

Ethical Rationality Erosion Theory: Explaining How Fear Undermines Employee Ethical Decision-Making Through Affective and Resource-Based Mechanisms.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This conceptual paper develops Ethical Rationality Erosion Theory (ERET) to explain how fear undermines employees' principled ethical reasoning and action. Contemporary workplaces expose employees to fear-inducing conditions such as job insecurity, surveillance, performance pressure, retaliatory leadership and uncertainty.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper integrates Affective Events Theory and Conservation of Resources theory, synthesizing behavioral ethics, employee voice, psychological safety and ethical leadership research.

Findings: The paper proposes that fear produces ethical rationality erosion through two mutually reinforcing pathways. The affective-cognitive pathway narrows attention, augments perceived threat and contracts deliberative reasoning. The resource-motivational pathway heightens perceived resource vulnerability, activates conservation motives and encourages defensive ethical adaptation. Together, these mechanisms explain why ethically aware employees may remain silent, comply excessively, avoid ethical risk or display reduced moral courage. Ethical leadership and psychological safety are theorized as boundary conditions that preserve ethical rationality.

Originality/value: The paper contributes to behavioral ethics and management decision-making by introducing ethical rationality as a dynamic organizational capability and reframing some ethical failures as capability erosion rather than solely moral deficiency. ERET provides a testable theory of ethical decision-making under fear and identifies managerial levers for sustaining ethical conduct in uncertain workplaces....

Keywords: ethical decision-making; fear; ethical rationality; behavioral ethics; psychological safety; Affective Events Theory; Conservation of Resources theory...

INTRODUCTION

Organizations increasingly operate in environments characterized by uncertainty, disruption and heightened performance demands. Digital surveillance technologies, algorithmic performance monitoring, restructuring initiatives, workforce reductions and intensified competitive pressures have altered the conditions under which employees make decisions. While these developments have attracted considerable attention within organizational behavior and management research, less attention has been devoted to their implications for ethical decision-making. Employees are frequently expected to exercise sound ethical judgment while simultaneously navigating fear of retaliation, reputational damage, social exclusion, career stagnation or job loss. Under such conditions, ethical decisions are rarely made within emotionally neutral contexts. Rather, they emerge within organizational settings in which fear shapes how employees interpret risks, evaluate alternatives and decide whether ethical action is worth its potential consequences (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Morrison, 2014; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

Ethical decision-making has traditionally been conceptualized as a process of rational deliberation. Seminal models suggest that individuals recognize moral issues, evaluate potential courses of action, develop

ethical intentions and ultimately engage in ethical behavior (Rest, 1986; Trevino, 1986). Although these frameworks acknowledge contextual influences, they implicitly assume that individuals possess sufficient cognitive and motivational capacity to engage in principled ethical reasoning. Ethical failures are therefore often interpreted as the consequence of weak moral character, flawed judgment or deliberate misconduct. Such assumptions have provided an important foundation for ethics research but are increasingly challenged by behavioral ethics scholarship (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Moore et al., 2012; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004).

Behavioral ethics scholars have demonstrated that ethical behavior is often shaped by bounded rationality, situational pressures, cognitive biases and organizational contexts rather than by stable moral principles alone (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Palazzo et al., 2012). Employees frequently fail to act in accordance with their ethical values despite recognizing ethical concerns. Research on ethical fading, motivated blindness and moral disengagement suggests that organizational conditions can systematically influence ethical outcomes without requiring explicit unethical intent (Moore et al., 2012; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Yet despite substantial progress in understanding contextual influences on ethical behavior, fear remains underdeveloped as a central

explanatory mechanism within ethical decision-making research.

This omission is notable because fear is among the most consequential emotions experienced within organizations. Fear may arise from punitive supervision, organizational restructuring, job insecurity, social exclusion, public criticism, performance evaluation systems and uncertainty regarding future employment. Recent developments in work arrangements, including algorithmic management and remote performance monitoring, have further intensified employee exposure to fear-related experiences (Kayas, 2023; Vitak & Zimmer, 2023). Consequently, employees make ethical decisions while managing perceived vulnerability and loss.

Existing research has linked fear to organizational outcomes such as employee silence, reduced voice behavior, withdrawal, stress and diminished well-being (Morrison, 2014, 2023; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Employees who perceive high interpersonal risk are less likely to challenge authority, report wrongdoing or express dissenting views. Similarly, psychological safety research demonstrates that employees are more willing to communicate concerns and engage constructively when they perceive lower risks of negative interpersonal consequences (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). While these findings provide valuable insights into the behavioral consequences of fear, they stop short of explaining how fear influences the underlying decision-making processes through which ethical judgments and actions are formed.

The present paper argues that fear does more than suppress ethical behavior. Fear alters the capacity through which employees engage in ethical reasoning. Employees may continue to recognize ethical concerns and endorse ethical values while experiencing reduced capacity to reason and act according to those values. Ethical failures under conditions of fear therefore cannot always be understood as failures of morality. Instead, many such failures may reflect deterioration in the cognitive and motivational capabilities required for ethical decision-making.

To address this gap, the paper develops Ethical Rationality Erosion Theory (ERET). Ethical rationality is defined as an employee's capacity to engage in reflective, principled and future-oriented ethical reasoning and to translate such reasoning into ethical action despite uncertainty and competing pressures. ERET proposes that fear systematically weakens this capacity through two interconnected mechanisms. First, fear generates affective-cognitive processes that narrow attention, increase threat sensitivity and constrain deliberative reasoning. Second, fear heightens perceptions of resource vulnerability, motivating employees to prioritize self-protection and resource preservation over ethical action. Together, these processes gradually shift decision-making from principled ethical evaluation toward survival-oriented logic.

The paper contributes in four ways. First, it introduces ERET as a novel explanation of how fear undermines ethical decision-making. Second, it conceptualizes ethical rationality as a distinct organizational capability that

enables principled ethical reasoning and action. Third, it integrates Affective Events Theory (AET) and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory into a unified framework explaining ethical decision-making under conditions of threat (Hobfoll, 1989; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Fourth, it reframes ethical failure as a process of capability erosion rather than solely a consequence of moral deficiency, thereby extending behavioral ethics, employee voice and management decision-making research.

2. Ethical Decision-Making Under Fear: Literature Review and Theoretical Gap

Ethical decision-making has historically been examined through models emphasizing rational deliberation and moral reasoning. Foundational contributions conceptualized ethical behavior as a sequence involving moral awareness, moral judgment, moral intention and moral action (Rest, 1986). Trevino's (1986) interactionist model argued that ethical decisions emerge from the interaction between individual characteristics and situational influences. Jones (1991) added moral intensity, showing that issue characteristics shape ethical judgments. Together, these models significantly advanced organizational ethics by demonstrating that ethical behavior cannot be explained solely through personal morality.

Despite their influence, traditional models retain an implicit assumption that individuals possess sufficient cognitive and motivational capacity to engage in principled reasoning when confronted with ethical dilemmas. Ethical failures are thus frequently interpreted as outcomes of weak moral judgment, deficient values or intentional misconduct. Such assumptions align with broader rational actor perspectives in organizational decision-making, which view individuals as capable of evaluating alternatives and selecting ethically appropriate actions (Bazerman & Moore, 2013; March & Simon, 1958).

Behavioral ethics research challenges these assumptions. Scholars have shown that ethical behavior is shaped by bounded rationality, situational constraints, motivated reasoning, cognitive biases and organizational pressures (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Gino, 2015; Trevino et al., 2006). Employees may engage in behaviors that conflict with their stated ethical beliefs despite adequate moral awareness. Research on ethical fading, motivated blindness and moral disengagement illustrates how contexts distort ethical judgment without explicit unethical intent (Bandura, 1999; Moore et al., 2012; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004).

The behavioral ethics literature has shifted attention away from purely rational explanations toward more psychologically grounded accounts. However, it remains primarily concerned with cognitive biases, incentives and social influences. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to how emotional states alter the capacity through which ethical reasoning is performed. This limitation is important given the increasing prevalence of fear-inducing work environments.

Fear is a powerful emotional response that emerges when

employees perceive threats involving personal well-being, social standing, professional identity, career advancement or employment security (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Unlike generalized stress, fear is specifically associated with perceived threat, vulnerability and potential loss. It therefore exerts a strong influence on attention, information processing and behavioral responses (LeDoux, 2015).

Contemporary workplaces expose employees to conditions capable of generating fear. Organizational restructuring, workforce reductions, intensified performance management, digital surveillance and algorithmic monitoring increase perceptions of vulnerability (American Psychological Association, 2024; Kayas, 2023; Vitak & Zimmer, 2023). Leadership practices characterized by excessive control, punitive evaluation and low transparency may further contribute to climates in which fear becomes normalized (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Tepper, 2000). Under such conditions, employees frequently confront ethical situations while managing concerns regarding retaliation, exclusion, criticism or career consequences.

Despite its prevalence, fear occupies a peripheral position within ethical decision-making literature. Studies typically examine fear indirectly through related constructs such as stress, anxiety, job insecurity, employee silence or withdrawal. Research has shown that fear contributes to reduced voice behavior, lower willingness to report wrongdoing and increased conformity to authority expectations (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2014, 2023). Studies examining job insecurity demonstrate that perceived threats to employment encourage defensive responses and self-protective decision-making (Shoss, 2017; Sverke et al., 2002).

Although these findings highlight consequences of fear, they generally conceptualize fear as an antecedent variable influencing behavior rather than as a mechanism that reshapes ethical reasoning itself. Employees frequently recognize ethical concerns while failing to challenge unethical practices, report misconduct or resist problematic directives. Existing frameworks explain these outcomes primarily through motivational deficits, power dynamics or organizational constraints. They provide less insight into how fear alters the cognitive and motivational capabilities required for principled ethical decision-making.

Employee voice and silence research provides important insights into these behavioral consequences. Employee voice refers to discretionary communication intended to improve organizational functioning through the expression of concerns, suggestions or warnings (Morrison, 2014). Voice is essential for learning, ethical accountability and effective decision-making. However, voice frequently involves interpersonal and professional risk. Employees who challenge authority, expose wrongdoing or raise ethical concerns may encounter retaliation, damaged relationships, reduced advancement opportunities or social exclusion (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Milliken et al., 2003).

Recent reviews confirm that employee silence remains a significant and theoretically fragmented organizational problem. Dehkharghani et al. (2023) reviewed two decades of silence research and identified diverse antecedents, mediators and outcomes, underscoring the need for stronger theoretical integration. Ethical silence has received increasing attention because withholding ethical concerns may enable misconduct to persist (Wang et al., 2023). Yet voice research primarily explains why employees remain silent; it offers less explanation of how fear influences the ethical reasoning processes through which silence becomes a defensible decision.

Psychological safety offers a complementary perspective. Psychological safety refers to a shared belief that individuals can express ideas, concerns or mistakes without fear of embarrassment, punishment or interpersonal harm (Edmondson, 1999). It has been linked to learning behavior, voice, knowledge sharing and team effectiveness (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017). Recent workplace evidence continues to demonstrate that psychological safety is central to employee willingness to communicate concerns and participate in decision-making (American Psychological Association, 2024). Yet psychological safety research generally focuses on behavioral outcomes rather than ethical cognition itself.

The preceding literature reveals three limitations. First, traditional models remain heavily influenced by rational actors' assumptions. Second, behavioral ethics demonstrates contextual constraint but under develops fear as a distinct explanatory construct. Third, employee voice and psychological safety research provide evidence regarding consequences of fear but limited explanation of how fear influences ethical cognition and motivation. These limitations suggest the need for a theory capable of explaining how fear alters the capacity through which ethical reasoning and ethical action occur. ERET addresses this gap by proposing that fear does not merely discourage ethical behavior; it progressively erodes the cognitive and motivational capabilities required for principled ethical reasoning and action.

3. Theoretical Foundations: Affective Events Theory (AET) and Conservation of Resources Theory (COR)

Ethical decision-making under fear requires theoretical perspectives capable of explaining both the psychological experience of threat and the behavioral responses that follow. The present paper argues that fear-induced ethical decision-making is best understood through the integration of Affective Events Theory (AET) and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. AET explains how workplace events generate emotional reactions that influence cognition and behavior (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). COR theory explains how perceived threats to valued resources shape motivation and behavioral choices (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive explanation of how fear progressively undermines an employee's capacity for principled ethical reasoning and action.

AET was developed to explain how workplace events influence attitudes and behaviors through emotional experiences (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). The theory

challenged perspectives that treated emotions as peripheral by demonstrating that everyday workplace events generate affective reactions that shape cognition, judgment and action. Employees continuously encounter events carrying emotional significance, including interactions with supervisors, performance evaluations, organizational changes, recognition, criticism, conflict and uncertainty. Such experiences trigger emotional responses that influence how individuals interpret their environment and respond behaviorally (Weiss & Beal, 2005).

A central contribution of AET is its recognition that emotions function as information-processing mechanisms. Emotional reactions influence attention allocation, cognitive appraisal and behavioral tendencies. Workplace decisions are thus not purely rational evaluations but are shaped by ongoing affective experiences. In this paper, fear is especially important because it is threat oriented. Fear emerges when individuals perceive potential harm, loss or vulnerability (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Evolutionary perspectives suggest that fear developed as an adaptive mechanism that prioritizes survival by directing attention toward potential dangers (LeDoux, 2015).

Although such responses may be beneficial in situations involving immediate physical danger, they can undermine ethical reasoning in organizational contexts. Ethical decisions often involve ambiguity, competing stakeholder interests and long-term consequences. Employees must engage in perspective-taking and deliberation rather than relying solely on threat responses. Fear narrows attentional focus, increases cognitive load, amplifies perceived risk and encourages avoidance-oriented behavior (Arnsten, 2009; Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Consequently, employees may focus disproportionately on personal consequences rather than ethical principles or organizational values.

COR theory provides a complementary motivational explanation. COR theory proposes that individuals are motivated to acquire, protect and preserve valued resources, including employment, income, relationships, reputation, autonomy, status and well-being (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). A core assumption is that resource loss is psychologically more salient than resource gain. Individuals are therefore highly sensitive to situations that threaten valued resources and adopt behaviours designed to minimize further depletion when loss becomes likely (Hobfoll, 2001).

COR theory is highly relevant to ethical decision-making because ethical action is frequently resource consuming. Speaking up about misconduct, resisting unethical directives, exposing wrongdoing or challenging powerful actors may threaten relationships with supervisors, promotion opportunities, professional standing or employment. Under fear, employees become increasingly aware of these potential losses. Fear functions as a signal that resources may be vulnerable. Consequently, employees become motivated to conserve rather than expend resources. Decisions are increasingly evaluated through a self-protection lens in which avoiding loss takes precedence over pursuing ethical ideals.

The complementarity of AET and COR is central to ERET. AET explains how workplace events generate fear and how fear influences cognition, attention and risk perception. COR explains why employees experiencing fear adopt self-protective behavioral strategies. Conversely, COR explains resource preservation but provides less detail regarding the emotional and cognitive mechanisms that produce resource threat appraisals. AET fills this gap by identifying fear as the emotional response through which workplace threats are experienced and interpreted.

Together, the theories describe a sequential and mutually reinforcing process. Workplace events trigger fear responses that alter cognitive functioning and threat appraisal. These perceptions activate concerns regarding resource vulnerability and motivate resource-conservation behaviors. The combined effect is a shift away from principled ethical reasoning toward self-protective decision-making. Ethical rationality is not diminished solely because employees experience fear, nor solely because they conserve resources. It erodes because fear simultaneously disrupts cognitive processing and activates motivational pressures oriented towards self-preservation.

4. Ethical Rationality Erosion Theory (ERET): Theory development and core mechanisms

The central premise of ERET is that fear systematically degrades employees' capacity to engage in principled ethical reasoning and ethical action. Existing ethical decision-making theories generally assume that individuals retain the cognitive and motivational resources necessary to evaluate ethical issues, formulate ethical intentions and act in accordance with ethical principles (Rest, 1986; Trevino, 1986). ERET challenges this assumption by proposing that ethical failures frequently emerge from deterioration in the decision-making capabilities required for ethical action. Employees may remain morally aware, endorse ethical values and recognize wrongdoing while becoming less capable of acting upon those judgments.

Ethical rationality is defined as an individual's capacity to engage in reflective, principled and future-oriented ethical reasoning and to translate such reasoning into ethical action despite uncertainty, competing interests and organizational pressures. It involves the integration of cognitive evaluation, moral reflection, risk assessment and behavioral commitment. Ethical rationality enables employees to move beyond immediate self-interest and consider broader obligations toward stakeholders, organizational values and societal expectations.

ERET proposes that fear undermines ethical rationality through a dual-process mechanism. First, fear alters cognitive functioning by narrowing attention, increasing threat salience and constraining deliberative reasoning. Second, fear activates motivational processes oriented towards resource protection and self-preservation. The interaction of these mechanisms shifts decision-making away from ethical evaluation and toward survival-oriented logic. Rather than viewing ethical failure as a static outcome, ERET conceptualizes ethical rationality erosion as a dynamic process that unfolds over time.

The theory begins with the recognition that fear is rarely an isolated emotional event. In organizational contexts, fear is typically generated through repeated exposure to workplace conditions communicating vulnerability, uncertainty or potential loss. These include leadership behaviors characterized by intimidation, punitive supervision, retaliation or unpredictability; organizational practices such as intensive performance monitoring, public ranking systems, excessive surveillance and algorithmic management; and broader events including restructuring, downsizing and strategic uncertainty (Kellogg et al., 2020; Kayas, 2023; Tepper, 2000; Vitak & Zimmer, 2023).

This focus distinguishes ERET from trait-based explanations of ethical behavior. Ethical rationality erosion is not primarily attributed to stable individual differences in courage, morality or personality. Instead, the theory emphasizes how organizational environments create conditions that systematically undermine ethical decision-making capacities across individuals. As fear-inducing experiences accumulate, employees become increasingly attentive to signals of potential harm. The resulting emotional response initiates the first mechanism of ethical rationality erosion: cognitive erosion.

Cognitive erosion originates from the impact of fear on information processing. Fear is a threat-oriented emotion whose adaptive purpose is to identify danger and muster vulnerability reducing responses (LeDoux, 2015). In organizational contexts, this produces attentional narrowing, threat amplification and deliberative contraction. Attentional narrowing occurs when fear directs cognitive resources toward perceived threats at the expense of broader information processing. Ethical reasoning requires consideration of multiple stakeholder perspectives, long-term consequences and competing moral obligations. Fear reduces this capacity by concentrating attention on immediate risks and personal consequences.

Threat amplification occurs when fear increases perceived probability and severity of negative outcomes. Individuals experiencing fear systematically overestimate risk (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Ethical action frequently involves uncertainty. Reporting misconduct, challenging authority or questioning established practices rarely guarantees success. Fear increases sensitivity to potential negative consequences while reducing attention to ethical benefits. Consequently, employees may perceive ethical action as disproportionately risky even when objective risks are manageable.

Deliberative contraction refers to the reduction of cognitive flexibility, perspective-taking and reflective judgment under threat. Under fear, employees increasingly rely on familiar rules, authority cues and defensive reasoning strategies rather than comprehensive ethical evaluation. They remain capable of making decisions, but less capable of engaging in the complex reasoning associated with principled ethical judgment. Ethical dilemmas are simplified into questions of personal safety and risk avoidance.

The second mechanism is motivational erosion, derived from COR theory. While cognitive erosion explains how

fear alters ethical reasoning, motivational erosion explains why employees become reluctant to engage in ethical action. Fear heightens perceptions of resource vulnerability. Employees become concerned about protecting valued resources such as employment security, reputation, social relationships, influence and career opportunities (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Speaking up about misconduct may jeopardize relationships with supervisors. Challenging authority may threaten advancement opportunities. Reporting wrongdoing may damage social standing within work groups.

When resource threats become salient, employees prioritize resource conservation. Resource conservation motivation encourages behaviors that minimize exposure to additional losses. Such motivation is adaptive during instability but may conflict directly with ethical obligations. Ethical action frequently requires employees to accept personal risk in pursuit of broader moral objectives. Resource conservation encourages the opposite response: minimizing exposure and protecting existing assets. Employees therefore become increasingly motivated to avoid actions perceived as resource threatening, even when such actions are ethically justified.

As conservation motives intensify, employees develop defensive ethical adaptations. These include silence, compliance, avoidance and disengagement. They are not necessarily indicators of ethical indifference. Instead, they represent efforts to manage vulnerability under fear. Silence protects employees from conflict and retaliation. Compliance reduces uncertainty by aligning behavior with authority's expectations. Avoidance minimizes exposure to ethically risky situations. These behaviors preserve resources while reducing ethical engagement.

The central contribution of ERET lies in its argument that ethical rationality erosion emerges from the interaction of cognitive and motivational processes. Cognitive erosion weakens employees' capacity for reflective ethical reasoning. Motivational erosion reduces willingness to bear the costs associated with ethical action. Together, these mechanisms create a decision environment in which self-protection becomes dominant. Ethical considerations are not necessarily abandoned; they become progressively subordinated to concerns regarding personal security. This distinguishes ERET from theories emphasizing moral disengagement or intentional unethical behavior. Employees may remain ethically committed while becoming less capable of acting on those commitments.

ERET predicts several consequences. Employees become more likely to engage in ethical silence because fear and resource vulnerability discourage communication of ethical concerns. Excessive compliance becomes more prevalent because deference to authority minimizes uncertainty and conflict. Avoidance emerges as employees seek to minimize exposure to ethically ambiguous or risky situations. Moral courage declines because employees perceive ethical action as carrying unacceptable personal costs. At the collective level, organizations may experience ethical deterioration as fear becomes institutionalized and employees learn that self-protection is rewarded while ethical risk-taking is discouraged.

Although ERET focuses on erosion, it also identifies conditions capable of interrupting the process. Ethical leadership and psychological safety are especially important. Ethical leaders reduce uncertainty through fairness, transparency and consistent moral conduct (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Mayer et al., 2012). Psychological safety lowers perceived interpersonal risk and increases confidence that ethical concerns can be expressed without disproportionate consequences (Edmondson, 1999). By reducing both cognitive threat processing and resource vulnerability, supportive environments help preserve ethical rationality even under challenging conditions.

5. Conceptual Model and Proposition

Figure 1 presents the conceptual architecture of ERET. The model specifies relationships among fear inducing organizational conditions, fear responses, ethical rationality erosion and ethical outcomes. It also identifies ethical leadership, psychological safety and organizational justice as boundary conditions capable of preserving ethical rationality despite organizational threat. The model proposes a sequential process in which organizational threats generate fear responses that alter cognitive functioning and motivational priorities. Ethical rationality erosion subsequently mediates the relationship between fear and employee ethical behavior.

The first component concerns organizational antecedents. Fear is not merely an individual emotional reaction but a response to organizational environments characterized by uncertainty, vulnerability and potential loss. Employees continuously interpret workplace events and conditions in terms of their implications for security, belonging and professional outcomes (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Fear-inducing conditions include employment insecurity, restructuring, punitive leadership, excessive monitoring, performance pressure and uncertainty. Such conditions communicate vulnerability and heighten awareness of potential loss. Consistent with AET, these experiences generate fear responses that influence cognition and behavior. ERET extends this view by proposing that repeated exposure progressively undermines the broader capacity for ethical reasoning and action.

Proposition 1: Fear inducing organizational conditions are negatively associated with employee ethical rationality, such that greater exposure to organizational threat increases ethical rationality erosion.

The second component concerns cognitive mediation. Drawing on AET, ERET proposes that fear alters information processing by directing attention toward perceived threats and away from broader ethical considerations. Ethical reasoning requires cognitive flexibility, perspective-taking and deliberative evaluation. Employees must consider multiple stakeholder interests, assess long-term consequences and reconcile competing obligations. Fear disrupts these requirements by narrowing attention, amplifying perceived risks and encouraging simplified decision strategies. Employees may continue to recognize ethical issues while experiencing reduced capacity to process them effectively.

Proposition 2: Cognitive erosion mediates the relationship between fear and ethical rationality erosion, such that fear-induced attentional narrowing, threat amplification and deliberative contraction reduce employees' capacity for principled ethical reasoning.

The third component concerns motivational mediation. Drawing on COR theory, ERET proposes that fear heightens perceptions of resource vulnerability. Employees become concerned about protecting employment security, reputation, relationships, influence and career opportunities (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Ethical actions involving risk become evaluated in terms of potential costs rather than ethical merits. Resource preservation consequently becomes a dominant objective. This shift encourages defensive ethical adaptation, including silence, compliance, avoidance and disengagement.

Proposition 3: Motivational erosion mediates the relationship between fear and ethical rationality erosion, such that heightened perceptions of resource vulnerability and resource conservation motivation increase self-protective decision-making.

Ethical rationality erosion is the central construct in the model. When ethical rationality weakens, employees increasingly rely on self-protective decision criteria. The behavioral consequences include ethical silence, excessive compliance, avoidance and reduced moral courage. These outcomes represent forms of defensive adaptation rather than indicators of moral indifference. Employees continue to value ethical principles but increasingly prioritize self-protection.

Proposition 4: Ethical rationality erosion is positively associated with defensive ethical outcomes, including ethical silence, excessive compliance, avoidance behaviors and reduced moral courage.

Ethical leadership is a cushioning mechanism. Ethical leaders demonstrate fairness, integrity, transparency and concern for stakeholders (Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Trevino, 2006). These behaviors reduce uncertainty and signal that ethical conduct will be supported. From an AET perspective, ethical leaders reduce fear-inducing workplace events. From a COR perspective, ethical leaders increase perceptions of resource security by reassuring employees that ethical action will not result in disproportionate loss. Consequently, ethical leadership should preserve ethical rationality by reducing both cognitive and motivational erosion.

Proposition 5: Ethical leadership moderates the relationship between fear and ethical rationality erosion, such that the negative effects of fear on ethical rationality are weaker under conditions of strong ethical leadership.

Psychological safety is a second boundary condition. It refers to shared beliefs that interpersonal risk-taking can occur without fear of embarrassment, punishment or negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). Psychologically safe environments directly address the concerns that drive ethical rationality erosion. Employees are less likely to perceive ethical voice, dissent or reporting as threatening. Consequently, both cognitive

threat processing and resource vulnerability perceptions are reduced.

Proposition 6: Psychological safety moderates the relationship between fear and ethical rationality erosion, such that the negative effects of fear on ethical rationality are weaker in psychologically safe work environments.

The conceptual model extends ethical decision-making research by identifying ethical rationality as a dynamic

organizational capability rather than a static individual attribute. It explains ethical failure through capability erosion rather than solely moral deficiency, integrates emotional and resource-based explanations, and identifies organizational conditions that accelerate or mitigate erosion. The model is suitable for empirical testing through structural equation modelling, multilevel models, experience-sampling methods or longitudinal designs.

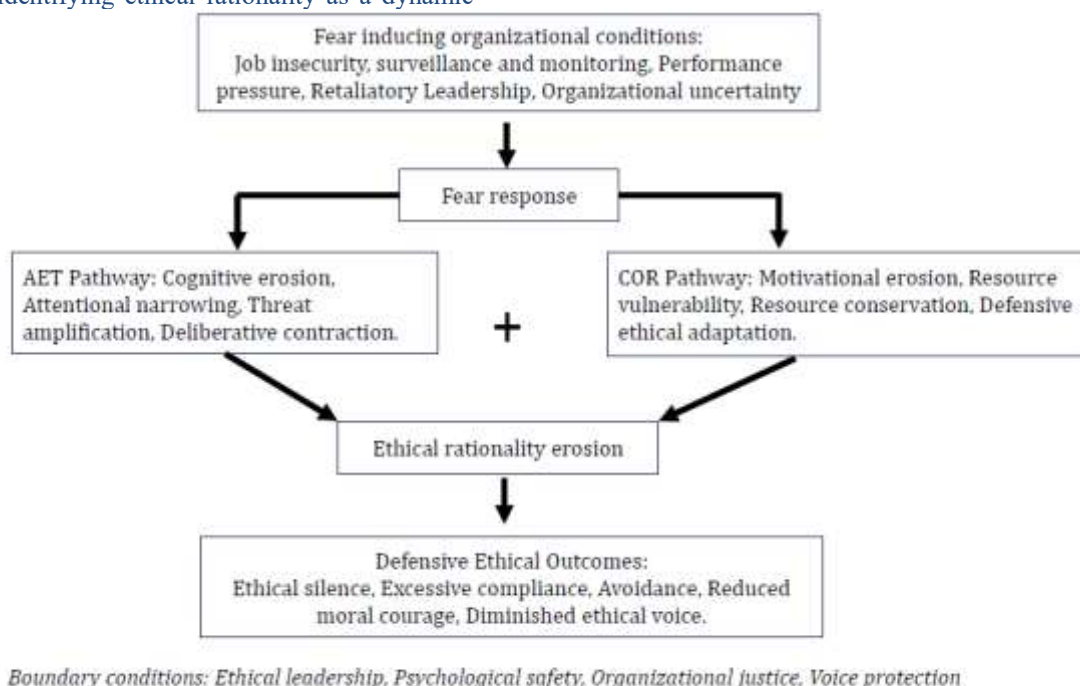


Figure 1. Conceptual model of Ethical Rationality Erosion Theory (ERET).

6. Theoretical Contributions

ERET contributes to behavioral ethics, organizational behavior and management decision-making in several ways. While prior research has established that organizational contexts influence ethical behavior, existing explanations remain fragmented in their treatment of fear. ERET positions fear not merely as a contextual antecedent of unethical behavior but as a mechanism capable of degrading the cognitive and motivational capacities required for ethical decision-making.

The primary contribution is the introduction of ethical rationality as a distinct theoretical construct. Existing models focus on moral awareness, judgment, intention or behavior (Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Trevino, 1986). These frameworks provide limited explanation for situations in which individuals recognize ethical issues and endorse ethical principles yet fail to act accordingly. Ethical rationality captures the integrated capacity to reason reflectively and act ethically despite uncertainty and pressure. It provides a missing explanatory layer between ethical cognition and ethical behavior.

A second contribution concerns the interpretation of ethical failure. Traditional approaches frequently attribute unethical behavior or ethical inaction to moral weakness, poor judgment or intentional misconduct. ERET reframes

some ethical failures as capability erosion. Employees may fail to act ethically not because they lack ethical commitment but because organizational conditions have eroded their capacity for principled reasoning. This perspective extends behavioral ethics by emphasizing organizational environments as shapers of ethical capabilities. Organizations therefore bear responsibility not only for establishing ethical standards but also for creating conditions that preserve employees' ability to act upon them.

A third contribution involves theoretical integration. Existing ethical decision-making research has often examined emotional and motivational influences separately. Emotion-focused perspectives emphasize how feelings influence judgment, while resource-based perspectives explain how concern regarding loss, shape behavior. ERET integrates AET and COR theory to show that these processes are interconnected. Fear simultaneously alters information processing and behavioral priorities. This dual process perspective provides a richer account of ethical decision-making under uncertainty.

The paper also contributes to employee voice, silence and psychological safety research. Existing studies demonstrate that fear reduces willingness to speak up, challenge authority and report concerns (Morrison, 2014, 2023). ERET extends this literature by explaining how

fear influences the cognitive and motivational processes preceding voice. Employees remain silent not merely because they anticipate negative consequences but because fear erodes the capabilities necessary for ethical engagement. Similarly, ERET expands psychological safety research by identifying ethical rationality preservation as an outcome of psychologically safe environments.

Finally, ERET contributes to management decision-making scholarship. Much decision-making research focuses on cognitive biases, information processing and strategic judgment. Less attention has been devoted to how fear influences ethical dimensions of organizational decision-making. ERET demonstrates that fear alters decision criteria by shifting attention from ethical evaluation toward self-preservation. Ethical decision-making under fear therefore cannot be fully understood through rational models alone. By linking fear, cognition, motivation and ethical outcomes, ERET provides a framework for understanding how organizational environments shape decision quality and ethical conduct simultaneously.

7. Managerial Implications

The practical implications of ERET extend beyond conventional ethics management. Organizations often assume that ethical behavior can be improved through codes of conduct, compliance systems and ethics training. While such initiatives remain important, ERET suggests that they may be insufficient when employees operate within environments characterized by fear. Ethical behavior depends not only on ethical knowledge but also on the preservation of ethical rationality. Organizations seeking to strengthen ethical decision-making must therefore address the conditions that generate fear and erode decision-making capabilities.

First, organizations should recognize fear as an ethical risk factor rather than merely a well-being concern. Fear influences how employees interpret information, evaluate risks and make decisions. Ethical failures may emerge even when employees possess strong values and understand expectations. Leaders should regularly assess sources of fear, including punitive supervision, excessive monitoring, unrealistic performance targets, employment insecurity and opaque decision-making. Reducing such conditions may help preserve capacity for ethical reasoning and action.

Second, organizations should build psychologically safe decision environments. Employees are more likely to engage in ethical voice, challenge questionable practices and discuss concerns when they believe such actions will not result in disproportionate consequences (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017). Mechanisms such as protected disclosure processes, non-retaliation policies, open communication routines and fair investigation procedures can reduce fear and strengthen ethical engagement. However, formal mechanisms must be supported by actual leadership behavior; else they may be perceived as symbolic rather than protective.

Third, leadership development should emphasize ethical leadership capabilities. Leaders influence employees'

perceptions of threat, fairness and resource security. Through transparency, consistency and integrity, leaders reduce uncertainty and strengthen confidence that ethical behavior will be supported (Brown & Trevino, 2006). Leadership development should move beyond compliance-based ethics training and incorporate psychological safety, emotional awareness and ethical decision facilitation.

Fourth, organizations should reconsider performance management systems. Excessive emphasis on short-term outcomes, public performance comparisons and punitive evaluation may increase fear and encourage defensive decision-making. Performance systems should reward ethical conduct alongside outcomes. Doing so signals that ethical behavior is valued and reduces perceptions that ethical action involves unacceptable personal risk.

Finally, ethical decision-making should be managed as an organizational capability rather than solely an individual responsibility. Ethical cultures are sustained when organizations preserve conditions necessary for ethical rationality. Managers must focus not only on defining ethical standards but also on protecting employees' ability to act upon them.

8. Future Research Agenda

The introduction of ERET opens several avenues for future research. First, empirical research should develop and validate measures of ethical rationality and ethical rationality erosion. Although related constructs such as moral efficacy, moral courage and ethical judgment exist, ERET suggests the need for a distinct construct capturing integrated cognitive and motivational capacity for ethical action. Scale development should examine discriminant validity relative to moral identity, psychological safety, ethical climate and moral disengagement.

Second, future studies should examine temporal dynamics. ERET proposes that erosion occurs progressively through repeated exposure to fear-inducing conditions. Longitudinal and experience-sampling methodologies would be valuable for capturing within-person changes in fear, resource vulnerability, cognitive narrowing and ethical action over time. Such designs could test whether fear has immediate effects on ethical reasoning and whether repeated exposure produces cumulative erosion.

Third, researchers should investigate multilevel influences. Organizational culture, leadership behavior and team climate may shape how fear affects ethical decision-making. Multilevel models could examine whether team psychological safety buffers individual fear or whether high-surveillance climates intensify ethical rationality erosion across work groups.

Fourth, future research should explore boundary conditions beyond ethical leadership and psychological safety. Organizational justice, trust, resilience, ethical climate, voice climate and emotional regulation capabilities may influence the extent to which fear affects ethical rationality (Colquitt et al., 2001; Mayer et al., 1995; Victor & Cullen, 1988). Individual differences such as moral identity, proactive personality and courage may also moderate erosion, although ERET cautions against

over-individualizing ethical failures produced by threatening organizational contexts.

Fifth, cross-cultural research may reveal variations in the operation of ERET. Perceptions of authority, uncertainty, power distance and interpersonal risk differ across cultural contexts. Employees in high power distance settings may experience ethical voice as more resource threatening, whereas collectivist norms may shape the relationship between fear, belonging and silence. Comparative research would clarify whether ERET mechanisms generalize across institutional environments.

Finally, emerging workplace technologies deserve attention. Algorithmic management, AI-enabled monitoring and remote surveillance may intensify ethical rationality erosion by increasing perceived observability and reducing employee control (Kellogg et al., 2020; Kayas, 2023; Vitak & Zimmer, 2023). Future research should examine whether transparent governance of monitoring systems reduces erosion.

9. Conclusion

Fear is an enduring yet insufficiently theorized feature of contemporary organizational life. As organizations confront increasing uncertainty, technological monitoring, performance pressures and workforce insecurity, employees are increasingly required to make ethical decisions under conditions characterized by perceived vulnerability and risk. Although ethical decision-making remains central to organizational effectiveness, accountability and stakeholder trust, existing research has paid limited attention to how fear influences the capacity through which ethical decisions are formed. Consequently, an important gap remains in understanding why ethically aware employees frequently fail to engage in ethical action despite recognizing ethical concerns.

This paper has argued that existing theories provide only a partial explanation of this phenomenon. Traditional models emphasize moral awareness, judgment, intention and behavior (Rest, 1986; Trevino, 1986), while behavioral ethics perspectives highlight cognitive biases, ethical fading and situational influences (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Although these approaches have substantially advanced understanding of ethical conduct, they generally assume that individuals retain the cognitive and motivational capabilities necessary for principled ethical reasoning. As a result, they offer limited insight into how fear progressively weakens those capabilities before ethical decisions are made.

To address this limitation, the paper introduced ERET. The theory advances a novel explanation of ethical decision-making under threat by proposing that fear systematically degrades ethical rationality: the capacity to engage in reflective, principled and future-oriented ethical reasoning and to translate such reasoning into ethical action. Through cognitive erosion, fear narrows attention, amplifies perceived threats and constrains deliberation. Through motivational erosion, fear heightens perceptions of resource vulnerability and encourages self-protective behavior. Together, these processes shift decision-making

away from ethical evaluation and toward survival-oriented logic.

A central implication is that many ethical failures should not be understood solely as manifestations of moral weakness or ethical indifference. Employees may continue to possess ethical values, recognize ethical concerns and understand appropriate courses of action while experiencing diminished capacity to act upon those judgments. Ethical silence, excessive compliance, avoidance and reduced moral courage may therefore represent organizationally induced capability failures rather than purely individual shortcomings.

If ethical rationality can be eroded by fear, organizations cannot rely exclusively on ethics training, compliance systems or formal codes to sustain ethical behavior. Managers must address the organizational conditions that generate fear and undermine ethical capabilities. Ethical leadership, psychological safety, transparent communication and fair practices become critical not only for employee well-being but also for preserving the decision-making capacities necessary for ethical conduct. Organizations that fail to manage fear may inadvertently create environments in which self-protection becomes more salient than ethical responsibility.

ERET contributes to behavioral ethics and management decision-making by integrating affective and resource-based explanations into a unified framework. Ethical behavior depends not only on what employees believe is right but also on whether organizational conditions preserve their capacity to act on those beliefs. Understanding how fear erodes ethical rationality is therefore essential for building organizations capable of principled decision-making under uncertainty....

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