

Unethical Leader Behavior and Employee Silence: Mediating Role of Moral Anger

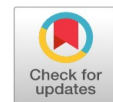
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Abstract: Emotions play significant role in shaping subsequent attitude and behavior. However, prior studies on prevalence of employee silence over growing incidents of unethical leader behavior in organizations has paid limited attention to the role of emotions. We investigated the relationship between unethical leader behavior and employee quiescent silence through mediating role of moral anger. Drawing upon Affect Theory of Social Exchange, we propose that unethical leader behavior will elicit emotions, which in turn will provoke employee silence, depending upon intensity of the emotions. We theorize that unethical leader behavior will trigger moral anger, which will further shape employee quiescent silence. Data were collected at three time intervals with 3-4 weeks lag, from 306 respondents employed in public and private sector hospitals located in country's capital-Islamabad and KPK's provincial capital- Peshawar. Analysis of results reveal that moral anger mediated the relationship between unethical leader behavior and employee silence. Findings contribute to existing literature through highlighting the significance of emotions in shaping employee silence over unethical leader behavior. The study broadens theoretical understanding of the potential underlying mechanism of employee silence over unethical leader behavior, which carries significant managerial and contextual implications.

Keywords: Unethical leader behavior, Quiescent silence, Employee silence, Moral anger, Moral emotions, Public sector, Three-wave time-lag

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INTRODUCTION

Unethical leader behavior has become a global phenomenon prevailing in almost all disciplines including but not limited to business, government, and religious institutions (Sufi, Raja & Butt, 2023; Chandler, 2009). According to Global Economic Crime and Fraud Survey (2022), unethical leader practices are increasing with confounding rate irrespective of business size with estimated yearly loss of US\$42 billions (Mishra, Ghosh, & Sharma, 2021). The Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE) reports also indicate the growing trend of unethical leader practices across organizations. Asset misappropriation, customer disinformation, manipulated business reports, sharing insider information to external stakeholders are few some among many unethical leader practices that prevail in organizations (Hassan, Kaur, Muchiri, Chidiebere, & Dhir 2022; Ünal, Warren, & Chen, 2012).

Unethical behaviors in organizations are increasing with a rapid pace, however majority of them remain unsurfaced due to employee silence in general (Hassan et al., 2022; Fehr, Fulmer & Highberger, 2020; Henriques, 2015; Waytz & Kilibarda, 2014). Employee silence refers to the tendency of remaining silent over objectionable conduct within organization and withholding valuable suggestions to improve the situation within the organization (John & Manikandan, 2019; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003).

Silence literature shows that employees generally prefer to remain silent despite of recognizing consequential sensitivity of unethical behavior for employees as well as organization (Cialdini, Li, Samper, & Wellman, 2021; Chou, Fannin & Barron, 2018; Knoll & Van Dick, 2013; Cortina and Magley 2003; Perlow and Williams 2003). Based on this common understanding, the existing studies mostly focused on exploring individual, group, and organizational level factors that may cause employee silence (John & Manikandan, 2019; Knoll, Hall, & Weigelt, 2018; Erthutlu & Chafra, 2018; Bagheri, Zarei, & Aeen, 2012). Besides, the existing literature is parsimonious with respect to mixed findings as to why employees remain silent even observing unethical leader behavior. This

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shows the complex nature of the phenomenon of employee silence over unethical leader conduct (Wang, Long, Zhang & He, 2019; Carnevale, Huang, Crede, Harms & Uhl-Bien, 2017).

Though some studies have attempted to examine when employees may not remain silent over witnessing leader unethical conduct (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009; Deter & Burris, 2007; Simon, Friedman, Liu, & Mclean, 2007), however, the existing studies mostly investigated certain specific types of leader unethical behavior on silence such as abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), despotic leadership (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008), workplace aggression (Neuman & Baron, 1998), Machiavellian leadership (Belschak et al., 2018), supervisory undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), etc.. According to Liu, Yang and Yao (2020) studies examining the impact of general types of unethical leader practices on employee silence is scarce and asserts need for future research on this perspective. Moreover, Mackey, Parker Ellen, McAllister, & Alexander (2021) and Sufi et al. (2023) have also noted the dearth of studies on the impact of general ethical transgression on silence behavior.

Emotions have been found to be a significant factor in eliciting attitudes and behaviors (Peng, Schaubroeck, Chong, & Li, 2019; Gibson & Callister, 2010; Weiner, 1985, 1995). According to Lindebaum, Geddes, and Gabriel (2017), emotions are at the root of all exchange processes and employee choice to remain silent over unethical leader conduct may depend upon the underlying emotional reaction (Shao, 2018). Similarly, Edwards, Ashkanasy, and Gardner (2009) noted that observing wrongdoings may generate different emotions in employees such as fear, regret which may impact silence behavior. However the potential role of emotions has generally been overlooked while examining employee silence over leader ethical transgressions (Mackey, Frieder, Brees & Martinko, 2017; Kirrane, O'Shea, Buckley, Grazi & Prout, 2017; Simon, Hurst, Kelley, & Judge, 2015).

Studies those attempted to investigate the dynamics of emotions in triggering silence behavior remained more focused on specific unethical behavior such as cynicism, pessimism, fear and paranoid based on sentiments of hatred, anger, and disappointment (Knoll et al., 2018; Pelletier & Bligh, 2008). Few studies have also asserted that positive emotions such as happiness provoke approach behaviors while negative emotions such as fear lead to avoidance approach (Coan & Allen, 2004), however these studies are not enough to understand comprehensively the underlying role of emotions and emotional outrage towards leaders over unethical behavior in the context of employee silence (Hassan et al., 2022; Kirrane et al., 2017; Lindebaum & Gabriel, 2016).

Moreover, past studies, in general, examined the role of aggregate emotions instead of discrete emotions (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). Whereas discrete emotions have reported more explanatory power (Hu & Kaplan, 2015). For example, the association of guilt and shame with violation of ethics (Ersoy, Born, Derous, & vander Molen, 2011), the relationship of anger and happiness with outcomes of negotiation (vanKleef, DeDreu, & Manstead, 2004), interaction of emotion of embarrassment and mistakes (Basch & Fisher, 2000). However, research examining the interaction of discrete emotions with employee silence is lacking (Lindebaum & Jordan, 2012; Gooty, Gavin, & Ashkanasy, 2009).

This study aims to explore specifically how leader unethical behavior may generate emotions i.e., moral anger, which may further impact the employee silence i.e., quiescent silence, drawing upon Affect Theory of Social Exchange (Lawler, 2001) as an overarching theory to support the hypothesis. The theory asserts that positive and negative emotions trigger as an emotional response to the event. These emotions further generate attitudinal and behavioral reactions to the attributed source or cause of the event. In the context of unethical leader behavior, moral emotions plays a significant role, which are triggered upon moral transgression (Lindebaum & Geddes, 2016) and consequently, shapes individual's attitude and behavior.

Examining this research question is worthwhile from different reasons. First, it is relevant to different disciplines of organizational behavior such as leader unethical behavior and employee silence. Secondly, examining the phenomenon from the Affect Theory of Social Exchange enhances our insight on the role of emotions in the complex nature of employee silence.

This study focuses on the impact of unethical leader behavior on employee silence through emotions such as moral anger. While anger in general has been studied in past, moral anger has recently been advocated as the anger manifestation over ethical transgressions (Kirrane et al., 2017) and has got little attention. We also examine the mediating role of moral anger, which will enable us to understand the underlying process through which unethical leader behavior impact employee silence. Moreover, we specifically examine the quiescent silence while observing leader unethical behavior, because fear has been reported to be main dominating underlying motive in remaining silent (Edwards, Ashkanasy, & Gardner, 2009; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009; Morrison &

Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; John & Manikandan, 2019; Lee, Detenber, Willnat, Aday, & Graf, 2004). Finally, conducting the study in Pakistan, having high on collectivism and power distance (Sufi et al., 2023) would enable to relate the findings to contextual significance as well. The hypothesized model is shown in Figure 1.

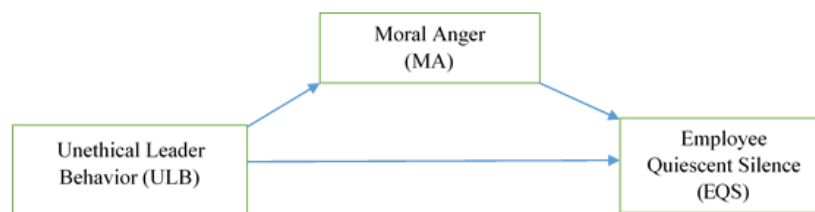


Figure 1: Hypothesized Model

LITERATURE REVIEW, THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS

Effect of Unethical Leader Behavior on Moral Anger

Unethical leader behavior has been 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” (Brown & Mitchell, 2010, pp. 588). Such behaviors may include employees’ rights violation, deviation from organizational interests, unjust and unfair processes, lack of strong leadership qualities etc. (Ünal et al., 2012).

Hassan et al. (2022) in recent review on unethical leader behavior reported that most of the studies examined the concept from specific types such as supervisor undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1997; Aziz, 2022), destructive leadership (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007), workplace aggression (Neuman & Baron, 1998), despotic leadership (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008), and Machiavellian leadership (Ashraf et al., 2022; Belschak, Muhammad, & Den Hartog, 2018) etc., whereas, studies on general unethical leader behavior is lacking. Categorizing these types into abusive supervision and destructive leadership, Mackey et al. (2021) has also found dearth of studies on general unethical leader behaviors such as violating norms, rules, exploitation of resources, discrimination etc.

Studies on these specific types of unethical leader behaviors also diverted researchers’ focus from exploring interaction between general unethical leader behaviors and employee silence (Sufi et al. 2023; Mackey et al., 2021) Moreover, these specific types of unethical leader behavior are different from general unethical behaviors in terms of target and scope of harm. They are more individual specific and thus carry limited consequential damage as compared to general unethical behaviors (Almeida et al., 2021). Whereas, general unethical leader behavior are not necessarily targeted towards specific recipient rather it incorporates continuous implicit orientation towards exploiting organizational resources through the misuse of influence, leverage and power etc. (Hassan et al., 2022).

Employees’ response over unethical leader behavior may depend upon the emotional reaction as emotions are at the root of all subsequent attitudes and behaviors (Gibson & Callister, 2010). Viewing transgressions as violation of norm and values, moral emotions may be provoked among the followers. More specifically, moral anger, which is “an aroused emotional state stemming from a primary appraisal of a moral standard violation that impacts others more than oneself and prompts correct behavior intended to improve the social condition even in the face of significant personal risk” (Lindebaum & Geddes, 2016, pp 743). According to Shao (2018), ethical transgressions trigger emotional states of the followers, whose intensity may depend upon type and intensity of the transgression (Lawler, 2001). Importantly, judging an incident as a moral bad may trigger moral anger (Landmann & Hess, 2017; Kayyal, Pochedly, McCarthy, & Russell, 2015).

The larger pro-social benefit associated with moral anger has also been reported by past studies as a motivational force to stop/discourage injustice (Niesta Kayser, Greitemeyer, Fischer, & Frey, 2010; Halmburger, Baumert, & Schmitt, 2015), appraisals of unfairness (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012), and uphold integrity and reputation (Yamagishi, Horita, Takagishi, Shinada, Tanida, & Cook 2009). It may provide courage to bring progressive social change (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2012; Vilas & Sabucedo, 2012) through consumer boycotts and protest against corporate unethical conduct (Braunsberger & Buckler, 2011; Cronin, Reysen, & Branscombe, 2012).

Leaders act as role model for employees. Due to their very position, certain roles are associated with them.

Being proxy for the organization, they are responsible for behaving in accordance with these roles and regulating organizational resources to achieve organizational objectives (Connelly et al., 2011). Employees as followers evaluate leader's conduct in terms of the roles and expectations associated with the leader, which further shape their reciprocal response towards the leader. The reciprocal response depends upon the emotions generated among employees in the event of leader-member interaction (Hassan et al., 2022; Kirrane et al., 2017).

According to Affect Theory of Social Exchange (Lawler & Thye, 1999), events trigger emotions in dyadic relationship. Emotions can be positive as well as negative. Positive events generate positive emotions, whereas, negative events trigger negative emotions. In social exchange context, when expectations associated with the leader's role are met, leaders are reciprocated with positive emotions and when these expectations are not met, negative emotions develop among employees. Moral Anger being one of the negative emotions is generated over leader's transgression (Royzman, Atanasov, Landy, Parks, & Gepty, 2014). In the context of ethicality, Lindebaum and Geddes (2016) and Lindebaum et al., Geddes and Gabriel (2017) argued that when employees witness unethical conduct on part of the leader, negative moral emotions are generated. More specifically, Lomas (2019), asserts that moral anger, being the most prominent moral emotion may be generated as a response to unethical leader transgression.

Based upon the above justification, following hypothesis is proposed.

H1: Unethical leader behavior is positively related to moral anger.

Effect of Unethical Leader Behavior on Employee Silence through Moral Anger Employee silence is a behavioral tendency through which employees deliberately prefer to withhold important information or concerns, which otherwise considered to be significant for the organization (John & Manikandan, 2019). According to Pinder and Harlos (2001, pp. 334), employee silence is "the withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual's behavioral, cognitive and/or affective evaluations of his or her organizational circumstances to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress".

Depending upon motives, employee silence may be of different types. Silence due to employee perception that speaking up is futile as it may not bring any change is referred to as Acquiescent silence. Whereas, silence due to fear of negative consequences is called quiescent or defensive silence (Van Dyne et al., 2003; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Employees may also remain silent based on pro-social altruism motives to avoid harm to others (Knoll & Dick, 2013; John & Manikandan, 2019; Jam, 2019) or may exhibit opportunistic silence to hide ideas and knowledge to keep self-advantage (Knoll and Dick, 2013). According to Morrison and Milliken's (2000), silence may be contagious and result in 'climate of silence' through collective sense making based on others experiences and management response (John & Manikandan, 2019; Brinsfield, 2013; Jam et al., 2018).

Leader's behavior such as supervisor incivility, abusive supervision, lack of openness for suggestions, supervisor perceived trustworthiness may impact employees' silence behavior (Detert & Burris, 2007; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). Unethical conduct on part of leaders may negatively affect the trust, attachment, and commitment of employees with the leader (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Schminke, Caldwell, Ambrose, & McMahon, 2014; Norman, Avolio, & Luthans, 2010) through emergence of negative feelings and sentiments (Mackey et al., 2017; Simon et al., 2015; Pelletier & Bligh, 2008).

Employees commonly perceive silence as a counterproductive and prefer to speak up over leaders' unethical conduct (Halbusi, William, Ramayah, Aldieri & Vinci, 2021; Stouten et al., 2019; Bies, 2009; Morrison & Milliken, 2000) to mitigate further ethical transgressions (Schyns and Schilling, 2013; O'Reilly and Aquino, 2011). However, it may depend upon emotional sentiments in the form of shame, sense of guilt, feelings of futility (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Van Dyne, et al., 2003; Weiner, 1985, 1995) and fear which has been found to be the dominant emotion behind employee silence (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). According to Edwards et al. (2009), employees will remain silent due to fear and shame while observing wrongdoing, whereas emotions of anger and guilt would play to discourage silence.

According to Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005), more the employee reacts negatively to the event, less likely will be silence. Similarly, Kirrane et al. (2017) investigated in details the interplay between anger and fear in connection with attribution effect while observing transgression. Behavioral outcome in response to underlying emotions also depends upon the attribution effect (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002) in such a way that behavioral response will be more sensitive when transgression is view as intentional as compared to unintentional.

When leaders behave unethically, employees' moral expectations shake and negative feelings and emotions may come into play. Depending upon moral violation, emotion of moral anger may be activated, which may affect response to the leader (Lindebaum et al., 2017; Dasborough, Ashkanasy, Tee, & Tse, 2009). This assertion carries useful basis to understand the complex and dynamic nature of employee silence behavior over unethical leader conduct (Shao, 2018; Lindebaum et al., 2017; Lindebaum & Geddes, 2016), as negative events trigger negative emotions, whereas positive events provoke positive emotions (Cropanzano, Dasborough, & Weiss, 2016). Emotions such as fear is associated with quiescent silence and hopelessness is linked with acquiescent silence (Kirrane et al., 2017).

Though significant research has been conducted on employee silence from different perspectives yet the potential role of emotions in silence literature is quite scarce (Kirrane et al., 2017). Some studies asserted that positive emotions such as happiness provoke approach behaviors while negative emotions such as fear lead to avoidance approach (Coan & Allen, 2004), however researchers have called for more in-depth research to examine complex nature of emotional phenomenon (Lindebaum & Gabriel, 2016) as the underlying mechanism between emotional arousal and subsequent silent behavior is still elusive especially on witnessing wrongdoing and ethical sensitivities (Kirrane et al., 2017; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). Moreover, the available research more focuses on aggregate emotions in general instead of specific discrete emotions (Barsade & Gibson, 2007), more research is required to examine interplay between specific discrete emotions, behavior, in the context of employee silence (Lindebaum & Jordan, 2012; Gooty et al., 2009) as such discrete emotions have found to be influencing behaviors (Hu & Kaplan, 2015).

In pursuance of Affect Theory of Social Exchange (Lawler & Thye, 1999; 2001), the reciprocal response of employees depend upon leader's actions. When leader's actions are not perceived as aligned with the associated role, expectations of the employees shatter and they tend to respond in way that may help to correct the leader's action (Mackey et al., 2017; Simon et al., 2015; Pelletier & Bligh, 2008;). More specifically, employees' silence behavior triggers and they would not prefer to remain silent over such unethical leader behaviors.

In the context of proposed research framework from Affect Theory of Social Exchange (Lawler, 2001) perspective, it is argued that unethical leader behavior is seen as negative event, which will generate negative emotions i.e., moral anger. To avoid recurrence of negative emotions due to negative event, employees will attribute the cause to the leader and would react in such a way that such negative emotions through attributed event may not recur. This will affect employees' silence tendencies and they would prefer to break the silence

Based on these arguments, following is hypothesized.

H2: Moral anger mediates the relationship between unethical leader behavior and employee quiescent silence.

METHOD

Participants, Procedure, and Measures

Three-waves-time-lags was used to collect the data. For non-experimental studies involving mediation, at least three-wave time lags is recommended (Da, Zhu, Cen, Gong, Siu, & Zhang, 2021; Haider, Heredero, & Ahmed, 2019; Jose, 2016). Unethical leader behavior was measured at time one (T1), moral anger at time two (T2), and employee quiescent silence at time three (T3) with three-four weeks lags.

Data was self-administered from employees working at different managerial levels in public and private sector hospitals located in the country's capital- Islamabad and KPK's provincial capital-Peshawar. Survey method is widely used and considered to be a useful data collection tool and the minimum recommended sample size for quantitative studies is 50-400 (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012; Delice & Practice, 2010). Keeping in view English as official language in Pakistan, all survey instruments adapted were in English. Respondents were briefed about volunteer participation and objectives of the research with the assurance that data would remain confidential and used only for research purpose.

The questionnaire were served at three different time points with 3-4 weeks interval. Respondents were traced using unique questionnaire ID (QID). At Time One (t1), 400 questionnaires were distributed out of which 363 usable questionnaire received giving 90 % response rate. 363 Questionnaires were distributed at Time Two (t2) for which 337 usable questionnaire received yielding 92 % response rate. For data collection at Time Three (t3), response rate was 91 % as 306 usable questionnaire received against the questionnaires distributed. Overall effective

response rate was 76%. Demographic details of the respondents including age, gender, qualification, managerial position, total working experience, working experience in present organization, working tenure under present boss were also collected at time one (t1).

Convergent validity was assured using Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria by assessing degree of shared variance among the study variables through Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability CR. AVE compares the variance depicted by the construct and the variance due to measurement error and it is the average sum of square of individual factor loading (0.5) of each item in the construct. $AVE > 0.7$ is considered as a very good, whereas, acceptable level is 0.5. Acceptable value of CR is 0.7 and is considered as a less biased estimate of reliability than Cronbach's Alpha. For convergent validity to hold, AVE should be lesser than CR. Discriminant validity has also been assessed and assured using Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria by comparing the variance captured by the construct i.e. AVE and shared variance with other study constructs. Discriminant holds when square root of each construct AVE is greater than the correlation coefficients with all other constructs of the study.

Unethical Leader Behavior

Kaptein (2008), 7-point likert scale comprised of 37 items with reported reliability ($= 0.99$) was used to tap response over unethical leader behavior. Sample items of the scale were: Wasting, mismanaging, or abusing organizational resources; Breaching customer, consumer or patient privacy; Discriminating against employees on the basis of age, race, gender, religious belief etc. Convergent validity holds as all individual factor loading were 0.5 as in the range 0.62 to 0.85. AVE was 0.601 (i.e., 0.5 but lesser than CR), and CR was 0.98 (i.e. 0.7). Discriminant validity also holds as AVE was greater than the correlation coefficients with all other constructs of the study.

Moral Anger

Moral Anger was assessed on 7-point likert scale using Siegel (1986) 14 items measure with reported reliability ($= 0.98$). Sample items of the scale are: I tend to get angry more frequently than most people (Over unethical leader behavior); I can make myself angry (Over unethical leader behavior) about something in the past just by thinking about it. Convergent validity holds as all individual factor loading were 0.5 as in the range 0.52 to 0.95. AVE was 0.63 (i.e. 0.5 but lesser than CR), and CR was 0.95 (i.e. 0.7). Discriminant validity also holds as AVE was greater than the correlation coefficients with all other constructs of the study.

Employee Silence (Quiescent)

12-items scale of Knoll and van Dick (2013) was used to measure employee silence (quiescent) on 7-point likert scale with reported reliability ($= 0.99$). Sample items of the scale are: I remained silent at work, because, my superiors are not open to proposals, concerns, or the like; I remained silent at work, because of fear of negative consequences; I remained silent at work, because I fear disadvantages from speaking up etc. Convergent validity holds as all individual factor loading were 0.5 as in the range 0.75 to 0.96. AVE was 0.78 (i.e., 0.5 but lesser than CR), and CR was 0.97 (i.e., 0.7). Discriminant validity also holds as AVE was greater than the correlation coefficients with all other constructs of the study.

The data was analysed using simple regression technique for direct effect of unethical leader behavior on employee quiescent silence, direct effect of unethical leader behavior on moral anger, and direct effect of moral anger on employee quiescent silence. For mediation analysis, Hayes (2017) Bootstrap estimation was used to test the proposed indirect effect of unethical leader behavior on employee silence (quiescent) through moral anger.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviation, correlations, and reliability coefficients for the sample. Significant positive correlation found between unethical leader behavior and moral anger ($r = .47, p < .05$), whereas negative correlation found between unethical leader behavior and employee silence ($r = -.33, p < .05$). Moral anger found to be significantly negatively associated with employee silence ($r = -.58, p < .05$).

Table 1: Mean, Standard Deviation, Correlations and Reliabilities

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
Unethical Leader Behavior	5.63	1.96	(.99)		
Moral Anger	3.75	2.50	.47**	(.98)	
Employee Silence (Quiescent)	2.70	2.10	-.33**	-.58**	(.99)

Regression Analysis

Table 2 presents the results of simple regression analysis for direct effect of unethical leader behavior on employee quiescent silence, direct effect of unethical leader behavior on moral anger, and direct effect of moral anger on employee quiescent silence.

Results show that unethical leader behavior significantly predicted employee silence, $F(1, 306) = 37.4492$, $p < 0.05$, indicating significant impact of unethical leader behavior on employee silence ($b = -.331$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, $R^2 = .110$ depicts that the model explains 11% variation in employee silence. Similarly, unethical leader behavior significantly predicted moral anger, $F(1, 306) = 89.421$, $p < 0.05$, indicating significant impact of unethical leader behavior on moral anger ($b = .477$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, $R^2 = .227$ depicts that the model explains 22.7% variation in employee silence. Moral anger significantly predicted employee quiescent silence, $F(1, 306) = 160.418$, $p < 0.05$, indicating significant impact of moral anger on employee quiescent silence ($b = -.494$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, $R^2 = .345$ depicts that the model explains 34.5% variation in employee quiescent silence.

Table 2: Regression Analysis

Variables	Regression Coefficient	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F
ULB with ES	-.331	.110	.107	37.492
ULB with MA	.477	.227	.225	89.421
MA with ES	-.494	.345	.343	160.418

$p < 0.05$ ULB = Unethical Leader Behavior ES = Employee Silence MA = Moral Anger

Mediation Analyses

For mediation analysis, Bootstrap estimation with 5,000 resamples at 95% confidence level (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007; Hayes, 2017) was used to test the proposed indirect effect of unethical leader behavior on employee silence (quiescent) through moral anger. Results (Table 3) of mediation analysis show positive impact of unethical leader behavior on moral anger ($\beta = 0.607$, $p < .001$) as well as positive impact of moral anger on employee quiescent silence ($\beta = 0.810$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, unethical leader behavior also reported direct positive impact on employee quiescent silence ($\beta = 0.354$, $p < .001$).

The indirect bootstrap effect of unethical leader behavior on employee quiescent silence through moral anger was significant as the bootstrap confidence interval didn't contain a zero value between lower and upper limit intervals, .49, CL [-.55, -.42].

Table 3: Regression Results: Direct And Indirect (Effects Mediation of Moral Anger (MA) B/W Unethical Leader Behavior and Employee Silence (Quiescent))

Employee Silence (Quiescent)				
Direct and Total Effects				
		SE	t	p
ULB → MA	.607	.0642	9.463	.000
MA → ES	.810	.0227	35.704	.000
ULB → ES	.354	.0579	6.123	.000

Bootstrap Results for indirect Effect of ULB on EES through MA (Bias Corrected Confidence Intervals)				
Effect	Boot S.E	LL 95% CL	UL 95% CL	p
.49	.032	-.55	-.42	.000

Note I: N = 306. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. LL = lower limit; CI = confidence interval; UL = upper limit. ULB (Unethical Leader Behavior), MA (Moral Anger), ES (Employee Silence).

DISCUSSION

We examined the direct impact of unethical leader behavior on employee quiescent silence and moral anger, direct impact of moral anger on employee quiescent silence, and the mediating impact of moral anger between unethical leader and employee quiescent silence. The findings suggest that unethical leader behavior has negative impact on employee quiescent silence and moral anger. We also found negative impact of moral anger on employee quiescent silence. The results also demonstrated that moral anger mediated the relationship between unethical leader behavior and employee quiescent silence.

Based on these findings, the negative association of unethical leader behavior with employee quiescent silence show employees’ reluctance to remain silent over when observe unethical conduct on part of leaders. Results of the study are consistent with previous studies that reported that unethical leader behavior trigger employee silence behavior (Stouten et al., 2019; Mackey et al., 2017; Simon et al., 2015; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; O’Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Pelletier & Bligh, 2008; Bies, 2009; Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Significant positive association between unethical leader behavior and moral anger reveal that moral emotions of followers may be provoked on observing leaders behaving unethically. The results are in line with previous studies that found that unethical leader behavior trigger negative emotions among followers in social exchange process (Hassan et al., 2022; Kirrane et al., 2017) specifically anger (Royzman et al., 2014). Lindebaum and Geddes (2016) and Lindebaum, Geddes and Gabriel (2017) also reported that moral emotions are generated due to leaders’ ethical transgression. Similarly, Lomas (2019) recently found that moral anger may be generated over unethical leader behavior.

Similarly, the negative association between moral anger and employee quiescent silence demonstrates that moral anger encourage employees to speak up against leader unethical behavioral conduct. The results are in line with previous studies that reported increased level of moral anger over ethically charged situations and violation of moral values (Milesi & Alberici, 2018; Landmann & Hess, 2017; Wisneski and Skitka, 2017; Kayyal et al., 2015; Mitchell, Vogel & Folger, 2015; Laurent, Clark, Walker, & Wiseman, 2013).

Theoretical Implications

Our study carries different theoretical significance to existing literature on unethical behavior, emotions, and employee silence. Firstly, it adds to understanding the impact of general unethical leader behavior on employee silence behavior, which is lacking (Sufi et al., 2023) because existing studies mostly examined the specific types of unethical behaviors on leader’s part such as bullying, abusive supervision (Liu, Yang and Yao, 2020). Specific types of unethical leader behaviors have narrower impact in terms of the target, whereas general unethical leader conduct spans over range of behaviors that may impact greater number of employees and the organization as a whole on continuous basis.

Secondly, investigating the inconsistent and contradictory findings on deepening employee silence over growing unethical leader practices (Hassan et al., 2022; Cialdini et al., 2021; Fehr et al., 2020), our study adds to the exiting debate through examining the role of emotions, which has generally been overlooked in past studies (Suf et al.,

2023; Mackey et al., 2017; Simon et al., 2015). Emotions have found to be regulating mechanism for subsequent attitude and behavior (Peng et al., 2019; Lindebaum et al., 2017), which may be triggered over witnessing ethical transgressions (Edwards et al., 2009). Moreover, past studies more focused on aggregate emotions, whereas the potential role of discrete emotions such as fear, guilt, anger, shame etc. has generally been overlooked (Hu & Kaplan, 2015; Lindebaum & Jordan, 2012). Our study expands the theoretical base of understanding the impact of moral anger, one of the discrete emotions as the underlying mechanism in the process of employee silence over unethical leader conduct. Furthermore, past studies remained more focused on the consequences of emotional outrage in the form of cynicism, pessimism, fear, paranoid etc. and the potential role of underlying discrete emotions that may result remained under examined (Hassan et al., 2022; Knoll et al., 2018).

Thirdly, departing from previous studies that have investigated the phenomenon of employee silence from various theoretical perspective such as —(),—() the present study deployed different theoretical lens of Affect Theory of Social Exchange (Lawler, 2001). Focusing on emotional/effective processes, the theory illustrates the mechanism to understand the impact of event on subsequent attitudinal and behavioral responses through emotional manifestation, depending upon the type (positive and negative) and intensity of the emotions. As an overarching perspective, this theoretical base carries added explanatory power to describe the phenomenon of employee silence over leader unethical behavior from the perspective of emotions.

Managerial Implications

The study also holds several managerial implications. Findings highlight that employee silence over unethical leader behavior is a complex phenomenon, which needs attention to mitigate it from newer perspectives (Vriend, Said, Janssen, & Jordan, 2020; Fehr et al., 2020; Henriques, 2015). Being counterproductive work behavior, employee silence carries multifaceted consequences and may foster the ‘climate of silence’ in the organizations (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013; John & Manikandan, 2019). Holding emotional arousal for longer time may have negative psychological impact on employees, which in long run may impact the organizational effectiveness as a whole. Organizations need to devise a mechanism to discourage ethical transgressions. One way to achieve it is through discouraging employee silence. Environment conducive to speak up over unethical leader conduct may be helpful for mitigating the opportunities for such a conduct. It may also be helpful for relaxing employees of psychological stress and subsequent strain of holding emotions unnecessarily, which may have negative consequences.

Findings of the study promises contextual implications as well. In countries like Pakistan scoring high on collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Sufi et al., 2023; Naseer, Raja, Syed, Donia, & Darr, 2016), speaking up over unethical leader behavior may risk compromise of relational asset and subsequent losses. This entails different dynamics to discourage employee silence over unethical leader conduct (Brynnatt & Merritt, 2019). The sensitive nature of health care institutes carries added contextual relevance to the findings of the study. As this discipline deals with the humans’ life and health, therefore prevalence of silence culture over unethical practices may have devastating impact at individual, societal, and national level (Esmaelzadeh, Abbaszadeh, Borhani, & Peyrovi, 2017). Another reason for contextual significance of the study’s findings is lack of any such study in past.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our study have also certain limitations, which can be pursued for future research work. Data were collected through self-reports based on the perception about the leader’s conduct. Actual incidents showing unethical leader behavior and employees’ response thereto may give better picture. Data were collected from the capital of country and capital of one of the provinces for diversity, however generalizability may be improved through having representation from greater part of the country. Similarly, this study was confined to the hospital sector only, whereas extending the study to other services and manufacturing industries may give wider perspectives to analyse the phenomenon. Mix-methods, longitudinal design, and case study approach may address the limitations of time-lagged settings adopted in our study.

CONCLUSION

This study adds to understanding the complex nature of employee silence over unethical leader behavior in organizations. This study examined the underlying role of emotions specifically, the moral anger in provoking employee silence behavior over leader ethical transgressions. Incidents of unethical behavior may be a source

for triggering moral anger among employees, which may further guide employee silence tendencies, depending upon intensity of moral anger. Organizations need to nourish the environment which may discourage employees to remain silent, to mitigate negative psychological impact of holding emotional arousal.

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