



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 pose 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, allowing them to engage in unethical actions without feeling guilty. Research: This study investigates the relationship between moral disengagement and decision-making, without an ethical review, through a systematic review of the literature that encompasses various studies, both empirical and theoretical, related to 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.

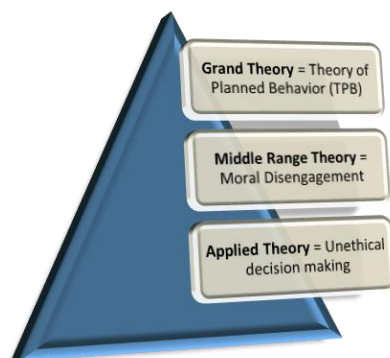


Figure 1. Research Theory Study

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

Systematic Literature Review. This study reviews the literature related to the theory of planned behavior, with a focus on the variables of Moral disengagement and unethical decision-making. An exploratory literature review was conducted through a systematic search of academic works in Google Scholar and Scopus, including Scival, to identify, analyze, and classify 20 journals selected based on topics, methodology, and research subjects. Mapping the results of the literature reveals a dominant discussion about moral disengagement and unethical decision-making as the central theme. Following this discussion, a literature review on the use of research methods in journals, sample respondents, journal list, variables used in research, country, and research results.

Table 1. Use of Research Methods in Journals

Use of Research Methods	Researcher
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 & R ašković (2021)

Table 1 reveals that the method questionnaire is the most common approach employed (17 studies) in studies on moral disengagement and unethical decision-making. In contrast, studies incorporating literature reviews are used in only three studies. This method involves giving a series of questions to participants for collection as research data. This method, employing the technique of data collection, involved asking questions to the respondents.

Table 2. Sample

Respondents	Researchers
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)

Based on Table 2, the study on moral disengagement and unethical decision-making used more students and employees as samples, indicating a greater interest in academics. The second group said. Meanwhile, the study involved respondents from diverse backgrounds, including adults, entrepreneurs, teenagers, leaders, and IT companies, in a slightly higher number, suggesting that this subject may be more specific or not sufficiently explored in the literature.

Table 3. Journal List

Field	Researcher
Psychology	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	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	▪ Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research: Baron et al. (2012) ▪ European Journal of Personality: Ogunfowora et al. (2013) ▪ Group Decision and Negotiation: Aldering et al. (2020)

Based on Table 3, the study on *moral disengagement* and *unethical decision-making* was most widely published in the Journal of Psychology Applied (10 studies), followed by the Journal of Business and Management (7 studies). In addition, there is also research related to those spread across various fields of social knowledge, such as Entrepreneurship, Personality, decisions, and negotiations. This indicates that this field is in high demand in the realm of applied management and business, with several emerging disciplines being developed, including social knowledge.

In Table 4, the influencing variables, moral disengagement and unethical decision making, reveal that factors like unethical leadership, external pressure, individual character, empathy, or a tendency to take risks lead someone to ignore moral principles. On the other hand, a supportive environment, accountability, values strong ethics, and a clear moral identity can reduce the occurrence of violations. For that, organizations need to build an integrated system of supervision, training, ethics, and cultural transparency to minimize unethical behavior and promote integrity.

The geographical distribution of moral disengagement and unethical decision making is presented in Table 5. The highest concentration is found in the United States (6 studies) and China (5 studies), followed by the United Kingdom, Canada, and the Netherlands (2 studies each). Research on the ASEAN region is still limited. This pattern reflects interest in further research in countries with a strong tradition in research psychology, social, and business. On the other hand, the limited studies in the area, such as Germany, Turkey, and Hungary, raise questions about whether this phenomenon is not relevant enough culturally or is just not yet mapped. The implication is that cross-cultural research in areas that have not been explored can provide new insights into how local context moderates the connection between moral disengagement and unethical decision making.

Table 4. Variables

Researcher	Variables
Detert et al. (2008)	1. empathy, 2. trait cynicism, 3. moral identity, 4. locus of control
Dang et al. (2017)	1. leader social account with MD language, 2. observer MD propensity, 3. perceived leader social account ethicality, 4. ostracism of the leader
Knoll et al. (2016)	1. Authenticity, 2. Situational Strength
Martin et al. (2014)	1. Ethical infrastructures, 2. personal gain motivations
Egan et al. (2015)	1. Personality, 2. The Muncy-Vitell Consumer Ethics, 3. The Short DT (psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism)
Baron et al. (2012)	1. Career Motivation, 2. Organizational life cycle
Ogunfowora et al. (2013)	1. self-monitoring, 2. Honesty-Humility, 3. Extraversion, 4. HEXACO model (Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience), 5. Personality
Dennerlein & Kirkman (2022)	1. empowering leadership, 2. unethical pro-organizational (UPB), 3. avoid stressors, 4. psychological empowerment, 5. role conflict behavior
Ebrahimi & Yurtkoru (2017)	1. UPB, 2. affective commitment, 3. ethical leadership.
Yang et al. (2020)	Self-compassion
Moore et al. (2012)	1. Propensity to morally disengage, 2. Cognitive moral development, 3. Idealism, 4. Relativism, 5. Social desirability
Kouchaki & Smith (2014)	Time of Day
Kish-Gephart et al. (2014)	1. Gender, 2. General mental ability, 3. Dispositional MD, 4. Personal gain condition, 5. Harm condition, 6. Conscientiousness, 7. Situationally-induced MD
Liu et al. (2022)	1. Creative personality, 2. Motivation 3. Competitive climate
Schuh et al. (2021)	1. Leader perceptions of UPB employees 2. Leader organizational identification 3. Leader moral disengagement 4. Leader Trust in Employees 5. Employee Perceptions of Leader Justice
Aaldering et al. (2020)	1. Negotiation, 2. Representatives, 3. Constituency, 4. Experiment, 5. Competition
Shaw et al (2020)	1. Gender, 2. Age, 3. Education, 4. Tenure, 5. Authoritarian leadership, 6. Benevolent leadership, 7. Authoritarian-benevolent leadership, 8. Unethical pro-organizational behavior
Bonner et al (2016)	1. Supervisor Moral Disengagement, 2. Employee Moral Disengagement, 3. Perceptions of Ethical Leadership, 4. OCBO / OCBI (Organizational citizenship behavior - organization/Individual), 5. Performance

Table 5. Country

Country	Researcher
American	Dang et al. (2017), Detert et al. (2008), Martin et al. (2014), Dennerlein & Kirkman (2022), Kouchaki & Smith (2014), Bonner et al. (2016)
German	Knoll et al. (2016),
English	Egan et al. (2015), Moore et al. (2012)
China	Baron et al. (2012), Yang et al. (2020), Liu et al. (2022), Schuh et al. (2021), Shaw et al. (2020),
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)

In Table 6, a significant positive connection is identified between moral disengagement and unethical decision making. Research has, in a way, been consistent and things are in harmony with Bandura's theory (1999) and Detert et al (2008), which shows that moral disengagement has a positive effect on unethical decision making. Psychological mechanisms in moral disengagement allow individuals to release self from personal moral standards, which makes it easier for them to make decisions that are not ethical without feeling guilty or experiencing pressure psychological findings this supported as various study empirical evidence that shows a significant positive between second variables said, even after controlling for various factor, such as situational and personality.

Positively Affected	Negatively Affected	No Affected
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),	-	-

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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