

Perkembangan teknologi dan lingkungan bisnis yang kompleks meningkatkan risiko perilaku tidak etis di kalangan individu maupun organisasi. Konsep moral disengagement, yang diperkenalkan oleh Bandura (1999), menjadi kerangka untuk memahami mekanisme psikologis yang memungkinkan individu untuk melepaskan standar moral mereka, sehingga mereka dapat melakukan tindakan tidak etis tanpa merasa bersalah. Penelitian ini menyelidiki hubungan antara moral disengagement dan pengambilan keputusan tidak etis melalui tinjauan literatur sistematis yang mencakup berbagai studi empiris dan teoretis terkait dengan teori perilaku terencana. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa tingkat moral disengagement yang tinggi meningkatkan kemungkinan seseorang untuk berperilaku tidak etis, yang dapat menyebabkan konsekuensi negatif bagi organisasi, termasuk kerusakan reputasi dan menurunnya kepercayaan stakeholder. Oleh karena itu, memahami dan mencegah moral disengagement sangat penting. Penelitian ini menegaskan perlunya pengembangan strategi yang berbasis budaya organisasi serta nilai moral dan integritas, guna mendukung perilaku etis di semua tingkat organisasi.

Kata Kunci: *Moral disengagement, perilaku tidak etis, pengambilan keputusan etis, budaya organisasi, integritas moral.*

1. Introduction

Development technology as well as a complex business environment. This often pushes individuals to make decisions that have an impact, not only in functional aspects, but also in deep ethical aspects. According to Sanggarwangi (2021), ethics is a concept derived from moral values and encompasses the truth that serves as guidelines for social behavior among individuals or groups. One of them is a frequent phenomenon that appears in matters. This is moral disengagement, a psychological mechanism that allows someone to separate their morals from their actions, enabling them to perform unethical actions without feeling guilty. This concept, first introduced by Bandura (1999), marks a significant milestone in the ethical decision-making process, which involves considering moral principles. Research has shown that moral disengagement can compromise integrity in making ethical decisions, especially in complex situations (Moore et al., 2012). Therefore, understanding the connection between moral disengagement and ethical decision-making becomes important in developing strategies that can increase awareness of ethics in various sectors, including organizations and education.

Behavior can be reflected through actions that are conscious and regulated by norms that must be obeyed, which is beneficial in daily life, environmental organization, or group settings. This is known as ethics, which functions as guidelines in interaction and decision-making. In the context of work, ethics hold a crucial role because every profession in the fields of business, health, education, and technology has moral principles that must be held in high esteem. Compliance with ethics not only forms integrity in an individual but also influences trust, reputation, and sustainability within an organization (Trevino & Nelson, 2021). Moreover, understanding application ethics in the world becomes fundamental for creating a responsible and sustainable environment.

Although established institutions exist, violations still occur in Indonesia and at the global level. One of the root problems is unethical behavior, which can come in various forms, ranging from fraud to abuse of authority to conflicts of interest. This phenomenon not only

harms organizations and society but also erodes public trust in the prevailing system. Studies show that weak supervision, a permissive culture, and a lack of firm sanctions contribute to a trend in which individuals ignore ethical principles (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Therefore, understanding the factors that trigger behavior is a critical step in designing an effective solution. Good character through education, enforcement regulations, and cultivating values of integrity in all lines are key.

Understanding moral disengagement and unethical decision-making is very important in management organizations. Leaders need to proactively identify reasons for moral disengagement in order to create a system that encourages ethical work. With a build culture that emphasizes values, ethics, and consideration, organizations can develop a consistent environment that supports decision integrity. In addition, practicing ethical business is not only good for internal reputation, but also improves trust externally, supporting the sustainability of the organization.

2. Literature Review

This study uses a number of theories as references, including the Theory of Planned Behavior, which serves as a grand theory, and Moral Disengagement, which works as a middle theory within a time framework theory. Applied theory plays a fundamental role in understanding unethical decision-making, as illustrated in Figure 1.
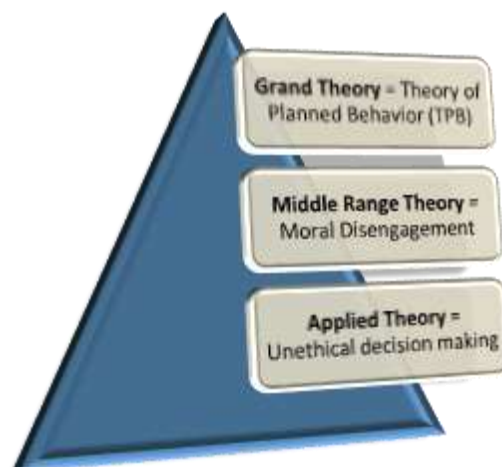

Figure 1. Research Theory Study

Theory of planned behavior (TBH)

Study this, referring to the Theory of Planned Behavior developed by Ajzen (1991). This theory posits that an individual's behavior is a consequence of their intention to act. Intention for act influenced by three factor main, namely : (a) behavioral beliefs, which include view individual about results from actions and assessments to results (b) normative belief, which is related to with view individual about other people's expectations as well encouragement for fulfil expectation these, and (c) control beliefs, which are related with understanding individual about factors that can obstruct or support behavior that will done as well as how much significant influence factor barriers and supporters to behavior That.

Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement is a concept developed by Albert Bandura in a study (Bandura, 1999) in the framework of social cognitive theory. Conceptually, this refers to the psychological mechanism that allows an individual to separate their self from their moral standards alone, so that they can behave in an unethical or harmful manner without feeling guilty or responsible. According to Detert et al. (2008), moral disengagement is a cognitive mechanism that enables individuals to disconnect their behavior from internal ethical or moral standards. This mechanism turns off the process of self-moral regulation, so that an individual can take action without feeling guilty or experiencing moral conflict.

Unethical decision making

The underlying theory of unethical decision-making refers to the theory of planned behavior, which is the process by which individuals or groups choose to violate laws, moral principles, social norms, or standards of ethics, both consciously and unconsciously. Concept: This encompasses cognitive, situational, and contextual factors that influence the occurrence of ethical violations. Three primary factors can influence unethical decision-making. First, individual factors such as personal character, moral values, and education influence a person's ethics. Second, the factors include an organizational culture that is not right, a reward system that is not effective, and a pressure hierarchy. Third, the situational factor encompasses pressure, time constraints, ambiguous rules, and conflicts that trigger interests, violating ethical principles.

Three main factors influence unethical decision-making. First, individual factors include personal character (moral locus of control), moral values held, and level of individual ethical understanding (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Second, the organizational culture of a permissive company, which covers factors such as a reward system that encourages unethical behavior and pressure from a coercive hierarchy, can lead to employees violating norms (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Third, situational factors such as time pressure, ambiguous rules, and conflicting interests reduce ethical consideration (Jones, 1991).

3. Methods

Methods applied in the article. This is a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), an approach for identifying, evaluating, and interpreting all relevant research on the topics discussed and the phenomena to be studied. In this study, the following guide reviews the literature that has been described (Snyder, 2019), formulating research questions, developing the SLR protocol, conducting a systematic literature search, selecting and evaluating the literature, extracting and synthesizing data, and reporting the results. The importance of SLR mapping development research in the field lies in identifying knowledge gaps for future studies and providing support for evidence-based decision-making.

The research process consists of four stages. First, determine the scope of the research, focusing on the Theory of Planned Behavior, which has been well-established in the literature. Then, determine related keywords, namely moral disengagement and unethical decision-making. Second, the collection of articles involves identifying data sources from Google Scholar, Scopus, and SciVal, and third, filtering the journals. The filtering process is conducted manually

by researchers to select an appropriate journal based on criteria that reflect studies on moral disengagement and unethical decision-making. Fourth, is assessment, in which the author will organize journals that have been collected using bibliographic details, such as author, title, journal name, volume, issue, page, goal, population sample, and study results.

4. Results and Discussions

This exploratory literature review systematically examines the relationship between moral disengagement and unethical decision-making. The review, guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior, was conducted through a systematic search across Google Scholar and Scopus databases, resulting in the identification and thematic analysis of 20 key academic journals. The findings are mapped across several dimensions: predominant research methodologies, sample characteristics, publication outlets, key variables, geographical focus, and the central relationship under investigation.

Methodological and Thematic Landscape

The analysis of the selected literature reveals a clear methodological preference and thematic focus. As shown in Table 1, the **questionnaire/survey method** is overwhelmingly dominant, employed in 17 out of the 20 studies. This method involves direct data collection from respondents on their attitudes, behaviors, and propensity for moral disengagement. In contrast, only three studies utilized a **literature review** approach, indicating a strong empirical and quantitative trend in this research domain.

Table 1. Use of Research Methods in Journals

Use of Research Methods	Researcher(s)
Survey/Questionnaire	Dang et al. (2017), Detert et al. (2008), Knoll et al. (2016), Egan et al. (2015), Baron et al. (2012), Ogunfowora et al. (2013), Dennerlein & Kirkman (2022), Ebrahimi & Yurtkoru (2017), Yang et al. (2020), Moore et al. (2012), Kouchaki & Smith (2014), Kish-Gephart et al. (2014), Liu et al. (2022), Schuh et al. (2021), Aaldering et al. (2020), Shaw et al. (2020), Bonner et al. (2016)
Literature Review	Martin et al. (2014), Schaefer & Bouwmeester (2021), Takacs Haynes & Rašković (2021)

Regarding sample composition, the research primarily draws from **student** and **employee** populations, as detailed in Table 2. This suggests significant academic and organizational interest in understanding how moral disengagement mechanisms operate in both educational settings and workplace environments. Other respondent groups, such as adults, entrepreneurs, and leaders, appear less frequently, highlighting potential gaps for future research in these specific demographics.

Table 2. Sample Respondents

Respondents	Researcher(s)
Student	Dang et al. (2017), Detert et al. (2008), Ogunfowora et al. (2013), Yang et al. (2020), Moore et al. (2012), Kouchaki & Smith (2014), Kish-Gephart et al. (2014), Aaldering et al. (2020)
Employees	Knoll et al. (2016), Ogunfowora et al. (2013), Dennerlein & Kirkman (2022), Ebrahimi & Yurtkoru (2017), Liu et al. (2022), Schuh et al. (2021), Bonner et al. (2016)
Adults	Egan et al. (2015), Dennerlein & Kirkman (2022)
Entrepreneur	Baron et al. (2012)
Teens	Yang et al. (2020)
Leaders	Schuh et al. (2021)

The publication outlets for this research are concentrated in applied psychology and business management journals. Table 3 shows that the *Journal of Applied Psychology* is the most prominent venue, followed by various business and management journals. This distribution underscores that the topic is of high relevance to applied fields concerned with ethical behavior in organizational and social contexts.

Table 3. Journal List by Field

Field	Researcher(s)
Psychology **(e.g., *Journal of Applied Psychology*)**	Dang et al. (2017), Detert et al. (2008), Knoll et al. (2016), Martin et al. (2014), Egan et al. (2015), Dennerlein & Kirkman (2022), Yang et al. (2020), Moore et al. (2012), Kouchaki & Smith (2014), Shaw et al. (2020)
Business, Accounting and Management **(e.g., *Research Journal of Business and Management*)**	Ebrahimi & Yurtkoru (2017), Kish-Gephart et al. (2014), Liu et al. (2022), Schuh et al. (2021), Schaefer & Bouwmeester (2021), Bonner et al. (2016), Takacs Haynes & Rašković (2021)
Social Science **(various journals)**	Baron et al. (2012), Ogunfowora et al. (2013), Aaldering et al. (2020)

Key Variables and Geographical Focus

The variables examined in the literature are diverse, encompassing individual, situational, and organizational factors that either foster or mitigate moral disengagement. As synthesized from Table 4, individual characteristics (e.g., empathy, moral identity, personality traits like Machiavellianism), leadership styles (e.g., unethical, empowering, or ethical leadership), and contextual pressures (e.g., role conflict, competitive climate, external pressure) are recurrent themes. This indicates that unethical decision-making is a complex phenomenon influenced by an interplay of personal propensity and environmental cues.

Geographically, research activity is heavily concentrated in the United States and China, with significant contributions from the United Kingdom, Canada, and the Netherlands (Table 5). This pattern suggests the phenomenon is extensively studied in countries with strong research traditions in psychology and business ethics. Notably, research within the ASEAN region and several other countries appears limited, pointing to a significant opportunity for cross-cultural studies to explore how local socio-cultural contexts might moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and unethical behavior.

Table 5. Country of Research Focus

Country	Researcher(s)
American	Dang et al. (2017), Detert et al. (2008), Martin et al. (2014), Dennerlein & Kirkman (2022), Kouchaki & Smith (2014), Bonner et al. (2016)
China	Baron et al. (2012), Yang et al. (2020), Liu et al. (2022), Schuh et al. (2021), Shaw et al. (2020)
German	Knoll et al. (2016)
English	Egan et al. (2015), Moore et al. (2012)
Canada	Ogunfowora et al. (2013), Kish-Gephart et al. (2014)
Türkiye	Ebrahimi & Yurtkoru (2017)
Dutch	Aaldering et al. (2020), Schaefer & Bouwmeester (2021)
Hungary	Takacs Haynes & Rašković (2021)

Central Finding: The Positive Relationship

The most consistent and significant finding across the reviewed literature is a positive relationship between moral disengagement and unethical decision-making. As summarized in Table 6, 15 studies confirmed this positive effect, with no studies finding a negative or non-significant relationship in the final analysis. This overwhelming consensus strongly supports Bandura's (1999) social cognitive theory, which posits that moral disengagement is a key psychological mechanism enabling individuals to bypass internal moral standards and engage in unethical conduct without experiencing guilt or self-censure. This relationship persists even when controlling for various situational and personality factors, underscoring the robust and central role of moral disengagement in the etiology of unethical choices.

Table 6. Nature of the relationship between moral disengagement and unethical decision-making

Positively Affected	Negatively Affected	No Effect
Dang et al. (2017), Detert et al. (2008), Knoll et al. (2016), Baron et al. (2012), Ogunfowora et al. (2013), Dennerlein & Kirkman (2022), Ebrahimi & Yurtkoru (2017), Yang et al. (2020), Moore et al. (2012), Kouchaki & Smith (2014), Liu et al. (2022), Schuh et al. (2021), Aaldering et al. (2020), Shaw et al. (2020)	-	-

The results confirm that moral disengagement is a critical antecedent to unethical decision-making. The dominant use of quantitative surveys points to a mature field focused on measuring and modeling this relationship. The focus on students and employees reflects practical concerns in educational integrity and organizational ethics. The geographical concentration of studies suggests a need for broader cultural validation. Ultimately, the literature converges on the conclusion that interventions aimed at reducing unethical behavior must strategically target the specific cognitive mechanisms of moral disengagement, such as fostering empathy, strengthening moral identity, promoting ethical leadership, and creating transparent accountability structures.

5. Conclusion

The results of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) confirm the existence of a positive connection between moral disengagement and unethical decision making. Analysis of 20 relevant studies consistently shows that individuals with high moral disengagement are more likely to engage in unethical actions. The majority of studies use this method of questionnaire with a sample drawn from student and employee circles, indicating that the second group often becomes the primary focus of the study. Moral disengagement alone is a mechanism of psychological factors that allows somebody to neutralize guilt through rationalization, denial, or justification for actual actions contrary to ethical norms. This process facilitates unethical behavior without being accompanied by moral remorse.

Unethical decision-making, which includes various forms of moral violations such as corruption, fraud, and abuse of power, can cause significant negative consequences for organizations, individuals, and communities. Extensive research underlines the importance of understanding the mechanisms of moral disengagement as a basis for developing effective prevention strategies. By building an environment that emphasizes values, ethics, and responsibility, institutions can create a system that encourages ethical behavior at all levels. However, the findings of this study need to be interpreted with consideration of the limitations of the sample used, so further studies are required with a larger and broader population and a more comprehensive methodology to strengthen the validity of the results.

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Declarations