

Emotional Neglect, Self-Deception, and Unethical Workplace Behavior: Moderating Effect of Machiavellianism

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Abstract

Based on ethical faded theory, this paper examines the relationship between emotional neglect and unethical behavior via self-deception under the influence of employee Machiavellianism. A two-phased survey involving 253 managerial employees of various private sector service organizations was conducted in the Punjab province of Pakistan. Data showed sufficient reliability and validity of existing measures used in this study. The conditional process analysis revealed that employees emotionally neglected at work indulged in unethical behavior and that self-deception by such employees explained this mechanism. Employee Machiavellianism moderated the relationship between self-deception and unethical behavior, indicating that the indirect effect of emotional neglect on unethical behavior would be more robust for employees with high levels of Machiavellianism in their personalities. Findings help understand the antecedents and conditions that promote unethical behavior at work and warrant the need for effective managerial strategies to prevent it. Implications of these findings have been discussed.

Keywords. Emotional neglect, self-deception, unethical behavior, Machiavellianism.

Introduction

Firms develop standards that oversee people's practices to help business activities and encourage the achievement of the firm's objectives. However, unethical workplace behavior is a pervasive problem in most organizations (Yao et al., 2021), harming the business image and financial standing, deceiving the firm's workers, and mischief clients, customers, speculators, and networks (Treviño et al., 2006). It can prompt clashes in a working environment and bring about violent conduct (Aquino & Thau, 2009). The personality and individual differences determine the acceptability of ethical or unethical behavior (Yao et al., 2021). The aggressive unethical behavior leads to workplace mistreatment exploiting the wellbeing of other people. Generally, workplace mistreatment arises if the psychological needs are not fulfilled, and the relationship between supervisors-

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followers is weak (Lian et al., 2012). The impulsive aggression resulting from emotion differentiation can be treated by improving emotion-processing and emotion-regulation difficulties (Edwards & Wupperman, 2017).

The children facing parental emotional neglect may face externalizing problems due to their deviant peer affiliation (Yang et al., 2021). Likewise, employees overwhelmed by neglect exhibit apathy, distrust, the revengeful mood of employees towards management (Jena & Pradhan, 2018; Tang et al., 2020) and the emotional exhaustion resulting from workplace ostracism leads to deviant work behavior (Jiang et al., 2020). In this study, we explored that emotional neglect leads to unethical behavior using ethical fading theory. Different social and organizational factors like high job demand, job insecurity, low social support from co-workers cause incivility (Torkelson et al., 2016). The individual differences in ethical values (Arsang-Jang et al., 2020), personality flaws, and non-supportive organization culture and climate (Hackney & Perrewé, 2018; Treviño et al., 2006; Wissing & Reinhard, 2019), and manipulative and deceptive nature, such as Machiavellianism (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004) may also lead to unethical behavior. However, unethical workplace behavior as an outcome of emotional neglect is not studies, which is a novelty in this paper.

This paper explored how experienced emotional neglect may lead to unethical workplace behavior through self-deception. It also explains Machiavellianism as a moderating condition when the effect of the self-deception mechanism on unethical behavior is more robust (Figure 1).

Literature Review

Ethical fading theory (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004) provides a basic understanding of how and when individuals repeat unethical behavior (Zhang, 2019). The root causes of unethical decisions are the psychological forces in which individuals fade moral principles and induce self-deception. Ethical fading occurs when ethics disappear from the decisions. Usually, the antecedents of ethical behavior are judgment and ethical awareness, but if people are not aware of these components, they may indulge in unethical behavior. According to Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004), false belief about oneself creates an error in ethical judgment without realizing its negative consequences and behaving accordingly in the future. The reason is that some psychological tendencies force us to fade ethics from the decision and behave unethically. Emotionally neglected people usually indulge in unethical behavior because some past non-corrected actions may be repeated in future.

Emotional Neglect and Unethical Workplace Behavior

Emotional neglect may lead to deviant peer affiliation and cause problems in externalization (Yang et al., 2021). An unethical act may include counterproductive work behavior (Mangione & Quinn, 1975), mistreatment (Vardi & Wiener, 1996), unethical pro-organization behavior (Umphress et al., 2010). Employees indulged in unethical acts to benefit themselves or harm the organization or co-workers (Thau et al., 2007). Regarding the pervasiveness of workplace incivility, research shows that 10% of American workers experience uncivil work practices each working day, and 20% of them survived uncivil conduct with a recurrence of one working day out of every week. Another research shows that 25% of Canadian representatives saw uncivil conduct every day with a recurrence once every week (Pearson & Porath, 2005). The previous meta-analysis on emotional neglect reveals that when cognitive psychological needs are not fulfilled, the neglecting behavior emerges in individuals (Stoltenborgh et al., 2013). When an organization show injustice or apathetic attitudes, the employees feel neglected and may show revengeful aggressive behavior (Jena & Pradhan, 2018). The negative behaviors arise due to poor or weak relationships with supervisors, and neglecting behavior influences employee performance depending on the leader-member exchange (McLarty et al., 2021). Therefore, we proposed as under:

Hypothesis 1: Emotional neglect is positively related to unethical workplace behavior.

Self-Deception Mechanism

Self-deception occurs on failing to encode negative information about oneself without constructing a realistic image alongside the distorted one (Von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). The problems originating from emotional neglect lead to depression and anxiety (Colvert et al., 2008). There are two phases of neglect in the workplace: latent and manifest. In the latent phase, things are the hidden and suppressed form; that is why the organization does not suffer from this behavior. In the manifest phase, when this behavior is not taken into consideration, it shows serious and long-term consequences that impact organization performance (Kampen, 2015). There are different behavioral characteristics of individuals, subordinates, and superiors seen in the workplace due to neglect. Mistreatment of employees decreases their efficiency and morale in the workplace, showing distrust, revengeful mood, and game-playing (Jena & Pradhan, 2018). Deception is common but widely fated, impacting relationships and outcomes significantly (Grover, 1993). Self-deception is a justification behavior to self and others when a person fails to act morally or ethically (Batson et al., 1999). According to Gur and Sackeim (1979), a self-deceptive person has a paradoxical nature (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004), having the conflicting

beliefs of true and false information in mind at the same time, aiming to gain a better social image towards impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and therefore likely to engage in unethical behavior. Accordingly, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 2: Self-deception mediates the relationship between emotional neglect and unethical workplace behavior.

Moderating Effect of Employee Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is a dark triad personality trait that comprises deceptive, avaricious, impassive, and selfish attitudes (Christie & Geis, 1970). It focuses on rigidity and control connected with social forcefulness, absence of empathy (Jonason et al., 2013), tendency to use threatening philosophies in social relationships, and misleading (Jonason et al., 2013). Machiavellians are manipulative and gain personal benefits by deceiving others (Christie & Geis, 1970). Due to their pessimistic perspective nature, affectability, unethical, destructive, and exploitative conduct, Machiavellians reflect their susceptibility and weakness or safeguard against it (Christie & Geis, 1970; Furnham et al., 2013). Low self-confidence (Andreou, 2000), low fulfillment with life (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010), or discharging and dreadful connection (Jonason et al., 2014) further demonstrate that Machiavellian people have a diverse picture of the world, and they stay with it. Furthermore, they lose control over the world, others, and emotions, a significant result of strain (Herman, 1997). They attempt to recover their losses by manipulating others (Christie & Geis, 1970). Prior research shows a strong link between self-perceived deception production abilities (Kowalski et al., 2018) and multiple deception-related biases (Callan et al., 2015). Specifically, Machiavellianism has a relationship with interpersonal deception production frequency (Baughman et al., 2014; Jonason et al., 2014). It suggests that people high in Machiavellianism demonstrate manipulation, personal benefit, and negativity towards others. Thus, in the self-deception mechanism of this study, we predicted that:

Hypothesis 3: Machiavellianism moderates the mediated relationship between emotional neglect and unethical workplace behavior such that a higher level of Machiavellianism will strengthen the indirect effect of self-deception.

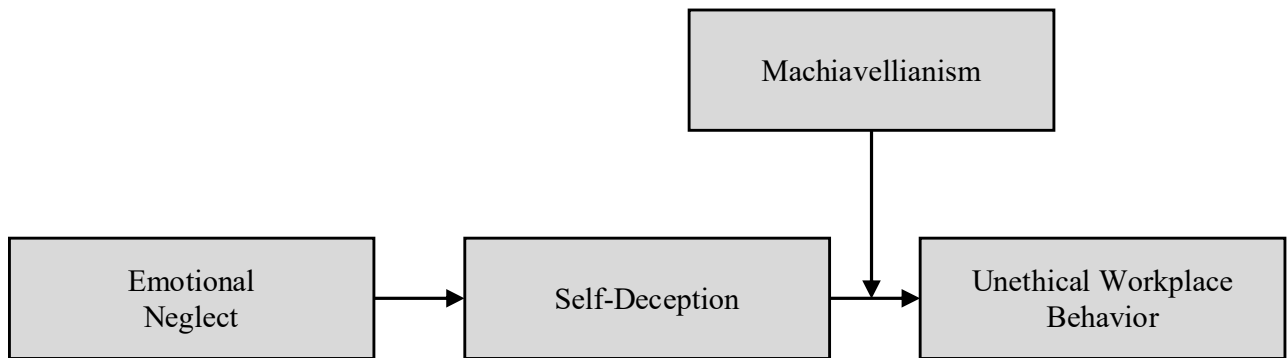


Figure 1: *Research model*

Methodology

Sample and Procedure

Data was collected from a randomized sample of 253 private sector service organizations employees in a two-waved survey. A list of 350 potential participants with their telephone numbers or email addresses was prepared using authors' networks and randomly accessing their organizations' senior managers and official websites. At time 1, the responses were received from 280 out of 350 invited participants on demographic characteristics, emotional neglect, and Machiavellianism questionnaires. At time 2 (15 days after time 1), the respondents of the time-1 survey were invited to fill out the questionnaires on self-deception and unethical behavior. After 15 days, the survey was concluded with 253 responses as a final sample for this study. Such a time-lagged survey is inconsistent with related prior research to avoid potential of a common method bias (Ali et al., 2020; Jahanzeb, S., & Fatima, 2018). The data showed participation of both male (62.5%) and female (37.5%) employees working at entry-level (14.6%), middle-level (55.3%), and senior-level (30%) positions within their organizations. The most were younger, aging up to 25 years (21.7%), 26-35 years (52.2%), 36-45 years (17.8%), and above 46 years (8.3%) with a good on-job experience of 1-5 years (47.4%), 6-10 years (25.3%), 11-15 years (13.4%), and 16-20 years (13.8%).

Measures

A questionnaire was prepared using reliable and validated measures with 7-point Likert scales (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree). The emotional neglect was measured using the eight items of parental bonding instrument (Klimidis et al., 1992). The mean score of emotional unresponsiveness, unavailability, and neglect characterized by lack of interaction between parent and child (Glaser, 2002) was used to measure emotional neglect. Self-deception was tapped using 12 items (Sirvent et al., 2019); the scale consists of two dimensions: manipulation and mystification, each comprising six items.

Machiavellianism was measured using 9-item by Paulhus and Williams (2002). The unethical behaviour was tapped using 17-items (Akaah, 1992). All the scales showed a good level of reliability in this study.

Result

Reliability and Validity

To prevent common method bias, we collected time-lag data at an interval of 15 days. The existing reliable scales were used to measure the study variables. Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, correlations, and Cronbach's alpha values, which showed sufficient reliability and validity of measures used in this study.

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics, Correlations and Reliabilities Statistics*

Variable	Items	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
Emotional Neglect	8	5.490	1.246	(0.954)			
Self-Deception	12	5.081	1.177	.545**	(.952)		
Machiavellianism	6	5.512	1.104	.573**	.589**	(.945)	
Unethical Behavior	9	5.194	1.056	.356**	.344**	.435**	(.953)

n = 253. Reliability values (Cronbach's alphas) are reported in parentheses on the diagonal, SD=standard deviation.

Moderated-Mediation Analysis

Hayes process model 14 was used to examine the proposed moderated-mediation in this study. Table 2 shows the total, direct and indirect effects. Total ($\beta=.30$) and direct ($\beta=.20$) effects between emotional neglect and unethical work were significant. Accordingly, H1 was supported. The indirect effect between emotional neglect and unethical behavior via self-deception ($\beta=.09$) was also significant, indicating self-deception's mediating role. Hence, the H2 was also supported. Table 3 shows the moderation model, which indicates that Machiavellianism's interaction effect was significant and negative ($\beta=-.09$), supporting H3. Figure 2 shows the interaction plot of moderating effects. The significant moderated-mediation index of -0.04 indicated the validity of these findings.

Table 2: *Mediation role of self-deception*

Model	Effect	SE	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI
<i>Mediation effects between X (emotional neglect) on Y (unethical behavior)</i>				
Total	.30	.05	.20	.39
Direct	.20	.06	.09	.32
Indirect	.09	.03	.04	.16
<i>Completely standardized indirect effect of X on Y</i>				
Self-deception	.12	.04	.04	.19

Table 3: *Moderating effect of Machiavellianism*

Variable	Self-Deception		
	β	SE	t
Intercept	5.26***	.06	1.37
Emotional Neglect (X)	.08***	.05	1.37
Machiavellianism (W)	.27**	.06	4.06
Interaction (X x W)	-.09***	.03	-3.15
R^2	.24		
ΔR^2	.03		
F	9.91***		

$n = 253$; *** $p < .001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

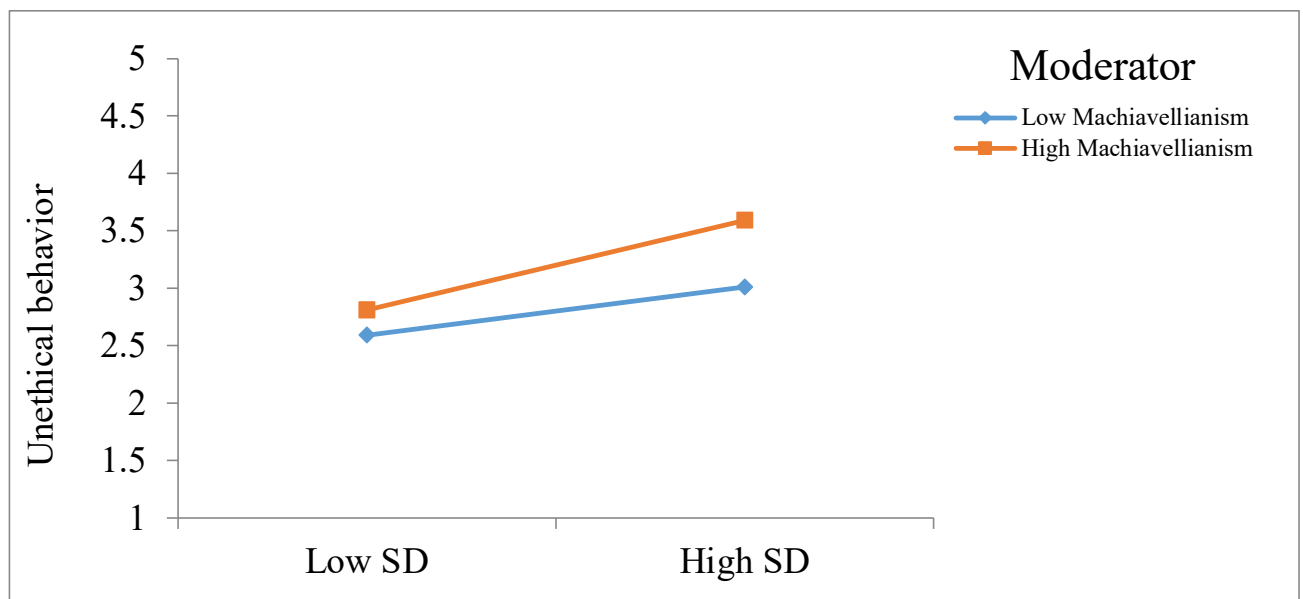


Figure 2: *Interaction plot*

Discussion

This study examined the mechanism explaining how and when emotional neglect at work leads to unethical workplace behavior, using ethical faded theory. Self-deception was studied as a mechanism explaining this process, while Machiavellianism personality was tested as a boundary condition defining the mediated relationship. The findings of this study support the proposed model by accepting the stated hypotheses. The finding that emotionally neglected employees may indulge in unethical behavior (hypothesis 1) is consistent with the previous studies in which employees experiencing neglect, mistreatment, or ostracism (Jiang et al., 2020) at work may exhibit aggression or violence (Demir & Rodwell, 2012), distress, and revengeful behavior (Jena & Pradhan, 2018) and cause serious harm (Kampen, 2015). Individuals neglected in childhood indulged in abusive and neglected behavior (Cheng et al., 2021; Graupman, 2020). It supports that the psychological, cognitive, and physical developmental needs of individuals who feel neglected at work may remain unfulfilled (Cohen & Thakur, 2021). Therefore, they may tend to exhibit negative behaviors at work.

Ethical faded theory (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004) is based on hiding ethics in decision making and involving self-deception. A negative orientation towards ethics and legal norms induces deception (Mohebbi et al., 2022) and integrity violation (Hamoudah et al., 2021). Self-perceived deception production abilities (Kowalski et al., 2018) and multiple deception-related biases (Callan et al., 2015) are linked to dark triad traits. Specifically, Machiavellianism and psychopathy have a relationship with interpersonal deception production frequency (Baughman et al., 2014; Jonason et al., 2014). Machiavellians demonstrate manipulation, personal benefit, and negativity towards others. Self-deception encourages harmful organizational practices (Agarwal et al., 2017) and involvement in fraudulent activities (Desai et al., 2018). It supports hypothesis 2 that self-deception mediates the relationship between emotional neglect and unethical workplace behavior.

Machiavellians are deceptive and pessimistic and, therefore, more prone to deviant, corrupt, and unethical behavior (Hauser et al., 2021). A high level of Machiavellian strengthens the positive relationship between self-deception and unethical workplace behavior. Earlier research shows that dark personality traits are strongly associated with self-perceived deception production abilities (Kowalski et al., 2018) and multiple deception-related biases (Callan et al., 2015). Another research also revealed that employees indulge in unethical behaviors due to the Machiavellian approach of their unethical leaders (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2019).

Theoretical Implications

Self-deception is the core of ethical faded theory in which individuals fade ethics in the decision-making process and indulge in unethical or morally corrupt behaviors. In this realm, the environment plays a significant role that triggers such types of negative behaviors. Firstly, there is need to recognize emotionally neglected people's reasons to behave like this, identify the root cause, and not mistreat them. Second, self-deceptive individuals show deception, make unethical decisions, and behave unethically. People behave unethically when there is a lack of moral and ethical judgments in decision-making. The reason is that they do not want to see the reality due to their past experiences. Unethical behavior at work may be reduced by treating emotionally neglected employees with justice and equality.

Managerial Implications

Organizations should identify the structural, institutional, and systematic factors that promote unethical behavior. Organizations can effectively decrease unethical behavior only by making sure that all organizational elements, including the formal and informal systems of communication, surveillance, and sanctioning mechanisms, and the organizational climates about ethics, justice, and respect are in line with each other (Tenbrunsel *et al.*, 2003). When the organization system is weak, a lack of communication, guidance, support, and a complex environment may cause unethical behavior. Educating employees on ethical or moral principles may decrease the likelihood of such behaviors.

Limitations and Avenue for Future Research

Emotional neglect and self-deception in the workplace are new and growing concepts warranting research to examine their roles in the organizational contexts. We examined a conditional process to determine how and when the effects of penetrating in organizations are unethical behaviors. Our findings support the proposed hypotheses under certain limitations. For better generalizability of findings, a larger sample from multiple sectors and other specific sectors of the economy may be examined. We would also appreciate if similar studies involving other potential mediators and moderators were conducted in other countries and cultural contexts to find clear generalizable evidence on the role of emotional neglect in predicting unethical behavior at work or otherwise. As multiple factors may influence individual behaviors, we suggest the moderating effect of other influential elements should also be considered in the emotional neglect-unethical behavior relationship. These may include affiliation motive, need for caring, learning organizational contextual, personality, and demographic factors. Similarly, the other negative workplace outcomes such as antisocial behavior, bullying, and workplace

mistreatment may also be tested to understand if emotional neglect is also associated with them.

Conclusion

Emotionally neglected employees are more likely to engage in self-deception and exhibit unethical behavior. This effect is contingent on the personality of such employees. We examined the moderating effect of Machiavellianism. The results indicated that the indirect effect of emotional neglect on unethical workplace behavior via self-deception is more robust in the case of high Machiavellianism. We suggest a need for taking preventive measures to mitigate the effects of emotional neglect and Machiavellianism to promote ethical practices at work.

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