Fear of Goal Failure and Unethical Behavior - The Mediating Role of Ego Depletion and Moderating Role of Moral Attentiveness

Abstract

Purpose: This article examines how fear of goal failure leads to unethical behavior at work. The study further explores whether ego depletion mediates the positive link between employees' fear of failure in meeting their goals and their unethical behavior. In addition, the moderating role of moral attentiveness on the mediated relationship is examined.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Time-lagged data were collected from the sales staff working across various industries in the USA and Pakistan. The final samples from the USA and Pakistan were n = 334 and n = 381, respectively.

Findings: Fear of goal failure was significantly related to employees' unethical behavior, and ego depletion mediated this positive relationship. In addition, employees' moral attentiveness attenuated the link between fear of goal failure and unethical behavior.

Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by testing an unexplored relationship between fear of goal failure and employee unethical behavior at work. It further confirms the role of an individual's morality in shaping this relationship.

Keywords. Fear of goal failure, unethical behavior, ego depletion, moral attentiveness

In the business world, corporate reputation has been shown to contribute positively to an organization's success (Alzola, 2017). Loyal customers will recommend an organization's products and services to others if they believe it has strong ethical values. On the flip side, if organizations ignore ethical considerations, they may risk harming their reputation (Mintel, 2015) and ultimately lose customers (Natter, 2019). Global organizations such as Volkswagen, Apple, and Cambridge Analytica have displayed growing numbers of nefarious deeds, which has invoked management scholars to explore the reasons behind employees' unethical behavior at work (Confessore, 2018; Hartmans, 2020; Hotten, 2015). Indeed, reports have suggested that unethical behavior such as lying, theft, and delinquent behavior may result in significant losses to businesses of tens of billions of dollars annually (Ewing, 2016; Segal, 2021). Given such costs for business, it is critical to examine the antecedents of unethical behavior and the factors that may prevent it from happening.

Unethical behavior has been defined as behavior that has detrimental effects on others and is "either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community" (Jones, 1991, p. 367). Under this conceptualization, unethical behaviors include violations of ethical norms or standards (whether legal or not), such as lying, cheating, and stealing (Treviño *et al.,* 2014). Extant literature has identified numerous causes of unethical behavior, including unfairness, pressure from management, unethical leadership, and conflicting goals (Badrinarayanan et al., 2018; Carucci, 2016; Grosch and Rau, 2020). However, the role of employee emotions, such as the fear of not meeting one's goals (i.e., the fear of goal failure), has been the subject of limited empirical attention. Some research has linked goal setting to employees' unethical behavior (Chen *et al.,* 2021; Fukushima and Yamada, 2024; Niven and Healy, 2016). However, the effect of employees' fear of not meeting their goals on their unethical behavior has yet to be examined.

This is surprising given that fear is a powerful emotion that influences the decisions we make, the actions we take, and the outcomes we achieve (Tsaousides, 2017), and the link between fear of failure and unethical behavior has received growing attention in the fields of sports management and education (Giel *et al.,* 2020; Gómez-López *et al.,* 2023).

In the present study, we contribute to prior work on employee responses to emotions at work by looking at the link between fear of failure in meeting one's goals and unethical behavior. Although numerous studies have explored the antecedents and consequences of employees' unethical behaviors (Lin *et al.,* 2018; Veetikazhi *et al.,* 2022), we know little about how emotions might drive employees to engage in unethical acts at work. In this study, we suggest that fear of goal failure can deplete individuals' psychological resources, leading them to make unethical choices. This resource-based perspective has been presented based on the conservation of resources theory, which defines resources as "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516).

In examining the link between fear of goal failure and unethical behavior, we draw on the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018) to argue that ego depletion explains the negative link between fear of goal failure and employees' unethical behavior. In particular, we argue that regulation of fear emotions may require exerting self-control, which reduces an employee's ability to maintain self-control and results in ego depletion. In turn, feeling ego-depleted may lead employees to take heuristic shortcuts in their decision-making processes and make them more prone to making unethical choices (Fan *et al.,* 2021; Lei, 2023).

Accordingly, we propose that ego depletion will act as a mediating mechanism linking fear of goal failure to unethical behavior.

In addition to examining the process by which fear of goal failure leads individuals to engage in unethical behavior, we also investigate whether the negative influence of fear of failure is the same for all individuals. Specifically, we argue that moral attentiveness, which refers to the "extent to which an individual chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences" (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1028), will buffer against the negative influence of fear of goal failure as people with high levels of moral attentiveness will be more likely to think about the consequences of their actions even when faced by stressful events at work. Following the previous research on the conservation of resources perspective (e.g., Khan *et al.,* 2022; Murtaza *et al.,* 2023), we present moral attentiveness as a valuable resource that can buffer the negative effect of stressful conditions on an individual's behavior and can help individuals to make ethical choices at work. The theoretical model to be tested in the study is presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In examining these issues, the present study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it makes an important contribution by drawing on the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to help us understand how fear of goal failure might lead people to engage in unethical behavior. Although prior work has suggested that fear of failure might lead individuals to take shortcuts to meet their goals, researchers have not examined the link between fear of failure and unethical behavior. The present study makes a second contribution by presenting moral attentiveness as an individual resource that may buffer the negative influence of

fear of failure. Doing so helps address calls from researchers for more work to identify how to reduce unethical behavior in organizations (Kuenzi *et al.,* 2018). It makes a third contribution by replicating our study across two distinct cultures. As research suggests that culture may influence individuals' ethical decision-making (Fok *et al.,* 2016), we draw on data from Pakistan and the USA to see whether our findings are generalizable across individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

This study utilizes time-lagged survey data from full-time employees working in different organizations across the USA and Pakistan. Measurements related to each study variable taken from previous research are utilized in the study surveys. The time-lagged data collected from two countries is analyzed using various robust techniques such as multigroup factor analysis, invariance analysis, multigroup path analysis, etc., to confirm the hypothesized study relationships. The current study, by collecting time-lagged data from two countries, addresses the research question: How does fear of goal failure lead to unethical employee behavior at work, and what role can moral attentiveness play in helping ego-depleted employees avoid such negative behavior?

Theory and Hypotheses Development

Fear of Goal Failure and Workplace Unethical Behavior

Previous studies have investigated the influence of emotions on an individual's ethical decision-making and behavior (Ng and Yang, 2023; Yip and Lee, 2022). One specific emotion, "fear of failure", has been widely studied in sports management, education, and entrepreneurship (Ayadi *et al.,* 2021; Kong *et al.,* 2020; Taylor *et al.,* 2023). However, its role in determining employee behavior while striving toward goal attainment has been rarely explored. In the past, scholars defined fear of failure as a "disposition to avoid failure and/or a capacity for

experiencing shame or humiliation as a consequence of failure" (Atkinson, 1966, p.13). However, later research has conceptualized fear of failure as a tendency towards threat appraisal while striving to achieve personal goals (Conroy *et al.,* 2002). Under this conceptualization, individuals high in fear of failure tend to worry about not meeting their goals at work (Engel *et al.,* 2021).

Research has begun to examine how people deal with the fear of failure. Some people deal with fear of failure by engaging in counterproductive activities that focus on self-protection instead of attaining success. The intention of these self-protectors is not to avoid failure but to minimize the implications of that failure (Khan *et al.,* 2022). Although extant research on fear of failure has explored various outcomes but empirical studies particularly investigating the role of fear of failure in predicting employee negative actions in the form of unethical behavior remain limited. To fill this gap, the current study tests the role of employee's fear of failure in shaping unethical behavior at work.

Previous research suggests that individuals shift their cognitive resources to protect their existing resources (a defense mechanism) in threatening situations. Therefore, in such situations, individuals are more likely to act in their self-interest rather than engage in moral reasoning or abide by their ethical principles (Kouchaki and Desai, 2015). Specifically, the loss aversion principle in the conservation of resources (COR) theory suggests that people use preventive strategies to avoid the possible threat to valuable resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Marx-Fleck *et al.,* 2021). In the work context, real or perceived threats may lead the individual to engage in unethical behavior to protect against anticipated negative consequences from the organization for not meeting one's goals.

COR theory explains individuals' motivation through the perspective of their drive for preservation. Specifically, it suggests that individuals' motivation is conditioned by the conservation of factors called resources, and those resources could be individual, social, tangible, and symbolic (Halbesleben *et al.,* 2014). Therefore, although individuals invest in the development of resources and when faced with threats, there is a greater tendency for them to invest in preserving existing resources from being depleted. In other words, when faced with the potential loss of resources, individuals may make unethical choices to preserve them. Such detrimental impacts of fear emotions on employees' behavioral outcomes have also been presented using the COR perspective (Halbesleben *et al.,* 2014; Raja *et al.,* 2020).

Based on this reasoning, we propose that when people experience fear that they may fail to accomplish their goals, they will be more likely to be selfish and engage in self-interested unethical behavior:

Hypothesis 1. Fear of goal failure is directly and positively related to unethical behavior at work.

The Mediating Role of Ego-Depletion

Literature has found various factors that lead towards ego-depletion, i.e., a state in which the self does not have all the resources it has normally" (Baumeister *et al.,* 2007, p.2). For example, studies have confirmed the significant role of workplace bullying (Zhang *et al.,* 2021), self-control demands (Gombert *et al.,* 2020), hindrance stressors (Xia *et al.,* 2020), and role conflict (Ye *et al.,* 2022) in predicting ego-depletion. Despite some controversies regarding the empirical evidence of ego-depletion in organizational research (Carter *et al.,* 2015; Forestier *et al.,* 2022; Vohs *et al.,* 2021), plenty of current research has utilized ego-depletion to link stressful conditions with employee behavior at work (Germeys and De Gieter, 2018; Hur *et al.,* 2023;

Malik *et al.,* 2021; Xia *et al.,* 2020). However, there is little to no evidence related to the role of

fear of failure in causing ego depletion and how ego-depleted employees get motivated to behave

unethically at work. To fill this gap, in the current study we use conservation of resources theory

(Hobfoll, 1989) to investigate ego-depletion as a mediating mechanism in the relationship

between fear of goal failure and employee unethical behavior.

Based on the COR perspective, we suggest that individuals may consume more

psychological resources when experiencing a threat (fear of goal failure) than in normal

circumstances. Previous organizational research has confirmed that overconsumption of

resources to handle stressful situations leads to resource depletion (Ming *et al.,* 2020; Saleem *et

al.,* 2022; Xia *et al.,* 2020). It has also been suggested that individuals use self-control resources

to inhibit negative thoughts and ensure smooth functioning in the workplace. Such attempts to

regulate thoughts and reactions can downgrade individuals' psychological resource pool and lead

to ego depletion (Zhang *et al.,* 2021). It is evident that dealing with negative emotions, such as

anger, anxiety, and so on, requires deliberate effort in terms of self-control (Bertrams and Pahl,

2014; Prem *et al.,* 2016). Such negative affective states consume energy and psychological

resources (Lin *et al.,* 2015). Individuals with fear emotions related to their goals may also act the

same way and feel the need to put forth the necessary effort to ward off this threatening situation.

By doing so, they may deplete their resources, thus causing ego depletion.

In addition, previous research has explored the role of ego depletion in predicting

unethical behavior (Deng *et al.,* 2017; Klotz *et al.,* 2018). Based on the COR theory, we propose

the resource-based view linking ego depletion to employee unethical behavior (Hobfoll, 1989).

According to the COR perspective (Hobfoll *et al.,* 2018), individuals acquire psychological

resources to deal with work conditions. Such resources regulate an individual's emotions (Beal *et

al., 2005). Suppression of emotions leads to the consumption of additional resources, and thus, individuals' psychological resources get depleted. In these situations, individuals become more immoral and are more likely to engage in unethical behavior at work (Gino *et al.,* 2011; Liu *et al.,* 2015). This argument remains aligned with previous evidence that experiencing stressful conditions can cause feelings of psychological depletion, which creates a high tendency to engage in deviant behavior (Shah *et al.,* 2022).

In a resource depletion state, individuals try to protect their resources from further loss (Hobfoll, 2001). In such situations, individuals may not have sufficient resources to inhibit themselves from engaging in unethical behavior at work. Additionally, they might not be motivated to invest remaining resources to control themselves to avoid further loss of resources from a limited resource pool (Ming *et al.,* 2020). Research suggests that individuals experiencing internal resource loss may respond in a deviant way to preserve current resources, power, and position in the organization (Shah *et al.,* 2022). Individuals show deviant behaviors to get short-term benefits (monetary reward) by losing long-term benefits (good reputation) at work (Yam *et al.,* 2014). Such impulsive choices are made to protect remaining resources in situations of resource depletion to avoid the resource loss spiral (Hobfoll *et al.,* 2018). Research on emotionally exhausted individuals with limited psychological resources clearly suggests that they ignore their internal moral compass and get involved in unethical behaviors at work. Such behaviors include preparing fake expense reports for more reimbursements, stealing materials and supplies from the company, and so on (Lawrence and Kacmar, 2017).

Based on these arguments, we argue that individuals with diminished resources may find it challenging to show behavior aligned with their personal moral standards or organizational policies. Their interest in avoiding further resource loss can motivate them to engage in unethical

behavior (Mitchell *et al.,* 2018). Our study suggests that individuals in an ego-depleted state will likely enter defensive mode after experiencing fear of goal failure. They will try to preserve their remaining resources by making irrational choices regarding unethical behavior. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2. Ego-depletion significantly mediates the relationship between fear of goal failure and workplace unethical behavior.

The Moderating Role of Moral Attentiveness

Previous research on business ethics has revealed that individual-level constructs relating to moral standards (e.g., moral judgments, moral awareness, moral identity, and moral disengagement) affect ethical behaviors (DeTienne *et al.,* 2021; Hertz and Krettenauer, 2016; Johnson and Connelly, 2016; Kim and Loewenstein, 2021). However, empirical evidence regarding how individual-level moral orientations, such as moral attentiveness, can limit the level to which employees negatively react to a fearful work environment by engaging in unethical behavior remains limited. The current study adds to the existing literature by testing the unexplored role of moral attentiveness in moderating the relationship between ego depletion and employee unethical behavior at work.

Moral attentiveness helps one perceive and interpret moral situations (Reynolds, 2008). According to Culiberg and Mihelič (2016), individuals who exhibit high moral attentiveness are alert to ethically charged situations and aware of the moral consequences of ethically charged information. Moral attentiveness has two dimensions: (1) perceptual moral attentiveness—the extent to which an individual recognizes morality in their daily experiences—and (2) reflective moral attentiveness—the extent to which an individual considers and thinks about moral matters. Individuals may vary in their moral attentiveness based on how they frame moral cognition

(Sturm, 2017). Prior research suggests morally attentive people are less likely to behave unethically (Reynolds, 2008; Khan et al., 2022). Reynolds (2008) stated that moral attentiveness helps individuals judge their behavior and helps them evaluate others' behavior by comparing it to their moral standards.

Furthermore, moral attentiveness helps people behave morally because it promotes perceptions of the "right thing to do" (Reynolds, 2008; Van Gils *et al.,* 2015). We draw on the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to present how individuals high in moral attentiveness are likely to react less negatively to fear of failure than those low in moral attentiveness. Within COR theory, employees' attitudes and behaviors are guided by their desire to protect and conserve their resource bases (Hobfoll *et al.,* 2018). Under this theory, we might expect individuals to respond more negatively to work environments that induce fear of failure when they have fewer resources to buffer against adverse life events.

COR theory highlights that "personal characteristics are resources to the extent that they generally aid stress resistance" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 517). In line with the assertions of the COR theory, we argue that moral attentiveness can be viewed as a personal resource. It helps employees make ethical decisions and actions by assisting them to evaluate and process ethical issues in the work environment (e.g., fear of failure) and solve them ethically (Reynolds, 2008). More specifically, we argue that when faced with excessive work pressure to achieve organizational goals, employees with high levels of moral attentiveness will be better able to deal with the fear of failure that might have resulted from these goals. Additionally, they might be less likely to respond in the form of unethical behavior. This argument is consistent with prior work that indicates that individuals at high levels of moral attentiveness are less inclined towards unethical behavior (Dong *et al.,* 2021).

In other words, individuals who possess more significant levels of personal resources may have a greater ability to maintain and mobilize their resources and deal with stressful situations at work (Grover *et al.,* 2017). Previous research has confirmed that individuals with greater resources are better capable of regulating their behavior in response to work demands and are more likely to cope effectively with challenging work conditions (Bakker *et al.,* 2023; Khan *et al.,* 2022). Based on these arguments, we suggest that, when faced with the fear of not meeting organizational goals, individuals with high moral attentiveness will therefore be more capable of maintaining self-control and less likely to exhibit unethical behavior. In particular, employees with high moral attentiveness will feel more capable of resolving ethical dilemmas. By contrast, people with low moral attentiveness may find it more challenging to resist the temptation to behave unethically when facing resource depletion. This argument leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Moral attentiveness moderates the relationship between ego-depletion and unethical behavior in such a way that the relationship between ego-depletion and unethical behavior will be weaker when moral attentiveness is higher.

Culture, Fear of Goal Failure, and Proximal Reactions

National culture remains influential in determining an individual's ethical decision-making (Vitolla *et al.,* 2021). However, comparative studies of unethical behavior predictors across nations remain limited (Liu *et al.,* 2020). Therefore, we attempt to test our hypothesized model across two culturally distinct countries, i.e., the USA and Pakistan. Regarding country-level differences, Hofstede (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.) has shown significant cultural differences between the United States and Pakistan based on values of individualism and collectivism. Such

individualistic and collectivistic values determine how much a society accepts the interdependence of people on each other.

In our case, the US sample is more individualistic and expects its members to be distinct from their group. On the contrary, the Pakistani sample has more collectivistic characteristics because they value functioning as a whole group (Hofstede, 1984). We argue that some cultures may produce more resilient personalities, so people may react differently when exposed to stressful situations. In our case, we suggest a higher level of unethical behavior by the Pakistani sample than its US counterpart. The reason behind this might be the higher collectivism in society. Stressful conditions such as fear of goal failure may affect those from a collectivistic culture more than those from individualistic nations. A primary reason might be the dependency of other family members on the working individual who is motivated to use any channel to fulfill their needs. Collectivistic cultures, such as Pakistan, have stronger ties (family and friends) than individualistic societies, such as the United States. People in collectivistic cultures are more likely to break the rules and regulations to fulfill such expectations (Hofstede, 1991). The threat of getting fired due to underperforming and fewer chances of re-employment can motivate individuals to preserve themselves, even when making unethical choices.

Other cultural dimensions could also support such motives. For instance, uncertainty avoidance guides individuals in responding to daily uncertain situations (Vitolla *et al.,* 2021). In cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, for example, Pakistan, people opt to work for organizations with well-established rules and procedures. However, such conditions can also motivate unethical practices because people think it is necessary to work through alternate routes to accomplish their personal agendas (Getz and Volkema, 2001).

Previous research has confirmed that fear emotions are linked with employees' un/ethical behavior across Western and Eastern societies (Singh *et al.,* 2018; Xu *et al.,* 2020). Based on this understanding, we explore the possible role of fear of goal failure in predicting unethical behavior across cultures.

Methods

Data Collection Procedure

A time-lagged study across two time points, T1 and T2, with a gap of one month, was conducted using online surveys administered across the United States and Pakistan. This medium-time interval of one month has been utilized by following previous research (e.g., Chen *et al.,* 2022; Qi *et al.,* 2020) on employee unethical behavior at work. Data collection was done over three months simultaneously in both study countries. In the United States, participants were invited to participate in the survey questionnaires via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The quality of MTurk data has been confirmed by previous research (Hauser and Schwarz, 2016; Khan *et al.,* 2022; Peer *et al.,* 2014). To keep our participants aligned with our sample requirements, we restricted survey accessibility to individuals in the United States with full-time employment status and a sales role in their organization.

Additionally, we mentioned in the survey invitation that only employees working full-time in sales roles, such as sales officers, sales executives, and sales managers, were allowed to participate in the study. The compensation for participation at T1 was USD .80; at T2, it was USD 1.20. At T2, only those individuals who completed surveys at T1 were invited to participate. The responses collected at T1 and T2 from the US sample were matched using the Amazon worker ID. For the Pakistani sample, respondents were requested to include their day of birth followed by the last three digits of their phone number. This procedure was followed to

maintain anonymity and ensure that data collected at both points matched adequately. In Pakistan, only full-time employees with similar sales roles were invited to complete online questionnaires through personal contacts. The questionnaires were kept in English for the Pakistani sample because it is the official working language in Pakistan, and individuals working in sales roles have been educated at high school and university levels. This is in line with previous research conducted using Pakistani samples (Abbas *et al.,* 2014; Bouckenooghe *et al.,* 2015; Butt *et al.,* 2005). No monetary reward was provided to Pakistani participants. To have better representation, we allowed participants in both samples to come from various industries, such as banking and financial services, health care, retail, software and IT, etc.

At T1, we collected data on fear of goal failure, ego depletion, and demographics. At T2, we collected data on unethical behavior and moral attentiveness. Time-lagged data were collected at two points, as recommended by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), because such measures are taken to overcome the possible concern of common method bias. Furthermore, by following previous research, we utilized well-established scales of each variable from the studies published in reputed journals.

Participants

In the United States, out of the 462 participants who took part in T1, 334 (72.29 % of those at T1) participated during T2, and in Pakistan, out of the 447 participants who took part during T1, 381 (85.23 % of those at T1) completed the survey during T2. The final US sample (N = 334) comprised 172 men (51.49%) and 162 women (48.50%). The final Pakistani sample (N = 381) comprised 268 men (70.34%) and 113 women (29.65%). The average age of respondents was 37.30 years (SD = 9.95) and 35.47 years (SD = 7.17) for the United States and Pakistan samples, respectively. To investigate if non-response bias might be an issue in our study, we checked for

any significant differences between the participants who dropped out and the final sample.

Findings confirmed non-significant differences in terms of fear of goal failure $t(460) = -.27$, p =

.78, ego-depletion $t(460) = -1.11$, p = .26, age $t(460) = -.42$, p = .67, and gender $t(460) = -.73$, p

= .46 in the U.S. sample. Results also showed non-significant differences in terms of fear of goal

failure $t(445) = -.83$, p = .40, ego-depletion $t(445) = -.31$, p = .75, age $t(445) = .72$, p = .47 except

gender $t(445) = -2.55$, p = .01 in the Pakistani sample. Based on these findings, we assume that

non-response bias was not a key concern in the current study.

Measures

All continuous variables were measured using five-point Likert scales.

   Fear of Goal failure. To measure fear of goal failure, we used the 5-item modified short

version of the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (Conroy *et al.,* 2002). Responses ranged

from (1) Do not believe at all to (5) Believe 100 % of the time. A sample item included 'When I

am failing in work goals, it upsets my "plan" for the future'.

   Ego Depletion. We assessed ego-depletion with a 5-item scale adapted from Twenge *et*

al. (2004) which has been validated by Ciarocco *et al.* (2007). A sample item included 'I feel

drained'.

   Unethical Behavior. The 12-item unethical behavior scale adopted from Barsky (2011)

was used to measure participants' unethical behavior at work. Specifically, we asked respondents

to mention how often they had performed listed behaviors in the last month. A sample item

included 'Reported financial data inappropriately to make it seem you are performing your job

better than you are'.

Moral Attentiveness. We adopted the 12-item self-report measure from Reynolds (2008) to assess moral attentiveness. A sample item included 'I regularly think about the ethical implications of my decisions'.

Demographics. We included age and gender in the study. Age was measured in years. Gender was coded as 0= Male and 1= Female. Previous research (e.g., Gan *et al.,* 2023; Jiang and Lin, 2022) on employee unethical behavior has utilized these demographic variables.

Results

Descriptive Analysis

The means, standard deviations, correlations, and scale reliabilities for study variables in both countries are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Multigroup Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We used SPSS Amos 24 software to conduct various analyses such as multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), measurement invariance, multigroup path analysis, etc. We used statistical analysis techniques that remain well-aligned with our research model and the cross-cultural nature of the sample. For example, multigroup CFA remains useful for simultaneously testing the distinctiveness of study constructs in different samples. Similarly, the test of path differences provides information related to variation in the strength of study relationships across different samples. When conducting multigroup CFA, in order to check the distinctiveness of constructs for the samples for both countries, we tested a measurement model for the proposed four-factor model against various alternate models i.e. a three-factor model where fear of goal failure and moral attentiveness were loaded onto one factor, a two-factor

model where fear of failure, moral attentiveness, and ego depletion were loaded onto one factor, and a single factor model where all items were loaded on a common latent factor. The results (Table 2) confirmed that our proposed four-factor model (i.e., fear of goal failure, ego depletion, unethical behavior, and moral attentiveness) was a good fit for the US and Pakistani samples. All items showed significant loadings onto their respective constructs (Table 3). Our hypothesized model best fits compared to all three constrained models. The confirmatory factor analysis results also showed that the single-factor model did not fit well in both samples.

Insert Table 2 about here

Insert Table 3 about here

We also performed tests to check composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The findings (Tables 4 and 5) confirmed all CR values > 0.70; hence, composite reliability issues did not significantly influence our data. Furthermore, the results (Tables 3, 4, and 5) showed that all AVE values and factor loadings were > 0.50; our study had no evidence of convergent validity issues. The findings also confirmed that the square root of AVE values remained greater than inter-construct correlations, so the model achieved discriminant validity.

Insert Table 4 about here

Insert Table 5 about here

Following this, we conducted a multigroup CFA for this four-factor model to cross-validate it across both samples. As seen in Table 6, this four-factor model (M1) showed a good fit, thus confirming that the factor structure is equal in both groups.

Insert Table 6 about here

Additionally, to further rule out the possibility of common method bias, we utilized the common latent factor technique recommended by Gaskin and Lim (2017). Specifically, we performed a chi-square difference test with unconstrained and constrained models having all the paths from the common latent factor equal to zero. This technique is supported by previous research, i.e., Gaskin (2016) and Podsakoff *et al.* (2012), to check the possibility of common method variance. The findings confirmed insignificant differences ($\Delta\chi^2$ (33) = 37.518 (p = .270) and ($\Delta\chi^2$ (33) = 43.109 (p = .112) in the USA and Pakistan, respectively. This evidence also confirms that common method bias is not a major concern in our study. This argument is further supported by using time-lagged data recommended by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003).

Measurement Invariance

Measurement invariance was conducted by comparing measurement models of the US and Pakistan at metric and scalar levels. The metric invariance analysis results with factor loadings constrained across groups showed that the model change was insignificant (Table 6). Therefore, we found support for full invariance at the metric level. Next, and as suggested by

Meredith (1993), a scalar model with additional intercept constraints was carried out, and it was found to vary when compared to the unconstrained model. A partial invariance procedure was performed following Byrne's (2004) recommendations. Evidence of partial scalar invariance was found between study countries. Based on these findings, we assumed scales were comparable between study countries.

Multigroup Path Analysis

Multigroup path analysis was conducted to test the hypothesized model across countries. Results showed that the model incorporating all hypothesized relationships exhibited good fit, i.e., $\chi 2 = 2.825$, df $= 4$, p $> .05$, NFI $= .99$, RFI $= .96$, CFI $= 1.00$. The path coefficients (Table 7) of the link between fear of goal failure (predictor) and ego-depletion (mediator) were significant ($\beta = .18$, p$< .001$; $\beta = .33$, p$< .001$) for the US and Pakistan, respectively. Furthermore, the relationship between ego depletion and unethical behavior (outcome) was also significant ($\beta = .35$, p$< .001$; $\beta = .18$, p$< .001$) for both countries. The direct path between fear of goal failure and unethical behavior was also significant ($\beta = .19$, p$< .001$; $\beta = .21$, p$< .001$) for the US and Pakistan, respectively. These results suggest the existence of partial mediation in our hypothesized model.

Insert Table 7 about here

The findings of the path analysis (Table 7) confirmed the moderating effect of moral attentiveness on the linkage between ego depletion and unethical behavior in both the US and Pakistan, thus supporting our hypothesis 3.

Furthermore, we utilized Hayes's PROCESS macro with model 14 to test our moderated mediated model. The relationship between ego depletion and unethical behavior was

significantly moderated by moral attentiveness (interaction effect = -.10, CI = [-.173, -.027] and -.14, CI = [-.228, -.049]) in the USA and Pakistan respectively. Additionally, moral attentiveness moderated the mediated relationship of ego depletion between fear of goal failure and unethical behavior in the second stage. The conditional indirect effect for the moderated mediation model at a low level (conditional indirect effect = .075, CI = [.025, .137]) was more substantial than at a high level (conditional indirect effect = .042, CI = [.009, .090]) of the moderator in the USA. For Pakistan, the conditional indirect effect for the moderated mediation model at a low level (conditional indirect effect = .102, CI = [.052, .163]) was significant. However, it became insignificant (conditional indirect effect = .019, CI = [-.028, .068]) at a high level of moderator. In particular, the indirect effect of fear of goal failure on unethical behavior through ego depletion was negatively moderated by moral attentiveness. The indirect effect decreases as the moral attentiveness value increases. Figures 2 and 3 graphically illustrate the magnitude of these indirect effects at the levels of the moderator. The 95% bootstrap CI for the index of moderated mediation was -.016 [-.0366, -.0015] and -.043 [-.079, -.012] for the USA and Pakistan respectively.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Insert Figure 3 about here

Testing Path Differences between Countries

The study findings from multigroup path analysis confirm the proposed model across cultures. In addition to testing our overall model, we compared various constrained models to check the differences in each individual path between countries. To do this, we compared the

chi-square of our original model with the chi-square results of constrained models. Findings from the chi-square difference test confirmed that there were significant differences between the US and Pakistan on the paths from fear of goal failure to ego depletion ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.48$, p < .05) and on ego depletion to unethical behavior ($\Delta\chi^2 = 5.44$, p < .05). However, our results showed there were insignificant differences for the paths between fear of goal failure and unethical behavior ($\Delta\chi^2 = .09$, p >.05), and between the interaction term of ego depletion/moral attentiveness and unethical behavior ($\Delta\chi^2 = .43$, p > .05).

Discussion

The present study extends our understanding of how fear of goal failure leads to employees' unethical behavior at the workplace and which employees are more likely to engage in unethical behavior when faced with the fear of goal failure. Drawing on a sample of 334 sales professionals in the USA and 381 in Pakistan, we found that ego-depletion acts as a resource-depletion mechanism that mediates the relationship between fear of goal failure and employees' unethical behavior. Our study also confirmed that moral attentiveness acts as a personal resource, which reduces the negative effects of ego depletion on unethical behavior that arises from the fear of goal failure. These findings are in line with the key tenets of COR theory and confirm the findings of previous research that suggests that moral attentiveness reduces followers' unethical behavior (Khan *et al.,* 2022; Wurthmann, 2013)

Theoretical Contributions

The present study provides several contributions to the existing literature. First, we make an important empirical contribution by examining the impact of the fear of goal failure on the unethical behavior of sales professionals. Although prior work has examined the link between fear of failure and the unethical behavior of sportspeople, students, and entrepreneurs

(Gustafsson *et al.,* 2017; Leonte, 2023; Zhang *et al.,* 2018), there has been limited research on the negative role of fear of goal failure in a workplace setting. Investigating such issues is important due to the increasing competitive pressures placed on employees by organizations to achieve sales targets, which may induce fear of goal failure (Pring-Mille, 2019). Specifically, the goal-setting literature argues the importance of setting appropriate and attainable employee goals to avoid unethical behavior at work (Ordóñez and Welsh, 2015). Our findings complement this research by confirming that unrealistic goals may create fear emotions related to their goal attainment. In such situations, employees may switch their attention toward alternate routes to achieve their targets by violating ethical norms.

Second, our study makes a theoretical contribution by examining the underlying mechanisms linking fear of goal failure to unethical behavior. In line with COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018), ego depletion partially mediates the link between employees' fear of goal failure and unethical behavior. This suggests that fear of goal failure leads to the depletion of an individual's cognitive resources and, in turn, increases the likelihood that they will engage in self-interested behavior that may go against widely accepted ethical values. This provides additional empirical evidence for the argument that dealing with stressful conditions can cause ego depletion and motivate individuals to make unethical decisions to protect themselves (Wang *et al.,* 2017).

Third, we make a theoretical contribution by examining individual-level differences in making unethical choices in response to fear emotions. Findings confirming the significant moderating role of moral attentiveness add to the business ethics literature (De Cremer and Moore, 2020; Trevino and Nelson, 2021), which argues the importance of an individual's level of morality. These results are consistent with prior work highlighting a negative link between

moral attentiveness and unethical behavior (Dong *et al.,* 2021; Murtaza *et al.,* 2023) and confirm Reynolds's (2008) assertions that individuals high in moral attentiveness tend to behave more ethically. These individuals are more aware of ethical issues and frequently reflect on "the right thing to do" (Reynolds, 2008). Furthermore, our findings contribute to the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) by validating moral attentiveness as a valuable resource that helps individuals deal with stressful conditions. When individuals are ego-depleted and have fewer psychological resources left to pay attention to ethical considerations, the availability of such resources can help individuals make better ethical choices.

Finally, our study makes a significant theoretical contribution by addressing the call for testing resource perspectives in cross-cultural settings (Hobfoll *et al.,* 2014, 2018) to observe differences based on the context. This study identifies the generalizability of our findings across cultures by confirming that individuals experiencing stressful conditions may become ego-depleted and make unethical choices to protect their resources in the United States and Pakistan. Although we found some differences in the strength of the relationship between the two samples—such as fear of goal failure has a stronger relationship with unethical behavior in Pakistan—overall, it remains significant in both countries. Additionally, the moderating role of moral attentiveness remains significant in both countries, suggesting that resources hold value across cultures.

Managerial Implications

Our study has several implications for managers. Researchers have generally agreed that emotions affect employees' work productivity (e.g., Haq *et al.,* 2020; Lavelle *et al.,* 2021). Similarly, our results suggest that fear of goal failure (a workplace emotion) is stressful for sales professionals and leads to unethical behavior at work. Mainly, sales professionals feel no control

over their behavior due to fear of goal failure, and they violate widely held moral principles to meet organizational goals. When they fear not achieving the required goals, they presume their monetary rewards/job security is at stake. Therefore, they can get involved in unethical activities to achieve organizational goals. Fear of goal failure fuels them to cheat, show dishonesty, steal, and break ethical norms or standards due to resource losses. We recommend that managers understand the link between fear of goal failure and unethical behavior and avoid such detrimental behaviors at work. By involving employees, for example, in the goal-setting process, providing the required support during goal striving, and rewarding appropriate ethical behavior, managers can enhance ethical behavior and the overall performance of their sales professionals. Also, managers should put less value on outcome goals, which remains a cause of unethical employee behavior. Adapting learning goals at the workplace can reduce employee prevention focus and unethical behavior (Welsh *et al.,* 2019).

Our finding suggesting that depleted employees are more prone to unethical behavior has important practical implications. Managers might be unintentionally depleting their employees by creating stressful environments at work. For example, setting consecutive high-performance goals may deplete employees and motivate them to be involved in over-reporting behavior, such as falsifying the number of hours worked or customers contacted for sales (Welsh and Ordonez, 2014). Avoiding ego depletion is important because, apart from predicting unethical behavior, it has an adverse impact on work effort (Ye et al., 2022), performance (Wagner and Wieczorek, 2024), and decision-making (Ma *et al.,* 2020). We recommend that organizations should not create pressure on employees by setting consecutive high-performance goals. Second, organizations should also make arrangements to screen employees through integrity testing and

monitor their behavior using technology to avoid dishonesty at work (Thiel *et al.,* 2023; Welsh & Ordonez, 2014).

By focusing on the beneficial role of moral attentiveness, organizations will glean a more comprehensive outlook on how sales professionals manage their unethical behaviors. Based on our study results, we suggest that managers might also increase the perceptual and reflexive moral attentiveness of sales professionals by arranging training programs such as ethical organizational culture that get employees to identify and reflect on ethical issues in their working environment (Jannat *et al.,* 2022; Remišová *et al.,* 2019). Such training provided to employees of a multinational bank has confirmed improvements in terms of intentions to behave ethically (Warren *et al.,* 2014). These training programs can make employees more aware of moral values and thus help them to make the right decisions when facing ethical dilemmas at work.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is not without its limitations. First, as all the variables examined in the study were obtained from self-reports, there is potential for common method variance and social desirability bias (Podsakoff *et al.,* 2003; Tan *et al.,* 2021). However, we adopted procedural and analytical remedies to reduce and rule out common method variance influencing our results. These include collecting data across multiple time points and examining the common latent factor during the confirmatory factor analysis. To overcome the challenges of possible common method variance and social desirability bias arising due to self-reported data, future studies may use strategies such as collecting data from multiple sources (immediate supervisors, co-workers, HR records, organizational performance reports, and customers). Particularly, employee unethical behavior reported by a third party remains more credible than self-reports.

In addition, although we collected data across two-time points, we are unable to infer causality. In future studies we recommend researchers collect data on all variables at multiple time points and draw on experimental methods to provide causal support for our predictions and examine dynamic relationships between study variables over time. Specifically, longitudinal research designs can provide better insight into the evolution of employee unethical behavior over time. In addition, the fluctuations in employee fear of goal failure can also be observed by conducting a longitudinal study. Similarly, the use of experimental research design can benefit future researchers by providing valuable information about how individuals react to various goals when they are afraid of losing. The experimental nature of research can provide a platform to test several types of goals and offer an opportunity to capture different individual reactions.

Finally, we only examined one possible moderator that reduces the negative influence of ego depletion on unethical behavior resulting from the fear of goal failure. Future research may examine the attenuating influence of other individual differences that have been shown to impact ethical decision-making, such as mindfulness, self-control in morality, moral emotions, self-efficacy, and positive affectivity (Gentina *et al.,* 2020; Greenbaum *et al.,* 2020; Ruedy and Schweitzer, 2010; Wang *et al.,* 2017).

Ethical Approval: This study was approved by the Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG) Australia (Protocol ID # BL- EC 58:18). The HEAG recognized that the project complies with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (2007).

Informed Consent. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and scale reliabilities between all study variables for Pakistan and the U.S.A

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	
Pan Cultural (n = 715)								
1. Age	36.32	8.62						
2. Gender	0.38	0.49	.05					
3. Fear of Goal Failure	2.49	1.02	.03	-.04	(.92)			
4. Ego Depletion	2.40	0.93	.00	.01	.27**	(.93)		
5. Moral Attentiveness	3.76	1.00	.00	.05	-.01	-.18**	(.95)	
6. Unethical Behavior	2.57	0.98	.02	.00	.26**	.39**	-.30**	(.95)
Pakistan (n = 381)								
1. Age	35.47	7.17						
2. Gender	0.30	0.48	-.04					
3. Fear of Goal Failure	2.57	0.97	.14**	-.04	(.93)			
4. Ego Depletion	2.50	0.88	.08	.10*	.35**	(.92)		
5. Moral Attentiveness	3.56	0.95	-.01	.04	-.03	-.15**	(.95)	
6. Unethical Behavior	2.72	0.93	.11*	.01	.27**	.31**	-.27**	(.95)
USA (n = 334)								
1. Age	37.30	9.95						
2. Gender	0.49	0.50	.10					
3. Fear of Goal Failure	2.40	1.07	-.03	-.01	(.91)			
4. Ego Depletion	2.29	0.98	-.03	-.03	.18**	(.93)		
5. Moral Attentiveness	3.98	1.01	-.03	-.02	.04	-.18**	(.95)	
6. Unethical Behavior	2.39	0.99	-.01	.06	.24**	.46**	-.28**	(.94)

Note. *p < .05; ** p < .01
Reliability coefficients alpha of scales are presented on diagonal

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis of measurement models

Models	$\chi2^*$	df	$\chi2/df$	$\Delta\chi2$	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Pakistan							
Hypothesized four-factor model	967.88	489	1.98		.95	.95	.051
Three-factor model	2543.54	492	5.17	1575.66	.78	.79	.105
Two-factor model	3863.18	494	7.82	2895.30	.64	.66	.134
One-factor model	6626.04	495	13.39	5658.16	.34	.38	.181
USA							
Hypothesized four-factor model	930.43	489	1.90		.94	.95	.052
Three-factor model	2027.56	492	4.12	1097.13	.80	.82	.097
Two-factor model	3394.37	494	6.87	2463.94	.62	.66	.133
One-factor model	5608.31	495	11.33	4677.88	.34	.38	.176

Note. TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.
*All chi-square values were statistically significant (p < .05).

Table 3. Factor loadings from confirmatory factor analysis

USA		Pakistan	
Factor	Estimate	Factor	Estimate
FOF1	.848	FOF1	.869
FOF2	.804	FOF2	.824
FOF3	.843	FOF3	.851
FOF4	.820	FOF4	.845
FOF5	.799	FOF5	.898
ED1	.851	ED1	.839
ED2	.864	ED2	.840
ED3	.879	ED3	.813
ED4	.868	ED4	.839
ED5	.842	ED5	.849
MA1	.802	MA1	.777
MA2	.823	MA2	.793
MA3	.772	MA3	.786
MA4	.821	MA4	.784
MA5	.798	MA5	.771
MA6	.762	MA6	.806
MA7	.829	MA7	.834
MA8	.817	MA8	.816
MA9	.794	MA9	.794
MA10	.754	MA10	.826
MA11	.778	MA11	.797
MA12	.776	MA12	.754
UB1	.826	UB1	.808
UB2	.823	UB2	.818
UB3	.791	UB3	.810
UB4	.763	UB4	.781
UB5	.769	UB5	.781
UB6	.760	UB6	.787
UB7	.759	UB7	.769
UB8	.772	UB8	.794
UB9	.734	UB9	.784
UB10	.763	UB10	.805
UB11	.826	UB11	.823

Note. FOF = Fear of failure, ED = Ego-depletion, MA=Moral attentiveness, UB=Unethical behavior

Table 4. Composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity for the US sample

Variables	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4
1. Fear of Goal Failure	0.913	0.677	**0.823**			
2. Unethical Behavior	0.945	0.610	0.255	**0.781**		
3. Ego Depletion	0.935	0.741	0.191	0.484	**0.861**	
4. Moral Attentiveness	0.953	0.631	0.037	-0.298	-0.186	**0.794**

Table 5. Composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity for the Pakistani sample

Variables	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4
1. Fear of Goal Failure	0.933	0.736	**0.858**			
2. Unethical Behavior	0.950	0.634	0.293	**0.797**		
3. Ego Depletion	0.921	0.699	0.375	0.335	**0.836**	
4. Moral Attentiveness	0.954	0.632	-0.021	-0.285	-0.157	**0.795**

Table 6. Measurement Invariance Results for Corresponding Waves among Countries

Model	χ^2	df	p	RMSEA	TLI	CFI	Model Comparison	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	p
M1 Configural Model	1898.32	978	.000	.036	.946	.950				
M2 Metric Model	1930.74	1007	.000	.036	.947	.950	M1 vs. M2	32.41	29	.302
M3 Scalar Model	1953.32	1017	.000	.036	.947	.949	M1 vs. M3	54.99	39	.046
M4 Partial Scalar Model	1948.68	1016	.000	.036	.947	.949	M1 vs. M4	50.35	38	.087

Note. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; CFI = comparative fit index

**Table 7.** Path Analysis Results for the US and Pakistani Samples

Study Relationships	β	SE	P
Fear of Goal Failure → Ego-Depletion (US)	.18	.05	< .001
Fear of Goal Failure → Ego-Depletion (PAK)	.33	.04	< .001
Ego-Depletion → Unethical Behavior (US)	.35	.05	< .001
Ego-Depletion → Unethical Behavior (PAK)	.18	.05	< .001
Fear of Goal Failure → Unethical Behavior (US)	.19	.04	< .001
Fear of Goal Failure → Unethical Behavior (PAK)	.21	.05	< .001
Ego-Depletion × Moral Attentiveness → Unethical Behavior (US)	-.13	.03	< .01
Ego-Depletion × Moral Attentiveness → Unethical Behavior (PAK)	-.14	.04	< .01

Table 8. Conditional Effects of Moderated Mediation in the US Sample

Path	β	t-value	Significance
TL → PJ	0.24	4.42	p < .01
PJ → OC	0.26	5.18	p < .01
PJ × CGO → OC (Interaction)	0.22	5.09	p < .01
TL → PJ → OC (Indirect Effect)	0.06	3.32	p < .01

Table 8. Conditional Effects of Moderated Mediation in Pakistani Sample

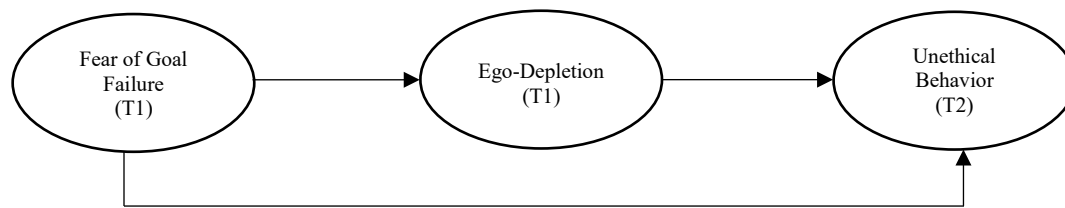| Path	β (Beta Coefficient)	t-value	Significance
TL → PJ	0.24	4.42	p < .01
PJ → OC	0.26	5.18	p < .01
PJ × CGO → OC (Interaction)	0.22	5.09	p < .01
TL → PJ → OC (Indirect Effect)	0.06	3.32	p < .01

Moral
Attentiveness
(T2)
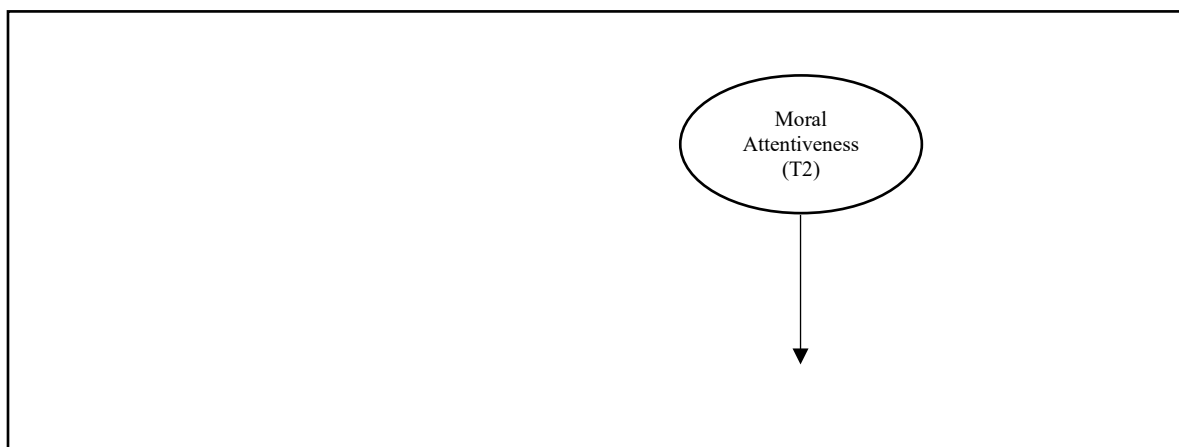
Figure 1. Cross-cultural model of fear of goal failure leading to unethical behavior at work.
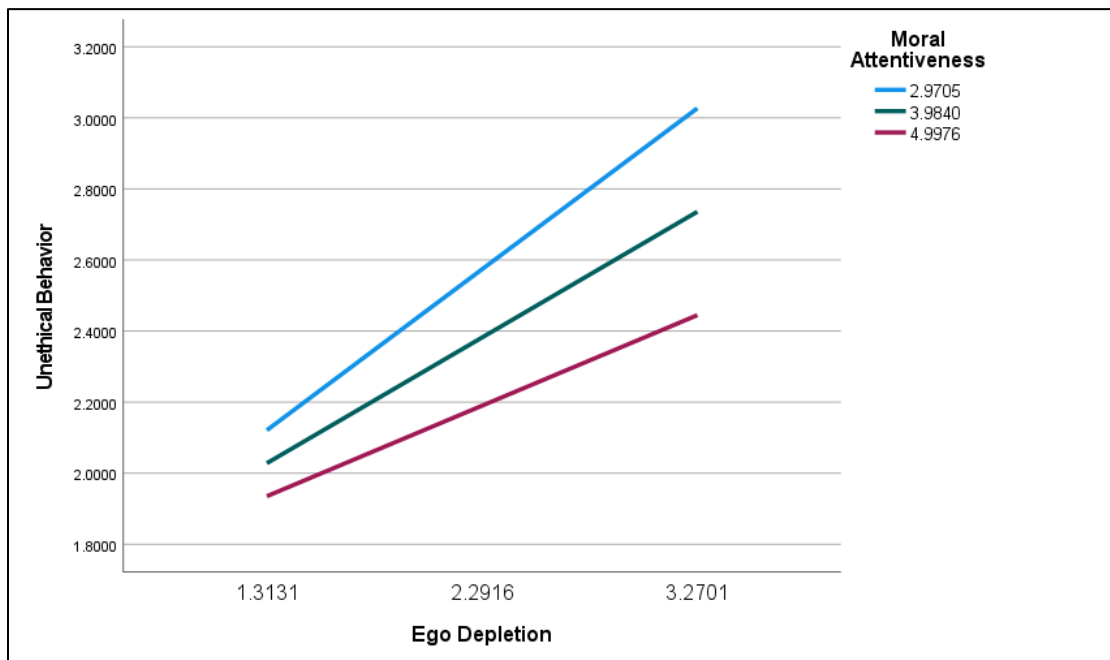

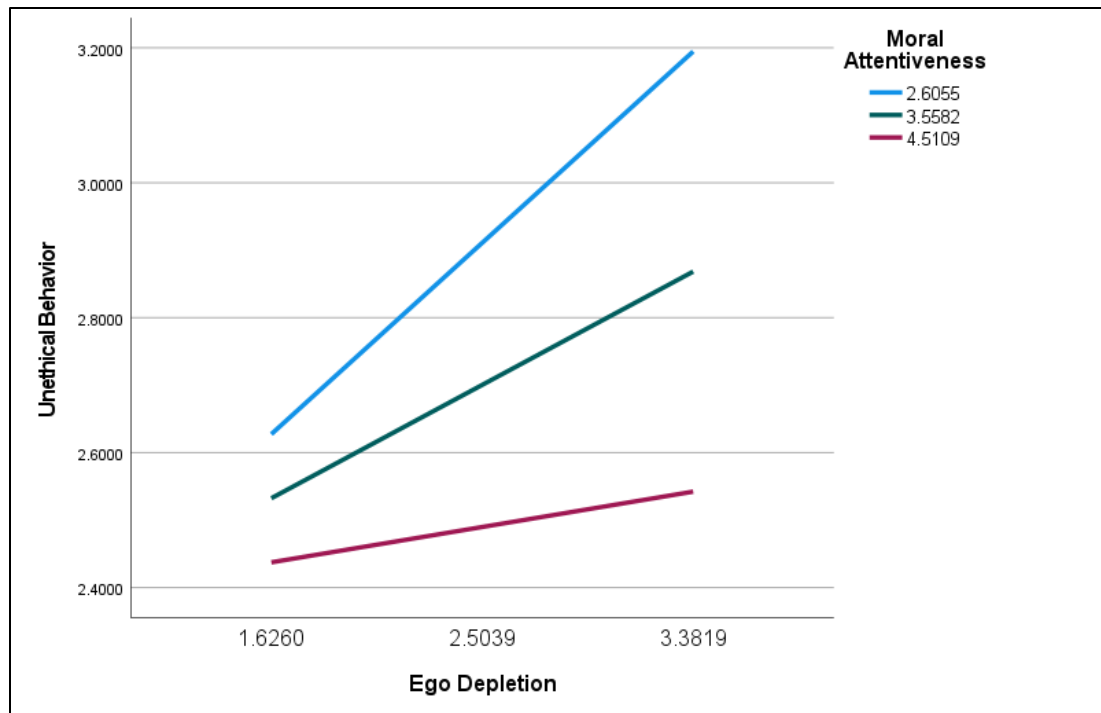*Figure 2*. Conditional effects at different levels of moral attentiveness in the USA.

Figure 3. Conditional effects at different levels of moral attentiveness in Pakistan.