UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY REVIEW OF THE HIGHLY CITED PAPERS

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Abstract:
Our multidisciplinary review paper aims to explore the research paradigms of *unethical behavior from different academic perspectives. By doing this, our paper contributes to a better understanding of unethical behavior by drawing knowledge from alternative understandings of such behavior. More specifically, our multidisciplinary inquiry aims to summarize the main findings documented by scholars from different disciplines that conducted independent research on the topic using unique perspectives and ideas associated with the field. As such, in order to gain a better understanding of how unethical behavior is examined through a range of different disciplines and areas of research we assessed the highly cited papers found at the intersection of various categories and research areas such as management, business economics, and psychology, ethics, engineering, and environmental sciences and ecology, public environmental occupational health. Having the goal to offer the most representative research on the topic, we based our review on the highly cited papers examining unethical behavior from the Clarivate Analytics' Web of Science (WoS), the world`s leading scientific citation search and analytical information platform. The results show that the highly cited papers analyzed cluster around two major research themes as antecedents and factors increasing/enabling unethical behavior (e.g. propensity of moral disengagement, psychological entitlement, self-serving justifications, job insecurity, air pollution, polluted social contexts, creativity, favorable attitudes of upper-class toward greed, etc.) and factors deterring or limiting it (e.g. religion, ethical leadership). Given our multidisciplinary review, our study helps provide alternative understandings and important insights on the research of unethical behavior to serve for novel investigations in both practice and theory.*

Keywords: *unethical behavior; literature review; multidisciplinary approach.*

JEL Classification: *M40; M10; D91; D23*

1. Introduction

Current research documented that unethical behavior is becoming widespread (Shalvi et al., 2015) and as a result is frequently found in the practice field (Gachter and Schulz, 2016). Research on the topic has grown considerably over the years

and can be found in different areas such as management, economics, psychology, engineering, environmental sciences, social technology, and others. The interest of scholars in examining unethical behavior is related to its negative impact and consequences affecting the intrinsic honesty of individuals and societies (Gachter and Schulz, 2016), companies' reputation, and development (Lee et al., 2019). Nevertheless, given its negative impact, scholars were interested to identify the antecedents, factors, and psychological mechanisms and constructs that drive such practices. Once the mechanism is understood, limiting such negative behavior with severe consequences becomes a possibility.

Gerlach et al., (2019) argued that despite the growing number of papers assessing unethical behavior in recent years, the findings as to when individuals engage in such behavior are to some extent unclear and sometimes contradictory. For this reason, studies like ours can be useful to better understand the circumstances under which such negative behavior emerges and how we can limit it.

In order to achieve the above, we review the existing literature on unethical behavior from the perspective of the highly cited papers from the Web of Science database, taking a multidisciplinary path (Management, Business economics, Psychology, Environmental sciences, Ethics, Social technology, Business finance, Engineering, Engineering environmental, Operations research management science, Public environmental occupational health). As such, we were interested to summarize the main findings drawn from multidisciplinary research and assess the views of scholars from multiple disciplines and fields of research, what they considered relevant, and the main contributions brought in terms of unethical behavior.

Given the fact that we selected only highly cited papers to conduct our review, we were interested in the novelty and importance of the results documented to the point that their findings were considered so relevant by other scholars in their fields of research and others to cite them, until the point that analyzed papers became the most cited papers approaching unethical behavior from the Web of Science database.

By taking a multidisciplinary perspective and combining findings from all areas of research summarized above, we contribute to a more nuanced understanding of unethical behavior.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section two summarizes our research methodology, while the next section approached the data analysis and discussion segment. The last section of our paper concludes.

2. Research methodology

In October 2022 we searched the WoS database (Keywords: unethical behavior) for prior studies approaching unethical behavior research topic. A total of 3.651 papers resulted. We further applied the "highly cited papers" quick filter and resulted in 19 articles, 2 review papers, and 1 book chapter ranging between 11 to 541 citations/paper. By using this particular quick filter we wanted to refine the search to the most representative papers in terms of the number of citations. After analyzing the papers, we excluded the ones with a marginal focus on unethical behavior and the final sample consisted of 15 scientific papers from different fields

of research such as management, business economics, psychology, ethics, engineering, environmental sciences, ecology, and public environmental occupational health.

As such we conducted a multidisciplinary review of the unethical behavior literature, aiming to summarize the novel and relevant insights coming from different disciplines and research areas. Given our goal, our research questions were the following:

RQ1: What is the focus of the highly cited papers from different areas of research approaching unethical behavior?

RQ2: What were the main findings documented by the scholars approaching unethical behavior across the different areas of research?

3. Data analysis and discussion

After obtaining the final sample of papers consisting as stated above 15 scientific papers we conducted further analysis in order to summarize their main findings, frequency of highly cited papers approaching unethical behavior per year, Web of Science categories that comprised the analyzed papers, main research areas, and publication titles. Table 1 below summarizes the publiation titles as follows:

Table 1: Papers included in our sample

No.	Authors /year of publication	Publication Title
1	Elshaer and Azazz (2022)	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health
2	Lee at el., (2019)	Journal of Business Ethics
3	Moore et al., (2019)	Journal of Applied Psychology
4	Gerlach et al., (2019)	Psychological Bulletin
5	Lu et al., (2018)	Psychological Science
6	Edwards and Roy (2017)	Environmental Engineering Science
7	Gachter and Schulz (2016)	Nature
8	Blanken et al., (2015)	Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin
9	Shalvi et al., (2015)	Current Directions in Psychology Science
10	Charness et al., (2014)	Management Science
11	Gino and Ariely (2012)	Journal of Personality and Social Psychology
12	Mayer et al., (2012)	Academy of Management Journal
13	McGuire et al., (2012)	Accounting Review
14	Moore et al., (2012)	Personnel Psychology
15	Piff et al., (2012)	Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America

Source: Authors' own contribution

As can be observed from Table 1 above, the distribution of papers approaching unethical behavior topic of research is constant over the years, from 2012 to the

present date, proving that the interest of scholars from multiple areas of research on the topic is maintained. Analyzing the journals where the above papers were published we can easily notice that in most cases we can identify top-tier journals from accounting (e.g. Accounting Review), psychology (e.g. Psychological Bulletin, Journal of Applied Psychology, Personnel Psychology, etc.), management (e.g. Academy of Management Journal), ethics (e.g. Journal of Business Ethics) or multidisciplinary (e.g. Nature being the most influential journal from this category). Overall, the large majority of the highly cited papers approaching unethical behavior were published by the most influential journals from different fields (organizational psychology, applied psychology, social psychology, business ethics, accounting, and management).

In terms of Web of Science categories and research areas table 2 summarizes the main findings as follows:

Table 2. Web of Science categories and research areas where the analyzed papers were published

No.	Categories/ Research areas	Number of papers for each category and authors
1	Management / Business Economics	4 (Moore et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2019; Charness et al., 2014; Mayer et al., 2012)
2	Psychology Multidisciplinary / Psychology	4 (Lu et al., 2018; Gerlach et al., 2019; Shalvi et al., 2015)
3	Business / Business Economics	2 (Lee et al., 2019; Mayer et al., 2012)
4	Environmental Sciences /Environmental Science Ecology	2 (Elshaer and Azazz, 2022; Edwards and Roy, 2017)
5	Psychology Applied / Psychology	2 (Moore et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2019)
6	Ethics / Business Economics, Social Sciences other Topics	1 (Lee et al., 2019)
7	Multidisciplinary sciences/Social Technology other topics	2 (Piff et al., 2012; Gachter and Schulz, 2016)
8	Psychology / Psychology/ Multidisciplinary	1 (Gerlach et al., 2019)
9	Psychology social / Psychology	2 (Gino and Ariely, 2012; Blanken et al., 2015)
10	Business Finance / Business Economics	1 (McGuire et al., 2012)
11	Engineering Environmental / Engineering	1 (Edwards and Roy, 2017)
12	Operations Research Management Science / Operations Research	1 (Charness et al., 2014)

	Management Science	
13	Public Environmental Occupational Health / Public Environmental Occupational Health	1 (Elshaer and Azazz, 2022)
Total of papers		15

Source: Authors' own calculations

Among the WoS categories, we can mainly find management, psychology, business, business finance, and ethics but also multidisciplinary sciences and engineering. The research areas of Business Economics and Psychology are the most represented, comprising the large majority of the papers analyzed. Also, as can be noticed from the table above, some of the papers analyzed were published at the intersection of various WoS categories and research areas (e.g. Moore et al., 2012, 2019 or Charness et al., 2014).

Further, examining the focus of the highly cited papers analyzed that examined unethical behavior, we identified two directions: (a) antecedents and factors enabling/triggering unethical behavior (comprising both review papers and empirical ones) and, (b) factors limiting ethical behavior (empirical papers). Based on the above, we summarized the main findings documented by the analyzed papers in two clusters, as follows:

Cluster 1: antecedents and factors increasing/enabling unethical behavior/ unethical organizational behavior / unethical pro-organizational behavior (papers: 12 papers: Moore et al., (2012); Piff et al., (2012); Gino and Ariely (2012); Charness et al., (2014); Blanke et al., (2015); Shalvi et al., (2015); Gachter and Schulz (2016); Edwards and Roy (2017); Lu et al., (2018); Gerlach et al., (2019); Lee et al., (2019); Elshaer and Azazz (2022)).

The empirical study conducted by Moore et al., (2012) was designed to identify antecedents of unethical organizational behavior. As such, using both laboratory and fieldwork, the authors were able to demonstrate that the propensity to moral disengage can predict various types of unethical organizational behavior. The importance of their empirical study relies on the fact that it seeks to understand what triggers unethical behavior in the workplace and further how it can be limited. The construct of the propensity to morally disengage is very important for both practice and theory given its potential to explain how dishonest behavior takes place inside organizations.

Piff et al., (2012) conducted seven studies using both experimental and naturalistic methods in order to assess whether a higher/lower social class predicts unethical behavior of individuals. Their empirical results documented overall that higher-class individuals might engage in morally unethical practices when compared to lower-class ones. The authors also documented that this relationship is moderated by favorable attitudes toward greed associated with upper-class individuals. The importance of their study for both theory and practice relies upon the documented results showing that belonging to a certain class can enable unethical behaviors.

Gino and Ariely (2012) argued that creativity and antisocial behaviors can enhance each other. To demonstrate the relationship between the two, they conducted five experiments. As a result, the authors found that unethical behavior can be triggered by the desire to obtain a better performance in divergent thinking where

cheating was found to be a creative choice used by the participants under the impression that their peers would do the same. Overall, the study conducted by Gino and Ariely (2012) offered empirical evidence that creative people tend to behave in a dishonest manner more than less creative ones given the fact that they possess the ability to justify such behavior. The importance of this empirical study relies on the fact that identifies creativity as having an important role in better explaining what triggers unethical behavior.

Charness et al., (2014) conducted an experiment examining the existence of unethical behavior in a specific setting where participants were paid to perform a task and found that ranking feedback motivates people to work harder proving that individuals care about their relative position and that social comparisons increase the motivation for work even in the absence of monetary incentives to outperform. Examining the behavior of leaders in terms of competition for status from a neuroeconomic perspective, the authors argued that the demand for status is overwhelming. According to their perspective and results, the desire to outperform their counterpart appears for intrinsic reasons such as raising their own status or dominance in the workplace. The importance of the study relies upon the fact that raising the own status can trigger unethical behavior.

Blanke et al., (2015) examined the literature approaching moral licensing (e.g. people that initially behave morally, later tend to behave unethically, immorally, or problematic) in order to contribute to a better understanding of this effect and documented an estimation of it. Despite de fact that it was smaller compared to other typical effects found in social psychology, the authors consider that its impact has the potential to create large societal implications and argue for further research on identifying when this phenomenon takes place and what triggers it. Given the results documented, the study contributes to the identification of important insights into individuals` behavior and motivations, while uncovering adverse consequences of such behaviors.

Shalvi et al., (2015) developed a framework focused on the role of self-serving justification taking place before and after moral violations, arguing that this construct enables individuals to do wrong while feeling moral. By identifying the psychological mechanisms enabling people to be dishonest while feeling moral, their novel framework has the potential to increase ethical conduct. Despite the effectiveness of this construct, the temporal dimension of it should be further assessed through future empirical studies.

Gachter and Schulz (2016) provided empirical evidence using cross-societal experiments from 23 countries around the world proving an important association between the prevalence of rule violations and intrinsic honesty. As such, the authors developed an Index of the Prevalence of Rule Violations based on country-level data comprising information about corruption, tax evasion, and fraudulent policies. Based on the Index of the Prevalence of Rule Violations the countries from their sample were split between low-index countries and high-index countries. In the cases with high values obtained according to the Index of the Prevalence of Rule Violations, rule violations had a high magnitude compared to the cases where the index disclosed low values. Intrinsic honesty was measured using an anonymous die-rolling experiment with 2568 participants. The findings document that intrinsic honesty is stronger in the low Index of the Prevalence of Rule Violations countries compared to high countries. Overall, the authors proved that

rule violations did not have only adverse economic consequences but also decrease individual honesty. The results documented by Gachter and Schulz (2016) are extremely important for both theory and practice showing that polluted social contexts (political fraud, tax evasion) have the potential to increase unethical behavior.

Edwards and Roy (2017) trying to answer why scientists engage in unethical behavior, argued that perverse incentives and decreased funding in research are regarded as factors contributing to it. This dishonest behavior is amplified by outside financial interests and significant competitiveness and also perverse incentives found in academia, as stated above.

The study conducted by Lu et al., (2018) (psychology field) investigated the ethical costs related to air pollution and proposed that a problem as serious as this one can increase criminal and unethical behavior since it increases anxiety. Therefore, the authors analyzed nine-year panel data of more than 9.300 US cities and found that air pollution predicted several major categories of crime. Three subsequent experiments involved American and Indian participants establishing that anxiety mediated the effect of psychologically experiencing a polluted environment on unethical behavior. The authors concluded that air pollution has the potential to contaminate the morality of people as well not only their health. One of the most novel contributions of the paper is that it uncovered the ethical costs of air pollution.

Gerlach et al., (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of the experimental literature on dishonest behavior aiming to identify the factors associated with it. The authors concluded that dishonest behavior depends on situational and personal factors. The gender and age (personal factors) of participants were found to be associated with dishonest behavior, while reward magnitude and externalities were cited as situational factors associated with unethical behavior.

Lee et al., (2019) found that psychological entitlement (i.e. manifesting when an individual thinks that she/he should receive desirable treatment irrespective of whether it is deserved) is an antecedent of unethical pro-organizational behavior. In order to demonstrate the impact of this construct on unethical behavior, the authors conducted an empirical study in China and UK. Their results showed that individuals exhibiting high levels of psychological entitlement tend to engage more in unethical pro-organizational behavior, a relationship that is mediated by status striving and moral disengagement. Also, the positive relationship between psychological entitlement and unethical pro-organizational behavior was moderated by organizational identification.

Elshaer and Azazz (2022) examined unethical practices in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, the authors conducted a survey on 650 employees from the hotel industry and travel agent companies in the Egyptian context and found that perceived job insecurity encourages unethical behavior in the organization. Their study contributes to a better understanding of the psychological process that drives unethical organizational behavior in the context of job insecurity, having an important contribution to theory and practice.

Cluster 2: factors limiting unethical behavior (Mayer et al., (2012); McGuire et al., (2012); Moore et al., (2019).

McGuire et al., (2012) (corporate finance and accounting fields) investigated the relationship between financial reporting quality and religiosity and found that managers in religious areas seem to be more willing to avoid financial reporting

irregularities. The authors also examined whether religiosity influences managers' methods of managing earnings, documenting a positive association between religiosity and real earnings management and a negative one between religiosity and abnormal accruals, showing a preference for real earnings management of managers in this regard. As the authors argued, organizational strategies and attitudes of managers seem to be affected by religious beliefs when they are part of a social context valuing religiosity. The most important contribution of this study consists of the empirical findings showing that religiosity has the potential to influence business ethics and constrain opportunistic behavior in financial reporting.

The empirical studies conducted by Mayer et al., (2012) and Moore et al., (2019) documented the important role of ethical leadership in decreasing unethical behavior. As such, Mayer et al., (2012) assessed the antecedents and consequences of ethical leadership and found that ethical leadership can deter unit unethical behavior and relationship conflict. The focus of Moore et al., (2019) paper was on how ethical leaders affect the way employees construe morally problematic decisions that can influence their behavior. In this regard, the authors employed four laboratory and field studies in both USA and China and documented that ethical leadership decreases employees` propensity to morally disengage. Overall, ethical leaders have the largest positive influence over weak moral identity individuals and over employees with strong moral identities. The most important contribution of their study resides in a better understanding of the fact that unethical behavior of employees comes from complex interactions between them and their peers, leaders, and the context in which such cases can be found, specifically via leaders` influence over their moral cognition.

4. Conclusion

Given the fact that the interest in unethical behavior increased significantly over time, scholars from different fields were interested to examine it. In order to contribute to a better understanding of the topic we took a multidisciplinary path and review the highly cited papers approaching unethical behavior from areas such as management, business economics, psychology, ethics, engineering, environmental sciences and ecology, and public environmental occupational health. As stated above, we were interested in summarizing existing knowledge on unethical behavior across various areas of research in order to gain an extensive understanding of the topic that can serve as a basis for future research.

Our findings show that the large majority of the highly cited papers analyzed focused on assessing the antecedents of unethical behavior/organizational unethical behavior/unethical pro-organizational behavior and on the factors enabling it. Few papers were examining how unethical behavior can be limited. Among the antecedents and factors triggering unethical behavior scholars were able to document based on the research conducted novel and useful findings for both theory and practice as the following:

a) the propensity of moral disengagement is able to predict various types of unethical behavior,

b) both psychological entitlement and self-serving justification were identified as antecedents of unethical behavior,

c) the effect of moral licensing is important to be further examined in the context of unethical behavior,

d) factors like perceived job insecurity, desire to raise its own status, creativity, and high-class status as well as polluted social contexts and air pollution (increasing anxiety) or the existence of perverse incentives and decreasing funding (available for academia) can trigger unethical and dishonest behaviors.

Ethical leadership and religion were identified as factors limiting unethical behavior (all identified in empirical settings).

The most important limitation of our research consists of the fact that we analyzed a very small number of papers. The second limitation consists in that we selected papers only from the Web of Science database, which despite the fact that is one of the most widely used for visible research, is not the only source of unethical behavior research. In this regard, our findings are limited.

Future research can expand the scope of our study to other databases in order to find the most cited papers approaching unethical behavior. Also, future studies can focus on finding measures that can lead to uniformity in the assessment of unethical behavior by generating innovative insights into the causes and conditions that trigger such practices. In this respect, joining efforts across multiple disciplines can be useful in this demarche in terms of interconnecting existing findings regarding the construction of this topic. Therefore, multidisciplinary research on the topic is needed more than ever to further promote the evolution of research on unethical behavior, especially efforts that are needed into limiting such practices given the negative consequences from economic losses of companies to harming moral characters of individuals.

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