

Unethical Leadership and Employee Networking Behavior: A Conservation of Resources Perspective

ABSTRACT

Leadership has been observed to play a significant role in corporate scandals, which are surfacing with a greater frequency than before. Against this background studying how employees may react to such leadership in the workplace becomes important. This paper focuses on the networking behavior exhibited by employees, which can be closely related to the unethical leadership displayed by the organization's management team. We propose a conceptual model in which we suggest the different pathways through which unethical leadership may affect employee networking behavior. Using the Conservation of Resources theory proposed by Hobfoll (1989), we suggest how employee voice behavior and psychological stress become the reason for the relationship. We also explore the moderating nature of leader-follower value congruence, power distance, and psychological ownership. In addition to highlighting a research gap, the conceptual model can have several theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords:

Leadership; unethical leadership; stress; stressors; conservation of resources

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Corporate scandals have become frequent in the last few years (Mishra et al., 2021). This increase in occurrences of scandals has made media and governments more vigilant to unethical practices perpetrated by the leadership of an organization (deriving from Lee et al., 2017). Extant literature and different forms of media have discussed a lot about the unethical issues in which leaders have been involved (Hoyt et al., 2013). Statistics say that the contribution of top management to different unethical practices in organizations may even be above 26% (Hassan et al., 2022). There is an increased pressure on firms as well as their leadership to behave in an ethical manner (Hartog and Belschak, 2012). However, the extant literature has yet to explore, adequately, the construct of unethical leadership, especially, when we compare it with closely connected constructs such as abusive supervision or destructive leadership (Hassan et al., 2022). Against this background, it becomes essential to explore the different repercussions of this form of leadership. It has been acknowledged that there are various ways in which unethical leadership can create trouble at multiple levels in the organization (Brown and Mitchell, 2010). A gist of the same is provided below.

Unethical leadership is cost incurring for organizations as well as the subordinates of the concerned leader (Brown and Mitchell, 2010; PwC, 2022). The leaders' unethical decisions and behaviors, subordinates stay under uncertainty and stress (Cialdini et al., 2021). This stress may have a considerable negative effect on employees (Tetrick and Winslow, 2015; Robbins et al., 2019), and it may get exhibited through the dipping levels of their job satisfaction or a higher intention to quit, taking cues from Maslach et al. (2001) and Cialdini et al. (2021). Under these uncertain circumstances, the most natural way for an individual to cope or to obtain relevant resources is to tap into his or her network, which is suggested by medical professionals, too (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2020).

Humans are social animals (Nature, 2018) and networks provide an excellent way to leverage their quest to gain adequate resources, taking cues from Batistic and Tymon (2017). These resources can come in different forms, such as increased visibility, access to critical information, success in career, or improved job performance, to name a few (Gibson et al., 2014). The connection between unethical leadership and networking behaviors of employees remains unexplored in research literature. Given the fact that networking is an integral part of a workplace, with people engaging in it for varied reasons like psychosocial support, visibility in the organization, or driven by their personality traits, taking cues from Fang et al. (2015) and Kumar et al. (2022), it becomes crucial to explore the connection between unethical leadership and networking behavior.

Using the Conservation of Resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 1989) we try to address the following questions:

1. What can be the relationship between unethical leadership and subordinate networking behavior and why? How may it vary?
2. Can there be a significant indirect effect of unethical leadership on the networking behavior of the subordinates via stress levels of the subordinate? If yes, why it is and how it may vary?

Through this paper, there can be a counter-intuitive way to look at the networking behavior of an employee. For instance, people generally see networking behavior in a

positive light, deriving from Fang et al. (2015). It is not exactly intuitive that when a person engages in networking behavior, the reason may be stress. This becomes more salient, especially when the literature also mentions that supervisor's negative behavior may subdue employees' networking behavior (Kim et al., 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE

Unethical leadership

Brown and Mitchell (2010) define unethical leadership by looking at the behavior of the leaders and the impact it may have on their followers. In their words, unethical leadership can be defined as “*behaviors conducted and decisions made by organizational leaders that are illegal and/or violate moral standards and those that impose processes and structures that promote unethical conduct by followers*” (pp.588). It is similar to the components of ethical leadership mentioned in Brown and Trevino (2006), viz., moral person and moral manager. Here, it can be said that unethical leadership may have two dimensions – an immoral person and an immoral manager. In their review, Hassan et al. (2022) brought forward the points that differentiate unethical leadership from similar sounding constructs like abusive supervision or destructive leadership. In the extant literature, abusive supervision has been defined as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, pp.178) and destructive leadership has been defined as “a process in which over a longer period of time the activities, experiences and/or relationships of an individual or the members of a group are repeatedly influenced by their supervisor in a way that is perceived as hostile and/or obstructive” (Schyns and Schilling, 2013, pp.141).

Hassan et al. (2022) argues that in the case of unethical leadership, quite contrary to destructive leadership, leaders may engage in illegal behaviors too. Moreover, unethical leadership may not involve punishment to subordinates. Furthermore, in contrast to abusive supervision, the targets are not necessarily followers in the case of unethical leadership. Additionally, outright and apparent hostility may not be present in unethical leadership behaviors. The authors also suggested that unethical leadership may not automatically imply a lack of ethical leadership. For instance, unethical leadership also includes decisions that could be termed illegal or immoral and a single instance of counterproductive behavior may not amount to unethical leadership. Unethical leadership may contain the essential elements of destructive leadership or abusive supervision and in addition to that, there may be several elements of unethical leadership that may be unique to it. For instance, all three forms of leadership mentioned above have the idea of morality as the foundation (Hassan et al., 2022).

Literature has also explored the repercussions of an unethical leader and unethical leadership on subordinates. For instance, Cialdini et al. (2021) have highlighted how unethical behavior of leaders may create an unethical climate which may be related to turnover intentions of group members and wrongdoings. Almeida et al. (2021) have examined the effects of unethical leadership and other harmful leader behaviors (HLB) on followers. However, since the authors have clubbed together the different harmful leader behaviors together in the paper, it becomes difficult to see how exactly unethical leadership behaviors, specifically speaking, effects the subordinates. Additionally, Brown and Mitchell (2010) have tried to bring together different literature on unethical leadership and highlighted the multi-level impact of this form of leadership. Organizations may lose considerable sums of money if their leadership team exhibits unethical behaviors. This may even go to the extent of organizations ceasing their business operations. As discussed earlier too, unethical

leadership may encourage unethical conduct from the employees since leaders help set the norms in the organization. Further, it has also been shown that there is a relationship between resource loss on the part of the employees and unethical leadership, which may impede an employee's ability to behave normally. Morais et al. (2020) brought a new perspective into the picture wherein unethical leadership was seen as a process embedded in social identity. The concept of social identity has been described in Tajfel (1972, as cited in Hogg and Terry, 2000, pp. 122) as "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership". In the context of the Presidential Elections in the United States of America, it was shown that unethical leaders might gain more acceptance if they are a part of the group to which the voters belong (Morais et al., 2020). Deriving from this, one can see the implications these findings may also have in a business setting.

In summary, unethical leadership may lead to many adverse outcomes for the subordinate often leading to stress (Tomiya, 2019).

Networking behavior

Forret and Dougherty (2004) define networking behavior as "individuals' attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their work or career". However, at the same time, it must be noted that the relationships are meant to be with people who have the "potential" to help the focal individual and the focus is mainly on career advancements. Networking behavior is also assumed to be an essential component of the social capital-building process of an employee, along with organizational citizenship behavior (Kim et al., 2020). It has been seen that engaging in networking behavior may be related to many positive employee outcomes, right from performance to power and career success (Kumar et al., 2022). In addition to this, networking becomes an important tool to increase the visibility of a person as far as career and community are concerned (Huang, 2020). Moreover, this networking behavior may not just be confined to the premises of the organization; instead, it can extend outside the organization, too (Kumar et al., 2022). The empirical study by Le (2022) also mentions the positive correlation between job prospects and the networking behavior of individuals. Therefore, networking is beneficial for employees.

Several studies have been done to understand the different antecedents, consequences, and correlates of networking behaviors. Batistic and Tymon (2017), in their empirical study, were able to find a significant relationship between networking behavior and access to resources. It also makes intuitive sense as networking may involve leveraging social connections to gain access to information that may be important to the focal individual, as confirmed by the analysis too. This relationship between networking behavior and access to resources gets more potent if the focal person has some job-related issues. Kim et al. (2020) also managed to show a relationship between networking behaviors and organizational-level outcomes (such as organizational citizenship behavior) which extends the objective of the networking behavior, as envisaged in the definition proposed by Forret and Dougherty (2004) mentioned above. A more specific perspective is provided by Macintosh and Krush (2014) concerning networking behaviors in a salesperson. The authors also look at the data by taking into account the gender of the salesperson. The results show that networking behavior is related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Additionally, it was also found that benefits accrued due to this networking behavior may also be contingent on the gender of the salesperson. Huang (2020) explored the outcomes of networking behavior, considering a political perspective. The author also looks at the relationship between networking behavior

and how the person is evaluated by their supervisor. The foundation of this study is how others perceive the different networking behaviors of an employee. Forret and Dougherty (2004) look at networking outcomes from a gender perspective. Networking may involve activities such as becoming a club member, taking up assignments that may increase the visibility of a person in the firm, or getting involved in different social functions. For women, networking is seen as an essential tool to break the glass ceiling. This paper describes five types of networking behaviors - (1) maintaining external contacts; (2) socializing; (3) engaging in professional activities; (4) participating in community activities; and (5) increasing internal visibility. Gender differences were found to be significant as far as the utility of this networking behavior is concerned when one discusses strategies for career enhancement.

Some studies have also examined the different determinants of networking behaviors. For instance, Huang (2016) found relationships between two types of goal orientations (learning goal orientation and performance goal orientation). The study's results by Huang (2016) showed a predominantly positive relationship between goal orientations and networking behaviors. Kim et al. (2020) also found a correlation between abusive supervision and networking behaviors. Specifically, two dimensions of networking behaviors (professional activities engagement and conflict avoidance/extending social support) were found to be negatively related to abusive supervision.

The networking behaviors of employees may not be without their own set of challenges, such as lack of reference or reasons to continue the relationship, to name a few (DeakinCo., 2017). In addition to this, Kumar et al. (2022) highlight some of the challenges associated with networking behavior in business parlance. These may be related to education or pedagogy, which focuses more on traditional subjects and networking is not really a core focus there. The second related challenge is in the form of general networking awareness, followed by the inability to sustain the network developed in the past. There can be macro-level challenges to networking too. For instance, in a high-power distance culture, employees may be hesitant to network with their seniors or supervisors. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced people to work from home, may have severely impeded the entire networking process, deriving from Gaskell (2021). However, despite the challenges, the view that networking behavior is an excellent way to access different resources, cannot be ignored. In the next section, I have discussed, in detail, about how networking can play an important role in resource management carried out by employees.

Resource management and networking behavior

Conservation of resources theory – the theoretical lens

The foundation of the COR theory is the principle that “people strive to retain, protect, and build resources and that what is threatening to them is the potential or actual loss of these valued resources” (Hobfoll, 1989, pp.516). Resources are anything that the focal individual may deem essential and may range from tangible objects (such as a car or a house) to intangibles (such as a skill or some specific knowledge), as mentioned in Hobfoll et al. (2018). As discussed above, this theory provides a more objective stress assessment lens.

Hobfoll (1989) defines psychological stress as a reactionary behavior to an environment where there is either a threat that there will be a net resource loss, actual net resource loss, or inadequate gain of resources despite investing in obtaining them. In case of stress, individuals may try to minimize net resource loss. Further, when the environment is

not hostile towards resources, individuals may make efforts to gather the required resources which can be used in case of any contingency. Moreover, other resources may be employed as an offsetting mechanism if there is a resource loss. It has already been established in the literature that burnout, which is a result of stress being present for a long duration of time (Vohra et al., 2019), can have several adverse outcomes for employees (Wright and Hobfoll, 2004). In their review paper, Hobfoll et al. (2018) highlighted four important principles and three corollaries of the COR theory. The principles are – (1) Primacy of loss (the higher salience of resource loss compared to resource gain); (2) Resource investment (loss of resource, recovery from any loss of resource, or the process to gain resources, all require some resource investment); (3) Gain paradox (in case there are higher chances of a resource loss, resource gain in that situation may become more salient); and (4) Desperation (in case the individual's resource are in an exhausted or outstretched state, people may become defensive). Additionally, the three corollaries are – (1) People who have a higher amount of resources may be less vulnerable to loss of resources and more capable of gaining resources, and the reverse is true for individuals who have fewer resources; (2) Resource loss may lead to a spiral of losses because of the involvement of stress; and (3) Resource gain spirals are comparatively weaker than resource loss spirals due to the difference in the salience attached to a loss.

In another study, Hobfoll (2001) reiterates that one of the leading causes of stress may be resource loss. COR theory has been applied in many settings over the years and has been able to predict stress-related consequences. Even a more recent theory on stress and burnout, called the Job Demands-Resources model proposed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), based its core tenets on aspects of the COR theory. Because of these reasons, this theory was chosen as the lens to view the relationships between the constructs discussed in this paper.

Unethical leadership and psychological stress

Hobfoll (1989) highlighted that in order to understand stress, one may need to focus on resources. The definition of resources as valued tangible or intangible entities is provided in the previous section. As mentioned, unethical leadership may have a host of adverse outcomes for employees as well as organizations. These outcomes can go to the extent of causing an organization to cease its operations (Brown and Mitchell, 2010). This consequence can have a more significant effect if there is no sense of belongingness with the group to which the leader belongs, deriving from Morais et al. (2020). The outcomes may threaten the status of the employee and financial stability (for instance, if the organization ceases operations, then the job of the person is at stake). Potential for a resource loss, through status loss, self-esteem loss (deriving from Drucker, 1951, as cited in Bernick, 1981, pp. 211), or economic instability may affect an employee more significantly than any experience of resource gain, taking cues from Hobfoll et al. (2018). Hassan et al. (2022) also proposed a host of negative consequences of unethical leadership on subordinates – employee cynicism, workplace discrimination, and turnover intentions, to name a few. These outcomes have the potential to cause a threat to resources such as socio-economic status, energy, favourable conditions, to name a few. As a reaction to this threat of net resource loss, as mentioned in Hobfoll (1989), the stress level of the employees may increase. Hobfoll (2001) also mentions the relationship between resource loss and stress. Hence, it can be proposed:

Proposition 1. *Unethical leadership is positively related to the psychological stress levels of the subordinate.*

Unethical leadership and networking behavior via psychological stress

As discussed earlier, the networking behaviors of an employee may provide him or her with a host of benefits. Research has even explored how networking behavior can be related to the availability of resources for a person (Batistic and Tymon, 2017). Further, it can alleviate a few adverse outcomes that may occur due to unethical leadership if we extrapolate and relate its consequences mentioned in the extant literature with the possible effects of unethical leadership mentioned in the previous section. For instance, unethical leadership may be related to intentions to quit the job (Cialdini et al., 2021). In this context, a good network will provide the employee with more job opportunities outside, taking cues from Gino et al. (2016). Specifically, as Wanberg et al. (2020) mention, the network also provides crucial information through strong ties. This can help one tide through the harrowing experience of job loss by providing relevant leads and final job offers in case the employee cannot cope with the stress and decide to leave the job, or the organization decides to stop its operations as a direct fallout of the unethical leadership behaviors and actions (Brown and Mitchell, 2010). Therefore, the higher the degree of unethical leadership, the higher the chances that the subordinate will engage in networking to buffer the resource loss that may arise from unethical leadership. The reason behind this relationship may become clearer if we consider the various tenets of the COR theory. Unethical leadership may lead to a threat that resource loss is imminent. This can arise due to employees' turnover intentions because of unethical leadership (Cialdini et al., 2021), or the prospect of job loss, as mentioned earlier. Additionally, as Hassan et al. (2022) states unethical leadership may also lead to knowledge hiding, impact on employee productivity and performance, workplace discrimination, or employee cynicism. All of these consequences of unethical leadership may be related to the economic stability of an employee, position in the company, esteem in the society, or favourable working conditions and hence, their absence or reduction has the potential to lead to a depletion of resources. Psychological stress is the natural reaction to this perception of net resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989). Under this threat, according to the resource investment principle of the COR theory mentioned in Hobfoll et al. (2018), people may think about investing resources to protect against resource loss. As discussed earlier, networking is related to the availability of resources and hence, investing in networking may be a way to address any threat to resource loss. Therefore, it can be suggested that:

Proposition 2. *Unethical leadership is positively related to the networking behavior of the subordinates and this relationship is mediated by the psychological stress that the subordinate is feeling.*

Leader-follower value congruence as a moderator

Values may have a significant effect on individuals' behavioral responses as well as their affective responses (Meglino and Ravlin, 1998). Lee et al. (2017) showed the importance of leader-follower value congruence, but their context was ethical leadership. One can state that there is more certainty concerning the leader's behavior in the followers' minds when there is value-congruence. A high value-congruence may imply that the moral decision criteria which the followers abide by are similar to the one deployed by the leader while making decisions, deriving from Hayibor et al. (2011) and Lee et al. (2017). Meglino and Ravlin (1998) also posit that interpersonal value congruence may result in perceiving an external stimulus similarly.

Erdogan et al. (2004) states that employees have a value set that is closely related to the prevalent values, then there is a high likelihood that there will be positive outcomes for the employees. However, the relationship between the leader and the follower and the organization and the follower will play an essential role in this. Meglino and Ravlin (1998)

proposed that value congruence may result in better coordination of actions. Further, this congruence can help achieve common goals more easily. However, this conclusion needs to be seen with some caution as diverse opinions or heterogeneity in values may also lead to better results under a different set of circumstances. Ostroff et al. (2005) also highlight the importance of value congruence with respect to the organization's culture as far as intentions to quit are concerned. Since leaders play an essential role in developing an organization's culture (Schein and Schein, 2017), it can be extrapolated that leader-follower value congruence may have some relationship with followers' intention to quit the organization.

Leader-follower value congruence leads to a varied set of positive outcomes for subordinates - from job satisfaction (Byza et al., 2019), better coordination in actions (Meglino and Ravlin, 1998) to lower intentions to quit (Ostroff et al., 2005). Hence, it can be said that leader-follower value congruence is related to the perceived economic stability of the employee in addition to providing a conducive environment to work (favourable working conditions as a resource) if we derive from Hobfoll (1989). In this situation, the psychological stress that the employee may feel due to the threat of a net resource loss may be lower as the different positive conditions may lower the threat of net resource loss. Further, if one also applies the gain paradox principle of the COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) which states that the importance of gain of resources may increase if the situation is such that there can be a high resource loss, it can be said that leader-follower value congruence may provide a significantly valuable resource set for the employee which can offset the perceived net resource loss arising out of unethical leadership. Therefore, we suggest:

Proposition 3. *Leader-follower value congruence will moderate the relationship between unethical leadership and psychological stress such that there is a weaker positive relationship when leader-follower value congruence is high and vice-versa.*

A moderated mediation model

The overall model that we suggest has psychological stress as the mediator of the relationship between unethical leadership and employee networking behavior because that is why an employee working under unethical leadership may choose to work on his or her networking, deriving from the resource investment principle of the COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) as mentioned above. Further, the model also posits that the degree of stress felt by the employee, as an outcome of unethical leadership, may also depend on the value congruence between the leader and the follower. For instance, if there is high value congruence between the follower and the leader, there may be less uncertainty with respect to the leader's behavior, as indicated by Lee et al. (2017). Deploying the tenets of the COR theory, one can propose that this will lead to employees perceiving higher stability or lower intentions to quit, as discussed in the previous section. Therefore, it will lower the net resource loss and psychological stress arising from unethical leadership behaviors. Overall, we propose the following:

Proposition 4. *The relationship between unethical leadership and the networking behavior of the subordinates via psychological stress depends on the leader-follower value congruence, and this indirect effect is lower if the leader-follower value congruence is high as compared to the situation when the leader-follower value congruence is low.*

Employee Voice as the mediator of unethical leadership behavior and employee stress levels

Employee voice has been defined in the organizational behavior literature as “Informal and discretionary communication by an employee of ideas, suggestions, concerns, information about problems, or opinions about work-related issues to persons who might be able to take appropriate action, with the intent to bring about improvement or change” (Morrison, 2014). The term first gained prominence in the research literature post the seminal work by Hirschman (1970) which discussed the reaction of employees or customers post decline in the performance, quality-wise and quantity-wise, of an organization. Since then, the literature on voice has branched into several different interpretations. For the purpose of this study, I have kept my focus on the interpretation of employee voice which is used in the organizational behavior area (Wilkinson and Fay, 2011). Here, employee voice is considered a part of the organizational citizenship behavior which is not a part of the core task performance of an employee. It is the behavior that the individual engages in, voluntarily, with an aim to benefit the organization (Nechanska et al., 2020). Keeping this perspective in mind, voice can be viewed as a behavior that individuals may exhibit when they feel that their organization stands to benefit. However, the behavior is more nuanced than one can envisage from this simplistic description. As the research suggests, there can be a host of determinants, antecedents, and consequences of an individual indulging in this behavior (Klaas et al., 2012). Further, the consequences may even provide feedback to the individual, deriving from Burris (2012) which will affect how and when that person will engage in voice behavior post the focal instance.

Morrison (2014) puts forth a framework for employee voice highlighting several motivators and inhibitors of the behavior. They are: (1) individual level (duty orientation and achievement orientation of employees, perceived efficacy, perceptions, attitudes, and emotions); (2) leader level (openness, influence, relationship with the employee and other team members, ethical and transformational qualities, or abusive behavior); and (3) contextual (culture and climate, hierarchy, stressors, formal mechanisms to voice). However, the assumption that seems apparent in this paper was that voice had only one dimension. This was not the stance taken by other scholars who explored different dimensions of voice – for instance, the three types of voice (prosocial voice, defensive voice, and acquiescent voice) highlighted in Van Dyne et al. (2003) and the four types of voice (supportive voice, constructive voice, destructive voice, and defensive voice) mentioned in Maynes and Podsakoff (2014). The seminal work by Gorden (1988) was one of the earliest attempts to provide a taxonomy of the different types of voice. At the foundation of this paper were theories from Politics, Morality, Economics, and Psychology. The different types of voice were placed on a coordinate plane with active or passive behavior as one axis and constructive or destructive behavior as the other axis.

Each of the categories of voice have a different set of antecedents and determinants which have been explored in research (Klaas et al., 2012; Liang et al., 2012). Klaas et al. (2011) discusses the different individual level characteristics like conscientiousness, self-esteem, extraversion, felt responsibility, proactive personality, openness to change, to name a few, as the determinants of voice which is prosocial and informal. The individual differences may also play a part in voicing through formal mechanisms. In addition to that, other individual level determinants can be job satisfaction and commitment, risk calculus, voice utility and legitimacy, the conditions prevalent in the working environment, and the culture of the workplace. Power distance seems to have a negative relationship with whistleblowing and

informal prosocial voice. Van Dyne et al. (2003) highlighted the possibility of pluralistic ignorance as an antecedent of acquiescent voice behavior. Additionally, a person can engage in a defensive voice if the intent of that person is self-protection. Liang et al. (2012) have mentioned several multilevel factors determining the voice behavior that an individual will engage in. These determining factors are employee's sense of responsibility, improvement of status quo, future-orientation, expression of concerns, intent to help the organization, to name a few. There seems to be a considerable overlap in the factors between the two types of voice behavior mentioned in the paper which can also be seen in Chamberlin et al. (2017). Using a COR perspective, Ng and Feldman (2012) bring to light the crucial role stressors and relationships with managers may play when individuals decide whether to engage in voice behavior or not.

It has been shown earlier that unethical leadership behavior may have several negative outcomes for the organization. In view of this, the employees may or may not indulge in voice behaviors depending on a host of factors discussed above. However, if there is a high value congruence between the employee and the leader then the employee may consider it as futile and may not consider it worthwhile to spend his or her resources to voice concerns about unethical leadership. Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 5. *There is a positive relationship between unethical leadership and employee voice and this relationship is moderated by the value-congruence between the subordinate and the leader such that at a higher level of value congruence, this relationship will be weaker.*

As discussed earlier, engaging in voice behavior involves considerable resource engagement from the employees. They have to analyze whether the environment is conducive to voicing, whether it is safe to voice, whether the culture supports expressing one's voice, and so forth (deriving from Morrison, 2014). Therefore, if the suggestions shared by the employees are not put into practice, it may give an impression of loss of resources and potential loss in the future as voice may affect the relationship between an employee and his or her subordinate (deriving from Burris, 2012). Therefore, in that situation the said employee may experience considerable stress. Hence, we suggest that:

Proposition 6. *There is a positive relationship between employee voice and stress levels of the subordinates and this relationship is moderated by whether the suggestions of the employee get implemented such that if the suggestions get implemented this relationship will be weaker.*

Power distance

Power distance has been defined as “the degree to which members of an organization or society expect and agree that power should be unequally shared” (House et al., 2002, pp.5). It has been shown in the literature that people with high power may feel a greater distance from people with lower power (Anderson and Brion, 2014). This factor signifies whether followers may view themselves as individuals on equal footing as their leader as far as getting access to resources are concerned, deriving from Lyubikh et al. (2022). This distance may lead to development of lower sympathy towards the subordinates. People working in a high power distance culture may expect the subordinates to obey, without any questions, their leaders (House et al., 2002). Therefore, using the tenets of COR theory, it can be said that the subordinates who are experiencing psychological stress may feel that investing resources in the organization to voice or suggest improvements against the

unethical leadership behavior may be a sunk cost. As research has also shown, there is a higher tolerance towards negative leader behaviors in high power distance cultures (Hon and Lu, 2016). Since there seems to be no adequate return on that resource investment, the followers would deem it prudent to engage in networking behavior to find an opportunity elsewhere. Hence, it can be said that:

Proposition 7. *Power distance moderates the relationship between psychological stress and employee networking behavior such that for high levels of power distance, this relationship will be stronger and vice versa.*

The moderating role of psychological ownership

Psychological ownership refers to a state where there is a ‘personal sense of possession’ (Pierce et al.; 2001; Pierce et al., 2003) where this the feeling of ownership is innately human; applies towards tangible and intangible targets, and behavioral, emotional, and attitudinal impact. on those that experience ownership. It has been increasingly associated with key outcomes at work related to both the employee and the organization (Brown et al., 2014; Jussila et al., 2015). It is noted that psychological ownership helps in fostering a sense of belongingness at work and in turn promotes contribution towards the organization (Ng and Feldman, 2012). So, the presence of psychological ownership, which can be seen as a sense of belief that an individual hold towards an organization is highly likely to lead to increased self-efficacy (Pierce et al., 2003) while also shaping attitude and behavior of people at work (Peng, 2013; Butt, 2021).

Scholars have distinguished between two types of psychological ownership, namely preventative and promotive (Avey et al., 2009). They have their foundation the regulatory focus theory by Higgins (1997) where the focus is on how individual select their goals. In the context of psychological ownership, this focus is seen as either being more cautious and guarded where they seek stability – preventive psychological ownership or more goal-oriented and driven by one’s aspirations and likely to be more open in their approach – promotive psychological ownership.

Drawing from the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) where valuable resources drive individual action. The individuals strive to protect and maintain their valuable resources and recover from the resource loss that they have suffered. Avey et al. (2012) states that that psychological ownership in employees is impacted by the values of leaders. Whereas in the context of the relationship between unethical leadership and psychological stress – psychological ownership, acts as a resource for the employee that helps prevent loss of valuable resources. Unethical leadership can influence directly and indirectly employee behavior (Almeida et al., 2022). When an employee who feels that the organization is theirs and they have a sense of belongingness, self-efficacy and identity attached to it. This sense of ownership drives them be concerned about the organization (Pierce et al., 2003) serving a dual role – (a) as a buffer to the draining and overloading impact of unethical leadership and (b) as a medium via which they avoid loss of resources that they value – mental stability in face of a challenging work context created by the presence of an unethical leader. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 8. *Psychological ownership moderates the relationship between unethical leadership and employee voice.*

Insert Figure 1 Here

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of the paper was to highlight the counter-intuitive relationship that may exist between unethical leadership and employee networking behavior. If one follows the more popular conception of resource management from the COR theory which is that an individual may try to save resources if they seem to be threatened or are actually lost (Hobfoll et al., 2018), then it is intuitive to say that the employee may get stressed but may stay subdued to prevent additional loss of resources. Hence the suggestions from this paper can have a unique significance in the literature related to workplace stressors. Furthermore, as highlighted in the sections above, the unique significance of value congruence between the leader and the follower concerning unethical leadership cannot be ignored. Suppose there are lower instances of resource loss or lower frequency of threats to resources due to the said value congruence. In that case, the strength of the relationship between unethical leadership and employee networking behavior may change. Moreover, we suggest that employee voice behavior can play an important role in the relationship between unethical leadership and psychological stress owing to the environment of low psychological safety and other factors discussed above. However, here too, the value congruence between the leader and the follower will come into the picture. We suggest a high significance of value congruence between the leader and the follower in the case of unethical leadership. Furthermore, it has already been established in the literature that there is a relationship between employee voice behavior and psychological stress that the employee faces. Additionally, we have also introduced the interplay of cultural factors in the form of the construct “power distance” which differs significantly across different countries (House et al., 2002). Lastly, we also considered what employees themselves may feel about their job and whether it has any bearings on their choice to voice their concerns. This can be a significant factor in the coming days since the new generation of workforce have a different set of expectations from their job (Gupta, 2020). Therefore, our model proposed a novel and nuanced perspective regarding unethical leadership and its possible effects on employees.

Implications

An empirical study based on the above propositions can have several theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical point of view, it may add to the little research that has been done on unethical leadership (Hassan et al., 2022), and it will also add to the gap that exists in the literature concerning the relationship between this form of leadership and networking behavior of the subordinates. Additionally, the study will get into a more nuanced view of this relationship from the point of view of psychological stress. Therefore, it also adds to the work done around the COR theory focusing specifically on the resource investment tenet. Furthermore, the importance of psychological ownership gets highlighted here. It would be interesting to explore the interplay of resource conservation and psychological ownership through an empirical study.

From a managerial perspective, the study posits that the networking behaviors of the employees should not be seen only from a positive point of view. Instead, employees may be engaged in increased networking behavior as a coping mechanism to dampen the effect of

unethical leadership and the stress it produces. Regular stress level monitoring of employees can be done to assess this situation. Further, let us assume there is high attrition in any department or function (deriving from the fact that employees may leverage their networks to escape the stressful situation of working under unethical leadership). In that case, an organization may investigate whether it is because of unethical leadership in any department or function. It can also be explored if the employees who are thriving in that department or function subscribe to the same moral decision criteria as the unethical leader. In that case, preventive steps can be taken to ensure that a culture of unethical behavior does not perpetuate in that department or function. Moreover, it can also be explored whether this value congruence may be leading to lower grievances and concerns being raised from a particular department in any organization. If that is the case, then interventions are required before things go out of hand.

Conclusion

Corporate scandals and instances of unethical leadership have become very common these days (Mishra et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2022). In light of these, it becomes essential to understand what the repercussions of these on the psychological state of the employees would be, when they are working in such organizations or under such leadership. The paper contributes to the ongoing debate on unethical leadership, and it also addresses a prominent gap in literature by bringing into view the networking behavior of subordinates. Leader-follower value congruence has been proposed as an important factor in determining the degree of the said networking behavior. Furthermore, psychological ownership has been explored as a variable of interest in addition to the critical role of employee voice. A macro contextual factor (power distance) has also been introduced to usher in a bit of a generalizability across geographies. However, we are planning to explore more contextual factors in further studies. For instance, if the society is one in which a certain degree of bending of rules or risk-taking is acceptable, then the relationship may be seen from a different angle. It can be the case that some of the unethical leadership behaviors may find acceptance in such a society. Therefore, future studies can explore this perspective. Another dimension that can be explored is the significance of the gender of the employee or the leader. This paper can help kickstart a process of more exciting studies in the domain of unethical leadership.

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FIGURE 1

The proposed moderated-mediation model for showing a relationship between unethical leadership and employee networking behavior

