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Original Article

Explaining the Relationships among Sense of Power, Psychopathic Personality, and Moral Judgment

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Abstract

Introduction: Moral judgment refers to evaluating the rightness or wrongness of an action. Individuals' moral judgments are influenced by various variables, including psychological characteristics. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationships among sense of power, psychopathic personality, and moral judgment.

Material and Methods: This study is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive and based on path analysis in terms of data collection. The statistical population consisted of employees of Karafarin Bank in 2024, from which a sample of 486 individuals was selected using random sampling. A questionnaire was used to measure the variables. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics and structural equation modeling.

Results: The results show that psychopathic personality has a significant positive relationship with sense of power and a significant negative relationship with employees' moral judgment. Moreover, sense of power has a significant negative relationship with employees' moral judgment.

Conclusion: Individuals with psychopathic personality tend to have higher levels of perceived power. Furthermore, individuals with psychopathic traits and high sense of power demonstrate lower levels of moral judgment compared to others. Therefore, it can be concluded that moral judgment and ethical decision-making are influenced by psychological characteristics such as psychopathic personality and heightened sense of power.

Keywords: Psychopathic Personality, Sense of Power, Moral Judgment

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INTRODUCTION

Moral judgments play a prominent role in the ethics literature and serve as a central element in ethical decision-making [1]. Individuals typically employ different reasoning in their moral judgments and often arrive at distinct conclusions regarding the morality of a particular act. While most individuals focus on the potential benefits of a decision, some pay less attention to ethical rules in order to maximize personal gain and may not be concerned about the consequences of their unethical behavior for others. Conversely, others consider both the consequences for others and ethical rules when making moral judgments [2].

Moral judgment is defined as the evaluation of the rightness or wrongness of an action. Research on moral judgment has shown that various individual characteristics - including moral ideologies and cultural values - influence

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individuals' moral judgments [3]. Studies also indicate that moral judgment is affected by personality traits [4]. Prior research on personality suggests that individuals' personality traits can explain many of the differences in ethical behavior among people. For example, conscientious and agreeable individuals demonstrate higher adherence to ethics compared to other personality types. Employees high in conscientiousness and agreeableness tend to follow ethical principles and are less likely to engage in deviant behaviors [5]. Evidence also confirms that managers' personality traits influence unethical organizational behaviors [6].

Researchers further argue that cognitive and behavioral factors - including psychological defense mechanisms and moods - play an important role in employees' professional ethics [7]. Findings indicate that managers' and employees' personality traits are significantly related to organizational ethical performance, and assigning tasks based on employees' personality capabilities can foster organizational ethical development [8].

One of the dark personality traits is psychopathy. Individuals with high levels of psychopathy generally lack empathy and exhibit antisocial and criminal behaviors. They disregard social norms, and behaviors such as disrespect for others, lying, cheating, and bullying are characteristic of them [9]. Evidence indicates that psychopathic employees in organizations violate regulations and are more likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors [10]. Research shows that individuals with higher psychopathic traits tend to exhibit utilitarian responses to moral dilemmas, and this relationship is moderated by aggression [11]. Another study found that psychopathy has a significant negative relationship with moral judgment and that this relationship is moderated by unpleasantness [12]. It has also been shown that individuals with psychopathic traits display low emotional responsiveness and high egocentricity, making them less sensitive to the unethical consequences of their judgments [13].

Most studies on psychopathic individuals have focused on their unethical or criminal behaviors. However, one domain that attracts individuals with psychopathic tendencies is leadership positions, as these roles provide opportunities for power, status, and control [14]. Psychopathy can strengthen the link between power and aggression; individuals high in psychopathy may attempt to compensate for feelings of powerlessness through aggression. Such individuals also exhibit higher psychological aggression, particularly when they feel powerful [15].

Individuals with dark personality traits - including psychopathy - tend to have excessively high confidence, high perceived power, and greater risk-taking, making them more inclined toward unethical behavior [16]. Research further shows that psychopathic managers are more inclined to seize power, which can negatively affect employees' effectiveness [17].

Evidence also shows that sense of power can deter individuals from adhering to ethical principles. Power-seeking leads individuals to ignore moral judgment in favor of maximizing personal benefits [18]. Sense of power can alter individuals' ethical standards. Researchers have found that powerful individuals apply stricter moral criteria when judging others' misconduct, but more lenient standards when judging their own [19]. Sense of power may incline individuals toward unethical decisions, leading them to exploit others to achieve their goals. Powerful individuals rely less on empathy in their ethical decision-making [20].

Power can also lead to behavioral disinhibition. Through behavioral disinhibition, power strengthens unethical motives and encourages individuals to violate social norms [21]. Studies indicate that powerful individuals who financially

supported refugee resettlement in Canada displayed dominating and racist behaviors toward them [22].

A sense of power is generally associated with cheating and serves as an antecedent to unethical decision-making. One study revealed that power predicts cheating, particularly when participants were confident in their own power, whereas for individuals with low self-confidence, sense of power had no effect on cheating [23]. In the auditing environment of Iran, researchers found that sense of power and bullying were among the factors contributing to auditors' unethical behaviors [24]. Additionally, findings show that moral power - through components such as moral ownership, moral efficacy, and moral courage - has a significant positive effect on employees' green behavior [25].

Considering that moral judgment is of particular importance to the regulatory bodies in accounting and auditing professions, and despite extensive research on factors influencing moral judgment, scientific gaps remain in this domain. One such gap in accounting and auditing literature concerns the roles of sense of power and psychopathy in individuals' tendencies toward unethical judgments and decisions. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to examine the relationships among sense of power, psychopathic personality, and moral judgment among accountants and financial managers. Based on the theoretical foundations and research objectives, the study hypotheses are formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Psychopathic personality has a significant relationship with moral judgment.

Hypothesis 2: Psychopathic personality has a significant relationship with sense of power.

Hypothesis 3: Sense of power has a significant relationship with moral judgment.

The research model is illustrated in Figure 1.

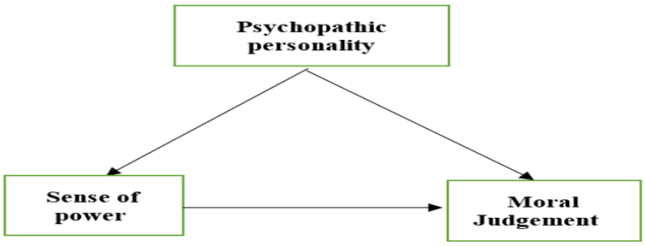

Figure1: Research model

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study is descriptive in method, and its data and theoretical foundations were collected through library research. The statistical population in the present study consists of employees of Karafarin Bank across Iran in 2024, from which a sample of 486 individuals was randomly selected. The sample includes 261 men and 225 women. Of these participants, 60% hold a bachelor's degree, 37% a master's degree, and 3% a doctoral degree. Additionally, 27% have less than 10 years of work experience, 62% between 10 and 20 years, and 11% more than 20 years of work experience.

In this study, the dependent variable is moral judgment, which is measured using the Moral Judgment Questionnaire on Cheating [26]. The independent variable is psychopathic personality, measured through the Dark Personality Questionnaire [27]. The mediating variable is sense of power, assessed using eight items on a seven-point Likert scale based on the Power Preferences Questionnaire [28].

Initially, the questionnaires were distributed among several faculty members, and after

receiving their feedback, necessary revisions were made to the items. The reliability of the variables was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and the rho_A coefficient, which are presented in Table 1. The results of this table indicate that all reliability indices exceed 70 percent; therefore, the questionnaire demonstrates acceptable reliability. Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) for the study variables exceeds 50 percent, confirming the validity of the variables. Structural equation modeling and LISREL software were used to test the relationships among variables and examine the study hypotheses.

Table 1: Reliability and convergent validity

Dimension	Cronbach's alpha	Rho-A	CR	AVE
Moral judgement	0.911	0.912	0.938	0.790
Sense of power	0.893	0.893	0.914	0.572
Psychopath personality	0.891	0.897	0.911	0.534

RESULTS

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics, including mean, median, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values. The evidence in this table indicates that the mean values for moral judgment, psychopathic personality, and sense of power are 10.86, 18.57, and 27.62, respectively.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

	Moral judgement	Psychopath personality	Sense of power
Mean	10.86	18.57	37.62
Median	11	19	38
SD	4.256	4.014	6.209
Min.	5	7	8
Max.	20	30	52

The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Table 3. The findings indicate that psychopathic personality has a significant positive relationship with sense of power and a significant negative relationship with moral judgment. Based on the results of this table, it can also be concluded that sense of power has a significant negative relationship with moral judgment. Thus, all three hypotheses of the study are supported at the 95% confidence level. Table 3 shows that psychopathy has a positive effect ($\beta = 0.207$) on employees' sense of power at Karafarin Bank, increasing it. However, the effect of psychopathy on moral judgment is negative ($\beta = -0.203$), indicating that psychopathy decreases moral judgment. Additionally, the coefficient for sense of power is negative ($\beta = -0.518$), showing that sense of power negatively affects moral judgment. The Chi-square statistic in Table 3 is 325.85 and significant, indicating that the research model is appropriate and meaningful.

Table3: Results of hypothesis testing

Paths	β	t	Sig.	R^2
Psychopathy → Power Sense	0.207	3.841	0.000	0.146
Psychopathy → Moral Judgement	0.203-	5.062-	0.000	0.197
Power Sense → Moral Judgement	0.518 -	14.709-	0.000	0.081
Chi-Square=325.85 P-Value = 0.000 RMSEA= 0.070				

Table 3 also presents the coefficient of determination (R^2) for each path. The results show that 14.6% of the variance in sense of power is explained by psychopathic personality; 19.7% of the variance in moral judgment is explained by psychopathic personality; and approximately 8% of the variance in moral judgment is explained by sense of power.

The Cohen's effect size for each path is presented in Table 4.

Table4: Cohen's d measure

Paths	Cohen's d
Psychopathy ⟶ Power Sense	0.02
Psychopathy ⟶ Moral Judgement	0.15
Power Sense ⟶ Moral Judgement	0.35

According to Table 4, the effect size for the path from psychopathy to sense of power is 0.02, which is considered small. The effect size for the path from psychopathy to moral judgment is 0.15, indicating a medium effect. Finally, the effect size for the path from sense of power to moral judgment is 0.35, which represents a large effect.

Table 5 reports the results of the indirect path coefficients and their significance levels:

Table5: Indirect path coefficients

Indirect path	β	Standard deviation	t	Sig.
Psychopath→ Sense of power→ Moral judgement	-0.209	0.031	6.827	0.000

As shown in Table 5, psychopathy exerts a significant indirect effect on moral judgment through sense of power. Therefore, sense of power functions as a mediating variable.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among sense of power, psychopathic personality, and moral judgment. The findings revealed that psychopathic personality has a positive and significant relationship with sense of power. The evidence also confirmed that both psychopathic personality and sense of power have significant and negative effects on moral judgment. These results are consistent with theoretical foundations and previous research. Earlier studies have likewise indicated that individuals with psychopathic traits seek power and, once achieving it, tend to engage in unethical behavior [17], [15]. Psychopathic individuals typically lack empathy, disregard ethical norms, and do not adhere to moral standards [9], [10]. Furthermore, sense of power can lead individuals toward unethical decisions; the experience of power serves as a driver of unethical decision-making [20], [23].

The findings of this study demonstrated that based on individuals' psychological characteristics - including dark traits such as psychopathy and sense of power - it is possible to predict their adherence to ethical behavior and moral judgment. In other words, increases in psychopathy and sense of power strengthen unethical decision-making. The reason for this is that, according to the psychological literature, individuals' judgments and decisions are associated with their behavioral and personality characteristics; thus, moral judgment is also

influenced by personality traits, including the dark personality trait of psychopathy [7], [29].

The authors of this article believe that examining the relationships among psychopathic personality, sense of power, and ethical issues is important because the literature on ethics and personality continues to develop largely independently, and better integration of these literatures may enhance our understanding of the role of behavioral characteristics in ethics. This article, as an interdisciplinary study, expands the scope of insight and intellectual depth for researchers, enabling them to reach new analytical perspectives on ethical and unethical issues. Furthermore, this study can inform researchers and policymakers about the role of psychopathy and sense of power in motivating individuals toward unethical behaviors and moral judgments. Thus, it is recommended that policymakers and legislators in the field of ethics and ethical behavior evaluate employees' psychopathic traits and sense of power and consider these two variables in their assessment models of ethical performance.

The main limitation of this study is the generalizability of its findings, which should be approached with caution. Future studies may draw on more diverse samples - including individuals with various occupations and income levels - to examine relationships between dark personality traits such as narcissism and Machiavellianism and unethical behaviors.

CONCLUSION

Previous research on moral judgment confirms that it is rooted in psychological characteristics. Inspired by personality psychology, the present study demonstrated that the dark trait of psychopathy and sense of power influence individuals' moral attributes and moral judgment. Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that individuals with psychopathic personality and higher levels of sense of power likely have fewer ethical concerns compared to others. Their moral virtues are low, and they do not support ethical mechanisms in their lives. Whether sense of power and psychopathy fully overshadow ethical considerations requires further investigation in future research.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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