Innovations

The Influence of Leadership Ostracism Behaviour Dimensions on Employee Moral Disengagement in the Public Sectors of East Gojjam Zone, Amhara Region, Ethiopia

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Abstract: *This research examines the impact of leader behavior dimensions (Exclusion (EX), Ignoring (IG), Undermining (UN), Differential Treatment (DT), and Neglect (NG)) on employees' moral disengagement in organizational settings. We used SPSS version 26 to look at the data we got from 397 people. We used multiple regression analyses to look at how these leader behaviors directly affected moral disengagement. The findings demonstrated that Ignoring (β = .374) emerged as the most significant predictor of moral disengagement, succeeded by Neglect (β = .265), Undermining (β = .230), and Differential Treatment (β = .183). Exclusion, however, did not significantly forecast moral disengagement. These results indicate that nuanced and relationally dismissive leadership behaviors have a more significant influence on employees' moral disengagement than explicit exclusionary actions. The findings enhance Bandura's (1999, 2016) social-cognitive theory of moral disengagement by highlighting the essential influence of leader interpersonal behaviors on moral reasoning in organizational contexts.*

Keywords: *leadership ostracism, counterproductive work behavior, social-cognitive theory, Bandura's theory, leader behavior*

1.1. Background of the Study

The behavior of leaders is very important for how employees think, make moral decisions, and how the organization as a whole feels. Historically, investigations into destructive leadership have concentrated on explicit manifestations of mistreatment, including verbal abuse, public humiliation, and coercive control (Tepper, 2000; Einarsen et al., 2007). However, new evidence suggests that subtle, indirect, and relationally harmful leader behaviors, such as ignoring, neglecting, undermining, exclusion, and differential treatment, may be just as

bad, if not worse, for employees' moral and emotional health (Lee et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2021). These behaviors frequently transpire surreptitiously, rendering them challenging to identify and address; however, they facilitate a gradual deterioration of trust, psychological safety, and ethical accountability within organizations (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

Relational forms of negative leadership, on the other hand, work through subtle interpersonal dynamics that slowly change how employees think and act morally. When leaders don't recognize the work of their employees, don't let them make decisions, or show favoritism, their subordinates may feel alienated, resentful, and morally conflicted. Over time, these experiences can diminish their ability for moral reasoning and self-regulation. Moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1999, 2016) helps us understand this process by showing how people make excuses for bad behavior by turning off their own moral standards. Through mechanisms such as moral justification, diffusion of responsibility, and attribution of blame, employees may begin to disengage from ethical norms, perceiving unethical conduct as acceptable or necessary in response to mistreatment (Detert et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2012).

Prior research has investigated the relationship between abusive supervision, unethical leadership, and moral disengagement; however, the field remains deficient in a comprehensive understanding of how various dimensions of leader misbehaviour, specifically ignoring, neglect, undermining, exclusion, and differential treatment (collectively known as Leader's Offensive Behaviors or LOB dimensions), affect this psychological process both collectively and individually. It is essential to address this gap, as it enhances theoretical understanding of how subtle leader behaviors contribute to the moral degradation of employees, potentially resulting in unethical workplace practices, reduced integrity, and compromised organizational performance.

Consequently, this study aims to empirically investigate the predictive impacts of these LOB dimensions on employees' moral disengagement. The study utilizes statistical analyses via SPSS and AMOS to ascertain which leader behaviors most significantly impact moral disengagement and to elucidate these relationships within the context of social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1999). Comprehending these dynamics enhances theoretical progress in leadership and organizational behavior while providing practical insights for leadership development, ethical training, and the management of organizational culture. The results should ultimately help shape interventions that promote moral engagement, psychological safety, and ethical leadership practices in different types of organizations.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Even though more people are aware of mistreatment at work, subtle and indirect forms of bad leader behavior, like ignoring, neglecting, undermining, and treating people differently, still hurt employees' moral functioning and the integrity of the organization (Lee et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2021). These relationally harmful behaviors, unlike overt mistreatment (e.g., physical or verbal abuse), frequently remain unnoticed while profoundly affecting employees' cognitive and ethical processes (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

One significant psychological mechanism through which these experiences affect unethical outcomes is moral disengagement, the cognitive process by which individuals suspend their moral self-regulation, thus rationalizing unethical or harmful behavior (Bandura, 1999, 2016). Previous research has investigated the effects of abusive supervision and unethical leadership on moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2012); however, there is a paucity of empirical evidence regarding how various dimensions of leader misbehaviour, specifically ignoring, neglect, undermining, exclusion, and differential treatment (collectively termed LOB dimensions), predict moral disengagement both collectively and individually.

Consequently, this study seeks to examine the following principal issue: to what degree do leader behaviors, including ignoring, exclusion, neglect, undermining, and differential treatment, serve as predictors of employees' moral disengagement? This study analyzes data from SPSS and AMOS to determine which types of leader mistreatment have the most significant impact on moral disengagement, thereby elucidating the cognitive mechanisms that connect leadership behavior to moral erosion within organizations.

1.3. Objectives of the Research

The current study aims to:

- Evaluate the extent of moral disengagement and perceived detrimental leader behaviors (exclusion, neglect, differential treatment, etc.) among employees.
- Investigate the correlations between each leader's behavioral dimension and moral disengagement.
- Utilize multiple regression and SEM analyses to ascertain which leader behaviors are significant predictors of moral disengagement.
- Assess the theoretical impact of leader relational behaviors on moral disengagement through the lens of social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1999).
- Provide actionable insights for leadership development and the cultivation of an ethical organizational culture.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Counterproductive Work Behaviour and Leadership Ostracism

Leadership ostracism is when a leader intentionally or unintentionally excludes their subordinates socially or psychologically (Ferris et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2013). It is a subtle but harmful way that leaders mistreat employees by ignoring, excluding, undermining, neglecting, or treating them differently (Wu et al., 2012). Ostracism is not the same as open hostility; it is marked by silence, inaction, and leaders not recognizing, including, or supporting their subordinates (Balliet& Ferris, 2013).

An increasing amount of evidence indicates that leadership ostracism has considerable adverse effects on employee attitudes and behaviors. Empirical research has associated ostracism with emotional exhaustion (Riva et al., 2014), psychological distress (Robinson et al., 2013), diminished organizational commitment (Ferris et al., 2015), and heightened deviant or counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) (Zhao et al., 2016; Hitlan& Noel, 2009). Absenteeism, withdrawal, and sabotage are all examples of counterproductive work behaviors. These are deliberate actions that hurt the company or its employees (Spector & Fox, 2002). When leaders ignore, neglect, or undermine employees, those employees may stop caring about their work and act out in retaliation. This response shows that the social and moral contract that links them to the rules of the organization has broken down.

In the Ethiopian public sector, where hierarchical structures and political bureaucracies have historically influenced leadership dynamics (Zewde, 2001; Gebresenbet & Gebrehiwot, 2020), ostracism behaviors frequently emerge in nuanced, systemic manifestations, including selective communication, unequal resource allocation, or neglect of employees' contributions. These actions make people feel invisible and unfair, which leads them to use self-protective and morally disengaged ways to deal with things.

2.2. Moral Disengagement as a Cognitive Process

Moral disengagement (MD), initially articulated by Bandura (1999, 2016) in the context of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), denotes cognitive processes that enable individuals to justify unethical or detrimental behaviors without experiencing self-reproach. Individuals deactivate their internal moral self-sanctions and allow themselves to act against ethical standards through strategies such as moral justification, euphemistic labeling, displacement or diffusion of responsibility, and dehumanization.

In professional environments, moral disengagement elucidates the rationale behind employees justifying deviant conduct in response to mistreatment. For example, when leaders ignore or undermine them, employees may think that

retaliatory actions are justified ("they deserve it") or that the organization is to blame ("everyone does it") (Moore, 2008; Detert et al., 2008). Studies consistently demonstrate that moral disengagement serves as a mediator in the relationship between unethical leadership and deviant outcomes (Kayani et al., 2021; Thau et al., 2008). It serves as a psychological conduit that transforms perceived injustice into moral justification for counterproductive work behavior (CWB).

2.3. Moral Regulation Process and Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986; 1991; 1999) serves as the basis for comprehending the role of moral disengagement in mediating the impact of leadership ostracism on counterproductive work behavior (CWB). SCT asserts that moral disengagement is governed by self-sanctions triggered by the violation of individual moral standards. However, these self-sanctions can be selectively nullified through cognitive justifications, facilitating unethical behavior without self-reproach.

In the context of leadership ostracism, employees undergo a disintegration of mutual respect and the reinforcement of moral identity. Ostracism indicates social exclusion and moral disapproval, thereby interrupting the self-regulatory mechanism. Employees may cognitively reconstruct the situation to mitigate self-blame, for instance, by rationalizing that mistreatment or lack of effort is permissible due to the leader's conduct. Previous research (Bandura, 2016; Detert et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2012) indicates that when authority figures exhibit unethical or exclusionary behavior, subordinates internalize moral disengagement as a cognitive framework.

So, SCT shows how ostracism (especially ignoring, undermining, and treating people differently) turns on moral disengagement mechanisms, which makes it more likely that people will do things that are not good for them. Your findings empirically validate this process, demonstrating that leadership ostracism accounts for nearly half (R^2 = .454) of the variance in employees' moral disengagement, indicating a significant cognitive transmission effect aligned with SCT.

2.4. Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and Resource Depletion

The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989; 2001) elucidates the motivational foundations for moral disengagement in the context of ostracism, whereas Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) focuses on cognitive processes. COR asserts that individuals endeavor to obtain and safeguard valuable resources, encompassing material, social, and psychological dimensions. When these resources are at risk or lost, stress happens. When leaders ostracize employees, they take away important social resources like recognition, inclusion, and support, which makes them feel like they have lost something. To avert additional

depletion, employees implement defensive strategies that preserve remaining resources, including cognitive disengagement from ethical standards (Deng et al., 2021).

Moral disengagement serves as an adaptive coping mechanism that alleviates emotional distress and cognitive dissonance. Employees preserve psychological energy and self-esteem by rationalizing unethical or self-serving conduct. Empirical research substantiates this resource-based perspective: ostracized employees exhibit heightened emotional exhaustion and diminished moral engagement, resulting in escalated counterproductive work behavior (Wu et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2016; Gumustas & Lilgun, 2023). The findings of the current study corroborate this pathway; dimensions such as Ignoring and Neglect (which directly indicate social resource loss) exert the most significant positive impact on moral disengagement, aligning with COR's hypothesis that resource-depleting leader behaviors provoke self-protective disengagement.

2.5. Affective Pathway and Self-Regulation Theory

Self-Regulation Theory (Baumeister et al., 1998; Richman & Leary, 2009) elucidates the affective mechanisms by which ostracism induces moral disengagement. Self-regulation relies on psychological energy and emotional balance. When people are left out or ignored, their emotional pain and mental overload take away the self-regulatory resources they need to act morally. Consequently, moral standards diminish in prominence, increasing the likelihood of disengagement (Riva et al., 2014).

The experimental study (Baumeister et al., 2005) demonstrates that social exclusion diminishes self-control and elevates impulsive or antisocial behaviors. Likewise, workplace research (Ferris et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2016) indicates that ostracized employees suffer from ego depletion and emotional fatigue, which serve as mediators in the relationship between ostracism and deviance.

2.6. Empirical Evidence from Previous Research

Previous studies consistently corroborate the suggested mediation chain. For example, Thau et al. (2008) discovered that abusive supervision indirectly heightened workplace deviance through moral disengagement. Kayani et al. (2021) illustrated that moral disengagement served as a mediator for the influence of despotic leadership on counterproductive behaviors within the public sector. Zhao et al. (2016) found that being left out at work was linked to moral disengagement and CWB, which confirmed the indirect pathway that SCT predicted. Deng et al. (2021) bolstered the COR perspective by demonstrating that resource loss mediated the connection between ostracism and unethical conduct. These studies collectively furnish robust empirical validation for the theoretical framework underpinning the present research.

2.7. Formulating Hypotheses

Based on Social Cognitive, Conservation of Resources, and Self-Regulation theories, and backed by previous empirical evidence, the following hypotheses are put forth:

- **Ha1:** Leaders' exclusion (EX) is positively correlated with employees' moral disengagement.
- **Ha2:** Leaders who ignore (IG) their employees are more likely to have employees who are morally disengaged.
- **Ha3:** Leaders who undermine (UN) their employees' morals are more likely to cause them to lose interest in their work.
- **Ha4:** Leaders' neglect (NG) is positively linked to employees' moral disengagement.
- **Ha5:** Differential Treatment (DT) by leaders correlates positively with employees' moral disengagement.

3. Methodology

3.1. Instruments versus Questionnaire Design

A structured, self-administered questionnaire was utilized to gather primary data. We chose this tool because it fits with the study's quantitative and explanatory design and makes it easier to collect data from a large group of people at institutions that are spread out across the country. The Questionnaires were given out in person, and each woreda had trained data collectors who helped with logistics, got permission to access the data, and answered questions. The instrument had four parts:

- **Demographic Information:** - This included gender, age, education, and work experience. The data was collected through multiple-choice questions that were measured on a nominal scale.
- **Leadership Ostracism Behavior (LOB):** This part used a 52-item scale based on Zhao et al. (2019) that looked at five different areas: neglect, differential treatment, undermining, ignoring, and exclusion.
- **Moral Disengagement (MD):** Seven items were adapted from Bandura (1996) and tailored for Ethiopian public organizational contexts.

A 5-point Likert scale was used to rate all of the items, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree." We tested the questionnaire with 30 public workers from a nearby area to make sure it was reliable and clear. This led to some small changes.

3.2. Target Group

The target group was all public sector workers in the East Gojjam Zone of the Amhara Region in Ethiopia. The East Gojjam Zone Public Service and Human Resource Development Office's report from 2024 said that there were 43,764 public employees. These people work in a variety of fields, including education,

health, agriculture, trade, marketing, investment, and administrative services in 28 districts (11 city administrations and 17 rural woredas).

3.3. Determining the Sample Size:

Using Yemane's (1967) formula with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error:

$$n = \frac{N}{(1+N(e)^2)} = \frac{43{,}764}{(1+43{,}764(0.05)^2)} = 397$$

Where:

N = 43,764 (total population)

Z = 1.96 (Z-score for 95% confidence level)

e = 0.05 (margin of error)

Therefore, a sample size of 397 was deemed statistically sufficient to represent the target population.

3.4. Method of Sampling

A stratified random sampling technique was used to make sure that the sample's representatives were accurate. First, public institutions were divided into groups based on their sector (e.g., health, education, administration). Then, 13 offices were carefully chosen in each of the 28 districts based on how important they were to public service and how many employees worked there. Respondents were randomly chosen from each selected office to make sure the results were fair and not biased. Lastly, five (5) zonal leaders and one (1) leader from each district or city were also included on purpose to get a higher-level view. This method allowed for proportional representation across different sectors and made sure that there was diversity in terms of location.

3.5. Test of Reliability and Validity

Reliability is how stable and consistent a measurement tool is when it captures the intended construct. It shows how well the tool works by showing how well it works on different items and at different times. In this study, we used Cronbach's Alpha in SPSS version 26 to measure reliability. This test measures internal consistency on a scale from 0 to 1. A higher value means that the reliability is stronger, and a value of 1 means that the internal consistency is perfect. Hinton et al. (2014) say that Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.50 are acceptable, while De Vellis (2017) says that values above 0.70 are good and those above 0.90 are great.

The findings indicated that all constructs exhibited superior internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients varying from 0.934 to 0.979 across seven variables. This shows that the measurement items were very reliable and consistent when measuring the intended dimensions.

Validity testing was done to make sure that the questionnaire really measured the things that were important to the study's goals. Content validity was confirmed via expert evaluation and the modification of items from recognized scales, including the Leadership Ostracism Behavior Scale (Zhao et al., 2019), with requisite adjustments to ensure cultural and contextual relevance.

The researcher used SPSS to look at inter-item correlations, item-total correlations, and the consistency of items within each construct to check for construct validity. All items showed strong links to their total scores, which means they accurately represented the constructs they were meant to. Moreover, convergent validity and discriminant validity were assessed utilizing Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), in accordance with the guidelines established by Fornell and Larcker (1981). All constructs exhibited CR values surpassing 0.80 and AVE values exceeding 0.50, thereby affirming sufficient convergent validity. Discriminant validity was established when the square root of each construct's AVE exceeded its correlations with other constructs, indicating that the constructs were empirically distinct.

3.6. Methods for Preparing and Analysing Data

After gathering the data, SPSS version 26 was used to code, enter, and clean the responses to make sure they were correct and complete. Descriptive statistical analyses, encompassing means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were employed to encapsulate respondent characteristics and principal study variables. Levene's independent t-test was utilized to analyze group differences, and Pearson correlation analysis was performed to evaluate the relationships among leadership ostracism, moral disengagement, and counterproductive work behavior.

Subsequent analyses employed multiple regression to investigate the predictive influences of dimensions of leadership ostracism on moral disengagement and counterproductive work behavior. We used Cronbach's Alpha to check the reliability of the constructs again and Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and the Fornell-Larcker criterion to check the validity of the constructs again and make sure that each variable is different. We used Baron and Kenny's (1986) three-step method to look at mediation effects and confirmed them by bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples using the PROCESS macro in SPSS 26 (Hayes, 2018). A mediation effect was deemed significant if the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect excluded zero. The outcomes of

these analyses were displayed through tables, graphs, and descriptive summaries produced in SPSS 26, offering a thorough comprehension of the interrelations among the study variables.

4. Descriptive Statistics

4.1. Descriptive Analysis of LOB Dimensions

Table 4.1 shows the mean values, standard deviations, and distributional properties of the statistical trends across five types of leadership ostracism behavior.

Table 4.1: The Five Dimensions of LOB with Descriptive Statistics

Predictor	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean	Skewness		Kurtosis	
					Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
EX	397	4.42	1.180	.059	-.617	.122	.433	.244
NG	397	3.01	.769	.039	.116	.122	-.089	.244
DT	397	2.98	.823	.041	.120	.122	-.303	.244
UN	397	3.06	.823	.041	.094	.122	-.303	.244
IG	397	3.87	.688	.035	-.298	.122	-.491	.244

The Exclusion dimension has the highest mean score (M = 4.42, SD = 1.18), which means that employees are very aware of exclusionary practices like being left out of informal conversations or interactions at work. This outcome aligns closely with the research conducted by Zhao et al. (2019) and Williams (2007), who recognized exclusion as a principal manifestation of workplace ostracism with considerable social and emotional repercussions.

In the East Gojjam Zone, historical trends of hierarchical leadership and tightly controlled power structures have often pushed dissenting voices and people who don't fit in to the edges. Some institutions have culturally ingrained these kinds of exclusionary behaviors, which strengthen status hierarchies instead of encouraging open conversation. Consequently, the significant incidence of exclusion in the present data signifies both global ostracism patterns and established local leadership conventions.

The Neglect dimension (M = 3.01, SD = 0.77) is close to the middle, which means that respondents have a moderate level of experience with passive leadership disengagement. This finding is consistent with Ferris et al. (2008) and Robinson et al. (2013), who characterize neglect as a subtle yet detrimental form of ostracism that compromises psychological safety and motivation.

In the history of organizational leadership in East Gojjam, especially in public institutions, leaders have often put more emphasis on authority than on helping

employees grow. This rigid bureaucracy helps create a culture where neglect, especially when it comes to not getting enough feedback, mentorship, or recognition, is normal. Consequently, the empirical data corroborate enduring criticisms of leadership passivity within the region's administrative frameworks.

Differential Treatment, with a mean of M = 2.98 (SD = 0.82), is also close to the neutral mark, which means that people think there is some favoritism or bias. This aligns with the findings of Robinson et al. (2013), which indicate that inequity serves as a demotivating factor, highlighting a deficiency in fairness and meritocracy.

The prevalence of differential treatment in East Gojjam may be partly attributed to historical patronage systems, where leadership roles were often influenced by familial, ethnic, or political affiliations. These tendencies continue to shape perceptions of favoritism and inequitable resource distribution in contemporary workplaces. Consequently, the current data corresponds with both modern research and the historical account of inequitable treatment in local leadership practices.

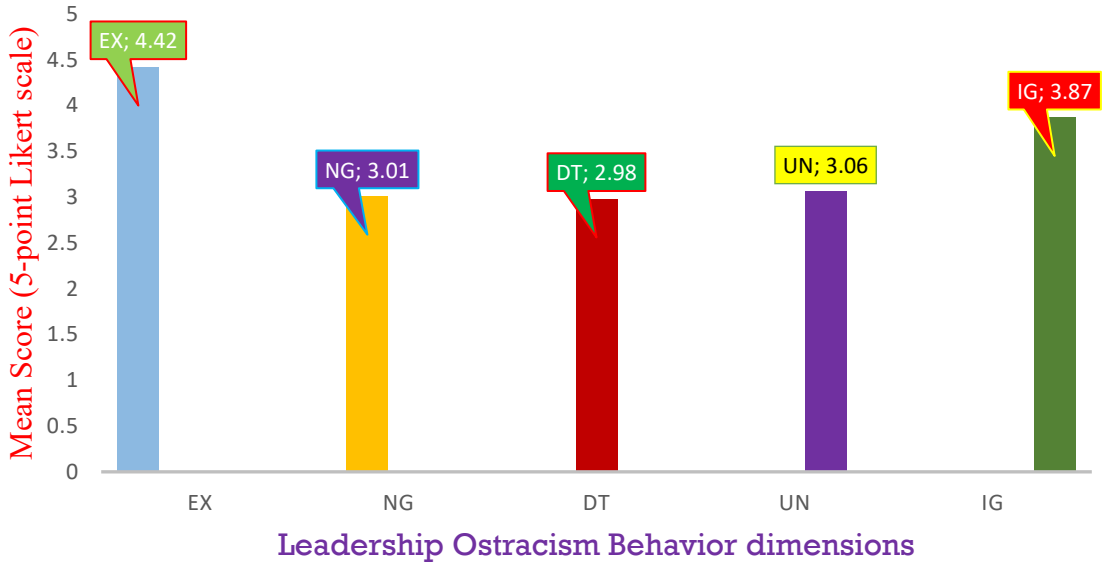
The average score for the Undermining dimension is M = 3.06 (SD = 0.82), which means that employees sometimes feel like leadership doesn't value them or undermines them. This dimension aligns with the research conducted by Duffy et al. (2002) and Aquino &Thau (2009), which associate undermining behaviors with diminished job satisfaction and heightened stress.

In East Gojjam's history of leadership, power has often been kept by controlling things from the top down and limiting the freedom of subordinates. These kinds of leadership behaviors, whether they are done on purpose or not, have historically made employees feel like their opinions don't matter and made them feel inferior. The data, therefore, indicate a perpetuation of these entrenched power dynamics.

The Ignore dimension has a mean of 3.87 and a standard deviation of 0.69, which is relatively high. This means that employees often feel like they are being ignored or treated as if they don't exist. This corroborates the findings of Williams (2007) and Leung et al. (2011), who characterize ignoring as a passive form of ostracism with significant psychological repercussions.

In the historical context of East Gojjam, leadership has frequently neglected or excluded diverse viewpoints, particularly from marginalized groups such as women or junior staff, especially in hierarchical or male-dominated environments. The feeling of being ignored is not only a problem in today's workplaces, but it also shows how the region's leaders are culturally and systemically excluding people.

Figure 4.1: Descriptive Statistics for LOB Dimensions



The skewness and kurtosis values show that the data is mostly normal, which shows that it is strong. The moderate negative skew for exclusion (-0.617) and ignore (-0.298) indicates a propensity for consensus regarding the existence of these behaviors. The standard errors for both skewness and kurtosis are comparatively minimal, signifying stability in the estimates.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns align with Bandura's (1999) social-cognitive theory, especially the notion of moral disengagement. In settings where exclusion, neglect, and disregard are commonplace, both leaders and employees may justify unethical conduct, resulting in the erosion of ethical standards and psychological safety.

The results indicate that exclusion and ignoring behaviors are the most significant aspects of leadership ostracism in the sampled institutions of East Gojjam Zone. These behaviors indicate not only individual leadership deficiencies but also systemic, historically entrenched leadership paradigms characterized by hierarchy, exclusivity, and diminished psychological engagement. The alignment with prior global studies underscores the universality of leadership ostracism, while the historical context of East Gojjam offers a culturally informed rationale for the identified patterns.

4.2. Analysis of LOB at the Item Level

In the East Gojjam Zone, leadership has always been based on a mix of communal values, hierarchical systems of government, and loyalty-expectancy models that are deeply rooted in the culture. Nevertheless, modernization and institutional pressures have engendered various leadership behaviors, some of which are at odds with the historically esteemed inclusive norms of the region. The present

analysis examines the descriptive statistics of leadership ostracism behaviors and correlates the findings with previous studies and regional leadership theory. Table 4.2 shows the average scores and standard deviations for each of the five ostracism dimensions' individual questionnaire items.

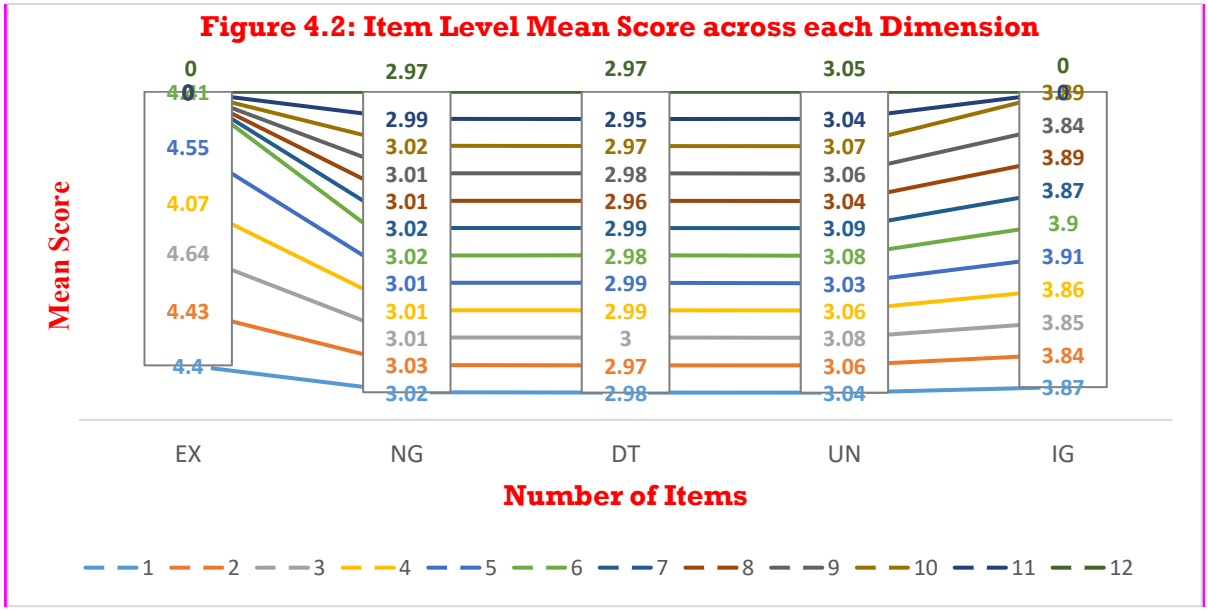
Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics for Item-Level LOB

Item	Leader's Behaviors	Mean	Std. Dev.
1.	Exclusion		
1.1.	My boss doesn't let me take part in team activities.	4.40	1.251
1.2.	My boss on purpose leaves me out of important meetings.	4.43	1.350
1.3.	My boss doesn't pay attention to me when we talk.	4.64	1.374
1.4.	My boss doesn't ask me to join informal team meetings.	4.07	1.405
1.5.	My boss doesn't tell me important things that other people know.	4.55	1.373
1.6.	My boss acts like I'm not on the team.	4.41	1.414
2.	Neglect		
2.1.	My boss doesn't give me any advice or feedback.	3.02	.856
2.2.	My boss doesn't care about my career growth.	3.03	.855
2.3.	My boss won't help me when I ask for it.	3.01	.867
2.4.	My boss doesn't recognize what I've done well.	3.01	.863
2.5.	My boss doesn't talk to me unless he has to.	3.01	.854
2.6.	My boss doesn't check to see if I'm okay.	3.02	.879
2.7.	My boss doesn't talk to me about how I'm doing very often.	3.02	.863
2.8.	My boss doesn't give me chances to grow.	3.01	.848
2.9.	My boss doesn't let me help make decisions.	3.01	.878
2.10.	When I have problems at work, my boss doesn't help me.	3.02	.877
2.11.	My boss doesn't thank me for my hard work.	2.99	.876
2.12.	My boss doesn't give me the tools I need to be successful.	2.97	.867
3.	Differential Treatment		
3.1.	My boss gives other people better chances than I do.	2.98	.907
3.2.	My boss gives more praise to some workers than to me.	2.97	.897
3.3.	My boss is harder on me than on other people.	3.00	.917
3.4.	My boss only gives good jobs to a few employees.	2.99	.910
3.5.	My boss lets other people make mistakes, but she is very hard on me.	2.99	.943
3.6.	My boss doesn't let me work on special projects or go to training sessions.	2.98	.904
3.7.	Some team members get more of my leader's attention than I do.	2.99	.902
3.8.	My boss talks to some workers more often than he talks to me.	2.96	.926

3.9.	My boss gives some people special treatment.	2.98	.918
3.10.	My boss doesn't often give me helpful feedback when they are helping someone else.	2.97	.927
3.11.	My boss lets some employees be more flexible, but not me.	2.95	.903
3.12.	My boss doesn't let me use important resources that other people do.	2.97	.900
4.	Undermining		
4.1.	My boss talks badly about my work in front of other people.	3.04	.881
4.2.	My boss on purpose gives me tasks with deadlines that aren't realistic.	3.06	.934
4.3.	My boss doesn't give me the tools I need to do my job well.	3.08	.909
4.4.	My boss takes credit for what I do.	3.06	.927
4.5.	My boss gives me tasks that I can't do well so I fail.	3.03	.913
4.6.	My boss tells people bad things about me.	3.08	.940
4.7.	My boss doesn't care about my successes.	3.09	.908
4.8.	My boss doesn't want me to grow in my career.	3.04	.877
4.9.	My boss on purpose makes me look bad in front of my coworkers.	3.06	.912
4.10.	My boss won't let me network with people in higher management.	3.07	.920
4.11.	My boss won't let me move up in the company or get promotions.	3.04	.924
4.12.	My boss doesn't give me enough credit for the team's success.	3.05	.921
5.	Ignore		
5.1.	My boss on purpose didn't say hello or look me in the eye.	3.87	.800
5.2.	In groups, my boss acted like they didn't see me.	3.84	.801
5.3.	During team meetings, my boss didn't listen to my ideas.	3.85	.774
5.4.	My leader didn't respond to what I said.	3.86	.780
5.5.	In meetings, my boss acted like I wasn't there.	3.91	.763
5.6.	My boss didn't notice that I was at work.	3.90	.777
5.7.	When I said hello, my leader didn't answer.	3.87	.813
5.8.	When my boss gave me important tasks, he or she didn't see me.	3.89	.805
5.9.	My boss didn't ask me for help or support.	3.84	.775
5.10.	My boss on purpose left me out of casual talks.	3.89	.796

The data show that leadership ostracism behaviors in the East Gojjam Zone are very different from the region's traditional values of inclusive leadership. Exclusionary behavior received the highest scores (means 4.07–4.64), indicating that leaders frequently neglect employees and withhold information,

representing a departure from the previously established communal consensus systems grounded in inclusivity (Bekele, 2015; Asmamaw, 2017). This is in line with what Ferris et al. (2008) say about exclusion being a harmful way to treat people at work. Neglect received moderate scores (3.01–3.03), suggesting that leaders were not interested in helping employees grow, which goes against the region's mentorship-based culture. Tesema (2016) and Liu & Wang (2013) say this is because of changes in the structure and too much work for leaders. Differential treatment scored the lowest (2.95–3.00), which means that favoritism is not very common, but there are still some small unfairnesses that go against traditional fairness and support Mengistu's (2019) findings that favoritism is on the rise because of political and social networks. Behaviors that undermine others (around 3.08–3.09) include publicly discrediting someone or not giving them chances, which were once socially unacceptable. This is in line with Ashforth's (1994) idea that leaders protect their status in bureaucracies. Ignoring, with high means (3.84–3.91), signifies systemic passive ostracism, which culturally corresponds to disrespect and undermines collective bonds (Kassaye, 2018; Williams, 2001). In general, these results show a move away from participatory and moral leadership and toward bureaucratic, transactional, and exclusionary practices. This fits with ideas about toxic leadership, social exclusion, and organizational dysfunction.



4.3. Descriptive Statistics of Mechanisms for Moral Disengagement

This section provides a comprehensive analysis of moral disengagement mechanisms among employees, contextualized by previous research and theoretical frameworks pertinent to the leadership context of the East Gojjam Zone. Moral disengagement is the mental process that people use to justify not following moral rules, which often leads to bad behavior at work. Table 4.3 shows

the average values and standard deviations for each of the seven mechanisms that were looked at in this study.

4.3.1. Moral Justification

In Table 4.3, the statement "I sometimes think it's okay to treat a coworker badly if it helps the company reach its goals" has a mean of 3.65 and a standard deviation of 0.817. This relatively high mean suggests that employees may morally justify harmful actions as necessary for organizational success, which means that a moderate level of agreement with this behavior exists. This is in line with Bandura's (1991) theory, which says that people turn bad behavior into a good cause. In the historical context of East Gojjam, communal loyalty and collectivist values frequently compelled individuals to rationalize actions that favored group success over personal well-being (Asrat, 2014). Previous leadership research in the Zone (Tadesse, 2018) indicated that moral relativism was sometimes utilized to rationalize unethical directives under the guise of "organizational benefit."

4.3.2. Labeling in a euphemistic way

The statement "I refer to harmful actions at work using soft or professional terms to make them seem less severe" in table 4.3 has a mean of 3.64 and a standard deviation of 0.757. This outcome indicates a propensity to employ sanitized language to mitigate the emotional repercussions of unethical behavior. Social-cognitive theory says that euphemistic labeling hides the true nature of behavior. Historically, East Gojjam's administrative culture has been characterized by formalistic bureaucratic communication, wherein uncomfortable truths were frequently recontextualized to preserve hierarchical order (Mengistu, 2016). Demeke (2020) supports this interpretation by showing that the language used in the Zone's institutions often made workplace injustices seem less serious.

4.3.3. Comparing to your advantage

The statement "When I compare my actions to what others have done, my behavior doesn't seem so bad" in Table 4.3 has a mean of 3.64 and an SD of 0.822. Respondents showed some agreement with advantageous comparison, which is when you compare your own bad behavior to worse behavior to make it seem less bad. In the East Gojjam Zone, traditional hierarchical systems have occasionally facilitated the normalization of unethical conduct, as individuals compare themselves to the misconduct of superiors or predecessors (Kassa& Belay, 2017). This corroborates the findings of Habte (2019), who observed that employees in local government offices justified their actions by citing previous leadership misconduct.

4.3.4. Taking Away Responsibility

Table 4.3 shows that the statement "I feel less responsible for my actions when I am just carrying out orders from higher-ups" has a Mean of 3.66 and an SD of

0.767. This finding shows a small trend toward displaced responsibility, which is when people put off being responsible to authority figures. This reflects the authoritarian legacy in East Gojjam's leadership culture, especially in public administration. According to Taddese (2015), historical leadership patterns in the Zone were influenced by top-down governance, which meant that orders were rarely questioned. This made people feel less responsible for their actions. This aligns with Bandura's framework, which asserts that individuals may disengage morally by perceiving themselves as mere instruments of higher authority.

4.3.5. Spread of Responsibility

In Table 4.3, the statement "When the whole team agrees on a bad choice, I don't feel personally responsible" has a mean of 3.64 and a standard deviation of 0.821. The data shows that there is some agreement with the idea of spreading responsibility. In cultures that value groups, like East Gojjam's, making decisions as a group is very important. But this can lead to shared blame, which makes it harder to hold people accountable. Gizachew (2021) says that traditional councils in the area often made decisions as a group, which could make it hard to tell who was to blame. These patterns align with the notion of "group moral disengagement" articulated by Detert et al. (2008).

4.3.6. Consequences that are not true

The statement "I believe that the negative effects of my workplace actions are usually exaggerated or temporary" in Table 4.3 has a mean of 3.63 and a standard deviation of 0.759. This indicates that employees often minimize the repercussions of their actions, which is consistent with the distortion of consequences mechanism. In East Gojjam, resilience and tolerance are frequently esteemed qualities, which may occasionally result in the mitigation of harm within organizational settings (Yimer, 2022). Gebremariam (2016) also found that zonal leaders often downplayed the effects of bad behavior or framed them as necessary changes, which made this pattern even stronger.

4.3.7. Assigning Blame

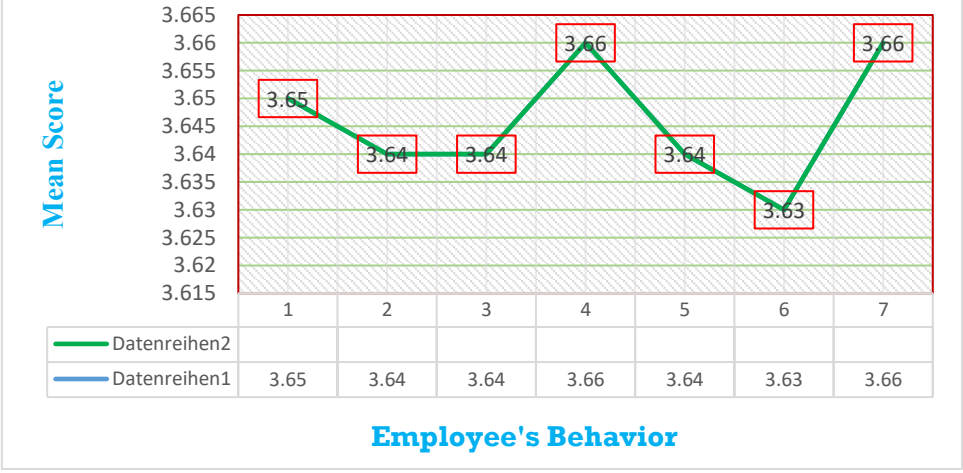
The statement "I think some employees deserve harsh treatment because of how they act" in Table 4.3 has a mean of 3.66 and a standard deviation of 0.776. This fairly high score suggests that people tend to blame victims for the wrong things that happen to them. In the traditional justice systems of East Gojjam, the concept of deserved consequences was fundamentally integrated into customary conflict resolution (Bekele, 2013). Research, including Sisay (2019), illustrates that perceived deviations from group norms can legitimize severe disciplinary actions. This supports Bandura's claim that transferring blame to victims of harm promotes moral disengagement.

Table 4.3: Descriptive Statistics of Mechanisms for Moral Disengagement

Item	Employee's Behavior (MD 7-Mechanisms)	Mean	St. Dev.
1	Sometimes I think it's okay to treat a coworker badly if it helps the company reach its goals.	3.65	0.817
2	I use soft or professional language to talk about harmful things that happen at work to make them seem less bad.	3.64	0.757
3	My behavior doesn't seem so bad when I compare it to what other people have done.	3.64	0.822
4	I feel less responsible for my actions when I am just carrying out orders from higher-ups.	3.66	0.767
5	I don't feel personally responsible when the whole team agrees on a bad choice.	3.64	0.821
6	I think that the bad things that happen because of what I do at work are usually blown out of proportion or only last for a short time.	3.63	0.759
7	Some workers deserve to be treated badly because of how they act.	3.66	0.776

The visual depiction of moral disengagement mechanisms is:

Figure 4.3: Descriptive Statistics of Moral Disengagement Mechanisms



4.4. The Impact of LOB Dimensions on Moral Disengagement

The regression model analyzing the impact of Leadership Organizational Behavior (LOB) dimensions on Moral Disengagement (MD) demonstrated significant explanatory power, elucidating 45.4% of the variance in MD (R^2 = .454). This means that almost half of the differences in moral disengagement between people can be explained by the differences in the LOB dimensions. The model comprises five dimensions: Exclusion (EX), Neglect (NG), Distributive Treatment (DT), Unfairness (UN), and Ignoring (IG). Four of these dimensions

exhibited significant positive correlations with moral disengagement, whereas one dimension (EX) did not.

Table 4.4: Regression Coefficients for Forecasting MD from LOB Dimensions

Model		Unstd. Coefficients		Std. Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	Constant	.503	.209		2.413	.016		
	EX	-.020	.022	-.033	-.887	.376	.989	1.012
	NG	.239	.038	.265	6.350	.000	.801	1.248
	DT	.154	.033	.183	4.629	.000	.894	1.118
	UN	.194	.032	.230	5.985	.000	.945	1.059
	IG	.377	.045	.374	8.446	.000	.714	1.401

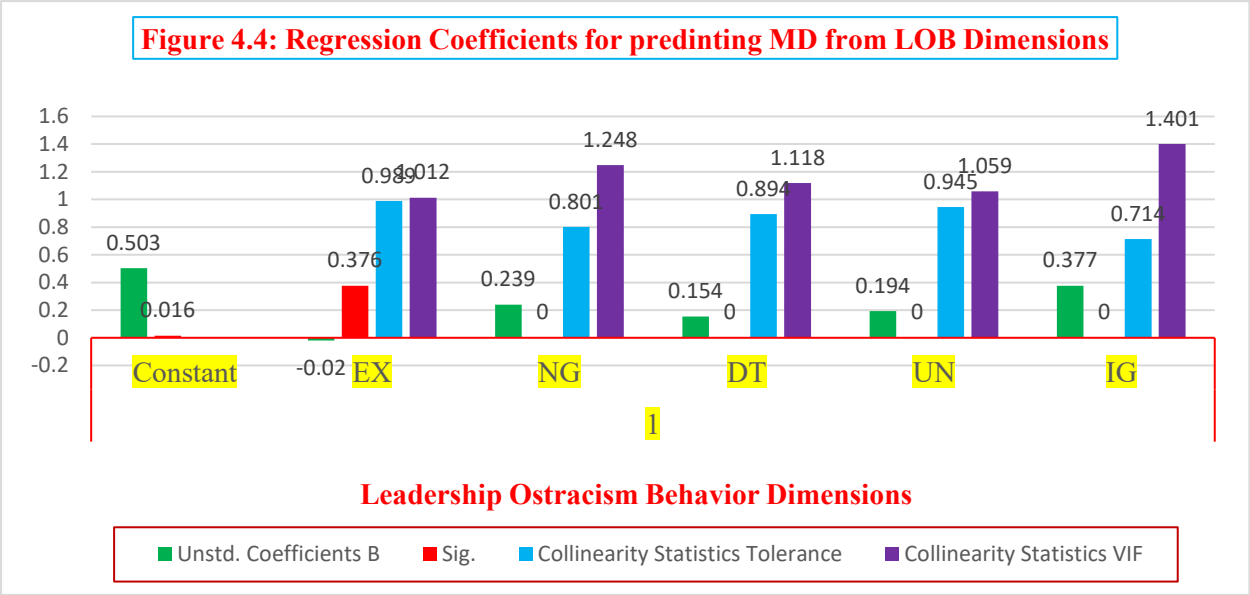
Table 4.4 shows that Ignoring (IG) was the best predictor of moral disengagement ($\beta = .374$, $p < .001$). This finding is consistent with Bandura's (1999) social-cognitive theory of moral disengagement, which asserts that social detachment diminishes empathetic accountability, thereby increasing the likelihood of individuals rationalizing unethical behavior. When leaders or peers repeatedly ignore members of an organization, it creates an emotional and moral gap that makes people less aware of what is right and wrong. In the collectivist society of East Gojjam, where social validation and communal belonging are highly esteemed, being ignored or unrecognized engenders a profound sense of alienation. This detachment weakens the moral ties between people that usually keep them from doing bad things, which makes people feel like they have a good reason to do things that go against moral standards.

Neglect (NG) exhibited a significant positive correlation with moral disengagement ($\beta = .265$, $p < .001$). This implies that when leaders neglect to offer emotional support, guidance, or recognition, components regarded as fundamental paternalistic responsibilities, followers encounter a collapse of moral accountability. This finding corroborates Kassa and Abate's (2018) assertion that moral erosion escalates when leadership neglect subverts culturally ingrained expectations. In these circumstances, neglect constitutes not only an administrative failure but also a moral one, as it indicates the cessation of relational care and moral stewardship.

Unfairness (UN) and Distributive Treatment (DT) also had big positive effects on moral disengagement (β = .230, $p < .001$ and β = .183, $p < .001$, respectively). These dimensions signify perceptions of inequity and bias in the treatment or rewards of individuals within organizational contexts. When fairness principles are breached, individuals are inclined to disregard moral constraints, rationalizing unethical behavior as justifiable reactions to perceived injustice. This dynamic aligns with the extensive literature on ethical cognition, which demonstrates that relational inequity undermines self-regulation and ethical restraint.

Conversely, Exclusion (EX) exhibited no significant correlation with moral disengagement (β = –.033, p = .376). This lack of significance may be indicative of cultural perceptions of exclusion in hierarchical societies such as East Gojjam, where social exclusion is frequently regarded as a normative aspect of legitimate authority structures. In these settings, exclusion might be regarded not as a moral transgression but as a socially endorsed practice that upholds order and reverence for hierarchy. As a result, individuals may not perceive exclusion as morally detrimental or as justification for abandoning moral principles.

Figure 4.4: A graph showing how standardized beta values for LOB dimensions predict MD



When looked at as a whole, the model shows that socially disengaging behaviors, like ignoring and neglect, seriously hurt moral integrity by breaking down empathic concern and making interpersonal accountability weaker, which is what keeps ethical behavior going. In collectivist settings, where leaders are anticipated to exemplify moral guidance and relational care, the lack of these behaviors exacerbates moral disengagement. Instead of openly rebelling,

people respond by rationalizing their actions internally, making unethical behavior seem okay within a moral framework that doesn't involve feelings.

5. Testing and Talking About Hypotheses

5.1. $\mathbf{H_{a1}}$: Exclusion has a significant and positive effect on MD ($\beta = -0.04$, $p = 0.407$).

The outcome for Hypothesis H1a indicated a non-significant and marginally negative correlation between exclusion (EX) and moral disengagement (MD). This finding contradicts earlier theoretical claims based on Bandura's (1996) social cognitive theory, which suggested that individuals experiencing negative interpersonal situations, such as exclusion, might cognitively detach from moral standards as a strategy for self-preservation. Empirical research (e.g., Zadro et al., 2004) contended that social exclusion enables justifications for unethical behavior.

Nonetheless, the current finding indicates a more contextually dependent psychological mechanism. Utilizing self-regulation theory, contemporary studies (e.g., Richman & Leary, 2009; Riva et al., 2014) have demonstrated that exclusion can result in moral vigilance rather than disengagement, particularly in individuals possessing elevated self-awareness or moral identity. In collectivist settings such as Ethiopia, which prioritize social harmony and conformity, exclusion may induce adaptive self-monitoring instead of moral disengagement. Furthermore, as DeWall and Bushman (2011) observed, certain excluded individuals exhibit pro-social behaviors to regain social acceptance, which may inhibit disengagement processes.

So, even though exclusion has a psychological effect, its role in moral cognition doesn't seem to follow a straight line and is affected by culture. In tightly-knit or hierarchical societies, it can sometimes stop people from disengaging.

5.2. Ha2: Ignoring has a significant and positive impact on MD ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$).

In stark contrast to exclusion, being ignored (IG) by leaders exhibited a robust positive correlation with moral disengagement (MD). Based on moral identity theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002), this finding corroborates the idea that when a person's self-esteem or recognition is compromised, moral disengagement serves as a psychological defense mechanism. Tepper et al. (2006) contended that passive abusive supervision, such as neglect, engenders emotional invalidation, thereby increasing the likelihood of unethical rationalizations.

Being ignored is not only a sign of absence, but also an active denial of worth. Williams (2007) found that being left out of a group can hurt basic human needs like belonging and self-esteem, which can lead to moral detachment as a way to cope. Consequently, this behavior seems especially detrimental, bolstering disengagement strategies like moral justification and the shifting of responsibility. This substantiates that social invisibility, as opposed to explicit

exclusion, may be more effective in activating cognitive processes that alienate individuals from ethical norms.

5.3. $\mathbf{H_{a3}}$: Undermining has a significant and positive impact on MD ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$).

The substantial positive correlation between undermining (UN) and moral disengagement (MD) exemplifies the application of Organizational Justice Theory. When leaders belittle or discredit their subordinates in public, employees may see this as a violation of interpersonal justice (Greenberg, 1990). To manage their stress, they use cognitive strategies like advantageous comparison or distorting the effects, which make it easier for them to ignore moral rules (Bandura et al., 1996).

Ferris et al. (2008) discovered that undermining diminishes trust in leadership, thereby weakening employees' psychological contracts. Mitchell et al. (2015) similarly observed that persistent assaults on dignity obscure moral boundaries, facilitating unethical justification. Undermining is both a psychological offense and an ethical destabilizer, creating an internal narrative that justifies behavior that goes against social norms.

5.4. $\mathbf{H_{a4}}$: Neglect has a significant and positive impact on MD ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$).

The substantial positive impact of neglect (NG) on moral disengagement (MD) aligns with the tenets of ethical climate theory and passive leadership models. In organizations lacking leadership feedback, support, or ethical guidance, employees frequently perceive this absence as implicit endorsement of deviance (Brown &Treviño, 2006; Detert et al., 2007). This helps internalized norms break down because there is no clear moral guidance without ethical leadership.

Neglect can also lead to emotional detachment, which lowers the motivation to act unethically. Skogstad et al. (2007) contend that sustained neglect fosters emotional numbness, thereby facilitating cognitive pathways for disengagement strategies. In these settings, self-regulation declines, leading individuals to employ moral rationalizations to justify actions that would typically contravene ethical norms.

Neglect creates a lack of moral oversight, and moral disengagement fills the void left by poor leadership.

5.5. $\mathbf{H_{a5}}$: Differential treatment has a significant and positive impact on MD ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$).

Lastly, the positive and significant impact of differential treatment (DT) on moral disengagement (MD) is most effectively elucidated by Organizational Justice Theory and Social Comparison Theory. When employees see leaders treating some people better than others for no good reason, it makes them feel like fairness rules are being broken (Colquitt et al., 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2003).

This kind of perceived unfairness can lead to moral disengagement, with workers justifying bad behavior as a way to make things right.

In a culturally stratified setting, differential treatment may further intensify in-group or out-group tensions, fostering disengagement among individuals who perceive themselves as marginalized. Barsky (2011) contended that moral disengagement flourishes in contexts where systemic bias erodes ethical consistency, prompting employees to dissociate from organizational values.

So, favoritism not only makes people think things are unfair, but it also weakens their moral commitment, which makes them less likely to care about others.

Table 5.1: The Path Coefficients of LOB Dimensions to MD

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	p-value	Significance
H1a	EX → MD	–0.04	0.407	Not sig.
H1b	IG → MD	0.43	< .001	***
H1c	UN → MD	0.26	< .001	***
H1d	NG → MD	0.30	< .001	***
H1e	DT → MD	0.21	< .001	***

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Summary of Results

This study sought to investigate the impact of various aspects of Leader Ostracism Behavior (LOB), specifically exclusion, ignoring, undermining, neglect, and differential treatment, on moral disengagement (MD) among public sector employees in the East Gojjam Zone, Amhara Region, Ethiopia. Based on Bandura's (1996) social cognitive theory and related frameworks like organizational justice and ethical climate theories, the study investigated the impact of adverse leader behaviors on the psychological mechanisms that disengage individuals from moral self-regulation.

The hypothesis testing yielded mixed yet informative results. Contrary to expectations, exclusion ($\beta = -0.04$, $p = 0.407$) did not significantly predict moral disengagement and even indicated a slight negative relationship. On the other hand, ignoring ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$), undermining ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$), neglect ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$), and differential treatment ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$) all had strong positive effects on moral disengagement. These findings collectively indicate that, although overt exclusion may not inherently undermine moral cognition, subtle, persistent, or passive forms of leader ostracism significantly impair employees' ethical engagement and self-regulation.

6.2. Conclusion

The insignificant correlation between exclusion and moral disengagement contests conventional postulates in moral psychology. In collectivist and hierarchically organized societies such as Ethiopia, exclusion may incite self-

correction and moral vigilance instead of disengagement, as individuals endeavor to restore social acceptance and preserve communal harmony. This indicates that the moral ramifications of ostracism are not universal but influenced by cultural and contextual determinants.

On the other hand, the strong effect of ignoring shows that being psychologically invisible, being dismissed, or being emotionally invalidated can be worse than being explicitly excluded. When leaders disregard their subordinates, employees feel threatened in their identity and emotionally devalued, which leads to defensive cognitive mechanisms that rationalize moral detachment. Likewise, undermining and neglect illustrate how both overt hostility and passive indifference compromise ethical behavior. When leaders don't offer support, fairness, or moral guidance, workers see a breakdown in moral order, which makes it normal for people to act in ways that aren't engaged. Differential treatment ultimately underscores that perceived injustice and favoritism undermine moral commitment, as employees justify unethical behavior as compensatory or retaliatory measures in response to perceived inequity.

These findings collectively affirm that moral disengagement in the workplace is not merely an individual ethical deficiency but also indicative of leadership dynamics and organizational culture. When leaders act disrespectfully, indifferently, or with bias, it can damage the moral fabric of public institutions by sending the message that ethical principles are negotiable.

Generally, the study adds to the growing body of research that connects moral thinking with leadership behavior in collectivist and non-Western settings. It expands Bandura's social cognitive theory by illustrating that the activation of disengagement mechanisms is contingent upon cultural and relational dynamics. The results also support organizational justice theory by showing that feelings of fairness and moral consistency are important ways to keep people from leaving, especially in public institutions where trust and service delivery depend on ethical legitimacy.

6.3. Recommendations

The findings provide numerous actionable insights for policymakers and administrative leaders within Ethiopia's public sector:

- To stop passive ostracism, leadership development programs should focus on emotional intelligence, moral sensitivity, and communication that includes everyone.
- Institutional ethics frameworks must encompass not only explicit misconduct but also insidious behaviors such as neglect and favoritism that erode moral culture.
- To combat the psychological effects of leader ostracism, employee support systems like counseling or grievance systems should be made stronger.
- To keep public employees motivated and stop them from becoming disengaged, managers need to make decisions that are fair and open.

6.4. Constraints and Prospective Investigations

The study offers valuable insights, yet it is constrained by its cross-sectional design and dependence on self-reported data, which may be susceptible to social desirability bias. Future investigations may utilize longitudinal or mixed-method strategies to examine causality and more profound psychological mechanisms. Comparative studies across regions or sectors may elucidate the distinct influences of organizational culture and leadership norms on moral disengagement.

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