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Short Communication

The Effect of Unethical Behavior on Job Insecurity: The Mediating Role of Moral Identity and Personality

Jean Jacobs*, **Mohamed Saber Hakim**
Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussel, Belgium.

Corresponding Author: Jean Jacobs, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussel, Belgium. E-mail: jean.jacobs@vub.be

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Abstract

Introduction: Unethical behavior is one of the prevalent phenomena in workplace environments and may arise from employees' perceptions of job insecurity. Job insecurity is defined as the perceived inability to maintain one's employment position and job-related capabilities under uncertain or threatening conditions, and it can have significant consequences for employees' performance and psychological well-being. This study aimed to examine the effect of unethical behavior on job insecurity by considering the mediating roles of moral identity and personality.
Material and Methods: This applied study employed a descriptive-survey research design. The statistical population consisted of 200 employees of Brussel based on Morgan's table; a sample of 132 participants was selected using a convenience sampling method. Data were collected using a standardized 40-item questionnaire. The face validity of the instrument was confirmed, and its reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Data were analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using SmartPLS software.
Results: The findings indicated that unethical behavior had a significant effect on job insecurity, moral identity, and personality. Furthermore, both moral identity and personality exerted significant direct effects on job insecurity and served as mediating variables in the relationship between unethical behavior and job insecurity.
Conclusion: The findings suggest that unethical behavior increases employees' perceptions of job insecurity by undermining their moral identity and personality characteristics. Therefore, strengthening employees' moral identity and positive personality attributes may contribute to reducing job insecurity and enhancing their psychological well-being.
Keywords: *Unethical behavior; Job insecurity; Moral identity; Personality*

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INTRODUCTION

Unethical behavior is a pervasive and persistent phenomenon in contemporary societies. Its prevalence within organizations, in addition to imposing substantial costs, threatens international financial stability, scientific progress, and global security [1]. Moral disengagement refers to the process through which individuals detach their personal moral standards from their unethical behaviors [2]. The greater an individual's ability to justify unethical behavior, the higher the likelihood of engaging in such behavior. Therefore, whenever the pursuit of profit tempts individuals to engage in unethical conduct and they can easily justify such behavior, they are more likely to act upon this temptation. Organizations that adhere to ethical conduct are more likely to achieve their objectives than organizations in which unethical and dishonest behaviors are prevalent [3]. Organizationally endorsed unethical behavior refers to unethical conduct that is intended to benefit the

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organization and is defined as unethical and/or illegal pro-organizational behavior. Although such organizationally endorsed behaviors are discretionary, they are not associated with explicit rewards [4].

Previous studies have identified two possible reasons why employees experiencing job insecurity engage in organizationally endorsed unethical behavior. First, despite the inherently unethical nature of such behavior, they may be motivated to engage in, rather than resist, organizationally endorsed unethical behavior because of its pro-organizational nature. For example, employees who perceive their jobs to be insecure may engage in organizationally endorsed unethical behavior as part of a job-preservation strategy designed to protect their employment [5].

Second, employees experiencing job insecurity may engage in organizationally endorsed unethical behavior because their self-regulatory efforts to cope with job insecurity deplete their personal resources and reduce their self-regulatory capacity [6]. Job insecurity refers to the perceived inability to maintain one's job-related capacities under threatened employment conditions, and it has a significant impact on work outcomes [7]. Previous studies have linked high levels of job insecurity to negative workplace behaviors, such as workplace bullying, unnecessary interpersonal conflicts [7], and unethical behaviors [8]. The adverse effects of job insecurity have been exacerbated by the increased levels of job insecurity resulting from global economic shocks and the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by widespread reductions in employment opportunities [9]. Although job insecurity may be influenced by environmental factors, employees differ considerably in how they respond to it [6]. One such response is organizational unethical behavior. Organizationally endorsed unethical behavior refers to actions intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members (e.g., leaders) while violating fundamental social values, norms, laws, or standards of appropriate conduct, such as concealing negative information about the organization or its products from customers. Previous research has shown that, in the short term, engaging in organizationally endorsed unethical behavior in response to job insecurity may help both organizations and employees demonstrate their value to employers and enhance job security. However, in the long term, such behavior may harm the interests of the organization and its stakeholders [10]. Nevertheless, not all employees experiencing job insecurity choose to engage in organizationally endorsed unethical behavior, as their responses to job insecurity depend on individual factors [6].

One of the factors that may influence the relationship between job insecurity and organizationally endorsed unethical behavior is moral identity, which refers to a self-concept organized around a set of moral characteristics. Moral identity functions as a self-regulatory mechanism that promotes ethical behavior while inhibiting unethical conduct [3].

In recent years, many scholars in the field of ethics, drawing upon Blasi's (1984) model, have regarded moral identity as the primary source of moral motivation and have referred to this construct as the core of ethical identity. From the perspective of moral identity, an individual's character is shaped by his or her moral values [11]. In other words, an individual's values are integrated with his or her motivational and emotional systems [1]. Moral identity has been identified as a predictor of individuals' mental health and psychological well-being [12]. Accordingly, moral identity encourages individuals to engage in ethical and prosocial behaviors while preventing the occurrence of unethical behaviors [13].

Another individual factor that may influence the relationship between job insecurity and

organizationally endorsed unethical behavior is personality, which refers to an individual's tendency to take initiative in response to environmental changes [14]. Such a tendency motivates individuals to be proactive, regulate their goal-directed behaviors, and overcome obstacles in order to bring about meaningful change. Owing to their individual capabilities, such actions enable individuals to overcome the challenges they encounter [15]. Previous studies have shown that employees may adopt organizationally endorsed unethical behavior as a coping strategy to protect their jobs under the pretext of benefiting the organization [10], and that job insecurity can be regarded as an important antecedent of organizationally endorsed unethical behavior. Because organizationally endorsed unethical behavior may substantially facilitate the achievement of organizational goals, it may encourage employees to engage in such behaviors in order to accomplish organizational objectives and to be perceived by their supervisors as more effective and higher-performing employees [16]. Accordingly, individuals attempt to regulate their goal-directed behaviors proactively in order to overcome obstacles in the workplace. In this context, some employees may perceive organizationally endorsed unethical behavior as a rapid means of changing their insecure employment situation, as such actions may help them demonstrate their value to the organization [1].

Therefore, the main research question of the present study is whether unethical behavior affects job insecurity through the mediating roles of moral identity and personality among employees.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present study is an applied research in terms of its objective and a descriptive field study in terms of the method of data collection. The statistical population consisted of all employees of Brussel, comprising a total of 200 individuals. Accordingly, the study population included 200 employees. A simple random sampling method was employed to select the participants. Based on Cochran's sample size formula, a sample of 132 respondents was determined. Sampling was conducted using simple random sampling based on the list of employees' names.

The demographic characteristics indicated that respondents aged 41–45 years constituted the largest age group participating in this study. Of the respondents, 84.8% were male and 15.2% were female. The majority of the respondents held a bachelor's degree.

Data were collected using a questionnaire. The items for each construct were extracted and adapted from relevant standardized questionnaires. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The data collection instrument consisted of the following questionnaires:

Job Insecurity: This variable was measured using the 10-item questionnaire developed by Nasasira [17].

Unethical Behavior: This variable was measured using the 10-item questionnaire developed by Farrell et al. [18].

Moral Identity: This variable was measured using the 10-item questionnaire developed by Black and Reynolds [19].

Personality: This variable was measured using the 10-item questionnaire developed by Gosling et al. [20].

Content validity was employed to assess the validity of the research instrument. To establish content validity, the questionnaire was submitted to several experts in the field of management for evaluation of the relevance, accuracy, and clarity of the questionnaire items. Based on their feedback, the content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which is one of the most widely used methods for assessing the reliability of ordinal measurement scales, was employed to evaluate the reliability of the instrument. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all variables exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability of the measurement instrument.

Data analysis was performed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with WarpPLS software.

RESULTS

Given that the significance level of the variables was lower than the error level of 0.05, it can be concluded that the data distribution of these variables was non-normal. Therefore, non-parametric methods, including Spearman's correlation coefficient and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), were employed for data analysis. Furthermore, before proceeding to model analysis and structural equation modeling, it was necessary to determine the magnitude and direction of the relationships among the variables. Accordingly, due to the non-normal distribution of the data, Spearman's correlation coefficient was used. The following table presents the Spearman correlation matrix.

Table1: Spearman's correlation coefficient between variables

Variables		Unethical behavior	Moral identity	Personality	Job insecurity
Unethical behavior	Correlation value	1			
	Sig.	.			
Moral identity	Correlation value	-0.54	1		
	Sig.	0.000	.		
Personality	Correlation value	0.57	0.482	1	
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	.	
Job insecurity	Correlation value	0.605	-0.595	-0.567	1
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	.

In addition, the following figure illustrates the conceptual model of the study in terms of the standardized path coefficients.

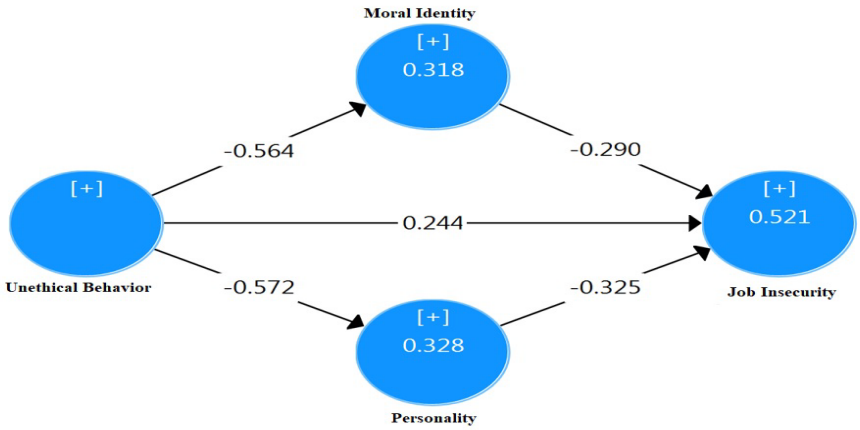

Figure 1: Research model in the form of standardized path coefficients

The calculated t-values for all relationships between the independent and dependent variables in the model were greater than 1.96, indicating statistical significance at the 95% confidence level.

The coefficients of determination (R^2) for the endogenous variables indicated that 32.8% of the variance in personality, 41.1% of the variance in job insecurity, and 54.1% of the variance in moral identity were explained by their corresponding predictor variables.

Furthermore, the Q^2 values for the endogenous constructs, namely personality (0.436), job insecurity (0.411), and moral identity (0.541), were positive and at acceptable levels, indicating that the model possessed satisfactory predictive relevance for these variables.

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and effect size (f^2) were calculated for those endogenous variables influenced by more than one predictor. The VIF values for all independent variables were below the threshold value of 5, indicating that no multicollinearity problem existed among the data.

Therefore, based on the structural model evaluation criteria and the obtained results, it can be inferred that the structural models were confirmed. Accordingly, the overall model fit was assessed, and the research hypotheses were subsequently tested.

The Goodness-of-Fit (GOF) index for the present study was calculated to be 0.422, indicating a strong overall fit of the proposed research model. Following the evaluation of the measurement, structural, and overall models, the research hypotheses were interpreted. In this stage, the hypotheses were examined using path analysis. Decisions regarding the acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses were made based on the t-statistics (T-value) and significance levels (p-value). A significance level below 0.05 or a t-value greater than 1.96 was considered as evidence supporting the research hypotheses.

Table 2: Results of hypothesis

Direct path	β	t-value	Sig.	Result
Unethical behavior→Job insecurity	0.244	2.771	0.006	Accepted
Unethical behavior→Moral identity	0.56	8.499	0.000	Accepted
Unethical behavior→Personality	-0.572	9.045	0.000	Accepted
Moral identity→Job insecurity	-0.290	3.143	0.002	Accepted
Personality→Job insecurity	-0.325	3.023	0.003	Accepted

According to the results presented in Table 2, all research hypotheses were supported.

DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1: Based on the obtained results, the t-statistic and the corresponding path coefficient indicate that this relationship is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Therefore, unethical behavior has a significant effect on job insecurity. This finding indicates that an increase in unethical behavior leads to higher levels of perceived job insecurity among employees. This result is consistent with previous studies [7, 13, 21, 22].

Hypothesis 2: Based on the results, the t-statistic and the corresponding path coefficient indicate that this path coefficient is statistically significant at the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, unethical behavior has a significant effect on moral identity. This finding is consistent with previous studies [23,24]. Previous research has also shown that repeated engagement in unethical behavior, or repeated exposure to such behavior in the surrounding environment, may lead to cognitive

dissonance. To reduce this dissonance, individuals may redefine or weaken their moral beliefs in order to align them with their behavior or the unethical environment. Therefore, such behaviors are not only inconsistent with moral identity but may also gradually lead to its deterioration over time.

Hypothesis 3: Based on the results, the t-statistic and the corresponding path coefficient indicate that this path coefficient is statistically significant at the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, unethical behavior has a significant effect on personality. This finding is consistent with previous studies [25–27]. Repeated engagement in unethical behavior may gradually alter an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and values. In an attempt to justify such behavior, individuals may redefine their moral principles or become indifferent toward them. Over time, this process weakens characteristics such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and trustworthiness, ultimately leading to adverse changes in personality. Therefore, unethical behavior can influence an individual's personality structure.

Hypothesis 4: Based on the results, the t-statistic and the corresponding path coefficient indicate that this path coefficient is statistically significant at the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, moral identity has a significant effect on job insecurity. This finding is in agreement with previous studies [12, 28]. Individuals with a strong moral identity generally possess well-defined values, principles, and work commitments and demonstrate responsible, trustworthy, and committed behavior in the workplace. These characteristics contribute to greater stability in their employment status and reduce their perceptions of job insecurity.

Hypothesis 5: Based on the results, the t-statistic and the corresponding path coefficient indicate that this path coefficient is statistically significant at the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, personality has a significant effect on job insecurity. This finding is consistent with the closest related studies [23, 29]. Individuals with proactive personalities tend to take initiative, identify opportunities, and maintain a strong sense of control in the workplace. Consequently, they are less likely to experience concern and insecurity when facing job-related threats. Rather than responding passively, they actively take steps to maintain or improve their employment situation. Therefore, a proactive personality reduces perceptions of job insecurity and exerts a significant influence on this construct.

Hypothesis 6: Based on the results, it can be inferred that moral identity plays a mediating role in the relationship between unethical behavior and job insecurity. Therefore, moral identity mediates the relationship between unethical behavior and job insecurity. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies [28, 30].

Hypothesis 7: Based on the results, it can be inferred that personality plays a mediating role in the relationship between unethical behavior and job insecurity. Therefore, personality mediates the relationship between unethical behavior and job insecurity. This finding is consistent with the results of the closest related study [31].

Based on the findings of the present study, it is recommended that future research also consider the role of attitudinal and psychological variables, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and emotional exhaustion, in the proposed research models.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study indicate that unethical behavior increases employees' perceptions of job insecurity by weakening their moral identity and personality characteristics. Therefore, strengthening employees' moral identity and positive personality characteristics can play an important role in reducing job insecurity and improving their psychological

well-being.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical issues (such as plagiarism, conscious satisfaction, misleading, making and or forging data, publishing or sending to two places, redundancy and etc.) have been fully considered by the writers.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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