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Article

Machiavellian Careerism and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior: A Sequential Mediation Model Among Russian Workers

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Abstract

This study examined how Machiavellian careerism influences unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), focusing on the mediating roles of careerist attitudes and moral rationalization. Whereas prior research has emphasized moral disengagement as a mediator, we incorporate careerism through the cognitive-affective personality system (CAPS), clarifying how Machiavellian individuals rationalize and engage in UPB. Online survey data from 320 Russian employees were analyzed. Machiavellianism significantly predicted UPB. This relationship was mediated not only by moral disengagement but also sequentially by careerism and moral disengagement, suggesting that career-oriented ambition facilitates the cognitive rationalization of UPB. Incorporating careerism into ethical decision-making models in the context of Russian cultural norms provides insights into how Machiavellian careerism influences UPB.

Keywords: careerism; Machiavellianism; unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB); moral disengagement; sequential mediation
JEL: M14, M12, D91

1. Introduction

Imagine a talented employee compromising on ethical principles to advance their career in a competitive corporate environment. This scenario may reflect careerism, devotion to advancing one's career at the expense of personal integrity (Feldman and Weitz, 1991), and/or engagement in unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) driven primarily by self-interest. UPB represents a phenomenon within organizational contexts in which employees engage in activities that intend to benefit the organization but violate ethical standards (Umphress et al., 2010). Such behaviors include exaggerating a product's benefits to attract customers and falsifying financial data to create an image of success. Although inherently unethical, UPB is often perceived as prosocial, making it different from many other forms of workplace misconduct. Thus, could self-interest not play a central role in motivating UPB? The tension over this question has attracted growing scholarly attention in management and organizational research (e.g., Graham et al., 2020; Steele et al., 2024).

Identifying its predictors has been crucial to understanding and addressing this issue from the beginning, and the first factors that emerged as significant antecedents are antisocial personality traits, such as Machiavellianism. More recent research has also examined the processes underlying UPB, with moral disengagement emerging as a well-established mechanism that illuminates the cognitive strategies employees use to justify and rationalize such actions to explain how personality traits translate into unethical conduct (e.g., Moore et al., 2012; Umphress and Bingham, 2011). However, this approach is insufficiently responsive to contextual and motivational nuances, particularly in today's career environment, in which employees derive job security from being employable (Bernstrøm et al., 2019). A new psychological contract has evolved to include more emotional and social aspects of work relationships. Consistent with Mischel and Shoda's (1995) view that behavior is an interaction between internal processes and situational cues, examining career-driven motivation can provide more comprehensive insights into unethical behavior than a purely moral lens or trait model allows.

Building on the potential role of Machiavellianism in shaping employees' UPB, this study examines careerism as a mediating variable alongside moral disengagement. Careerism provides a strategic avenue for Machiavellian individuals to justify their unethical actions. Its conceptual proximity to psychopathy (Chiaburu et al., 2013) reflects the prioritization of self-interest over ethical norms and the calculated navigation of organizational hierarchies. Although recent studies, such as that of Steele et al. (2024), have acknowledged self-interest as a motivator for UPB, a notable research gap remains regarding the specific role of careerism and its interplay with moral disengagement. This study addresses this gap by positioning careerism as a novel mediator in the Machiavellianism–UPB link and examining its convergence with moral disengagement. Rather than focusing solely on personality traits, this study investigates how Machiavellianism influences UPB through a specific cognitive-affective response. Integrating these components provides a more nuanced understanding of how Machiavel-

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lianism, careerism, and moral disengagement jointly foster employee engagement in UPB.

This study uses a predictive approach to contribute to the literature by demonstrating how both career motives and moral justification promote UPB. It highlights underexplored links, such as Machiavellianism's influence on careerism and careerism's role in UPB to provide a foundation for emerging models. By situating the analysis in Russia, a society shifting from collectivism to materialism and individualism, we also add cultural depth to a body of literature largely based on Western contexts. To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore these dynamics in Russia. Furthermore, the sequential mediation model helps distinguish transient changes from enduring ones, particularly among Millennial and Gen Z employees with weaker employer ties. As corporate ethical failures often stem from employee misconduct, our model offers practical guidance for human resource managers and leaders, emphasizing the need to move beyond conventional selection and training to proactive strategies that mitigate UPB in the workplace.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Drawing on the cognitive-affective personality system (CAPS; Mischel and Shoda, 1995), our sequential model demonstrates that UPB emerges from interactions between affective elements (reckless careerism) and cognitive factors (moral disengagement). Russia's centralized economic legacy, hierarchical corporate structures, and enduring business culture provide a distinct context in which to examine these dynamics. The post-Soviet transition to a market economy fostered oligarchic consolidation, corruption, and instability, which has continued to shape organizational practices (Ledeneva, 2013). Unlike merit-based systems, career advancement in Russia often depends on navigating power dynamics, demonstrating loyalty, and aligning with organizational interests (Michailova and Hutchings, 2006). In an environment of limited mobility and economic volatility, collectivist norms and entrenched hierarchies may further legitimize unethical conduct when framed as serving organizational goals.

2.1 Machiavellianism and UPB

Machiavellianism is a personality trait characterized by manipulativeness and self-serving goals, typically expressed through deceitful, strategic actions to maximize personal gain (Christie and Geis, 1970; Wilson et al., 1996). Individuals with Machiavellian personalities are cynical and tactical, viewing interpersonal manipulation as a key to life success and often disguising their true intentions to achieve their goals. Although employees who score high in Machiavellianism may occasionally outperform their lower-scoring counterparts, their behavioral patterns are frequently described as malevolent, vindictive, and pragmatically focused on winning (Garcia et al., 2015). In the workplace, these tendencies can manifest as withholding information to maintain control, undermining colleagues to advance, or forming alliances solely for personal gain. Research further shows that Machiavellianism predicts employees' perceptions of organizational politics, whereas political skill can mask Machiavellian tendencies (Blickle et al., 2020).

Griep et al. (2023) defined UPB as actions intended to promote an organization's effective functioning but that violate core societal values, norms, laws, or standards of proper conduct. As intentional extra-role behavior, UPB embodies both unethical and pro-organizational elements. While engaging in UPB is a deliberate choice made by employees, its unethical nature ultimately undermines the long-term interests of the organization, its teams, individuals, and broader society (Tang et al., 2020). Overemphasis on the pro-organizational aspect can cause employees to overlook potential negative consequences; however, when engagement in UPB is acknowledged and rewarded, it may increase their sense of visibility within the larger collective, fostering feelings of competence and supporting their reputation management (Alqhaiwi, 2024).

The well-known quote "the ends justify the means" suggests a greater chance that employees high in Machiavellianism may act unethically at work. This mindset blurs ethical boundaries, as such individuals often view ethical constraints as malleable when bending or breaking them serves their goals (Castille et al., 2018). Machiavellian employees are proficient in interpreting social cues and are likely to view UPB as a means to advance personal growth or ensure organizational success regarding unethical actions as necessary to achieve their desired outcomes. UPB can function as a social exchange resource (Bryant and Merritt, 2021). Therefore, this view may be further reinforced by the reciprocal exchange of interests and goals that motivates Machiavellian employees to form transactional psychological contracts with their organizations (Zagenczyk et al., 2014). Based on this evidence, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Machiavellianism and UPB have a positive relationship.

2.2 Moral Disengagement as a Mediator

In addition to Machiavellian traits, a critical factor contributing to UPB is the individual tendency to become morally disengaged from one's transgressive actions and their consequences. The individual predisposition to reconstruct one's behavior is referred to as moral disengagement, reflecting a set of cognitive mechanisms that deactivate moral self-regulation and help individuals mitigate moral dissonance when their actions and ethical beliefs conflict (Bandura, 1999). This process not only bypasses normal moral reasoning but also dampens self-condemning emotions during or after wrongdoing. Shu et al. (2011) found that individuals who cheated exhibited higher levels

of moral disengagement and impaired ability to remember moral rules. Over time, such gradual disengagement decouples employees' internal moral standards from their perceptions of their behavior, eroding the effectiveness of those standards in guiding conduct.

Machiavellians are master manipulators and are thus more likely to employ moral disengagement mechanisms to distance themselves from the ethical implications of their actions, thereby increasing their UPB. This moral justification process enables individuals to prioritize organizational or personal goals over moral considerations, which eventually allows them to engage in unethical behaviors that they believe are beneficial to their organization. Therefore, moral disengagement deactivates moral self-regulation and prevents Machiavellians from acting morally. Several studies have examined moral disengagement as a mediator of the effects of individual-level predictors on morally problematic cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Chen and Chen, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Based on these findings, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. Moral disengagement mediates the positive relationship between Machiavellianism and UPB.

2.3 Employee Careerism as a Mediator

The term careerism denotes an individual's steadfast commitment to advancing their career (Naseer et al., 2020), which has a somewhat emotional side, leading to excessive careerism (Keller et al., 2016). Implicit in adopting a careerist orientation is the prioritization of self-interest, signaling diminished willingness among employees to demonstrate organizational commitment. Kang et al. (2025) demonstrated that the prevalence of competitive careerism among Korean employees significantly contributes to "sick presenteeism", defined as attending work while ill (Johns, 2010). Careerist orientations manifest as opportunistic conduct and often involve discreet pursuit of personal career interests through guile, including actively seeking leadership positions to climb the managerial ladder. Ding et al. (2022) observed that employees with careerist tendencies frequently employ political and deceptive tactics to advance their careers, even when this behavior is detrimental to organizational well-being.

Characterized by an instrumental attitude toward work, a careerist approach aligns with the essence of Machiavellianism (Dahling et al., 2009), which reflects a tendency to manipulate others to achieve one's own goals with a focus on personal results. Similar to careerists, Machiavellians tend to evaluate their roles primarily in terms of personal gain, prioritize relationships that offer the most substantial rewards, and engage in office politics to maximize self-interest. This convergence of Machiavellianism and careerist ambitions may facilitate the exploitation of situations and resources for personal benefit, often with minimal concern for ethical implications (Gürlek, 2021). Machiavellians typically have a weak moral conscience and strong motivation to succeed in competitive environments. Therefore, a strong association between careerist orientations and Machiavellian traits is anticipated. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3a. Machiavellianism is positively related to employee careerism.

Similar to those who indulge in transactional psychological contracts, those who hold careerist beliefs are grounded in a short-term orientation (Bratton and Kacmar, 2004). Employees with strong careerist tendencies may view UPB as a strategic means to enhance their reputations or increase their visibility in organizational environments. These individuals are driven by a strong desire for professional success and engaging in UPB is a conscious or subconscious process for advancing their careers. This dedication to personal achievement can be particularly pronounced in competitive settings in which the organizational culture implicitly prioritizes results over methods. As careerists are more inclined to recognize and participate in behaviors that organizations formally reward (e.g., Park and Sturman, 2022), UPB is likely to shift from being perceived as a moral transgression to an acceptable or even necessary tactic to obtain career-related benefits.

Hypothesis 3b. Employee careerism is positively related to UPB.

Career ambition driven by Machiavellianism may be associated with unethical behavior (Pekdemir and Turan, 2015). High Machiavellianism supports a short-term approach by careerists, in which immediate reputational and promotional benefits take precedence over potential long-term ethical repercussions. By leveraging UPB, careerists may consider unethical behaviors necessary to secure promotions or improve their professional standing, aligning their careerist motives with actions that also achieve organizational goals (e.g., Wu et al., 2013). In the specific context of Russia, an "institutional void" and the absence of stable "rules of the game" may heighten the need for status (Ardichvili et al., 2012), prompting Machiavellian individuals to use UPB for survival and advancement. Accordingly, careerism fueled by a strong desire for professional success and advancement may bridge Machiavellian tendencies and willingness to engage in UPB. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3c. Employee careerism mediates the positive relationship between Machiavellianism and UPB.

2.4 Careerism and Moral Disengagement

Career-driven Russian employees strive for success, and many see no reason why they cannot achieve it. As Makarova (2024) noted, Russia's systemic corruption further amplifies the emotional drivers of careerism through social learning processes. The irrational and reckless nature of careerism makes individuals who engage in it more susceptible to moral justification than those who focus on career growth, which is centered on values-based princi-

ples. Employees with this mentality are likely to legitimize their careerist attitudes cognitively and rationalize non-performance-based activities as strategic necessities. For example, in a political culture that prioritizes loyalty over merit, employees may perceive morally questionable behaviors as permissible or even necessary for career advancement by reframing or distorting the consequences of their decisions (Bandura, 1999). Consequently, moral justification becomes a necessary pretext that allows careerists to act beyond ethical boundaries in pursuit of their objectives. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 4. Employee careerism is positively related to moral disengagement.

2.5 Sequential Mediation of Careerism and Moral Disengagement

This study proposes that Machiavellianism increases employees' willingness to engage in UPB through a careerist orientation and subsequent moral reasoning. Prior research has examined careerism (Kuyumcu and Dahling, 2014) and moral disengagement (Yıldız et al., 2015) separately; however, few studies have tested their sequential mediating effects. Employees high in Machiavellianism may aggressively pursue career advancement, and a strong careerist orientation can lead them to justify their unethical actions. These responses reflect affective reactions to situational cues rather than stable personality traits. Careerist affect can be activated to protect oneself from guilt and self-sanctions. Machiavellian careerists who develop a cognitive strategy, such as moral disengagement, will further distance themselves from the moral implications of their actions, making it easier for them to engage in UPB (Bandura, 1999). Thus, careerism and moral disengagement are key intermediary elements in this psychosocial process. Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 5. Careerism and moral disengagement sequentially mediate the positive relationship between Machiavellianism and UPB.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and Procedure

Data were collected through an online survey distributed to white-collar employees working in organizations located across major Russian cities. The sample covers various industries, including healthcare (33.6%), construction (24.5%), education (16.5%), information technology (8.4%), oil and gas (5.8%), and other sectors (11.2%). Prior to distribution, we obtained approval and support from top management, a step known to enhance response rates (Kim et al., 2023). Participants were recruited via email through convenience sampling, utilizing employee lists provided by each firm between June and August 2025. They received a Google Forms link with a brief description of the study and were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. A single reminder was sent two weeks after the initial invitation. No incentives were offered. All responses were confidential and used exclusively for research purposes.

Of the 516 surveys distributed, 320 valid responses were retained after excluding incomplete or ineligible questionnaires. The exclusions were based on (a) completion times significantly below the mean (speeding), (b) failed attention checks, and (c) evidence of straight-lining. Most respondents were women (78.4%), and 62.8% were between 20 and 39 years of age. The majority of participants had been employed in their current organization for ten years or fewer (65.9%), and approximately three-quarters of the participants (76.9%) had at least a university-level education (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency distribution of categorical variables (N = 320).

Demographics	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	69	21.6
	Female	251	78.4
Age	20–29 years	66	20.6
	30–39 years	135	42.2
	40–49 years	97	30.3
	50 years or older	22	6.9
Educational background	High school	23	7.2
	College	51	15.9
	Undergraduate	199	62.2
	Master or above	47	14.7
Organizational tenure	1–5 years	53	16.6
	6–10 years	158	49.4
	11–15 years	68	21.3
	16 years or more	41	12.8

Source: Authors' own work.

3.2 Measures

All four study variables were measured using validated and well-established scales drawn from relevant literature. The scales, initially created in English, were translated into Russian and back-translated into English to ensure conceptual equivalence (Brislin and Freimanis, 2001). Three researchers held discussions and made modifications to reconcile these discrepancies. Unless otherwise indicated, participants rated all measures on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.2.1 Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism was measured using the 16-item scale developed by Dahling et al. (2009), which addresses the psychometric limitations of the widely used Mach IV scale (Christie and Geis, 1970), including reliability and di-

mensionality issues (Zagenczyk et al., 2014). Sample items include: "I am willing to be unethical if I believe it will help me succeed" and "I am willing to sabotage the efforts of other people if they threaten my own goals". Cronbach's alpha was 0.80.

3.2.2 Employee Careerism

Careerism was assessed using an 8-item abbreviated version of Feldman and Weitz's (1991) original 23-item scale that measures the extent to which individuals prioritize their personal career goals over organizational demands. Sample items include: "Sometimes you have to use your social relationships with coworkers and bosses to get ahead in an organization" and "Looking and acting like a winner can be more instrumental than simply being very competent". Cronbach's alpha was 0.76.

3.2.3 Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement was measured using an 8-item scale adapted from Moore et al. (2012) that captures employees' proneness to justify unethical behavior by disengaging moral self-regulation. Sample items include: "Considering the ways people grossly misrepresent themselves, it's hardly a sin to inflate your own accomplishments a bit" and "People shouldn't be held accountable for doing questionable things when they were just following authority". Cronbach's alpha was 0.77.

3.2.4 Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB)

Employees' self-reported UPB was measured using a 6-item scale developed by Umphress et al. (2010). Sample items included: "If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good" and "If it would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company's products or services to customers and clients". Cronbach's alpha was 0.73.

3.2.5 Control Variables

Consistent with prior research, gender (0 = male, 1 = female), educational background (1 = secondary education/high school to 4 = graduate degree), organizational tenure (1 = 1–5 years to 4 = 16 years or more), and age (1 = 20–29 years to 4 = 50 years or older) were included as control variables. Demographic data were collected alongside the independent and dependent measures.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients. To ensure data integrity, extreme values were excluded based on Mahalanobis D^2 method (Finch, 2012). The findings showed that Machiavellianism was found to be positively associated with employee careerism ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$). A positive association was also observed between employee careerism and moral disengagement ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, moral disengagement was significantly correlated with UPB ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$). These significant correlations in the expected direction provided preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships. Age and education were significantly correlated with moral disengagement ($r = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$; $r = –0.10$, $p < 0.05$), and Machiavellianism was significantly correlated with gender ($r = –0.18$, $p < 0.01$). The remaining variables did not show statistically significant correlations.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables (N = 320).

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Machiavellianism	2.73	0.51	(0.80)			
2. Employee careerism	3.17	0.62	0.37**	(0.76)		
3. Moral disengagement	2.33	0.60	0.40**	0.34**	(0.77)	
4. UPB	2.66	0.60	0.43**	0.29**	0.39**	(0.73)

Note. **$p < 0.01$. Cronbach's α values are in parentheses on the diagonal. Source: Authors' own work. UPB, unethical pro-organizational behavior; SD, standard deviation.

4.2 Reliability and Validity

A measurement model was evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with AMOS 23 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) to ensure goodness of fit for the study variables before testing the hypotheses. The measurement model was compared with four other models to determine the model with the best fit. The findings in Table 3 show that the four-factor measurement model demonstrates a better fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.71$, GFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.95, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.047). We followed Hair et al.'s (2006) method to assess convergent and discriminant validity (Table 4). The average variance extracted (AVE) was above the threshold of 0.40 (Henseler et al., 2015), indicating acceptable convergent validity of the constructs. Furthermore, the maximum shared variance (MSV) was less than the AVE, establishing discriminant validity. Overall, the constructs exhibited sound measurement properties.

4.3 Reliability, Validity, and Common Method Bias

The data were collected from a single source; therefore, we examined potential common method bias (CMB) in two ways, following Podsakoff et al. (2003). We began with Harman's single-factor test. Principal component analysis showed that the first factor accounted for 20.7% of the variance, which was below the benchmark threshold of 40%. This indicated a lack of serious problems with CMB. For more robust verification, an additional latent variable, "LV", was introduced, and the CFA was re-conducted by linking this variable to the existing four conceptual constructs to assess its impact on the model. The potential impact of CMB was evaluated by comparing the findings with the measurement model, which excluded the "LV" factor

Table 3. Fit indices for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (N = 320).

Model	χ^2	DF	χ^2/df	GFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Four-factor	100.699	59	1.71	0.95	0.95	0.96	0.047
[a]Three-factor	150.211	62	2.42	0.93	0.89	0.91	0.067
[b]Three-factor	178.168	62	2.87	0.91	0.86	0.89	0.077
Two-factor	227.022	64	3.55	0.89	0.81	0.84	0.089
One-factor	281.331	65	4.33	0.87	0.75	0.79	0.102

Note. [a]Three-factor model combines moral disengagement and unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB).

[b]Three-factor model combines Machiavellianism and employee careerism.

The two-factor model combines Machiavellianism and careerism, as well as moral disengagement and UPB.

The one-factor model combines Machiavellianism, employee careerism, moral disengagement, and UPB.

Source: Authors' own work.

DF, degrees of freedom; GFI, goodness-of-fit index; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation.

Table 4. Convergent and discriminant validity (N = 320).

Variable	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	Mach	EC	MD	UPB
Machiavellianism	0.79	0.56	0.18	0.16	**0.75**			
Employee careerism	0.70	0.55	0.14	0.11	0.37	**0.74**		
Moral disengagement	0.74	0.50	0.16	0.14	0.40	0.34	**0.71**	
UPB	0.73	0.58	0.18	0.14	0.43	0.29	0.39	**0.76**

Note. CR, Composite reliability; AVE, Average variance extracted; MSV, Maximum shared variance; ASV, Average shared variance; Mach, Machiavellianism; UPB, Unethical pro-organizational behavior; EC, Employee careerism; MD, Moral disengagement. Diagonal values in bold represent square root of AVE while values below the diagonal are inter-construct correlations.

Source: Authors' own work.

and included the study variables (Jiang and Gu, 2016). The analysis indicated that the four-factor model had a better fit than the five-factor model, indicating a more accurate representation of the data structure. These findings suggest that common method variance was not a major problem in this study.

4.4 Hypothesis Testing

Hayes's (2018) SPSS PROCESS macro (Version 4.0, Model 6) was used to test the sequential mediation effects. Respondents' gender, age, education, and organizational tenure were included as covariates. As Table 5 shows, Machiavellianism was positively associated with UPB (β = 0.357, $p < 0.001$) and employee careerism (β = 0.496, $p < 0.001$), validating H1 and H3a. In agreement with H4, employee careerism received empirical support for moral disengagement (β = 0.203, $p < 0.001$). However, careerism did not have a significant impact on UPB (β = 0.102, n.s.). As Table 5 shows, the mediating role of employee careerism between Machiavellianism and UPB was negligible (Effect = 0.076, CI = [–0.010, 0.148]). Hence, the results did not support H3c. The simple mediation outcome established an indirect effect of Machiavellianism on UPB through the mediating role of moral disengagement (Effect = 0.145, CI = [0.083, 0.210]). These findings support H2.

Finally, testing H5 for sequential mediation showed that the indirect effect of Machiavellianism on UPB through mediation by employee careerism and moral disengagement was significant (Effect = 0.035, CI = [0.014, 0.061]). Thus, the results showed an association between Machiavellianism and stronger careerism, which fostered higher levels of moral disengagement and further influenced employees' willingness to engage in UPB. The model explained 36.85% of the unique variance in UPB (F[7, 312] = 26.01; $p < 0.001$), supporting H5. Fig. 1 presents the main results.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to develop a sequential mediation model to explain how employees' Machiavellianism influences their engagement in UPB. Specifically, we examined the combined role of careerism and moral disengagement, positing that a careerist mindset significantly shapes the psychological mechanisms that lead to unethical behavior. This study investigated the sequential mediating effects of careerism and moral disengagement, thereby offering a

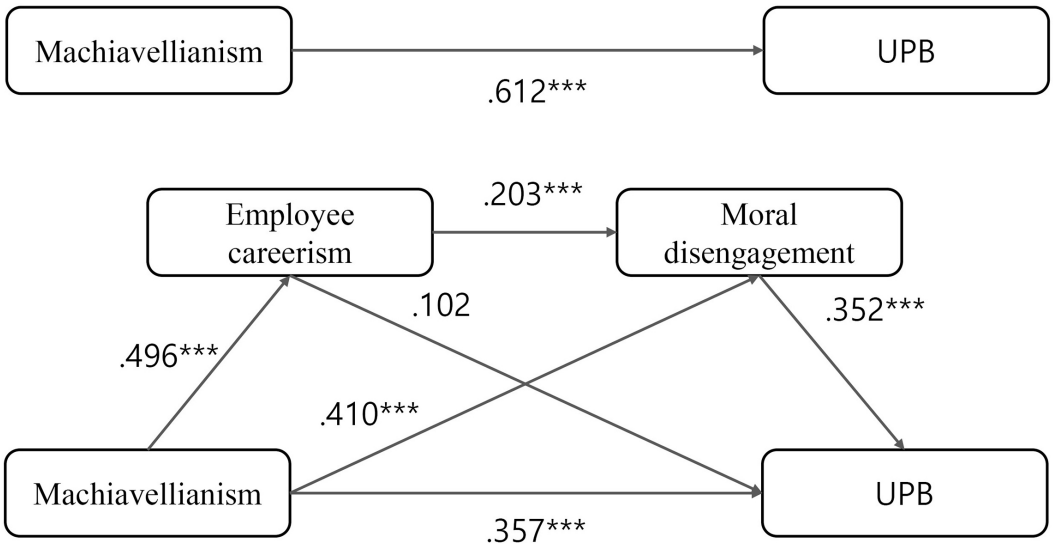


Fig. 1. Mediating effect of employee careerism and moral disengagement on the relationship between Machiavellianism and UPB. ***$p < 0.001$, N = 320; Source: Authors' own work.

Table 5. Path coefficients and indirect effects for mediation models (N = 320).

	Path coefficients			Indirect effects		
	EC	MD	UPB	Estimate	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
From → To						
Mach	0.496***	0.410***	0.357***			
EC		0.203***	0.102			
MD			0.352***			
R^2	0.178	0.277	0.368			
Indirect Effect						
Mach → EC → MD → UPB				0.035	0.014	0.061
Mach → MD → UPB				0.145	0.083	0.210
Mach → EC → UPB				0.076	–0.010	0.148
Direct Effect						
Mach → UPB				0.357	0.228	0.485
Total Effect						
Mach →UPB				0.612	0.494	0.730

Note. ***$p < 0.001$; LLCI, Lower Limit Confidence Interval; ULCI, Upper Limit Confidence Interval; Mach, Machiavellianism; UPB, Unethical pro-organizational behavior; EC, Employee careerism; MD, Moral disengagement. Source: Authors' own work.

more comprehensive understanding of how Machiavellian individuals navigate ethical boundaries to pursue organizational and personal gains.

Individuals high in Machiavellianism, driven by strong self-serving intentions, engage in strategic behaviors to maximize their personal benefits (Bratton and Kacmar, 2004; Klotz and Bolino, 2013). This finding adds nuance to the literature by suggesting that, although typically manipulative and prone to act against organizational interests, Machiavellians may engage in unethical behaviors that protect their organizations when such actions align with their own goals. This perspective clarifies why Machiavellians tend to be less responsive to moral cues and ethical role modeling from leaders (e.g., Belschak et al., 2018); their behavior is governed by instrumental self-interest rather than normative ethics. Moreover, when operating under a perceived consensus that "everyone is doing it" (Gino et al., 2009), Machiavellian individuals readily employ cognitive rationalizations to deflect moral accountability (Detert et al., 2008). For these employees, UPB can be both acceptable and strategically necessary to achieve individual and organizational objectives, irrespective of the broader economic system.

Contrary to our initial prediction, careerism was not directly related to UPB. This lack of a direct effect suggests that careerism does not inevitably lead to unethical behavior. Russian careerists tend to prioritize personal safety before resorting to morally questionable actions, despite

career-focused individuals often engaging in competitive or strategic workplace behaviors. Consistent with Jonason et al. (2015), they view unethical decisions as jeopardizing long-term success and therefore prefer realistic career strategies, even beyond their current organization. Meanwhile, in vertical collectivist cultures, such as Russia (Michailova and Hutchings, 2006), whether UPB serves as a stabilizer to demonstrate loyalty is a more critical factor. UPB can be further legitimized only when it is perceived to facilitate access to informal networks, such as svyazi, unlike in Western contexts (Song et al., 2019). Future research is warranted to examine whether this tendency is shaped primarily by cultural context or generation.

Our results highlight that careerism operates in tandem with moral disengagement to shape ethical decision-making. As Ng and Feldman (2009) noted, career motives are often combined with other psychological processes to influence workplace behavior. In our model, careerism intensified the effects of moral disengagement by providing the instrumental justification necessary for UPB. This implies that careerism functions as an affective trigger that activates moral disengagement through self-interest. In other words, the findings reflect the intersection of emotional careerism and calculated, rationalized morality, illustrating how multiple processes within a CAPS network manifest in behavior. In hypercompetitive career environments, employees may become increasingly preoccupied with career success, thereby fostering reliance on rationalization strategies that neutralize the moral implications of unethical conduct. Ultimately, the synergy between emotional ambition and cognitive disengagement serves as a primary driver of UPB.

5.1 Practical Implications

This study suggests practical recommendations for managers of current business organizations. First, managers should be wary of the prevalence of careerism in organizations because career success provides an important pretext for moral justification. In competitive workplaces, career-driven employees may feel forced to engage in unethical actions in pursuit of their professional ambitions, particularly when moral disengagement mechanisms are at play. Training programs that emphasize ethical decision-making and personal responsibility can help employees become better able to resist justifying misconduct (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Likewise, promoting healthy career commitment, which is arguably more instrumental than ever, can help address careerist attitudes (Kim et al., 2016). Therefore, managers should embed these strategies in the foundations of career development initiatives.

Second, considering that people high in Machiavellianism can use dishonest methods in workplace decision-making, ethical screening and personality assessments should be incorporated into human resource policies for hiring and promotion. Rather than merely condemning careerist behaviors, firms should identify employees with strong Machiavellian tendencies and address the ethical risks they pose. By moving beyond standard ethical leadership initiatives and adopting a strategic staffing model, organizations can redirect these tendencies into competitive drives (e.g., Zettler and Solga, 2013), channeling them toward constructive career advancement while reinforcing organizational norms. Such measures promote a competitive yet healthy climate that balances collaboration, clear goals, and employee well-being, thereby supporting long-term organizational success.

Third, the strong link between careerism and Machiavellianism substantially contributes to employees' justification of unethical behavior in the pursuit of immediate organizational goals. In practice, the co-occurrence of these traits warrants caution because it may signal a heightened likelihood of intentional, self-serving, and unethical actions (e.g., Burns et al., 2024). Employees displaying both traits are often highly motivated to succeed and may resort to manipulation or violate ethical norms to accomplish their objectives. Firms should mitigate UPB by designing targeted interventions that address these psychological drives, particularly those rooted in poor emotional regulation, egoism, and deceit. Retention alone is insufficient; sustaining agility in a careerist culture depends on a psychological contract of reciprocity that balances individual ambition with collective integrity (Verhezen, 2010).

Finally, this study adds a cultural dimension to discussions of unethical workplace conduct by presenting evidence from Russia, where hierarchical organizational structures and career-driven ambitions shape ethical decision-making in distinct ways. Even outside a fully capitalist system, high-potential employees often prioritize personal advancement over collective goals. Although the term "careerist" originally carried negative connotations in Russia, it has evolved toward a neutral or even positive meaning as career advancement has gained legitimacy amid shifting economic and political conditions (Chernysheva and Shepelenko, 2017). Incorporating Russian employees' careerism and moral disengagement into models of ethical behavior enriches the understanding of how excessive careerism and pragmatism influence workplace ethics across cultural contexts.

5.2 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study had several limitations. First, the predominantly female, white-collar sample based in Russia restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research should investigate careerism and its associated justification processes across more diverse populations, including various industries and varying levels of organizational tenure. Considering the cultural specificity of the current sample, further investigations are required to determine the relevance of these findings in Western countries with stronger masculine cultural values.

Second, to maintain parsimony, boundary conditions such as workplace climate and leadership style were not considered, although they may moderate the relationships among Machiavellianism, careerism, moral disengagement, and UPB. Future research should incorporate such moderators to provide a more nuanced understanding of how Machiavellian careerism interacts with contextual variables to shape workplace behavior.

Third, all variables were measured using self-report scales, which may have introduced subjectivity and CMB. In particular, the use of self-report measures of UPB raises concerns regarding social desirability bias. Subsequent studies should consider using multisource data or objective behavioral assessments to enhance the validity of the findings (Puffer, 1987).

Finally, this study's cross-sectional design limited the ability to draw causal inferences. Careerism is a dynamic construct that may evolve over time; therefore, longitudinal research employing repeated and more robust measures is required to capture its developmental trajectory and enhance the generalizability of the results to global human resource management practices.

6. Conclusion

This study elucidates the UPB of Machiavellian careerists in the Russian context. In a career landscape in which employability increasingly replaces the traditional role of job security, careerism emerges as a powerful force that amplifies unethical conduct when combined with moral disengagement. These insights highlight the need to move beyond static trait-based explanations toward a deeper understanding of how evolving career dynamics drive employee willingness to cross ethical boundaries.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data sets used in this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Author Contributions

DK, NB, and JS conceptualized the study. DK and NB conducted the research, and DK analyzed the data. All authors contributed to revising the manuscript, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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AI tools were utilized solely to enhance the grammatical accuracy and spelling of this document; the original content and ideas remain those of the authors.

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