

# Dual Moral Licensing Effect of Spiritual Leadership: When Religious Authority Promotes Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior, But Restrains Cheating Behavior

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## Abstract

This study advances the literature on ethical behavior by exploring complex relationships between spiritual leadership (SL) and unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). Grounded in moral cleansing theory and cheating behavior framework, we examine the constructive and dark side effects of SL on UPB. Specifically, we investigate how personal obligation (POB) and moral organizational identification (MOI) mediate the relationship between SL and UPB, and subsequent influence on cheating behavior (CB). We hypothesized that these significant mediating effects occur through both parallel and serial pathways. To test our model, we conducted three studies involving students and employees across multiple countries. Findings provide robust empirical support for the hypotheses, highlighting the dual nature of SL. Specifically, while SL fosters moral commitment and reduces individual cheating, it also unintentionally promotes unethical acts aimed at benefiting the organization. This paradox occurs because spiritual leadership strengthens employees' moral identification with the organization, creating a sense of personal obligation that can justify rule-breaking in service of organizational goals. These findings underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of value-driven leadership. Research offers both theoretical and practical implications for leadership development, ethics training, and organizational policies. By unpacking the unintended consequences of spiritual leadership, we contribute to a more balanced and critical discourse examining the complex role of ethical leadership in organizational contexts. Organizations must recognize that even well-intentioned ethical forms of leadership can create blind spots, requiring targeted interventions to prevent the moral justification of unethical (pro-organizational) behaviors while preserving the positive effects on individual ethical conduct.

**Keywords:** cheating behavior, moral cleansing theory, moral identification, personal obligation, spiritual leadership, unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB)