

CRONYISM RECONSIDERED: A MODERATED MEDIATION MODEL OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AND KNOWLEDGE HIDING

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Abstract

Cronyism is favoritism based on personal loyalty rather than merit remains a persistent challenge in workplace. It is particularly prevalent in cultures that are shaped by paternalism, particularism and collectivist norms. Prior research has predominantly classified cronyism as a linear process that flows from cultural norms of employees thinking. However, it is not true as employee's response may reproduce and reinforce cronyism system making it a cyclic process. This study proposes a dual level framework that conceptualizes cronyism as both a cultural antecedent and cognitive behavioral outcome sustained through recursive mechanism. The study conducted a 3-wave longitudinal study of Pakistani employees from diverse background. Data was collected at 4 weeks interval to examine temporal relationship among organizational cronyism, moral disengagement, egoistic climate, moral identity and knowledge hiding. Findings showed that knowledge hiding creates informational asymmetry and political dependency among colleagues at workplace. Furthermore, it advances social cognitive and moral identity theory by demonstrating that employees are not passive recipients of cronyistic culture but active agents in its perpetuation. Practically, it highlights the necessity of transparent HR system, merit-based evaluation and ethical leadership in deterring the recursive cycle of favoritism, cognitive rationalization and informational control in workplace.

1. Introduction

Cronyism is an unethical practice in which individuals in positions of authority show favoritism toward friends, colleagues and associates based on personal loyalty rather than merit (Fatima et al., 2025). These favors may include incidents such as making decisions on appointments, budget or allocation of resources, promotions regardless of the relative qualifications or merit among other candidates. It remains a deeply ingrained organizational phenomenon as

in both public and private organizations as personal loyalty supersedes merit, undermining justice, collaboration and innovation (Xu et al., 2025; Khraim, 2025). As cronyism may seem harmless in collectivist context that value and harmony, its ethically and operationally damaging towards organization universally (Khan et al., 2025).

Existing research on unethical behavior similarly frames moral disengagement as a passive outcome

of situational influences, overlooking its potential within a recursive loop that continually reproduces unethical norms and practices (Bandura, 2005; Moore et al., 2012). Additionally, it is emphasized that cronyism is a one directional phenomenon flowing from cultural norms to employee cognition and conduct (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Khatri and Tsang, 2003; Theodorsson et al., 2025). Such models and collectivist loyalty norms shape employee's perception and ethical reasoning as it rarely considers how employee's subsequent behaviors can, in turn reinforce the very system that created them.

Connelly et al., (2012) suggested that unethical cognition and behavior particularly knowledge hiding may actively sustain and reproduce cronyism by creation of information asymmetry. It also fosters power imbalance and increases dependence on influential insiders. When employees hide knowledge to protect themselves in politicized environment, they inadvertently reinforce the advantage of those already connected crony network. Over time in an environment where knowledge and resources become asymmetric and favoritism becomes dominant, favoritism will thrive. The dynamic indicates that cronyism is not a linear top to bottom cultural artifact. In fact, it is cyclic and mutually reinforcing which is shaped by leadership behaviors and employee's response (Arain et al., 2022).

These aspects highlight the importance of transparent human resource (HR) practices. As weak or opaque HR practices often create such circumstance where cronyism becomes the norm. They may be non-transparent recruitment, promotions, ineffective recruitment standards, informal pay bonuses, unequal pay due to subjective evaluations (Colquitt et al., 2001; Khan, 2024). Weak HR practices reduce organizations credibility, perception of distributive and procedural justice. They increase the likelihood of moral disengagement and employee's self-protective behavior such as knowledge hiding (Yao et al., 2026). In contrast transparent and effective HR practices like merit-based appraisals, transparent recruitment and performance based promotions not only enhance an institutes

credibility but serve as antidote to cure cronyism in workplace. They weaken the conditions that enable its cognitive and behavioral reinforcement and restrict opportunities for cronyism. Thus, it is suggested that HR plays a pivotal role in controlling organizational structure under which cronyism emerges. It also shapes the ethical climate that can either amplify or inhibit recursive cycles of disengagement and information holding. However, recent research in higher education showed that cronyism creates moral disengagement and knowledge hiding, diminishing knowledge exchange and trust (Fatima et al., 2025; Oo and Ling, 2025).

To address this gap, the present study proposes a dual level framework that links cultural antecedents with cognitive outcomes of cronyism as can be observed in figure 1. The cultural antecedents include in-group favoritism, particularism, and paternalism whereas cognitive outcomes include moral disengagement and ethical rationalization. In contrast to linear models this framework incorporates a bidirectional mechanism in which unethical behavior such as knowledge hiding and political dependency is reduced. Furthermore, a moral identity mechanism is proposed as a moderating mechanism capable of weakening the cultural-to-cognition pathway by reducing moral disengagement, while also interrupting the cognition-to-culture feedback loop by limiting knowledge hiding. Moral Identity theory emphasizes why some individual resist this unethical cycle. It posits that the degree to which being a "moral person" is central to one's identity influences moral motivation and behavior. This theory connects moral reasoning to action, suggesting that individuals with a stronger moral identity are more likely to act in accordance with their moral beliefs (Aquino and Reed, 2002; Treviño et al., 2014; Alhaidan, 2025). Hence, this study advances a comprehensive, multilevel understanding of cronyism as both a cultural product and a cognitive process, providing a theoretical foundation for breaking this unethical cycle in an organization.

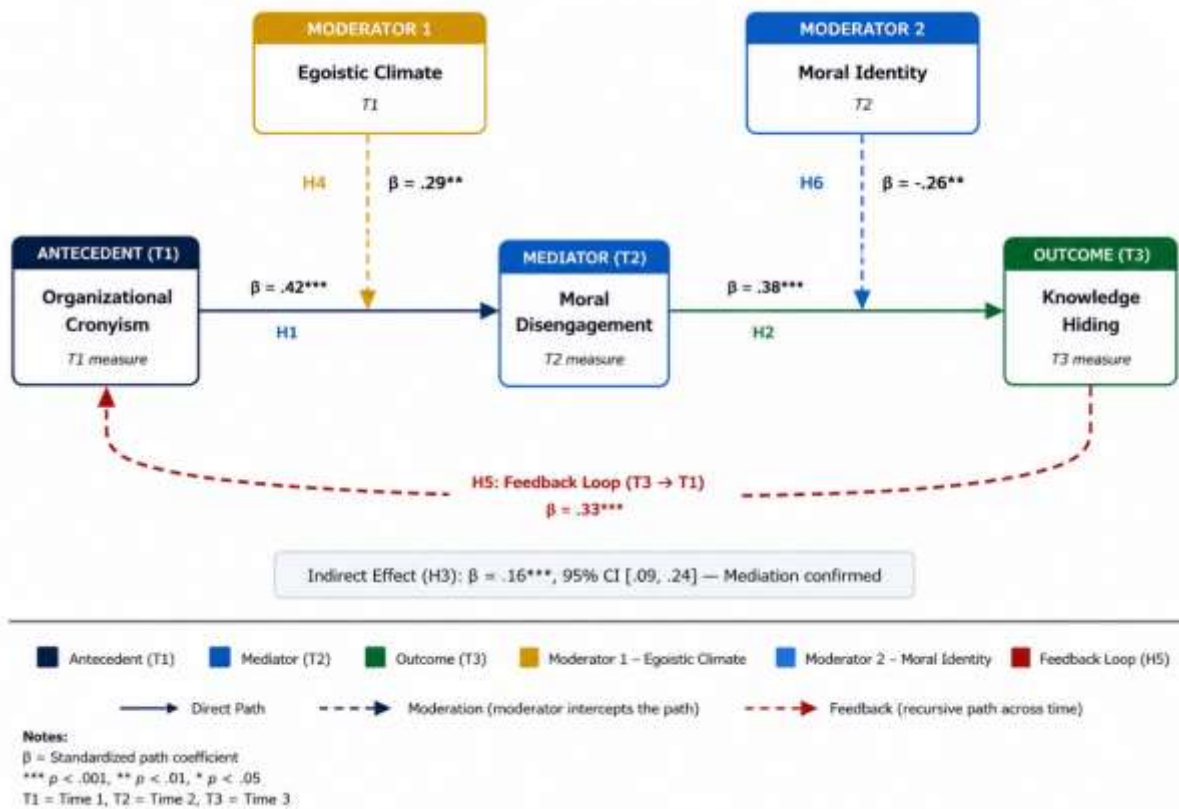


Figure 1. Proposed Dual-Level Moderated Mediation Framework. Standardized path coefficients from the final structural model ($N = 285$; 3-wave longitudinal design). Bootstrapped confidence intervals based on 5,000 resamples. MD = Moral Disengagement; KH = Knowledge Hiding. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$.

The framework presents a moderated mediation model explaining the dynamic relationship between moral disengagement, organizational cronyism, and knowledge hiding across three-time durations. Organizational cronyism denoted with T1 positive influenced moral disengagement. Moral disengagement denoted by T2 subsequently influences knowledge hiding behavior. The model further suggests that an egoistic environment augments the relation between cronyism and moral disengagement whereas a strong moral identity deters knowledge hiding and moral disengagement. Notably, the feedback loop suggests that knowledge hiding reinforces organizational cronyism over time by creating political dependence and informational asymmetry. Therefore, cronyism is conceptualized as recursive and self-sustaining unethical organizational process.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Background and evolution of cronyism

The word “cronyism” traces its linguistic and conceptual evolution for over several centuries. The word “crony” originated in Cambridge university slang in 1660s. It was derived from Greek word *khronios* meaning long standing or close friend. The noun cronyism emerged later around 1840 to describe the “ability or desire to make friends”. However, its neutral meaning shifted dramatically in the middle of 20th century, when journalists used the term to criticize political favoritism is government appointments (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). Since then, cronyism has been associated with corruption, nepotism and unethical favoritism.

Khatri and Tsang (2003) categorized cronyism into 2 distinct classifications i.e., horizontal and vertical cronyism. Horizontal cronyism relates to

cronyism among peers while vertical cronyism occurs within superior-subordinate relationships. It manifests as preferential access to contracts, allocated resources and funding as can be seen during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Vertical cronyism involves superiors granting favors such as promotions, bonuses and desirable assignments in exchange for subordinate loyalty. Such practices reduce meritocracy and create relational dependency. Emotional loyalty and behavioral loyalty further complicate this process as subordinates often adopt behavior intended to gain approval or favor from superiors (Deluga and Perry, 1994; Theodorsson et al., 2025).

2.2. Cultural antecedents of cronyism

Cronyism is deeply rooted in our cultural such as paternalism, particularism and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Farh & Cheng 2000; Beugelsdijk et al., 2017). Particularism promotes differential treatment based on relationships while paternalism emphasizes hierarchical or familial roles in which superiors expect loyalty and subordinates expect favoritism and protection. Collectivism is the practice or principle of giving a group priority over each individual in it (Yao et al., 2025). These cultural norms and customs generate strong in group biases and environment in which personal loyalty outweighs professional competence. It provides a fertile ground for cronyistic exchanges (Yusoff, 2025).

2.3. Individual level Consequences

At individual level, cronyism produces divergent outcomes. Favored “insiders” may experience increased job satisfaction and psychological safety while “outsiders” suffer diminished organizational commitment and mistrust in evaluative process (Greenberg, 1990; Colquitt et al., 2013). Employees who are ignored and unfavored at workplace respond with less positive and more negative behavior towards completing their task, as cronyism exhausts their resources. It generates a perception of inequality and compliance as strategies to secure advancement in environments where merit seems insufficient recognition (Deluga and Perry, 1994; Liu et al., 2014). Employees often resort to impression

management behaviors such as flattery, symbolic loyalty or compliance to secure advancement (Treviño et al., 2014; Khan et al., 2025)

2.4. Organizational level consequences

Cronyism erodes efficiency, fairness and innovation in an organization. Loyalty based promotions reduce overall performance, innovation and morale (Colquitt et al., 2001). It undermines organizational justice. Promotions based on loyalty distort merit system while hierarchical protectionism suppress dissent and creativity. Over time organization becomes politically rigid and resistant to change. Fatima et al., (2025) observed that cronyism creates moral disengagement during her study i.e., the cognitive process that allows individuals to justify unethical acts. Employees facing unfair treatment in workplace disengage morally to rationalize self-protective behavior such as knowledge hiding.

From the above literature, it is suggested that cronyism is culturally embedded phenomenon shaped by particularism, collectivism and paternalism (Khatri & Tsang, 2003; Farh & Cheng, 2000; Theodorsson et al., 2025). These existing models overwhelmingly treat cronyism as a unidirectional process assuming that cultural norms shape ethical cognition and employee perception. However, they do not account for how employee response may reinforce and reproduce cronyism itself. Studies on moral disengagement similarly conceptualize unethical behavior as a passive reaction to situational factors (Bandura, 2005; Jiang et al., 2024). It overlooks potential role in creating antecedents and self-sustaining cycles of unethical behavior. Finally, the moderating role of moral identity i.e., a protective mechanism that may weaken unethical cycles remains underexplored in workplace cronyism.

This gap shows the need for a multilevel framework that explains cronyism as both a cause of unethical thinking and behavior and an outcome that is strengthened by them. Additionally, the study aims to show that cronyism is both a cultural product and a cognitive process. It is reinforced through information asymmetry and employee behavior.

3. Methodology

The study follows a three-wave longitudinal design to capture temporal ordering among variables and reduce common method bias. The sample consisted of 285 participants drawn from diverse organizational sectors and locations in Pakistan, providing variability in exposure to cronyistic practices. The initial target sample of N = 350 was informed by power analysis for moderated mediation in SEM, which recommends a minimum of N = 200 and ideally N = 300+ for stable estimation of indirect and interaction effects (MacKinnon, 2008; Hayes, 2022). Participants were recruited via stratified purposive sampling across manufacturing, financial services,

public administration, education, and healthcare sectors, stratified by sector and organizational type (public vs. private).

At T1, 352 individuals were invited, of whom 318 completed the baseline survey (90.3% response rate). Attrition across waves yielded T2 completion by 301 participants (5.3% attrition) and T3 completion by 285 participants (10.4% cumulative attrition; retention rate: 89.6%). Only participants completing all three waves were included in the analytic sample. Attrition analysis confirmed no significant demographic differences between completers and non-completers, ruling out systematic attrition bias

Table 1: Overview of three-wave longitudinal research design

Wave	Timing	Variable measured	Measurement Instruments	Purpose in study
T1: Organizational context	Week 0	Organizational cronyism: Egoistic climate	Turhan’s cronyism scale: Egoistic climate scale	Establish initial perception of favoritism and political behavior
T2: Cognitive Mechanism	Week 4	Moral Disengagement: Moral identity	Moore et al. (2012) Moral Disengagement Scale; Aquino & Reed (2002) Moral Identity Scale	Measure cognitive and moral processes activated in response to perceived cronyism identified in T1
T3: Behavioral Outcomes	Week 8	Knowledge hiding	Connelly et al., (2012) Knowledge hiding scale	Assess behavioral consequences emerging after cognitive processing, enabling temporal interference
Analytical Approach	-	Moderated Mediation model	Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Bootstrapping	Examine causal pathways between predictor, mediator and moderators and outcomes

3.1 Data collection procedure.

Data was collected in three different phases, each phase being four weeks apart:

- **Time 1 (T1):** At T1, participants were asked to answer a structured questionnaire using Google forms. Participants consent was taken before sending performa and the timing can

be observed in table 1. Participants then completed standardized scales measuring of organizational cronyism and egoistic climate. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which promotions, task assignments, rewards, and recognition in their department were influenced by personal relationships with supervisors. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Participants rated statements describing the general climate of their department such as whether colleagues acted in self-interest, competed in personal advantaged or engaged politically. They were asked to rate the behavior in a 5-point Likert scale.

- **Time 2 (T2):** Four weeks after completing the T1 survey, participants were contacted to complete 2nd wave of surveys. At this stage, participants responded to validated scales measuring moral disengagement and moral identity. The Time 2 survey captured the internal cognitive processes that develop in response to perceived cronyism. Using Moore et al.'s (2012) moral disengagement scale, participants evaluated the extent to which they justified questionable behaviors, displaced responsibility onto others, minimized the consequences of misconduct, or selectively distorted ethical standards. Moreover, participants were asked to fill a moral identity Likert scale based on Aquino and Reed's (2002) moral identity model. It assessed how moral traits like fairness, honesty and compassion were to their self-concept. Collectively, this wave focused on internal moral reasoning and identity-based responses to the organizational environment measured at Time 1.
- **Time 3 (T3):** Final survey was taken from participants to measure knowledge hiding after 4 weeks. Participants answered Connelly et al., (2012) knowledge hiding scale which captures three distinct behaviors: evasive hiding (providing vague or partial information), playing dumb (pretending not to know), and rationalized hiding (offering

legitimate-sounding justifications for withholding information). It was observed in the T3 survey whether earlier perception of cronyism and cognitive moral disengagement translated into subsequent behavioral withdrawal from knowledge sharing. As knowledge hiding is an enacted response rather than an immediate perception. Placing this survey 3rd strengthens the temporal logic of the study.

The survey respondents were able to complete the survey in around 10-12 minutes. The survey was accessible only via unique link provided by email so that their answers would be confidential while avoiding multiple response submission. The researchers monitored the response rate and sent a gentle reminder three days after they sent the link for the survey, to verify that enough respondents completed the survey to draw valid conclusions. There was no identifying information collected from the respondents, and all responses were automatically assigned a coded reference number for analysis.

3.2. Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using Structural Equational Modeling (SEM) with Bootstrapped confidence intervals to test moderated mediation model. Hence, the three-wave design allowed each variable to be assessed in sequence, reflecting its theoretical position in the proposed model. Cronyism and egoistic climate which are relatively stable organizational perceptions were measured first. Moral disengagement and moral identity, which develop as cognitive responses to these perceptions, were captured one month later. Behavioral outcomes like knowledge hiding were assessed last because behaviors occur after cognitive appraisal. The temporal separation among predictor, mediator, and outcome variables reduces common method bias and improves causal inference. The eight-week spacing of the surveys followed best practices in longitudinal organizational research by ensuring that changes in cognition and behavior could be meaningfully attributed to earlier organizational perceptions rather than immediate response effects.

4. Findings

The final analytic sample (N = 285) comprised 58.2% male and 41.8% female participants. Mean age was 34.7 years (SD = 7.3), and mean organizational tenure was 6.4 years (SD = 4.9). The sample represented manufacturing (22.1%), financial services (19.3%), public administration (18.2%), education (21.4%), and healthcare (19.0%). Private sector employees constituted 61.4% of the sample. The SEM results showed a positively significant effect ($\beta \approx 0.42, p < 0.01$) as can be

observed in table 2. Participants that perceived favoritism or biased decision making reported greater justification of unethical actions which were consistent with moral disengagement theory. Indirect effects were significant as bootstrap confidence interval excluding zero, indicated that cronyism facilitates hiding through increase moral disengagement. Employees who cognitively reframed unethical behavior were likely to withhold information either strategically i.e., evasive hiding or consciously i.e., playing dumb.

Table 2. Hypothesis and observed findings

Hypothesized relationship	Description	SEM result	Interpretation
H1: Cronyism → Moral Disengagement	Employees perceiving favoritism rationalize unethical actions	Significant ($\beta \approx 0.42, p < 0.01$)	Cronyism triggers cognitive justification mechanisms
H2: Moral Disengagement → Knowledge hiding	Disengaged employees are more likely to hide or distort information	Significant (Indirect CI excluding zero)	Cognitive rationalization promotes protective unethical behaviors
H3: Cronyism → Knowledge hiding (Mediated by MD)	Moral disengagement mediates the link between cronyism and knowledge hiding	Positive significant interaction	Cronyism influences behavior through cognitive filtering
H4: Egoistic climate x cronyism → Moral Disengagement	Egoistic environment strengthens the impact of cronyism on unethical cognition	Longitudinal support	Competitive, self-serving climates intensify the harmful effects of cronyism
H5: Knowledge hiding → Reinforcement of cronyism	Information asymmetry strengthens power imbalances and favoritism	Longitudinal support	Knowledge hiding reproduces and stabilizes cronyistic structures
H6: Moral identity as a Buffer	High moral identity reduces moral disengagement and knowledge hiding	Supported	Strong moral identity interrupts the unethical feedback cycle

The interaction term among cronyistic and egoistic environment was positive and statistically significant. It indicates that effect of cronyism on

moral disengagement was stronger due to self-interest, high competition and political maneuvering. The findings suggest that

organizational norms and egoistic climate operate in a synergistic manner. Furthermore, the longitudinal results showed employees that engage in knowledge hiding had greater control over information, resources and informal workplace influence. This leads to greater workplace asymmetry in knowledge, justice and resources. The informational asymmetric advantage creates dependence among colleagues and produces the power structure i.e., cronyism. It enables those who withheld such knowledge to wield greater political leverage and favors. Hence, it is suggested that knowledge hiding is not only a defensive mechanism but a procedure by which power is consolidated. Thus, making cronyism a self-reinforcing system rather than a one directional linear model.

Finally, the moderating effect of moral identity was significant. As individuals with high moral character such as honesty, fairness and compassion reported lower moral disengage even in a cronyistic environment. They engage less in knowledge hiding or distortion of knowledge. It supports the theory that high moral identity based on fairness, integrity and compassion can disrupt the unethical cycle of cronyism by weakening the behavioral and cognitive structure which makes cronyism.

5. Discussion

In this paper we define cronyism and develop the theory on its antecedents and consequences. It was proposed that particularism, collectivism and paternalism give rise to a cronyistic environment. It gives rise to in-group bias and unreserved loyalty. Its effect on both individual and organization is both far reaching. From in-group perspective it is desirable as it entails higher pay to the individual and is faster road to promotion. However, in organization perspective, it staggers the organizations credibility and performance. It is believed that organizations that are riddled with cronyism tend to be inefficient and are unable to survive in a competitive market.

Findings of this study contribute towards a deeper and intricate understanding of cronyism by showing that it is not a top to bottom cultural

practice. It is a self-reinforcing ethical cycle that is shaped by reciprocal interactions among cultural norms, cognitive mechanisms and employee behaviors. The results confirm that cultural antecedents such as paternalism and particularism provide a foundation for loyalty-driven exchanges that marginalize merit, which is consistent with previous literature (Khatri and Tsang, 2003; Farh & Cheng, 2000; Chen et al., 2014). Furthermore, this study extends prior research by empirically showing that employees do not simply react to cronyism as they also participate in perpetuating it.

The results highlight the reciprocal relationship among superiors and their cronies. It may be due to the desire of achieving higher rewards or favors in future. Despite being able to obtain desired end goal, cronies do not always perform better than non-cronies. It is because cronies know well that their performance is not based on competence but rather the lack of it. This outcome contracts the person normal prediction of equity theory that employees use to improve their job performance. As they receive bonuses or favorable treatment from their work, the link between reward and merit becomes severed. Of course, this may test experimentally in future research.

The results suggest that perceived cronyism significantly increases moral disengagement, meaning employees cognitively justify unethical behavior when faced with unfair treatment. This result supports social cognitive theory of Bandura, 2005, emphasizing that individuals selectively disable the self-regulatory mechanism of moral disengagement. The deactivate the mechanism that contradicts internal moral standards to justify cronyism behavior. Once the mechanism disengages, the employee is more likely to engage in knowledge hiding, behavioral strategy to protect self interest in politically charged environment. This behavior in turn creates a strategic asymmetry that grants insiders undue advantage, additionally reinforcing the cronyistic environment (Connelly et al., 2012). Interestingly, our findings challenge the equity theory as cronies believe that rewards are dissociated from competence. The motivational assumption of equity theory weakens and link between effort and outcomes are

distorted. This outcome suggests that cronyism may ultimately erode performance in workplace and organizational efficiency.

The moderating role of egoistic climate further shows that when competition, political maneuvering and self-interest are normalized in a workplace, effect of cronyism and immoral behavior is amplified. Individuals who view moral traits as central to their identity disengage less and hide less knowledge, showing that personal moral frameworks can interrupt unethical organizational cycles (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Treviño et al., 2014). From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the importance of Human Resource (HR) systems. Weak HR practices like informal promotions, subjective evaluation and unjust resource allocation create openings for loyalty-based exchanges. In contrast structured and transparent HR policies discourage such recursive cycle by limiting opportunities for favoritism and reducing knowledge hiding. Ethical leadership development, justice-oriented HR practices, and transparent communication norms therefore serve as powerful levers for mitigating cronyism's impact.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its methodological advances, the present study has several limitations. First, while the present three wave longitudinal study improves upon its cross-sectional alternatives. It still does not capture the nuance and long-term dynamics of cronyism as a self-reinforcing system. Future research should employ designs spanning months or even years. Additionally, it may include experience sampling methodologies as it would enhance evidence for temporal dynamics theorized here

Second, the sample came from a relatively small population of 285 and was spread across different office sectors in Pakistan. Although the cultural context is suitable due to the emphasis on collectivism and paternalism. Future studies should look at the model in various cultural settings. Comparing across cultures may show the conditions under which cronyism and moral disengagement are stronger.

Finally, the current model primarily focuses on cognitive mechanism i.e., moral disengagement and moral identity. Future research may benefit from exploring additional moderators such as ethical leadership, psychological safety, organizational justice, structural power asymmetries. Examining how technological systems like remote work and AI mediated monitoring influence cronyism can also be good new direction for future.

7. Conclusion

The study aims to present a comprehensive impact of cronyism in workplace environment. The mediating role of high moral identity on breaking the recursive cycle of cronyism. It links the cultural norms with behavioral and cognitive consequences. In developing countries like Pakistan, cronyism has become part of our cultural norms. It affects most of the working class in the form of knowledge hiding, politicized environment and asymmetric resource allocation. The findings suggest that cronyism is not unidirectional phenomenon imposed by organizational culture solely but rather it is an interactive and cyclic process. Cultural norms like particularism and paternalism form the basis of favoritism but employee cognition especially moral disengagement and their behavior like knowledge hiding contribute towards maintaining the recursive cycle. By integration of strong moral identity and social cognitive theory, this research highlights how it can serve as a powerful tool in interrupting the unethical cycle of conduct.

Ultimately, the study emphasizes that breaking the cronyistic structure requires transparent HR system and psychological interventions like strong moral character. These can be attained using structural interventions, ethical training and leadership practices. By understanding that cronyism is a cultural product and cognitive process, organizations can develop more effective strategies to promote fairness, restore trust, and cultivate ethical climates that encourage knowledge sharing and merit-based advancement.

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