Integrating modern research on social courage via psychological contract theory: direct and interactive effects of work engagement and moral disengagement

Matt C. Howard
University of South Alabama, Mobile, Alabama, USA, and
Mandy Kasprzyk
Pensacola Christian College, Pensacola, Florida, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The current article integrates four prominent directions of modern research on workplace social courage. We (1) apply a novel framework, psychological contract theory, to identify (2) work engagement and moral disengagement as potential antecedents of social courage, (3) unethical pro-organizational behaviors as a possible duplicitous outcome of these antecedents and (4) moderating effects of moral disengagement on the relations of work engagement with these outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – We perform a two-wave survey study (n = 347), wherein antecedents are measured at Time 1 and outcomes are measured at Time 2 (one week later).

Findings – We support that work engagement and moral disengagement significantly relate to both workplace social courage and unethical pro-organizational behaviors. We also support that moral disengagement moderates the relation of work engagement with unethical pro-organizational behaviors but not workplace social courage.

Practical implications – We highlight that work engagement can be a possible avenue to promote workplace social courage, but organizations should monitor any interventions because it may also promote unethical pro-organizational behaviors for those who are morally disengaged. We also contend that the current results support the “resiliency of courage” by discovering a nonsignificant moderating effect, providing further support for this broadly replicable aspect of workplace social courage.

Originality/value – We discuss how these findings support psychological contract theory as a viable lens to understand workplace social courage, and we call on future researchers to apply the theory to identify further relations of the construct.

Keywords: Moral disengagement, Work engagement, Courage, Social courage

Paper type Research paper

Courage is an intentional, deliberate and personally risky behavior performed primarily for noble purposes, such as to selflessly benefit others (Detert and Bruno, 2017; Rate et al., 2007; Woodard and Pury, 2007). While courage has been discussed in philosophical debates for...
centuries, dating back to Plato and Aristotle (Balot, 2001; Sanford, 2010), recent years have seen a growth in scholarly attention on the behavior, and a prominent stream of modern research on courage is the study of workplace social courage (Kaltiainen et al., 2022; Magnano et al., 2022a, b; Mert et al., 2021). Social courage is a courageous behavior in which the personal risks involved can damage the actor's esteem in the eyes of others, such as their relationships or social image (Howard et al., 2017; Magnano et al., 2022a, b). Researchers have recognized that the modern workplaces can greatly benefit from social courage; employees must often navigate difficult social situations for the greater good of the organization, such as providing constructive criticism to coworkers or leading an important project with a chance of failure. This recognition has spurred many studies on workplace social courage, and authors have identified antecedents (Howard and Cogswell, 2019; Magnano et al., 2022a, b; Mert et al., 2021), outcomes (Ilyas et al., 2021; Kaltiainen et al., 2022; Mert and Köksal, 2022), mediators (Howard, 2019) and moderators (Howard and Holmes, 2020; Howard et al., 2022) of workplace social courage and its relations.

Many directions are evident in modern research on social courage, but four directions are particularly pronounced. First, given the known importance of courage to the workplace, many authors have called for researchers to identify further antecedents of social courage (Howard and Fox, 2020; Magnano et al., 2022a, b; Mert et al., 2021). Such discoveries could prompt the development of interventions to promote social courage, perhaps resulting in healthier and more productive organizations. Second, it is regularly assumed that the antecedents of courage broadly relate to beneficial outcomes and do not relate to detrimental outcomes; however, Holmes and Howard (2022) recently questioned this notion and supported that some predictors of social courage also predict unethical behaviors. The authors called for future research to identify further duplicitious antecedents of social courage. Third, authors have investigated whether several moderators influence the relations of social courage, but these studies have failed to produce consistent moderating effects (Howard and Holmes, 2020; Holmes and Howard, 2022). These recurrent nonsignificant effects have caused some authors to coin the phrase, “the resiliency of courage” (Holmes and Howard, 2022, p. 8), suggesting that courage may be inherently resilient to moderating effects. The authors have also called for further research to verify the resiliency of courage. Fourth, researchers have repeatedly called for research to integrate novel theoretical perspectives into the study of courage, which could lead to a deeper understanding of the construct (Detert and Bruno, 2017; Koernr, 2014; Schilpzand et al., 2015). These integrations could also prompt future research to integrate novel theory with existing theory to better model the effects of social courage, resulting in comprehensive frameworks.

The goal of the current article is to integrate and advance these four directions of modern research on workplace social courage. We apply psychological contract theory (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Kutaula et al., 2020; Rousseau, 1995) to primarily argue that (1) employees perform workplace social courage behaviors at work because, in part, they feel an obligation to uphold their psychological contract, and these feelings are intensified by work engagement; (2) these obligations can cause employees to perform deviant behaviors on behalf of their organization, resulting in a positive relation between work engagement and unethical pro-organizational behaviors; (3) and moral disengagement moderates these relations, such that the relations of work engagement are weaker with social courage and stronger with unethical pro-organizational behaviors when moral disengagement is high (Figure 1). We then report a two-wave survey study of 347 employees to test our proposals, providing a robust assessment of whether psychological contract theory is a valid lens to understand workplace social courage.

These efforts significantly advance modern scholarship on workplace social courage by satisfying calls in all four noted directions. Our results can uncover two novel antecedents of social courage, work engagement and moral disengagement, perhaps leading to interventions to promote social courage at work. We also show, though, that organizations
should not assume that such interventions would always result in beneficial outcomes, as our studied antecedents of courage may also relate to the detrimental outcome of unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Testing the moderating effect of moral disengagement provides a further assessment of the resiliency of courage, uncovering more nuance in the relations of courage. Furthermore, we follow recent trends in psychological contract theory by not directly measuring contract fulfillment or breach, but we instead utilize it as a lens to understand our relations of interest (Bi, 2019; Kutaula et al., 2020; Pate and Scullion, 2018; Soares and Mosquera, 2019). Integrating psychological contract theory can identify further dynamics of social courage, and subsequent researchers could use the theory to identify antecedents, outcomes, moderators and mediators. The theory could also be integrated with current theoretical perspectives to understand courage, such as the approach/avoidance framework (Howard, 2019, 2021), resulting in broad models to understand the emergence of courage at work. Together, the current article addresses present uncertainties regarding workplace social courage and opens avenues for future research.

**Background**

*Psychological contract theory*

The psychological contract is described as, “beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the focal person and another party (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123), and organizational research often studies psychological contracts with employees as the “focal person” and their organizations to be the “another party” (Alcover et al., 2017; Karagonlar et al., 2016; Rousseau et al., 2018). This unspoken agreement governs the rules and conditions of behavior between employees and their organizations (Solinger et al., 2016; Tekleab et al., 2020), wherein people develop a set of perceived obligations, both for themselves and their organization, based on their anticipated reciprocal interactions. In turn, these perceived obligations shape employees’ expectations, perceptions, emotions and behaviors associated with their organization (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019; Tomprou et al., 2015). For instance, an employee may have no expectation regarding their organization’s reciprocation for extra work, whereas another employee may expect their organization to repay their additional labor. After working overtime, the former employee may be relatively unphased if their organization does not recognize their additional work (beyond standard payment), whereas the latter employee may become particularly disgruntled. Although the interactions between these employees and...
their organizations were the same, their outcomes differed because of their psychological contracts. These dynamics are why psychological contracts are often considered the hypothetical linchpin in the employment relationship (Taylor et al., 2006; Wu and Chem, 2015).

The roots of psychological contracts are founded in social exchange theory (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Rousseau, 1989, 1995). Blau (1964) described social exchange obligations as favors that create future unspecified obligations in the mind of the contract creator. Because of the contract, an equal reaction is expected when a positive experience occurs; however, when the contract is broken, it is translated by the other party as a breach in reciprocity. In turn, negative reactions that result from a psychological contract breach can result in intensified negative actions (Probst et al., 2020). As these non-legal contracts are unwritten and implicit, employees regularly interpret situations as breaches in their psychological contract. Further, psychological contracts are categorized as transactional or relational (Rousseau, 1995). Transactional contracts focus on defined, specific and short-term economic relationships, such as performing required job duties in exchange for payment; whereas relational contracts focus on open-ended, broad and long-lasting social and emotional relationships, such as making personal sacrifices on behalf of the organization without being asked (Jensen et al., 2010; Richard et al., 2009; Zhao et al., 2020). Whether transactional or relational, the norm of reciprocity is prevalent, which we suggest is pivotal for understanding our relations proposed below.

**Hypothesis development**

**Social courage.** While other definitions exist, likely the most popular conceptualization of work engagement is, “a state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Knight et al., 2017, p. 793), which we utilize in the current article due to its widespread popularity (Borst et al., 2020; Freeney and Fellenz, 2013; Knight et al., 2017). Work engagement is produced by beneficial organizational qualities and interventions, such as positive work design characteristics, social relationships and psychological climates (Freeney and Fellenz, 2013; Knight et al., 2017; Kühnel et al., 2012). Likewise, employees perform beneficial behaviors when experiencing work engagement. For instance, work engagement has a positive relation with performance, organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) and voice (Kwon et al., 2016; Yalabik et al., 2013). We suggest that employees may perform these positive behaviors when experiencing work engagement, in part, because of their psychological contracts. When positive evaluations of the work environment become apparent to an employee, such as job satisfaction or work engagement, felt obligations might surface (Freeney and Fellenz, 2013; Knight et al., 2017; Kühnel et al., 2012; Rayton and Yalabik, 2014). Employees might then be motivated to return the felt obligations with beneficial behaviors, and it may even be possible that feelings of work engagement may cause transactional psychological contracts to transition to relational psychological contracts. This transition may then cause employees to perform behaviors that are beyond normal expectations, and we suggest that one such behavior is social courage.

As mentioned above, social courage is a courageous behavior in which the personal risks involved can damage the actor’s esteem in the eyes of others, such as their relationships or social image (Howard et al., 2017). Employees often go beyond their typical work expectations to perform social courage behaviors, and these behaviors improve organizational functioning because many necessary interactions in workplaces are difficult to perform due to potential social ramifications (Howard and Cogswell, 2019; Magnano et al., 2022a, b; Mert et al., 2021). For instance, social courage is often needed to give truthful feedback to coworkers, and it is also needed to voluntarily lead projects with chances of failure. While distinct from general OCBs, social courage can be considered a type of OCB because it is a beneficial behavior outside of typical work expectations (Howard et al., 2017; Organ, 2014; Podsakoff et al., 2000).
We suggest that social courage behaviors can be an obligatory transaction to uphold the ongoing exchange process of the psychological contract. When an employee perceives that their organization has upheld their end of the psychological contract, the employee may perform a social courage behavior to likewise uphold their end. This suggestion is bolstered by prior evidence that employees perform OCBs in response to felt obligations of their psychological contract (Hui et al., 2004; Turnley et al., 2003), suggesting that social courage may function in a similar manner. Because these perceived obligations are heightened when employees experience work engagement, we further suggest that employees are more likely to perform these difficult behaviors on behalf of their organization when they experience higher work engagement. Therefore, we propose that work engagement positively relates to workplace social courage.

**H1.** Work engagement positively relates to workplace social courage.

Moral disengagement is “a set of eight cognitive mechanisms that decouple one’s internal moral standards from one’s actions” (Moore, 2015, p. 199), and the construct stems from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001, 2002). Social cognitive theory suggests that people have moral controls that prevent them from performing unethical behaviors, but the mechanisms associated with moral disengagement can cause these moral controls to be sidestepped or deactivated. The sidestepping or deactivation of these moral controls can be attributed to instances of morally upright people performing unethical behaviors. For instance, a person who normally would not steal may justify the action by telling themselves that everyone occasionally steals small items (i.e. diffusion of responsibility), and this cognitive mechanism may subsequently enable the unethical behavior of stealing. Because of its potential to explain unethical behaviors across a wide range of people and contexts, moral disengagement has become among the most studied constructs in the ethical decision-making literature (Moore, 2015; Newman et al., 2020).

Most studies on moral disengagement investigate whether it turns off the moral self-sanctions that are normally active within an employee to result in deviant work behaviors (e.g. theft and fraud; Moore, 2015; Probst et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2020). Fewer studies have tested whether moral disengagement curbs positive workplace behaviors, but we propose that this is the case for social courage. Most employees have a psychological contract with their organization that prompts them to perform beneficial behaviors, as employees at a minimum feel the need to repay the salary that they receive from their organization (Alcover et al., 2017; Karagonlar et al., 2016; Rousseau et al., 2018). While social courage is regularly considered going beyond typical work requirements, most employees perform some amount of social courage behaviors (Howard and Cogswell, 2019; Howard et al., 2017; Ilyas et al., 2021; Kaltiainen et al., 2022; Mert and Köksal, 2022). This may be because employees perceive occasional social courage behaviors as a necessary avenue to reciprocate standard organizational obligations, and they will perform more social courage behaviors when they perceive heightened positive evaluations of their organizational environment (e.g. work engagement).

When employees are morally disengaged, however, their cognitive mechanisms may prompt them to frequently disregard their psychological contracts. While most employees would feel the need to reciprocate, those high in moral disengagement may engage in specific cognitive processes to justify their failure to reciprocate. For instance, these employees may tell themselves that all employees sometimes fail to reciprocate their organization’s positive actions (i.e. diffusion of responsibility), and they may also view their organization as an entity not deserving of reciprocation (i.e. dehumanization). In turn, this could cause those higher in moral disengagement to perform fewer positive organizational behaviors, including social courage. It should be noted, though, that we do not expect those high in moral disengagement to entirely cease fulfilling their psychological contracts, but they are instead expected to disregard their psychological contracts more often than those low in moral disengagement. Therefore, we propose that moral disengagement negatively relates to workplace social courage.
H2. Moral disengagement negatively relates to workplace social courage. We further suggest that these dynamics of work engagement and moral disengagement interact. Above, we argued that people perform more social courage behaviors when experiencing work engagement because of their felt reciprocity obligations, and we also argued that those high in moral disengagement perform fewer social courage behaviors because they disregard their psychological contracts. When studied together, this theoretical rationale suggests that moral disengagement moderates the relation of work engagement and social courage. Specifically, those low in moral disengagement may feel little temptation to disregard their psychological contracts, causing the relation of work engagement and social courage to be unphased; however, those high in moral disengagement may be tempted to disregard their psychological contracts, even when these employees would otherwise feel a strong compulsion to reciprocate to their organization. For this reason, we expect the relation of work engagement and social courage to be weaker for those high in moral disengagement, as these employees are more likely to disregard their psychological contracts.

H3. Moral disengagement moderates the relation between work engagement and workplace social courage, such that the relation is weaker when moral disengagement is high.

Unethical pro-organizational behaviors. In addition to relating to a positive behavior, social courage, we argue that the constructs discussed above also relate to a negative behavior, unethical pro-organizational behaviors. We further argue that these relations with unethical pro-organizational behaviors can likewise be studied via the lens of psychological contract theory. Unethical pro-organizational behaviors are “actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members (e.g. leaders) and violate core societal values, mores, laws, or standards of proper conduct” (Umphress and Bingham, 2011, p. 622). Example unethical pro-organizational behaviors are withholding negative information to make an organization look better, exaggerating products and services to increase sales, and refusing a refund to increase organizational revenue (Bryant and Merritt, 2021; Mishra et al., 2022; Umphress et al., 2010). While these behaviors often provide short-term benefits to the organization, they are believed to be detrimental in the long-term. Customers often have negative reactions to unethical pro-organizational behaviors, as they frequently perceive these behaviors as service failures. In some cases, unethical pro-organizational behaviors are illegal in addition to being immoral, leading to significant organizational costs if discovered. For these reasons, it is often in the best interest of the organization to prevent their employees from performing unethical pro-organizational behaviors.

As mentioned, work engagement may be employees’ responses to perceptions that the organization is treating them fairly, and employees may have the urge to reciprocate the positive experience to maintain the harmony of their psychological contract. While it is desired for employees to reciprocate via ethical behaviors, they may reciprocate via unethical behaviors that they perceive to be fulfilling their psychological contract. Most unethical behaviors are outside of this scope, such as counterproductive work behaviors, as they are detrimental to the organization in both the short- and long-term (Cohen et al., 2013; Fida et al., 2015; Samnani et al., 2014); however, unethical pro-organizational behaviors are often perceived as beneficial to the organization by the employee, such as omitting product flaws to a customer to complete a sale, and these unethical behaviors may be construed as approaches to increase organizational prestige and revenue. Despite being immoral, employees may therefore perceive unethical pro-organizational behaviors as avenues to repay their organization, and we propose that work engagement positively relates to unethical pro-organizational behavior.

H4. Work engagement positively relates to unethical pro-organizational behavior.
Moral disengagement is a reliable predictor of deviant behaviors, including incivility and counterproductive work behaviors (Ilies et al., 2020; Probst et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2020). When self-sanctions are disengaged, moral standards are set aside and deviant conduct results (Moore, 2015). While most employees would be reluctant to perform unethical behaviors, even those that are pro-organizational, those who are morally disengaged may have little hesitancy to perform these behaviors because of their cognitive justification mechanisms. An employee may justify an unethical pro-organizational behavior by focusing on the positive aspects (i.e. distortion of consequences), telling themselves that everyone performs these types of behaviors (i.e. diffusion of responsibility) or other cognitive approaches.

While it is expected that those high in moral disengagement are more likely to disregard their psychological contracts, they are also expected to adhere to their psychological contracts to some extent. When these employees choose to repay their organizations, they may be more likely to reciprocate by performing unethical pro-organizational behavior, because these employees may perceive these behaviors as beneficial to the organization and overlook the immoral aspects due to their cognitive justification mechanisms. Therefore, we propose that moral disengagement positively relates to unethical pro-organizational behavior.

H5. Moral disengagement positively relates to unethical pro-organizational behaviors.

Like the effects of work engagement and moral disengagement on social courage, we also expect these two constructs to interact regarding the outcome of unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Employees low on moral disengagement adhere to their moral principles, as they do not engage in the cognitive mechanisms necessary to sidestep their internal standards. These employees may still occasionally perform unethical behaviors under extenuating circumstances, but they are not expected to perform a sizable number of unethical behaviors. For this reason, these employees are expected to satisfy their psychological contracts through other means, and the relation of work engagement and unethical pro-organizational behaviors is expected to be weaker when moral disengagement is low. On the other hand, while employees high in moral disengagement are believed to be more likely to disregard their psychological contracts, they are also expected to utilize justification mechanisms in deciding how to fulfill their psychological contract. When they may feel particularly obligated to fulfill their psychological contract (e.g. high work engagement), they are believed to engage in psychological processes to justify their unethical behaviors to repay their organization. The relation of work engagement and unethical pro-organizational behaviors is expected to be stronger when moral disengagement is high.

H6. Moral disengagement moderates the relation between work engagement and unethical pro-organizational behavior, such that the relation is stronger when moral disengagement is high.

Method
Participants
Participants (Age = 37.17, AgeSD = 11.49, 50% female; Tenure = 6.47, TenureSD = 8.08) were recruited from Prolific in return for monetary compensation. Prolific is an online platform that connects those needing a task completed, such as taking a survey, with those willing to complete the task. Significant prior research has supported that samples obtained via Prolific can provide valid results if precautions are taken (Litman et al., 2021; Palan and Schitter, 2018; Stanton et al., 2022). We applied these recommended precautions, including the use of a time-separated research design and attention checks. We removed participants that
failed any attention checks (e.g. “Mark strongly agree to show that you are paying attention”), and our sample size provided below reflects the sample after removing these participants.

**Procedure**
Participants enrolled in the study via the Prolific platform, and they immediately completed the first survey containing the measures of work engagement and moral disengagement \((n = 468)\). One week later, they were provided a second survey to complete containing the measures of workplace social courage and unethical pro-organizational behavior. Afterwards, they were thanked for their time and disclosed the purpose of the study \((n = 347)\).

**Measures**

*Work engagement.* Work engagement was measured via the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, which is likely the most-used measure of work engagement (Kulikowski, 2017; Mills et al., 2012; Seppälä et al., 2009). An example item is, “I get carried away when I’m working.” The Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was 0.95.

*Moral disengagement.* Moral disengagement was measured via the eight-item scale of Moore et al. (2012), which ensures sufficient content coverage by including one item to assess each of the major aspects of moral disengagement. An example item is, “It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about.” The Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was 0.78.

*Workplace social courage.* Workplace social courage was measured via the 11-item scale of Howard et al. (2017), which is the only empirically supported measure of social courage. An example item is, “Even if it may damage our relationship, I would confront a subordinate who had been disrupting their workgroup.” The Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was 0.87.

*Unethical pro-organizational behaviors.* Unethical pro-organizational behaviors were measured via the six-item scale of Umphress et al. (2010), which has been supported in ample prior research (Effelsberg et al., 2014; Miao et al., 2013). An example item is, “If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good.” The Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was 0.91.

**Results**
Supplemental Material A provides our dataset, and Table 1 provides our correlations and Cronbach’s alphas. We followed standard recommendations to conduct our moderation analyses (Dawson, 2014). We mean-centered our predictor (work engagement) and moderator (moral disengagement) variables, and we multiplied together our mean-centered variables to create our interaction term. We then performed stepwise regression analyses. In the first step, we tested the relation of our mean-centered predictor and moderator variables with our outcome. In the second step, we added our interaction term to assess its incremental effects. Table 2 provides the results for both steps of our moderation analyses. We use the first step of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) WE</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) MD</td>
<td>−0.18**</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) WSC</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>−0.24**</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) UPB</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.45**</td>
<td>−0.11*</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note(s):** WE = Work engagement; MD = Moral disengagement; WSC = Workplace social courage; UPB = Unethical pro-organizational behavior \(*p < 0.05\); \(**p < 0.01\)

**Source(s):** Created by author
our regression results to test direct effects (H1, H2, H4, and H5), whereas we use the second step to test moderating effects (H3 and H6). Any significant moderating effects are probed by simple slopes analyses.

We focus on standardized beta coefficients to interpret the magnitude of our results, for which we use the benchmarks proposed by Fey et al. (2023). The authors developed these benchmarks from a review of the management literature, and their suggested standardized beta coefficient guidelines were primarily based on recommendations of Acock (2008). These benchmarks consider standardized beta coefficients between |0.00| and |0.20| to be small, |0.20| and |0.50| to be moderate, and above |0.50| to be large. We consider coefficients closely approaching these cutoffs (e.g. within 0.03) to be small-to-moderate or moderate-to-large.

Hypothesis 1 proposes that work engagement has a positive relation with workplace social courage. Work engagement has a positive, moderate and statistically significant relation with workplace social courage ($\beta = 0.26$, $t = 4.96$, $p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 1 is supported. Hypothesis 2 proposes that moral disengagement is significantly related to workplace social courage. Moral disengagement has a negative, small-to-moderate, and statistically significant relation with workplace social courage ($\beta = -0.18$, $t = -3.56$, $p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 2 is supported. Hypothesis 3 proposes that moral disengagement moderates the relation of work engagement and workplace social courage. The interaction term did not have a statistically significant effect on workplace social courage, and the size of the effect was negligible ($\beta = 0.09$, $t = 1.76$, $p = 0.08$). Hypothesis 3 is not supported.

Hypothesis 4 proposes that work engagement has a positive relation with unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Work engagement has a positive, small, and statistically significant relation with unethical pro-organizational behaviors ($\beta = 0.11$, $t = 2.32$, $p = 0.02$). Hypothesis 4 is supported. Hypothesis 5 proposes that moral disengagement is significantly related to unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Moral disengagement has a positive, moderate-to-large, and statistically significant relation with unethical pro-organizational behaviors ($\beta = 0.47$, $t = 9.62$, $p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 5 is supported. Hypothesis 6 proposes that moral disengagement moderates the relation of work engagement and unethical pro-organizational behaviors. The interaction term has a positive, small, and statistically significant effect on unethical pro-organizational behaviors ($\beta = 0.12$, $t = 2.46$, $p = 0.01$). Figure 2 provides a visual representation of this moderating effect, and we again performed a simple slopes test to probe it further. The slope for the relation between work engagement and unethical pro-organizational behavior is steeper when moral disengagement is high ($\beta = 0.28$, $t = 3.39$, $p < 0.01$) compared to when it is low ($\beta = 0.02$, $t = 0.36$, $p = 0.72$). The relation is statistically significant when moral disengagement is high but not when it is low. Hypothesis 6 is supported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work engagement</th>
<th>Unethical pro-organizational behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workplace social courage</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$t$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) WE</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) MD</td>
<td>−0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Int</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>0.12**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note(s):** WE = Work engagement; MD = Moral disengagement * $p < 0.05$ **$p < 0.01$**

**Source(s):** Created by author

Table 2. Regression analyses of direct and moderating effects
Discussion
The current article applied psychological contract theory to integrate four calls in recent research on courage (Detert and Bruno, 2017; Holmes and Howard, 2022; Howard and Fox, 2020; Koerner, 2014; Magnano et al., 2022a, b; Mert et al., 2021; Schilpzand et al., 2015). We argued that people feel an obligation toward their organization that is intensified by work engagement, resulting in greater amounts of workplace social courage behaviors but also unethical pro-organizational behaviors. We also argued that moral disengagement moderates the relations of work engagement with workplace social courage and unethical pro-organizational behavior. Thus, the effects tested in the current article were (1) the relation of work engagement to workplace social courage, (2) the relation of work engagement to unethical pro-organizational behaviors and (3) the moderating effect of moral disengagement on these two relations.

Our results supported that work engagement relates to both workplace social courage and unethical pro-organizational behavior, with its effect being stronger on the former than the latter. Our results also supported that moral disengagement relates to both workplace social courage and unethical pro-organizational behavior. The moderating effect of moral disengagement on the relation of work engagement and workplace social courage behaviors was not supported, whereas the moderating effect of moral disengagement on the relation of work engagement and unethical pro-organizational behaviors was supported. For the significant moderating effect, the relation of work engagement and unethical pro-organizational behavior became stronger as levels of moral disengagement increased. That is, those low in moral disengagement did not perform unethical pro-organizational behaviors regardless of their work engagement, whereas those high in moral disengagement were more likely to perform unethical pro-organizational behaviors as their work engagement increased. Together, these results have many implications for modern research and practice.

Implications and future Research directions
Work engagement. Researchers have continuously speculated that employee and organizational performance can be considerably benefitted by identifying avenues to
promote courage (Detert and Bruno, 2017; Koerner, 2014; Schilpzand et al., 2015). Extant empirical investigations have largely focused on relatively stable individual differences (e.g. personality; Howard, 2021; Howard et al., 2022; Howard and Fox, 2020) and aspects of the environment (e.g. job characteristics; Howard and Cogswell, 2019; Mert et al., 2021). Recent studies have recommended that researchers should devote greater focus on malleable antecedents of courage, as malleable antecedents can be potentially influenced by organizations to ultimately promote employee courage (Holmes and Howard, 2022; Magnano et al., 2019). Identifying work engagement as an antecedent to workplace social courage provides organizations an avenue to promote courage, which enables the current article to potentially provide immediate benefits to practitioners. Organizations should enhance aspects of their work environment known to improve work engagement, such as expressed social support and transformational leadership (Ghadi et al., 2013; Halbesleben, 2010; Strom et al., 2014) to ultimately result in more courageous employees.

Future researchers should assess whether similar constructs may also be antecedents of social courage, such as work commitment and thriving (Cooper-Hakim and Viswesvaran, 2005; Porath et al., 2012). Testing these relations can broaden the nomological net of workplace social courage, which is needed due to the relative nascency of empirical research on the construct (Howard et al., 2017). Likewise, researchers should test whether work engagement and other similar constructs are mediators between the previously identified stable individual differences and workplace social courage. For instance, prior broad studies of antecedents have supported that social support at work relates to social courage, even when accounting for numerous other antecedents (Howard and Cogswell, 2019). Because social support at work relates to greater work engagement (Freeney and Fellenz, 2013; Knight et al., 2017), future researchers should integrate these studies to test whether work engagement mediates the relation of social support at work and social courage. Such investigations could lead to process models of workplace social courage with sequential links that ultimately result in the behavior at work, which could complement current theoretical models (Koerner, 2014; Schilpzand et al., 2015).

By also showing that work engagement leads to unethical pro-organizational behaviors, however, the current article supported that organizations should not universally promote antecedents of courage, else they may suffer from unintended negative consequences. This finding further supports the proposals of Holmes and Howard (2022). Many popular press and scholarly articles imply that the antecedents and outcomes of courage are wholly beneficial (as pointed out by Purdy et al., 2015), suggesting that there is very little downside to promoting the behavior; however, Holmes and Howard (2022) suggested that more antecedents than commonly assumed produce duplicitous effects, such that they relate to both courage and unethical behaviors. Now that this perspective has been supported across multiple studies, researchers should develop broader models of the duplicitous effects of courage. This would include identifying the antecedents of courage that produce duplicitous effects, but researchers should also identify mediators of these duplicitous effects. It is possible that a common antecedent leads to different outcomes via different explanatory mechanisms, which would be a novel perspective and finding compared to extant research on duplicitous effects associated with courage.

It should be highlighted, however, that the effect of work engagement on workplace social courage was stronger than its effect on unethical pro-organizational behavior. In other words, while work engagement may lead to a potentially detrimental outcome (unethical pro-organizational behaviors), it did produce a stronger relation with the more overtly positive outcome (workplace social courage). For this reason, practitioners should still monitor the potential unintended consequences of work engagement, but they should recognize that our results suggest that work engagement leads to more good than bad. This finding also suggests that work engagement is more conceptually related to social courage than unethical
pro-organizational behaviors, and it may be more readily integrated with theoretical perspectives associated with the former than the latter. Notably, the study of workplace social courage has often been studied with behavioral decision-making theories (Howard et al., 2022; Holmes and Howard, 2022; Kaltiainen et al., 2022; Magnano et al., 2022a, b; Mert et al., 2021), which may be particularly relevant to the study of work engagement. For instance, people may see greater rewards in certain work behaviors when engaged, causing them to be more likely to perform those behaviors (such as workplace social courage). This theoretical link can lead to multiple directions for future research on both work engagement and workplace social courage.

**Moral disengagement.** Our findings regarding the direct effect of moral disengagement should be emphasized, given the sizable strength of its relations observed in the current article. Moral disengagement significantly impacts employees and organizations, as it causes employees to perform maladaptive behaviors that ultimately harm themselves and the organization, such as disengaging in prosocial behaviors and engaging in unethical behaviors. Fortunately, prior research has studied moral disengagement via a multitude of theoretical lenses, enabling researchers and practitioners to understand appropriate avenues to prevent its occurrence (Bandura, 2001, 2002; Moore, 2015; Newman et al., 2020). Linking our studied constructs to moral disengagement likewise links these constructs to these previously supported theoretical lenses, which can now be justifiably used to understand the dynamics of workplace social courage and unethical pro-organizational behaviors. For instance, although prior authors have discussed the clear association of courage with ethics and morals, the study of social courage has focused more on behavioral decision-making theories than theories of ethics and morals (Howard et al., 2022; Holmes and Howard, 2022; Kaltiainen et al., 2022; Magnano et al., 2022a, b; Mert et al., 2021). By drawing from the link created by associating workplace social courage with moral disengagement, we provide justification for future authors to apply these broader theories of ethics and morals that have been previously applied to study moral disengagement, especially considering the strong relation observed between the two constructs in the current study.

Additionally, the moderating role of moral disengagement produces multiple notable implications. Prior authors have referred to the “resiliency of courage” to describe the tendency of courage’s relations to produce non-significant moderating effects (Holmes and Howard, 2022, p. 8). The current article provides further support for this perspective, as moral disengagement did not significantly moderate the relation of work engagement and workplace social courage. At the same time, this moderating effect was marginally significant. The somewhat heightened moderating effect observed in the current study may be due to the more direct relevance of moral disengagement to courage. That is, prior studies investigated moderators such as supervisor attitudes and communication opportunities (Howard and Holmes, 2020). These moderators are not as directly relevant to morals, which are believed to be central aspects driving the relations of courage (Detert and Bruno, 2017; Koerner, 2014; Schilpzand et al., 2015). On the other hand, moral disengagement is directly relevant to morals, enabling the construct to more directly influence the central dynamics of courage. Researchers should therefore investigate further moderators that are likewise directly associated with morals. Heyler et al. (2016) argued that the most central constructs to courage are moral awareness, ownership, intensity and efficacy. The authors argued that each of these constructs are pivotal to ethical decision-making routines, which ultimately result (or not) in courage. Employees with low standings on these moral constructs may be unwilling to engage in courage altogether, no matter their standing on other predictors (e.g. work engagement). This would cause these moral constructs to moderate the relations of courage, which should be explored in future research.

The significant moderating effect of moral disengagement on the relation of work engagement and unethical pro-organizational behaviors also provides avenues for
organizations to curb possible duplicitous effects associated with antecedents of courage. That is, workplaces could allocate efforts to promote courage only to employees who are not morally disengaged, which would result in benefits to courage without promoting unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Organizations could likewise allocate efforts to reduce the moral disengagement of their employees to ensure that they maximize the benefits of work engagement. Therefore, moral disengagement may be a key construct that organizations can target to maximize benefits.

Psychological contract theory. Integrating psychological contract theory opens many avenues for future research on courage (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Kutaula et al., 2020; Rousseau, 1995). Now that an initial link has been established between the theory and the construct. Prior research has produced many insights into when employees uphold their psychological contracts – and when they do not. Likely the most consistent influence is whether the employee perceives their organization as upholding their end of the contract, which occurs even at an event-level of analysis (Bankins, 2015; Hofmans, 2017; Kiefer et al., 2022). For instance, employees are more likely to have negative reactions and subsequent counterproductive work behaviors to specific broken organizational promises (e.g. denying a training or promotion) if they perceive high levels of causality, controllability, and stability regarding the organization (Kiefer et al., 2022). As mentioned, prior research on courage has largely focused on stable aspects of the employee and environment as antecedents, but future researchers should place a greater focus on contract breaking and fulfillment to identify more fleeting antecedents of courage. By doing so, researchers could even develop and test event-oriented perspectives of courage, which have been repeatedly encouraged by researchers because courageous behaviors themselves are events (Harris, 1999, 2001; Schipplzand et al., 2015). These event-oriented perspectives via psychological contract theory may be the most appropriate to study courageous behaviors.

Research has also shown that employees fulfill their psychological contracts in different manners, similar to the current article showing that workplace social courage and unethical pro-organizational behaviors are both routes to upholding contracts. Notably, authors have shown that employees may differ regarding whether they uphold their contracts in more transactional or relational-oriented manners (Chambel et al., 2016; De Cuyper and De Witte, 2006; Montes and Irving, 2008), such as Chambel et al. (2016) and De Cuyper and De Witte (2006) showing that long-term employees are more focused on the former and short-term employees are more focused on the latter. This perspective is particularly relevant to workplace social courage. Workplace social courage is a transactional and relational behavior, as it involves potentially difficult interactions with others for the betterment of either the other or organization. Future researchers should assess whether social courage satisfies upholding psychological contracts in both manners, which could provide significant psychological benefits for employees and how they view giving back to their organizations. That is, employees may experience particularly positive affect and feelings towards their organization after performing workplace social courage, as they may feel that their behavior gave back to the organization in multiple manners.

Psychological contract theory can also extend the model tested in the current article. The theory has been applied to identify antecedents of work engagement, and the theory can thereby be used to develop mediation models with work engagement as a key mediator of antecedents’ relations with courage (Rayton and Yalabik, 2014; Soares and Mosquera, 2019). Perhaps more importantly, the theory has also been integrated with other theories to develop macro perspectives of employee functioning (Kiazad et al., 2014; Low et al., 2016; Sherman and Morley, 2015), and these macro perspectives may be particularly useful for future theorizing on courage. Notably, authors have integrated psychological contract theory and conservation of resources theory to identify when and why employees may try to acquire or conserve resources after psychological contract breach (Deng et al., 2018; Kiazad et al., 2014). Future
research should investigate whether social courage is a behavior associated with acquiring or conserving resources, and then subsequently assess how its association with resources interfaces with psychological contract breach or fulfillment. For instance, employees may perform fewer social courage behaviors after psychological contract breach because it may be associated with the expenditure of resources, but employees may still perform these behaviors if they have the excess resources to expend. Through this perspective, researchers could identify more specific psychological and interactional mechanisms that explain the occurrence of social courage.

Conclusion

The current article supported that work engagement relates to both workplace social courage and unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Moral disengagement’s moderating effect on the former of these relations was marginally significant, whereas it was significant on the latter of these relations. These results suggest that psychological contract theory is a viable lens to understand workplace social courage, opening many avenues for future research on workplace social courage, unethical pro-organizational behaviors, and other constructs closely associated with morals. Thus, the current article is hoped to be only the first of many on the application of this theoretical lens to understand the performance of moral behaviors at work.

References


Appendix

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

Corresponding author

Matt C. Howard can be contacted at: MHoward@SouthAlabama.edu