

# **Moral Disengagement: The Impact of Age, Entitlement, Managerial Respect and Tenure on Unethical Decision-Making**

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# **Moral Disengagement: The Impact of Age, Entitlement, Managerial Respect and Tenure on Unethical Decision-Making**

*The current climate of the American workforce brings to light many new, interesting opportunities and vulnerabilities to be addressed by upper level management. The attitude of entitlement can be seen in new hires as well as employees that have considerable tenure in the work force. Age, tenure and entitlement are investigated in respect to the impact of Moral Disengagement Theory on tendencies toward unethical decision-making. Tenure within the organization allows employee to build complex social and technical networks that may make the organization more vulnerable. The role of managerial respect toward superiors is also investigated to determine the causal relationship that may incur.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The role of ethical decisions and behavior in organizations (descriptive ethics) is becoming increasingly more important with each passing decade. Daily reports of ethical violations in the public and private sector including insider trading on Wall Street, arrests of public officials, scandals in companies like AIG, Enron, and General Motors, etc. have highlighted the need to study and better understand the behaviors and decisions that lead individuals to engage in unethical behavior. Corporations have increased their emphasis on the role of ethics in daily business practice by implementing and enforcing a code of ethics in policy manuals and business schools have added numerous ethics classes to their academic requirements. Academia has seen an increase in journals that focus specifically on the publication of research in areas of ethics – i.e. *Journal of Business Ethics*, the *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, *Business Ethics Journal Review*, and *Journal of Academics and Business Ethics*. A meta-analysis of business ethics research conducted by O’Fallon and Butterfield (2005) determined that between 1996 and 2003, researchers conducted more empirical studies of ethical decision making than in the previous forty years.

Researchers seem to agree that business ethics is the study of decisions made by a manager, organizational leader or an employee that is morally acceptable to the community at large. An unethical business decision would thus be a choice made by a manager, organizational leader or an employee that violates the moral acceptability of the community at large. This definition is consistent with several disciplines of study including ethics and criminal justice (Jones, 1991, De Cremer, 2011). The continued violations of ethical standards in business and politics has prompted many studies to build on the original model of Rest (1986) which suggests ethical decision-making includes four components- identifying the moral awareness, making a moral judgment, establishing moral intent, and prioritizing moral action i.e. implementing moral intention (Trevino, 1986, Jones, 1991, Singhapakdi et al., 1999, Cohen et al., 2001, O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005).

Despite the recent interest in ethical decision-making, there is a continued need for on-going research to develop a better understanding of the attributes (i.e. age, organizational tenure, entitlement, and respect for leaders) that influence ethical decisions and behaviors empirically. Additionally, many theories that may bring new causal understanding of unethical decision making (i.e. moral disengagement) have either failed to be applied or have been studied in limited numbers of research endeavors. Many current models of ethical decision-making implicitly assume that individuals understand and consider an ethical dilemma when they are confronted with one. (Gioia, 1992, Husser, et.al, 2014, Murty, 2014). These thoughts and recognitions may be redirected through moral disengagement. The application of moral disengagement provides an opportunity to study and potentially resolves some of these dilemmas.

In this study we propose that individuals experiencing high moral disengagement will have a significant, positive tendency to make unethical decisions. We further examine the impact of entitlement, age, managerial respect, and organizational tenure as they interface with moral disengagement to result in unethical decisions. Entitlement, age and organizational tenure are expected to have a significant positive effect on moral disengagement behaviors and unethical decision-making. Respect for leadership is expected to have a significant negative effect on moral disengagement and unethical decision-making. In the remainder of this work, correlating literature will be reviewed; the model and hypotheses of this study will be presented; and the research method will be explained. An explanation of data collection, analysis, and results will also be discussed along with conclusions, limitations of the study and recommendations for future study.

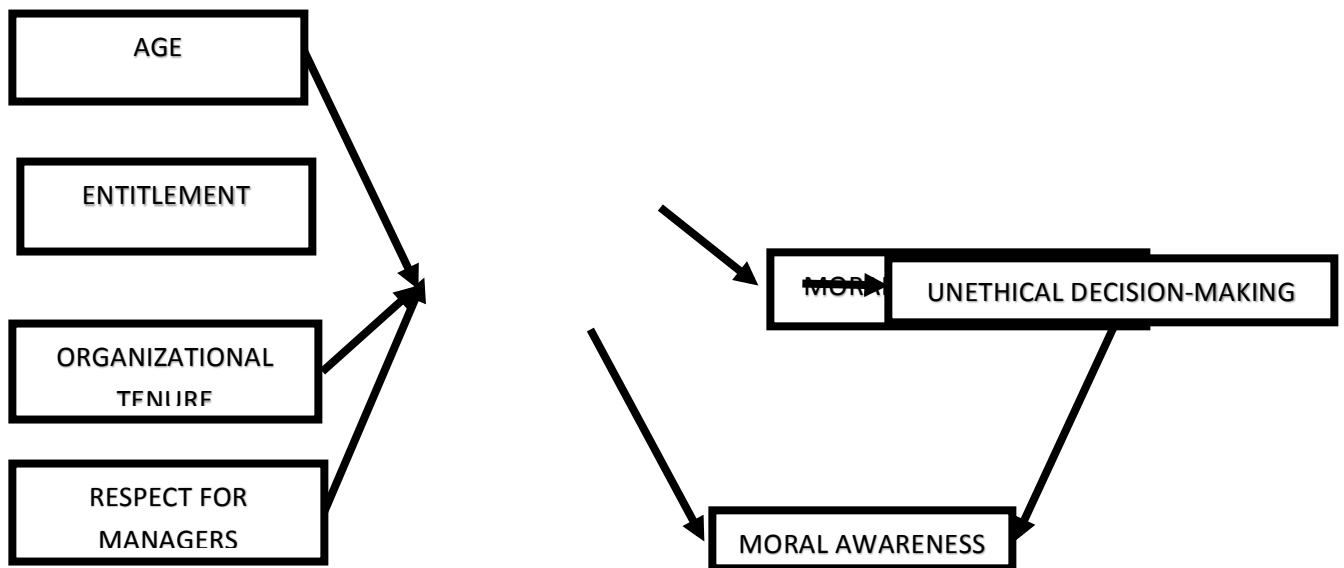


Figure 1: Study Model

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Unethical Decision-Making**

Kohlberg (1969) provided a powerful tool to understand the cognitions of managers and employees regarding ethical dilemmas. Kohlberg provided six stages of moral development that an individual may use to make a moral judgment. He defined a moral judgment as an assessment of right or wrong. Kohlberg's stages provide a foundation to understanding how managers navigate ethical dilemmas (Trevino, 1986). Theories to assist us in understanding ethical and unethical decision-making began to make significant advances in the mid-1980's. Rest (1986) proposed a model with four components: 1) recognizing of a moral issue 2) making a moral judgment, 3) establishing moral intent by placing moral concerns ahead of other concerns and 4) acting on moral concern (Rest, 1986). Each stage of Rest's model is self-contained and does not suggest success at any other stage. The instrument that Rest developed to measure moral development provided other researchers with an important tool to conduct empirical studies on this topic.

Trevino's (1986) interactionist model between persons and situations builds on Rest's and Kohlberg's models (Jones, 1991). Trevino suggests that ethical decision-making within organizations occur through interactions between individuals and situational components. Trevino includes ego strength, field dependence, and locus of control as predictor variables while immediate job context and organizational culture mediate the situational component. In her theory, Trevino (1986) utilizes Kohlberg's cognitive moral developmental stages to provide construct definition and measurement. She suggests that moral judgment moderates ethical

and unethical decision-making. Jones (1991) adds to existing theory by suggesting that ethical and unethical decision-making are issue contingent. Thus, the characteristics of the moral issue (referred to as moral intensity) are determinants of decision-making and behavior (Jones, 1991). His findings suggest that moral intensity helps individuals recognize that a moral issue exists. Jones proposes that the moral intensity of an issue significantly impacts the behavior and ethical or unethical decision-making process. Thus when individuals view that a moral issue is important, they will behave differently and make better ethical decisions (Jones, 1991).

Four meta-analyses serve to summarize the research related to ethical decision-making from 1978 -2011. Ford and Richardson (1994) provided the first review of ethical decision-making literature by reviewing published works from 1978 to 1992. There was little theory development at that time and most of the work was non-empirical (Trevino 1986). Studies focused on personal attributes of individual decision-makers including gender, nationality, religion, education and employment background (Ford and Richardson (1994). Loe et al. (2000) followed with a literature review of ethical decision-making of studies conducted between 1992 and 1996. Loe et al. focused on how individuals actually behave (descriptive ethics) rather than how individuals should behave (normative ethics). Loe et al. found, like Ford and Richardson (1994), that gender was the most common individual variable studied. Loe et al. was able to include Jones (1991) theory of moral intensity that differentiated the meta-analysis from its predecessor. They found an increased number of studies that investigated cognitive moral development and the development of ethical judgment. O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005) reviewed one hundred and seventy-four articles from top business journals published between 1996 and 2003. They reviewed articles that evaluated variables identified in Rest's 1986 theory

for ethical decision-making. The articles covered over 30 variables as they related to moral awareness, moral judgment, moral intent, and moral behavior (O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). This work identified the variables that received the most research attention. O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005) concluded that ethical decision-making was receiving a great deal of research attention advancing our understanding of influences on ethical decision-making that included knowledge of individual, situational, and issue-related factors. Their study also revealed a need for better theoretical grounding and methods of measurement of ethical and unethical behaviors (O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). Craft's (2013) meta-analysis of the ethical decision-making literature covered the time period from 2004 until 2011. Among other contributions, Craft (2013) revealed the on-going significance of research interest in ethical decision-making pointing out the increase in studies from 103 between 1978 and 1992; 188 between 1992 and 1997; 384 between 1996 and 2003; and 357 between 2004 and 2011. The growing body of research appears to still be most interested in individual variables impacting ethical decision-making rather than organizational variables (Craft, 2013). Since the introduction of Jones' Moral Intensity Construct (1991), the research regarding moral intensity has increased (Craft, 2013). As unethical business decisions continue to impact our organizations and society, researchers need to continue to investigate causal variables to better understand this trend in spite of increasing control and monitoring systems (De Cremer, 2010, Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008, De Cremer, 2011). The impact of moral disengagement theory may assist us to better understand if individual cognitions are impacted when self-regulation is affected.

## **Moral Disengagement Theory**

Moral Disengagement is derived from general social cognitive theory. According to Bandura (1986), self-regulatory mechanisms deter deviant or unethical behavior through self-condemnation by individuals who have an internalized moral standard for conduct. Moral disengagement theory provides an explanation of how the process of self-regulation may fail if alternative cognitive mechanism facilitate unethical behavior (Bandura, 1990). These mechanisms include moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and the attribution of blame (Bandura, 1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1999, 2002). Complete definitions of each of these mechanisms can be found in Bandura's work on the theory. The eight mechanisms reconstruct the process used by individuals to make decisions and justify choices and behaviors. Moral disengagement allows individuals to restructure their actions and decisions in ways that seem less harmful, minimize their role in resulting outcomes, and alleviate distress caused to others (White, Bandura, and Bero, 2009). Moral disengagement theory has been utilized to explain the human atrocities that occur through criminal, political and military violence (Bandura, 2001).

Moore (2008) and Moore et al. (2012) began to build a body of work that applied moral disengagement to unethical decision-making, unethical behaviors, and organizational corruption. Three mechanisms that link moral disengagement to unethical decision-making and ultimately to organizational corruption include: 1) moral disengaged individuals with low levels of moral awareness will facilitate corruption inside organizations; 2) moral disengaged individuals with high levels of unethical decision-making initiate organizational corruption; and



3) moral disengagement provides a framework to allow corruption to be perpetuated throughout an organization. Moore et al. (2012) substantiated the propositions of Moore (2008) by providing four empirical studies in laboratory and field settings to demonstrate moral disengagement as a predictor of unethical organizational decision-making and behavior.

Bonner, Greenbaum and Mayer (2014) studied the impact of high moral disengagement of supervisors on subordinates. Their study revealed that employees that are low in moral disengagement are keenly aware of the unethical decisions and behavior of their morally disengaged managers. This incongruity has potential to impact organization citizenship behavior and employee job performance (Bonner, et al., 2014). When morally disengaged, employees may disengage moral standards due to self-interest (Kish-Gephart, et al. 2014). Bonner et al. (2014) found that morally disengaged employees are motivated by personal gain, utilize morally disengaged reasoning when making decisions about moral situations, and apply morally disengaged mechanisms differently based on the situation (i.e. harm to others). Therefore, we propose that individuals high in moral disengagement will have a significant positive impact on unethical decision-making within a business context.

**Hypothesis 1: High moral disengagement in individuals will have a positive impact on unethical decision-making within a business context.**

## **Age**

Several studies have investigated the relationship between work decisions and employee age (Rhodes, 1983; Waldman and Avolio, 1986; Shore, Cleveland and Goldberg, 2003). Other studies have looked at the correlations of co-workers' ages and attitudes of older

and younger workers (Ferris, Judge, Chachere, and Liden, 1991; Cleveland and Shore, 1992; and Cleveland, Shore, and Murphy, 1997). Shore, Cleveland and Goldberg (2003) investigated the manager's age in relation to the age of employees they supervised. Their study concluded that chronological age alone was not a factor in employee motivation (Shore et al., 2003). Perceived similarity in co-workers age is less important to younger employees (under 40) and very important to workers fifty-five and older (Avery, McKay, and Wilson, 2007). Employees were more engaged if they were satisfied with their co-workers in spite of age, although age similarity and engagement were more closely linked in employees over fifty-five (Avery, McKay and Wilson, 2007).

Ng and Feldman (2009) looked beyond work attitudes in their study to investigate the impact of age on workers' attitudes toward the psychological contracts between employers' promises and employees' expectations. Younger employees had showed frustration, anger and less tolerance to unfulfilled expectations. Older, more experienced workers perceived contracts to be more malleable and were, therefore, more tolerant to unfulfilled promises (Ng and Feldman, 2009). Ng and Feldman (2010) followed their 2009 work with a meta-analysis of job attitudes and age. Their study of eight hundred articles found that age had a significant impact on favorable job attitudes toward colleagues, supervisors, work tasks, and the organization (Ng and Feldman, 2010). Organizational tenure, gender, race and educational level were found to moderate the relationship between age and job attitudes (Ng and Feldman, 2010). We hypothesize that age will have a significant, positive impact on an individual's tendency toward moral disengagement.

**Hypothesis 2: Age will have a positive impact on an individual's tendency toward moral disengagement.**

### **Entitlement**

Entitlements are the preferences that define how people want to be treated and beliefs regarding how they should be treated (Heath, Knez and Camerer, 1993). Preference formation may cause employees to resist change; belief formation may lead to over-entitlement that produces resistance to changes perceived to be unjust or unfair. Attitudes of entitlement constrain an organization's ability to adapt to competitive situations. Entitlement may often refer to an individual's perception of reward and treatment deserved with no consideration of work quality or performance (Harvey and Martinko, 2008). Harvey and Martinko (2008) found a significant correlation between attitudes of entitlement and reduced job satisfaction, increased conflict with supervisors, self-serving attributions and less cognitive mediation in decisions.

Entitlement is currently influencing most American institutions (Fisk, 2010). Fisk (2010) suggests that excessive entitlement when ignored will continue to increase and when regulated could result in disengagement, turnover, retribution, or retaliation. Tomlinson (2013) indicated that one of the greatest frustrations of U.S. human resource departments is managing employees who exhibit an attitude of entitlement. Managers must explicitly articulate legitimate levels of entitlement while remaining cautious that such communication could result in negative reactions by employees. Entitlement beliefs are enacted in work values and job entitlement from young adulthood and continue through adult development (Chow, Krahn, and

Galambos, 2014). We therefore hypothesize that higher levels of entitlement will have a significant, positive impact on an employee's tendency toward moral disengagement.

**Hypothesis 3: Entitlement will have a positive impact on an individual's tendency toward moral disengagement.**

### **Organizational Tenure**

Job longevity has been understood for a long time to impact employee attitudes and reactions (Parson, 1951; Brim, 1966; and Schein, 1967, 1971; Grant, 2007; Mayfield, 2013; Biggs, et.al, 2014). Katz (1978) investigated the impact of job tenure on job satisfaction and found employees who have longevity in an organization may become increasingly disengaged. Wright and Bonett (2002) found that there is a significant correlation between length of tenure and organizational commitment and job performance; newer employees will have a stronger positive commitment and job performance, and then commitment and performance will level off as employee tenure increases.

**Hypothesis 4: Length of tenure within an organization will have a significant, positive impact on an employee's tendency toward moral disengagement.**

### **Respect for Managers**

A common challenge in the work force within many countries and cultures is a lack of mutual respect among employees. Many individuals place a high value on respect shown by them and to them yet fail to behave in respectful ways to colleagues and superiors (Ferguson and Page, 2003). Respect is the high regard, consideration, appreciation, interest, and

encouragement of other employees and managers. Employee productivity and efficiency increase when employees are treated with respect (Campbell, 2007). Respect is conveyed through civility. Incivility conveys disrespect to managers and colleagues (Leiter, Laschinger, Day and Oore, 2011). Leiter, et al., (2011) concluded that incivility among coworkers is a major challenge in many employment sectors. Differentiating between recognition respect and appraisal respect impacts the corporate environment (Grover, 2014). Bonner, Greenbaum and Mayer (2014) found that morally engaged employees who worked for morally disengaged supervisors were keenly aware of the breach in ethical decision-making causing a potential loss in respect for unethical managers. Their study also found that morally disengaged employees do not view their managers in light of ethical or unethical decisions or behavior. They concluded that morally disengaged employees are so cynical about leadership that they view them as lower in ethical leadership (Bonner, et al., 2014). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 5: Loss of respect for managers within an organization will have a significant, positive impact on an individual's tendency toward moral disengagement.**

### **Moral Awareness**

In an effort to investigate Kohlberg's six stages of moral development, Turiel (1966) performed an experiment that investigated the moral awareness of participants to the moral development of others at different stages. Turiel concluded that individuals were morally aware of others' decisions and behaviors one stage above or below them. Rest, Turiel, and Kohlberg (1969) repeated this study using a different experimental method. The Rest et al. (1969) study supported the earlier findings that individuals are aware of moral concepts above

and below their own moral development stage. In 1986, Rest provided the first attempt of formally defining moral awareness as an interpretive process where an individual realizes the existence of a moral principle of standard that impacts a set of circumstances. Butterfield, Trevino, and Weaver (2000) refined that definition of moral awareness as “a person’s recognition that his or her potential decision or action could affect the interests, welfare, or expectations of the self or others in a fashion that may conflict with one or more ethical standards” (p. 982). Reynolds (2008) recognized the individual-level of moral awareness and conducted a study to determine the individual preference of utilitarian and formal decision-making on moral awareness. His study found that utilitarian decision-makers were less aware than formalistic decision-makers thus emphasizing the importance of individual differences and pre-dispositions on moral awareness. Moore (2008) concluded that moral disengagement links lower levels of moral awareness to facilitating corruption within organizations. Jordan (2009) studies the social cognition of managers to determine if unethical decision-making may be a result of unconscious cognitive processes. The importance of training in early years of employment to development moral ethical schemas to enact when confronted with moral situations will prevent non-conscious unethical decisions and promote positive moral awareness (Jordan (2009). Therefore, we propose that moral awareness will mediate the relationship between moral disengagement and unethical decision-making.

**Hypothesis 6: Moral awareness will mediate the relationship between moral disengagement and unethical decision-making.**

## **METHODOLOGY**

One of the challenges in incorporating moral disengagement theory is that the instrument developed by Bandura (1996) was specifically developed to study children and prohibited utilization of the tool for adults since the language in the tool referred to schoolyards and classrooms. Secondly, Bandura's instrument incorporated only a few of the mechanisms in the moral disengagement theory instead of incorporating all the measures. Additionally, the instrument used needed to appropriately measure a broad sample of intercultural, employed adults. Fortunately, Moore, et al. (2012) developed an instrument that is consistent with Bandura's theory of moral disengagement by measuring all eight theorized mechanisms in a unifactorial scale that connects the relationship between internalized moral standards and unethical behavior. The instrument has been tested and proven to be a parsimonious measure of the tendency to morally disengage in adults.

For this study we requested permission to utilize Moore's, et al. (2012) instrument to test moral disengagement in employed adults (see Appendix A). We revised the instrument to include survey questions to determine the relationship of the independent variables of age, organizational tenure, entitlement, and respect for managers. We also included items to evaluate the moderating relationship of moral awareness. Rigorous best practices for new measure development were implemented to insure that the modifications will provide reliability and internal and external validity of the instrument.

**Dated and Analysis will be collected during summer of 2015**

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## APPENDIX A

### Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale

#### *Moral Justification*

**It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about.\***

It is alright to lie to keep your friends out of trouble.\*

Playing dirty is sometimes necessary in order to achieve noble ends.

#### *Euphemistic Labelling*

**Taking something without the owner's permission is okay as long as you're just borrowing it.\***

It's okay to gloss over certain facts to make your point.\*

When you're negotiating for something you want, not telling the whole story is just part of the game.

#### *Advantageous Comparison*

**Considering the ways people grossly misrepresent themselves, it's hardly a sin to inflate your own credentials a bit.\***

Compared to other illegal things people do, taking something small from a store without paying for it isn't worth worrying about.\*

Damaging property is no big deal when you consider that others are assaulting people.

#### *Displacement of Responsibility*

**People shouldn't be held accountable for doing questionable things when they were just doing what an authority figure told them to do.\***

People cannot be blamed for misbehaving if their friends pressured them to do it.\*

You can't blame people for breaking the rules if that's what they were taught to do by their leaders.

#### *Diffusion of Responsibility*

**People can't be blamed for doing things that are technically wrong when all their friends are doing it too.\***

It's okay to tell a lie if the group agrees that it's the best way to handle the situation.\*

In contexts where everyone cheats, there's no reason not to.

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#### *Distortion of Consequences*

**Taking personal credit for ideas that were not your own is no big deal.\***

Walking away from a store with some extra change doesn't cause any harm.\*

It is OK to tell small lies when negotiating because no one gets hurt.

#### *Dehumanization*

**Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt.\***

It's okay to treat badly somebody who behaves like scum.\*

Violent criminals don't deserve to be treated like normal human beings.

*Attribution of Blame*

**People who get mistreated have usually done something to bring it on themselves.\***

If a business makes a billing mistake in your favor, it's okay not to tell them about it because it was their fault.\*

If people have their privacy violated, it's probably because they have not taken adequate precautions to protect it.

Items measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

*Items in bold comprise the final 8-item measure. Items marked with \* comprise the 16-item measure.*