



Team Level Antecedents and Consequences of Authentic Leadership: Moderated-Mediation Model

Mohamed Ahmed Ali Nemr

Lecturer

Business Department

Faculty of commerce

Sohag University

nemrmemr@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5265-9753>

Tarek Mohamed Ali

Associate Professor. Management Department

Faculty of Commerce, Sohag University

Faculty of Economics, Business and Political Science

Business department, British University in Egypt

tarek.ali@bue.edu.eg

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7268-4224>

Abstract

This study employs a moderated-mediation model to investigate the influence mechanism of leaders' moral courage and the cynicism climate on followers' perceptions of authentic leadership. It further examines how followers' perceptions shape team-level behaviors, specifically group organizational citizenship behaviors and group counterproductive work behaviors. Grounded in attribution theory, the hypothesized model was designed. A cross-sectional survey was conducted to collect data from 604 academic staff across 146 teams at a public university.

The findings reveal a positive relationship between leaders' moral courage and perceived authentic leadership, moderated by the cynicism climate. Perceived authentic leadership is positively associated with group organizational citizenship behaviors and negatively related to group counterproductive work behaviors.

This study addresses a gap in the current literature by examining the impact of followers' perceptions of authentic leadership on team behaviors, with a focus on the role of "leader's moral courage" and the "climate of cynicism" in shaping these perceptions.

By applying the fundamental principles of attribution theory to human resource management and leadership, this study enhances leaders' understanding of how followers interpret authentic leadership and offers insights into the mechanisms shaping these perceptions within public universities.

Keywords: Leader Moral Courage; Authentic Leadership; Cynicism Climate; Group Organizational Citizenship Behaviors; Group Counterproductive Work Behaviors; Attribution Theory.

Introduction

The advancement of research on individual differences has led to the development of new leadership theories that influence affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes (Dall, Houston & McNamara, 2004). However, a need remains to generalize these theories to support organizations adopt effective leadership styles in competitive environments (Hai, Van & Thi, 2021). Amid the growing interest in identifying the most effective leadership style, authentic leadership has attracted significant attention from scholars (Malik, Burhan, & Khan, 2023). Authentic leadership, as defined by Malik et al. (2023), involves conveying signals, proposing problem-solving solutions, and presenting positive visions of integrity. The literature is still struggling to fully capture the developmental process of authentic leadership (Malik et al., 2023; Malik, Khan, & Mahmood, 2021). Gardner et al. (2011) and Zhang et al. (2022) have demonstrated strong

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associations between authentic leadership and various follower outcomes. However, the antecedents of authentic leadership—factors shaping followers’ perceptions of authentic leadership—remain underexplored (Gardner et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023). Malik et al. (2021) have highlighted a significant gap in research on the antecedents of authentic leadership. Although a few studies, such as Olsen & Espevik (2017), have identified potential antecedents, there remains a critical need for a comprehensive investigation into the factors shaping authentic leadership development. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the roles of leader moral courage and cynicism climate antecedents in shaping followers’ perceptions of authentic leadership.

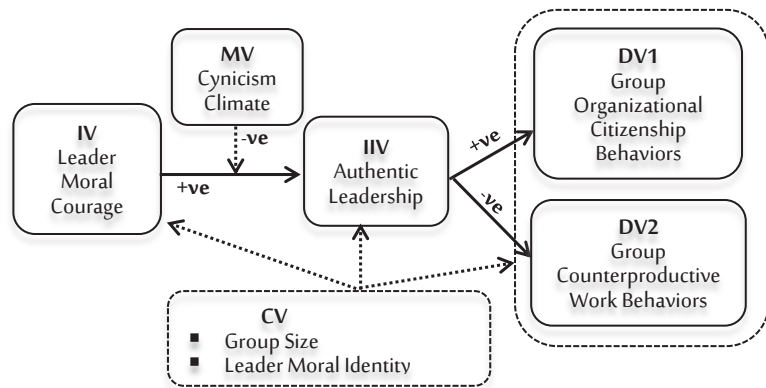
Ethical decision-making requires what is often termed “moral courage” (Comer & Vega, 2011; Hannah & Avolio, 2010; Kidder, 2005). Sekerka, Bagozzi, & Charnigo (2009) define “moral courage” as a complex set of ethical competencies that empower individuals to uphold moral principles and act in alignment with their convictions, even in the face of challenges and threats. Leaders who demonstrate moral courage embed ethical values into managerial decisions, generating long-term benefits for their organizations (Simola, 2018). Mansur, Sobral, & Islam (2020) demonstrated that moral courage in leadership enhances followers’ feelings of security and confidence, making it a critical factor in shaping their perceptions of authentic leadership, which underscores the need for further examination and investigation of its role. Additionally, moral courage acts as a signaling mechanism, enabling group members to perceive their leaders as ethical role models (Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). Nevertheless, a cynicism climate—defined as a prevailing perception that the organization lacks integrity and authenticity—can obstruct followers’ recognition of moral courage (Hewett, Shantz, & Mundy, 2019). This perception, shaped by employees’ overarching impressions, influences their expectations of HR practices and undermines the credibility of efforts to promote authentic leadership (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998).

Previous studies have focused on authentic leadership from an individual-level perspective (Liu & Wong, 2023), leaving a noticeable gap in research exploring its impact at the group level. To deepen our understanding and promote the application of authentic leadership in organizational contexts, leaders should prioritize fostering a positive climate and an atmosphere of innovation within their teams (Lie, Qin, Ali, Freeman, & Shi-Jie, 2021). In this context, Lie et al. (2021) emphasize the need for examining the effects of authentic leadership at the team level. Despite the limited attention given to the consequences of authentic leadership at the group level, most existing studies examining the relationship between authentic leadership and group behavior have focused primarily on outcomes such as team creativity (Lie et al., 2021) or team helping behaviors (Hirst, Walumbwa, Aryee, Butarbutar, & Chen, 2016). However, a significant research gap remains regarding the connection between authentic leadership and other group behaviors, such as group organizational citizenship behaviors and group counterproductive work behaviors, which have substantial impact on team performance (Hirst et al., 2016). To address this gap, the present study aims to investigate how followers’ perceptions of authentic leadership influence key group outcomes—specifically, group organizational citizenship behaviors and group counterproductive work behaviors.

Given the broad nature of authentic leadership, which requires the integration of various theoretical frameworks (Gardner et al., 2011), this study seeks to deepen our understanding of followers’ perceptions of authentic leadership by adopting attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Harvey, Madison, Martinko, Crook & Crook, 2014). Attribution theory examines how individuals interpret and explain the causes of events, behaviors, and outcomes in their lives (Hewett et al., 2019). The framework of attribution theory underscores the interplay between a leader’s moral courage, followers’ perceptions of authentic leadership, and the cynicism climate. Kelley & Michela (1980) outlined two categories of factors influencing attributions, which provide a foundation for constructing models to explain attributions of authentic leadership. The first category focuses on information related to the stimulus, such as its characteristics and context. Here, a leader’s moral courage emerges as a key source of information. Ethical signals from a leader are particularly significant in human resources due to their perception-specific nature (Leventhal,

1980), often assessed through how others are treated (Adams, 1963). These perceptions form a foundational evaluation of the organizational environment (Barsky, Kaplan, & Beal, 2011) and informs attributions. The second category encompasses the general beliefs of perceivers, shaped by both past and ongoing experiences (Jones & Davis, 1965). This section focuses on the cynicism climate, which reflects a widespread belief that the organization lacks integrity and authenticity (Davis & Gardner, 2004). According to attribution theory, a leader's moral courage and cynicism climate act as antecedents that influence followers' perceptions of authentic leadership. In this context, attribution theory suggests that when followers recognize their leader's positive ethical intentions, it enhances group dynamics, fostering cooperation and the pursuit of collective goals. Ultimately, this theory illustrates that a leader's moral courage shapes followers' perception of authentic leadership, while a cynical climate may alter this relationship. By adopting attribution theory basic assumptions, this study aims to broaden existing knowledge through investigating how followers' perceptions of authentic leadership affect group outcomes.

Based on the above discussion, this study addresses the primary question: "How do a leader's moral courage and the cynicism climate influence followers' perceptions of authentic leadership, and how do these perceptions shape group organizational citizenship behaviors and group counterproductive work behaviors?"



Leader Signaling Follower's Perception Follower's contribution
Source: developed by authors

Figure 1. Hypothesized Model

Theoretical Background and Hypothesized Model

Leader Moral Courage and Perceived Authentic Leadership

Although there is extensive literature on authentic leadership, our understanding of its antecedents is limited (Malik et al., 2023). Moral courage is a key foundation of genuine ethical conduct, reflecting an individual's moral standards within their moral self. It enables individuals to embody ethical principles and engage in morally sound actions (Comer & Sekerka, 2018). The expression of moral courage indicates significant psychological resilience, equipping leaders to convert their internalized, value-driven moral intentions into authentic behaviors. Research shows that in morally ambiguous situations, where conflicting interests and principles exist, leaders greatly benefit from having moral courage and the ability to maintain such behavior (Comer & Vega, 2011; Comer & Sekerka, 2018). The influence of moral courage on followers' perceptions of authentic leadership is significant, as it allows leaders to act on their intentions, demonstrating integrity and authenticity in the workplace (Fehr, Yam, & Dang, 2015). These behaviors are not only noticed and processed by followers but also lead them to infer the underlying traits and values of their leaders (Craig & Gustafson, 1998).

Leaders who act with moral courage send cues about their values and virtues, consistent with attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980). This theory posits that individuals instinctively seek to understand the reasons behind others' behaviors. In the context of authentic leadership, when followers interpret the ethical signals from leaders as stemming from internal factors—such as the leaders' established reputation—they are more likely to recognize authentic leadership. Attribution theory suggests a positive relationship between leaders' moral courage and followers' perceptions of authentic leadership. In summary, leaders

who exhibit moral agency and confront ethical challenges make their moral actions socially significant to followers (Treviño et al., 2000), leading them to be viewed as authentic leaders by their followers. Building on this discussion, our paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Leader moral courage is positively related to followers perceived authentic leadership

Perceived Authentic Leadership, Group Organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) and Group Counterproductive Work Behaviors (CWB).

At the group level, leadership involves guiding individuals toward shared objectives, a common trajectory, and a cohesive vision (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Zaccaro, Rittman & Marks (2001, p. 452) assert that “effective leadership processes are arguably the most crucial factor in achieving organizational team success.” Kozlowski & Ilgen (2006, p. 107) characterized leadership as a “promising point of influence for enhancing team effectiveness.” Additionally, Varella, Javidan & Waldman (2012) found that socially charismatic leadership contributes to improved group behaviors, leading to better outcomes in the workplace. Peng & Lin (2017) demonstrated that perceived ethical leadership enhances both in-role performance and group-helping behaviors. Even though, studies investigating the connection between leadership and group outcomes or behaviors in the work environment remain noticeably scarce compared to those focusing on individual performance or behaviors (Bommer, Dierdorff & Rubin, 2007).

Lie et al. (2021) demonstrated that authentic leadership enhances the atmosphere of team innovation and creativity. Furthermore, Hirst et al. (2016) formulated and tested a trickle-down model illustrating how authentic leadership at the departmental level permeates through the organizational hierarchy, fostering authentic leadership among team leaders, thereby encouraging team and individual-level supervisor-directed helping behavior. The findings substantiated that authentic leadership contributes to the elevation and augmentation of helping behaviors within the team. Consistent with the research conducted by Craig and Gustafson (1998), positive responses from followers include perceptions of the leader’s selflessness, along with feelings of confidence and trust in the leader (Gottlieb & Sanzgiri, 1996). Consequently, a leader’s values and ethics significantly influence group behavior.

Group-level Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) is defined by the extent to which members of a work group collectively engage in discretionary, extra-role behaviors that benefit the group (Bommer et al., 2007). Engagement in Group OCB is a critical predictor of both group and organizational effectiveness, influencing employee turnover intentions and overall firm performance (Chen, Lam, Naumann, & Schaubroeck, 2005; Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997). In contrast, Group-level Counterproductive Work Behaviors (CWB) refer to behaviors that occur collectively among group members and aim to intentionally sabotage work. Despite the conventional conceptualization and measurement of OCB and CWB at the individual level, researchers argue for their analysis at the group level, emphasizing that the collective involvement in OCB significantly contributes to group and organizational effectiveness (Mansur et al., 2020).

In attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980), when followers attribute positive ethical intentions to their leader, it has a favorable impact on group dynamics. This attribution leads to an increased willingness among followers to collaborate, actively contribute to shared goals, offer assistance to one another, make additional contributions to the group, and go beyond their formal duties. Authentic leadership, as defined by Malik et al. (2023), involves conveying signals, proposing problem-solving solutions, and presenting positive visions of integrity. The perceived intrinsic value of the efforts of group members becomes intertwined with the leader’s values and principles, fostering cooperation through positive beliefs and values within the group. The perception of authentic leadership gives rise to positive behaviors among group members, such as engaging in organizational citizenship behaviors, and diminishes negative behaviors, such as counterproductive work behaviors within the group. Based on previous discussion, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Followers' perceived authentic leadership is positively related to group organizational citizenship behaviors.

H3: Followers' perceived authentic leadership is negatively related to group counterproductive work behaviors.

The Mediating role of followers' perception of authentic leadership in the relationship between Leader Moral Courage and OCB & CWB.

In this study, Hypothesis H1 proposed a positive relationship between leader's moral courage and followers' perception of authentic leadership. Furthermore, Hypotheses H2 & H3 suggest that followers' perceptions of authentic leadership will be positively associated with organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) and negatively associated with counterproductive work behaviors (CWB). As a result, an indirect effect of a leader's moral courage on group behaviors—mediated by followers' perceptions of authentic leadership—is expected.

Attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980) posits that individuals make sense of events by attributing them to specific causes. In the context of leader moral courage, followers may interpret such behavior as a signal of ethical integrity and positive leadership intentions (Sekerka et al., 2009). This favorable attribution enhances their perception of the leader's values and principles, thereby increasing the perceived intrinsic value of their own contributions to the organization. According to attribution theory, when followers positively attribute a leader's moral courage, they are more likely to engage in OCB, as they perceive their efforts as meaningful and aligned with ethical leadership. In other words, they become more inclined to collaborate, contribute actively to shared goals, and exceed formal job expectations to strengthen the group (Gong, Chang, & Cheung, 2010).

Similarly, Attribution theory can be applied to the correlation between leader moral courage and group counterproductive work behaviors. If followers view the leader's actions as morally courageous, it can shape their attributions of the leader's intentions. When a leader demonstrates moral courage, followers may attribute positive ethical intentions to the leader's decisions and actions (Shin, 2012). This positive attribution is likely to deter negative attributions, reducing the likelihood of perceiving the leader's actions as harmful or unfair. Consequently, the perception of leader moral courage may contribute to a decline in counterproductive work behaviors within the group. Based on previous discussion, it is hypothesized that:

H4: Followers' perception of authentic leadership mediates the relationship between leader moral courage and group Organizational Citizenship Behaviors.

H5: Followers' perception of authentic leadership mediates the relationship between leader moral courage and group Counterproductive Work Behaviors.

Cynicism Climate as a Moderator of the Effect of Leader Moral Courage

Organizational cynicism, which arises from negative feelings toward one's employer, is a prevalent issue globally (Jiang, Hu, Wang & Jiang, 2019). This phenomenon involves a pessimistic outlook where the organization is perceived as lacking honesty, leading to adverse emotions and critical behaviors (Dean et al., 1998: 345). This study focuses on the cynicism climate, a facet of organizational cynicism defined by skepticism, mistrust, and negative beliefs about the organization (Brown, Cregan, Kulik & Metz, 2022). We examine the relationship between leader moral courage, cynicism climate, and authentic leadership through the lens of attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980).

This theory analyzes how employees interpret leaders' behaviors, attributing them to either personal traits or external conditions. In a cynicism-laden environment, attributing ethical behavior to ex-

ternal factors can foster skepticism and mistrust, thereby reinforcing a culture of cynicism (Hewett et al., 2019). Misinterpretation of ethical signals in such a climate reduces the perception of authentic leadership, highlighting the importance of understanding the interplay between a leader's moral courage and cynicism (Kelley & Michela, 1980). The negative beliefs held by cynical employees significantly influence their evaluations of the organization's intentions (Dean et al., 1998). Based on previous discussion, it is hypothesized that:

H6: Cynicism climate moderates the positive relationship between leader moral courage and followers' perceived authentic leadership so that the relation is weaker (Vs. Stronger) at high (Vs. Low) levels of cynicism.

Moderator-Mediation

Earlier discussions highlighted that increased cynicism among followers has the potential to reduce their receptiveness to ethical signals from leaders, consequently weakening the overall impact of authentic leadership on group behaviors. This sets the stage for a conditional indirect effect, where the mediated relationship is contingent on the level of the moderator, in this case, the cynicism climate (Preacher, Rucker & Hayes, 2007). Expanding on these arguments, we foresee that a cynicism climate hampers followers' capacity to comprehend and evaluate moral signals, thus hindering their perception of authentic leadership. Consequently, this impairment in perceiving authentic leadership is expected to obstruct positive (or negative) indirect effects of leader moral courage on group behaviors. Therefore, cynicism climate will weaken the mediated impact of leader moral courage on group behaviors through the lens of perceived authentic leadership. Based on previous discussion, it is hypothesized that:

H7: Cynicism climate moderates the indirect relation between leader moral courage and group organizational citizenship behaviors through followers' perceived authentic leadership so that the relation is weaker (Vs. Stronger) at high (Vs. Low) levels of cynicism.

H8: Cynicism climate moderates the indirect relation between leader moral courage and group counterproductive work behaviors through followers' perceived authentic leadership so that the relation is weaker (Vs. Stronger) at high (Vs. Low) levels of cynicism.

Methodology

Population and Sample

This study is limited to public universities. Based on Musenze, Mayende, Wampande, Kasango & Emoojong (2021), the contributions of higher education institutions to research and development are essential in improving the intellectual growth within the community. In addition, academic staff considered one of the most significant groups in society, bear the responsibility of preparing students for the labor market, ultimately enhancing productivity and contributing to better community performance. Since this study focuses on group-level rather than individual-level analysis, examining single university provides an opportunity to explore group dynamics and collective behaviors within a specific organizational context. This approach allows investigating how authentic leadership influences the behaviors and performance of academic staff as a group, taking into account the shared norms, values, and goals within a university setting.

Sohag University was chosen as a representative educational institution for this study for several reasons. It is a prominent institution serving approximately 63,258 students from the Upper Egypt region, representing 41% of the total student population in the region (Zad Electronic Platform, Sohag University, 2025). Over the past decade, the university has received significant attention from political leadership, leading to unprecedented advancements in the higher education sector, in line with a carefully planned timeline and program (Ministry of planning and economic report, 2021). Additionally, the university has made remark-

able progress in its academic ranking. In 2024, it ranked first among Egyptian and African universities in the International Ranking of Sustainable Universities, leaping 65 places globally to secure the 255th position out of 1,477 universities from 95 countries. Moreover, it ranked 17th among Egyptian universities and 40th in the Arab world in the 2024 CWUR rankings (Sohag University Official Website, 2025). The university comprises 20 faculties and 146 departments, employing approximately 2,806 faculty members, creating a suitable environment for examining the relationships between the study variables. In this study, faculty members are considered subordinates, with department heads serving as their direct leaders. There is no differentiation among various types of faculty members, as they all work under similar conditions.

The sample consisted of 146 groups of academic staff, with an average group size of seven members. To mitigate consistency bias and align with the hypothesized causal effects, data collection was conducted in three phases over six weeks. During the first phase, 700 questionnaires were distributed to academic staff, achieving an 86.8% response rate. Participants evaluated their leaders' moral courage, authentic leadership, and the cynicism climate. The same group received another set of 700 questionnaires, this time focusing on group organizational citizenship behaviors and group counterproductive work behaviors, with a response rate of 87.7%. After excluding incomplete questionnaires from the first two phases, the final analysis included 604 responses from 146 departments. In the third phase, conducted approximately two weeks later, 146 survey responses were collected from department heads, who completed a questionnaire on the leader's moral identity (used as a control variable).

Data Collection and Measures

The survey materials and measurements were translated from English to Arabic by an author proficient in both languages. To ensure accuracy, a back-translation procedure, following established guidelines (Brislin, Lonner & Thorndike, 1973), was applied to both language versions. Notably, certain scales, such as Leader Moral Courage and Group Organizational Citizenship Behaviors, required contextual adjustments or shifts in the reference point from self to others. Further details about the scales will be provided in subsequent sections.

Leader Moral Courage (independent variable) was measured using Sekerka et al. (2009) ten-item scale. The survey consists of two questions related to each of the five dimensions of moral courage outlined by the authors. Participants are asked to rate their responses using a 6-point Likert scale. An example item is, "My head of department thinks about his motives when achieving the mission to ensure they are based upon moral ends" (α) for this construct was 0.89.

Perceived Authentic Leadership (mediating variable) was measured using the adopted questionnaire from Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson. (2008) study. Eight items were utilized to evaluate followers' perceptions of authentic leadership. Followers expressed their agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale. For instance, a sample item is, "My head department says exactly what he/she means." The Cronbach's alpha (α) for this construct was 0.84.

Group Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (dependent variable) was measured by a scale developed by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter (1990). The measurement of Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) utilized five items from the altruism dimension. This study focused on the helping aspect of OCB, aligning with the prevalent approach in group-level OCB studies (e.g., Mansur et al., 2020). Respondents used a 5-point Likert scale to express their agreement with statements reflecting the group's behavior. For instance, one statement is, "My department members are always ready to help or lend a hand to those around." The Cronbach's alpha (α) for this construct was 0.88.

Group Counterproductive Work Behaviors (dependent variable) was measured using Kelloway, Loughlin, Barling, & Nault. (2002), ten-item scale. There are two main dimensions: deviation at the level of the organization and deviation at the individual level. Participants are asked to rate their responses using a 5-point Likert scale. An example item is, "I compete with my co-workers in an unproductive way". The Cronbach's α of the scale was 0.853.

Cynicism Climate (moderating variable) was assessed using belief items from the Organizational Cynicism Scale, which was developed by Dean et al. (1998). Cynicism Climate refers to the prevailing beliefs among members and comprises 5 items. Participants are asked to rate their responses using a 7-point Likert scale. An example of one of these items was: 'I think the department administration is saying one thing and doing something else'. The Cronbach's α of the scale was 0.893.

Control variables used in data analysis include department size, which was collected from the Human Resources Department of each college and leader moral identity. Leader moral identity, as defined by Aquino and Reed (2002), represents the degree to which moral traits are integral to one's self-concept and was used as a control variable. We included moral identity as a control to demonstrate the autonomy of moral courage from leader self-concepts. The assessment of moral identity consisted of 10 items adapted from Aquino and Reed's (2002) scale, prompting participants to express the significance they attribute to possessing various moral characteristics. Participants are asked to rate their responses using a 5-point Likert scale. An example of one of these items was: 'It would make me feel good to be a person who has moral characteristics.' The Cronbach's α of the scale was 0.88.

Results

Measurement Assessment (Validity and Reliability Tests)

Ensuring the quality of measures is a prerequisite for conducting hypothesis testing. Convergent validity relies on factor loadings that are statistically significant and standardized, with values greater than 0.5, along with an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) exceeding 0.5. Discriminant validity, which signifies differences between constructs, is confirmed when the AVE surpasses the squared correlation estimate between variables. The assessment of measures' goodness-of-fit involves various fit indices that address both absolute and incremental fit. Common absolute fit indices include chi-square, the χ^2/df ratio, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean residual (SRMR). Incremental fit indices encompass the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) and comparative fit index (CFI) (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Discriminator validity was evaluated by comparing the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) with squared correlation estimates. A construct is deemed to possess discriminant validity when its AVE surpasses the square of its correlation with any other construct. Findings, with discriminant validity values for each variable (leader moral courage: 0.86, authentic leadership: 0.89, cynicism climate: 0.84, group organizational citizenship behaviors: 0.85, group counterproductive behaviors: 0.91), indicate no issues. The assessment utilized Gaskin & Lim's (2016) Master Validity Tool in Amos 23, and detailed results are available upon request from the first author.

Convergent validity, supported by an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of at least 0.5, was established, with AVE values surpassing 0.5 for all variables: leader moral courage (0.765), authentic leadership (0.786), cynicism climate (0.717), group organizational citizenship behaviors (0.782), and group counterproductive work behaviors (0.789) (Details of the results are available upon request from the first author.). The measurement employed Gaskin & Lim's (2016) Master Validity Tool in Amos 23, supplemented by a two-level Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) for evaluating goodness-of-fit and distinctiveness using Mplus 7.3 (Muthen & Muthen, 2012), adopting a contemporary two-level CFA approach.

The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted, as presented in Table 1, involving variables such as Leader moral courage, authentic leadership, cynicism climate, group organizational citizenship behaviors, and group counterproductive work behaviors. The hypothesized five-factor model demonstrated satisfactory fit indices ($\chi^2(778) = 3609.777$, $p < .001$, $TLI = .91$, $CFI = .91$, $SRMR = .034$, $RMSEA = .06$). This model was compared to alternative models, affirming its superiority over models that combined Leader moral courage and authentic leadership (alternative model 1), combined group organizational citizenship behaviors and group counterproductive work behaviors (alternative model 2), and combined Leader moral courage, authentic leadership, cynicism climate, and group counterproductive work behaviors into one factor (alternative model 3). The results provide support for the validity of the hypothesized model.

Table 1: Two-level CFA of the Hypothesized Measurement Model, Model 1, Model 2, and Model 3

Fit Index	Model			Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Results	Rule of Thumb	Was Good Achieved?	Results	Rule of Thumb	Was Good Achieved?	Results	Rule of Thumb	Was Good Achieved?	Results	Rule of Thumb	Was Good Achieved?
χ^2	3609.777	-	-	7435.208	-	-	8615.417	-	-	22388.447	-	-
Df	774	-	-	786	-	-	786	-	-	796	-	-
P	0.000	-	-	0.000	-	-	0.000	-	-	0.000	-	-
χ^2/df	4.66	≤ 5	YES	9.46	≤ 5	NO	10.96	≤ 5	NO	28.126	≤ 5	NO
SRMR	0.034	< 0.08	YES	0.14	< 0.08	NO	0.14	< 0.08	NO	0.22	< 0.08	NO
RMSEA	0.06	0.055-0.08	YES	0.14	0.055-0.08	NO	0.13	0.055-0.08	NO	0.26	0.055-0.08	NO
CFI	0.92	0.90-0.94	YES	0.83	0.90-0.94	NO	0.76	0.90-0.94	NO	0.34	0.90-0.94	NO
TLI	0.92	0.90-0.94	YES	0.76	0.90-0.94	NO	0.74	0.90-0.94	NO	0.22	0.90-0.94	NO

Notes. N = 146 group

Data Aggregation

Data aggregation from individual scores to unit scores was justified through three procedures (LeBreton & Senter, 2008): inter-rater agreement (rwg), intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC1), and reliability of group mean (ICC2). All rwg values (leader moral courage: 0.86, authentic leadership: 0.91, cynicism climate: 0.88, group organizational citizenship behaviors: 0.90, group counterproductive work behaviors: 0.92, Leader Moral identity: 0.83) fell within the strong agreement range, indicating suitability for aggregation. ICC1 values were above 0.10 (Leader moral courage: 0.23, authentic leadership: 0.22, cynicism climate: 0.65, group organizational citizenship behaviors: 0.38, group counterproductive work behaviors: 0.46, Leader Moral identity: 0.15), supporting aggregation.

Statistically significant F ratios associated with ICC1 values were observed. ICC2 values (leader moral courage: 0.75, authentic leadership: 0.60, cynicism climate: 0.85, group organizational citizenship behaviors: 0.80, group counterproductive work behaviors: 0.80, Leader Moral identity: 0.50) exceeded the proposed standard of 0.70, except for authentic leadership and Leader Moral identity (Details of the results are available upon request from the first author.). Chen & Bliese (2002) emphasized that if there is theoretical support and other indicators (e.g., rwg and ICC (1)) are met, a low value of ICC(2) does not pose a restriction to aggregating the variables. Therefore, the results above indicate the justified aggregation of individual scores at the group level.

Descriptive Statistics: Correlation Matrix

Initial examination through Pearson correlation indicated significant connections among core variables at the group level (as illustrated in Table 2). Leader Moral Courage exhibited a positive correlation with authentic leadership ($r = .42$, $p < .01$), while authentic leadership demonstrated a positive relationship

with group organizational citizenship behaviors ($r = .49, p < .01$) and a negative association with group counterproductive work behaviors ($r = -.34, p < .01$). Furthermore, Leader Moral Courage displayed a negative association with cynicism climate ($r = -.08, p < .05$).

Hypotheses Testing

To assess the study hypotheses, the investigator employed moderated mediation path analysis using Mplus 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012), a versatile statistical software that facilitates the analysis of complex models, allowing for the examination of multiple relationships like mediation and moderation. Following Dawson’s (2014) recommendations for enhanced interpretability, all variables were z-standardized. The hypothesis testing was organized into two main models. In Model 1, hypotheses H1–H6 were evaluated, focusing on direct and indirect effects (mediation). This involved predicting authentic leadership based on leader moral courage, cynicism climate, and control variables (group size and Leader Moral Identity) for the a-path, and using these variables to predict group organizational citizenship and counterproductive behaviors for the b-path. Model 2 tested moderated mediation hypotheses H6–H8 by introducing interaction effects between leader moral courage and cynicism climate. The study utilized bias-corrected bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples to assess the moderated mediation model, following Preacher et al. (2007) guidelines. Figure 2 presents the outcomes of the hypothesized model.

Model 2 tested moderated mediation hypotheses H6–H8 by introducing interaction effects between leader moral courage and cynicism climate. The study utilized bias-corrected bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples to assess the moderated mediation model, following Preacher et al. (2007) guidelines. Figure 2 presents the outcomes of the hypothesized model.

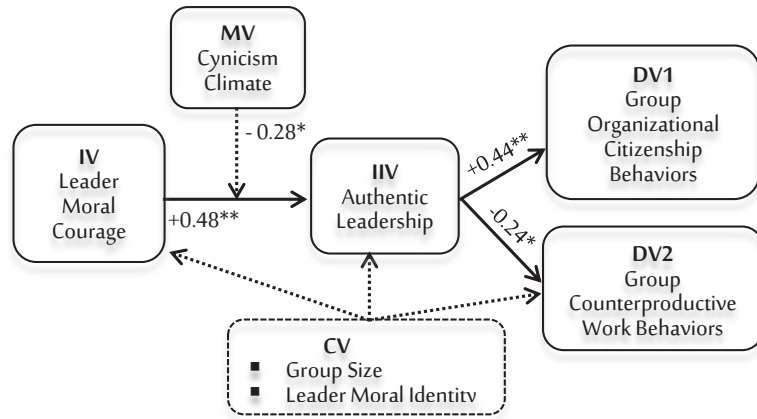
Direct Effects

Table 3 presents the outcomes related to the proposed correlation between leader moral courage and authentic leadership. In alignment with research hypothesis 1, which suggests a positive association between these two constructs, the results from Model 1 confirm the hypothesis. Specifically, the analysis shows a positive and statistically significant relationship between leader moral courage and authentic leadership ($\beta = 0.52, t = 2.72, p < .01$), supporting H1. For Hypothesis 2, the researcher found a positive and significant association between authentic leadership and group organizational citizenship behaviors ($\beta = 0.44, t = 2.59, p < .01$). Additionally, Hypothesis 3 posited a

Table 2: The Two-way Linear Correlation Coefficients between Variables-group Level

Sr.no.	Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1	Leader Moral Courage	-				
2	Authentic Leadership	.42**	-			
3	Cynicism Climate	-.08*	-.11	-		
4	Group Organizational Citizenship Behaviors	.48**	.49**	-.13	-	
5	Group Counterproductive Work Behaviors	-.29**	-.34**	.34**	-.19**	-

Note, N = 146. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.



Source: developed by authors

Figure 2. Path Coefficient Model

Table 3: Path Analysis Results– Model1

Independent Variables	Model 1								
	Authentic Leadership			Group Organizational Citizenship Behaviors			Group Counterproductive Work Behaviors		
	B	SE	T	B	SE	T	B	SE	t
Group Size	-.06	.06	-.86	.04	.06	.71	-.01	.05	-.01
Leader Moral Identity	.14	.06	2.09	-.13	.06	-1.35	.03	.05	.43
Leader Moral Courage	.52**	.16	2.72	.31*	.15	2.07	-.01	.07	-.19
Cynicism Climate	-.07	.08	-.78	-.06	.08	-1.02	.31	.20	1.44
Authentic Leadership				.44**	.14	2.59	-.24*	.12	-2.32
R ²	.28			.39			.21		
N	146			146			146		

Notes. N = 146 group. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

negative and significant relationship between authentic leadership and group counterproductive work behaviors ($\beta = -0.24, t = -2.31, p < .05$). These findings provide empirical support for both H2 and H3.

Indirect Effects

Hypothesis 4 of the study posited that the connection between leader moral courage and group organizational citizenship is influenced by followers’ perceptions of authentic leadership. The findings demonstrate that authentic leadership serves as a mediator in the positive relationship between leader moral courage and group organizational citizenship, with an indirect effect of 0.212 (95% CI Low = 0.022; CI High = 0.334). Consequently, Hypothesis 4 was confirmed. Conversely, Hypothesis 5 proposed the existence of an indirect effect between leader moral courage and group counterproductive work behaviors, mediated by followers’ perceptions of authentic leadership. The results reveal that authentic leadership acts as a mediator in the negative relationship between leader moral courage and group counterproductive work behaviors, yielding an indirect effect of -0.203 (95% CI Low = -0.334 ; CI High = -0.019). This supports Hypothesis 5.

Interactive Effects

Hypothesis 6 proposed that cynicism climate moderates the relationship between leader moral courage and authentic leadership, suggesting a weaker association under high cynicism climate conditions and a stronger one when cynicism is low. Findings from Model 2 in Table 4 revealed that the interaction term between leader moral courage and cynicism climate significantly and negatively predicted authentic leadership ($\beta = -0.28, t = -3.18, p < .05$). Following Baron & Kenny’s criteria (1986), the conditional effects indicated that the interaction term significantly predicted authentic leadership, showing a change in R^2 of 0.101 ($F(1,129) = 19.35, p < .01$). Therefore, Hypothesis 6 is supported.

Table. 4: Path Analysis Results – Model 2

Independent Variables	Model 2								
	Authentic Leadership			Group Organizational Citizenship Behaviors			Group Counterproductive Work Behaviors		
	B	SE	T	B	SE	T	B	SE	t
Group size	-.07	.06	-1.26	.04	.06	.71	-.01	.05	-.01
Leader Moral Identity	.15	.06	2.29	-.13	.06	-1.35	.03	.05	.43
Leader Moral Courage	.48**	.16	2.22	.31*	.15	2.07	-.01	.07	-.19
Cynicism climate	.07	.09	-.48	-.06	.08	-1.02	.31	.20	1.44
Authentic leadership				.44**	.14	2.59	-.24*	.12	-2.32
Leader Moral Courage x Cynicism climate	-.28*	.14	-3.18						
R ²	.38			.39			.21		
N	146			146			146		

Notes. N = 146 group. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Moreover, in line with the recommendation of Aiken, West, & Reno. (1991), the researchers conducted simple slope analyses. In this analysis, authentic leadership was regressed on leader moral courage for both high (mean + 1 SD) and low (mean – 1 SD) levels of cynicism climate. The results indicated a significant and positive slope for low cynicism climate (-1 SD, $\beta = 0.66, t = 4.09, p < .01$; 95% CI Low = 0.531; CI High = 0.924). Conversely, for groups experiencing a high cynicism cli-

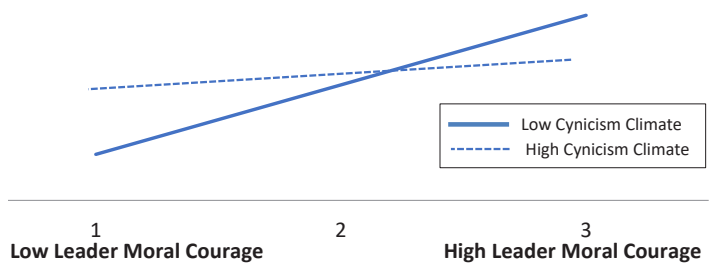


Figure.3. Moderating Effect of Cynicism Climate on the Relationship between Leader Moral Courage and Authentic Leadership

mate, there was no discernible relationship between leader moral courage and authentic leadership (+1 SD, $\beta = 0.14$, $t = 0.49$, ns; 95% CI Low = -0.274; CI High = 0.708). The interaction effect is visually represented in Figure 3.

1- Moderated Mediation Effects

The study proposed two hypotheses (H7 and H8) regarding conditional indirect effects within the theoretical model. To investigate the conditional indirect effect of leader moral courage through authentic leadership on both group organizational citizenship behaviors and group counterproductive work behaviors, 10,000 bootstrap samples were analyzed. Point estimates and 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated for the conditional effects of cynicism climate. The findings indicate that the conditional indirect relationship, mediated by authentic leadership, between leader moral courage and group organizational citizenship behaviors is significantly positive when the cynicism climate is low (conditional indirect effect = 0.225, 95% CI = [0.052; 0.589] at -1 SD). However, this relationship becomes insignificant at high levels of cynicism climate (conditional indirect effect = 0.059, 95% CI = [-0.124; 0.159] at +1 SD), supporting Hypothesis 7 by showing that the indirect link weakens under higher cynicism. For group counterproductive work behaviors, the analysis reveals a significant conditional indirect relationship mediated by authentic leadership only at below-average cynicism climate (conditional indirect effect = -0.169, 95% CI = [-0.233; -0.051] at -1 SD). This relationship becomes insignificant at high cynicism levels (conditional indirect effect = -0.033, 95% CI = [-0.159; 0.079] at +1 SD). These results support Hypothesis 8, indicating that the negative indirect impact of leader moral courage on counterproductive work behaviors through authentic leadership diminishes as the cynicism climate becomes more pronounced.

Discussion and Conclusion

The investigation explored how leaders' moral courage interacts with a climate of cynicism, examining their effects on organizational citizenship behaviors and counterproductive work behaviors within groups. This analysis was framed through attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980), focusing on moral courage as an essential quality that highlights the ethical dynamics between leaders and their teams, particularly in challenging managerial situations (Harbour & Kisfalvi, 2014). The study emphasized the importance of moral courage, noting its positive influence on authentic leadership and group behaviors by fostering trust, integrity, and credibility among followers—crucial elements of authentic leadership (Bolschakow, Rigotti, & Otto, 2023). While there are theoretical discussions regarding the impact of authentic leadership on groups, empirical research on how leaders' values translate into positive group outcomes remains limited (Malik et al., 2023).

The research examined various group dynamics, demonstrating how moral courage encourages followers to engage in prosocial actions and enhances perceptions of authentic leadership. Interestingly, it also revealed a counterintuitive negative moderating effect of a cynical climate on the relationship between leader moral courage, authentic leadership, and group behaviors. In this context, the presence of negative beliefs acted as a buffer, reducing the impact of moral courage by creating perceived incongruence between leaders' beliefs and behaviors, which in turn cast doubt on their authenticity as leaders.

Moreover, the research uncovers that followers' perceptions of authentic leadership have a beneficial impact on group organizational citizenship behaviors, while simultaneously exerting adverse effects on counterproductive work behaviors within the group. Through the exploration of novel moral factors and their intricate interactions, this study contributes significantly to a more profound comprehension of the essential requirements for effective authentic leadership and its correlation with leadership effectiveness (Bolschakow et al., 2023). Our scrutiny of behavioral outcomes at the group level provides insights into how teams react to authentic leadership, aligning with recent calls to prioritize follower outcomes at the

group level (Malik et al., 2023). By delving into group behaviors, we advance our understanding of how authentic leaders, through their actions and demonstration of moral courage, shape positive group behaviors.

Theoretical Implications

This study makes a significant contribution to the understanding of authentic leadership and moral courage in several important ways. It enhances knowledge by examining how these constructs impact group behaviors, specifically focusing on organizational citizenship and counterproductive work behaviors. The study highlights that leader moral courage extends beyond mere personal virtue; it has a broader influence on the organization as a whole. Despite the increasing scholarly interest in leader behaviors (e.g., Paterson & Huang, 2018), this study expands the discourse by linking the effects of leader moral courage and the prevailing cynicism climate as dual drivers of authentic leadership. By employing attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980), the study clarifies how followers interpret authentic leadership. It reveals that moral signals from leaders, perceived as intentional and beneficial, significantly shape followers' perceptions, while external factors, such as a cynical climate, can adversely affect these perceptions. Importantly, there is a noticeable gap in research focused on the factors that lead to perceptions of authentic leadership (Malik et al., 2023). This study emphasizes the need to explore the antecedents of authentic leadership, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this critical area in leadership research.

This study expands the application of attribution theory in the context of authentic leadership, advancing theoretical approaches in organizational sciences. Scholars have called for incorporating attribution theory when examining workplace phenomena (Harvey et al., 2014). Our paper contributes by introducing novel frameworks to explore the antecedents and outcomes of authentic leadership. The current literature lacks studies on how authentic leadership affects follower attitudes and behaviors in group contexts (Malik et al., 2023). This study addresses this gap by examining the impact of leaders' authentic behaviors on followers, particularly regarding group behaviors like organizational citizenship and counterproductive work behaviors. This study establishes a foundation for future research on the effects of authentic leadership on group outcomes. In the realm of behavioral ethics, our findings reveal how leaders' moral principles promote ethical conduct, highlighting the importance of moral courage and authentic leadership in enhancing organizational citizenship behaviors and reducing counterproductive work behaviors within groups. Overall, this study significantly deepens our understanding of these dynamics and addresses critical gaps in knowledge.

Practical Implications

The study findings have practical implications for leaders in university settings that emphasize interpersonal relationships. By embracing informal social interactions through personal actions and connections, leaders can positively influence academic staff, enhancing group behaviors within public universities. The perception of leaders as authentic contributes to improved group organizational citizenship behaviors and reduces counterproductive work behaviors. These findings advocate for the implementation of training initiatives aimed at developing authentic leadership behaviors at the group level within universities. Such training can equip supervisors with the ethical knowledge and skills necessary for effective leadership.

Moreover, it is essential to encourage department heads and supervisors to model authentic conduct, allowing team members to learn from these role models and deepen their understanding of moral values, which fosters trust and enhances group behaviors. Implementing training programs to cultivate authentic leadership is crucial for universities. These initiatives are intended to provide supervisors with the tools to promote ethical behavior at the group level, ultimately improving overall group dynamics. To counteract the negative effects of a cynical climate, measures should include promoting organizational justice, avoid-

ing psychological violations, and involving employees in decision-making. Prior studies have shown that these strategies significantly reduce organizational cynicism (Bakari, Hunjra, Jaros & Khoso, 2018).

Limitations and Future Research

The current study exhibits significant strengths in both design and theoretical contributions. However, caution must be exercised in generalizing the findings, as limitations arise from the exclusive focus on academic staff in public universities. The use of cross-sectional design, while suitable for initial evidence, hinders the establishment of causal inferences. Adopting a longitudinal approach in future studies could provide insights into changes over time. The reliance on self-report data introduces the potential for common method variance, despite efforts to mitigate this concern. Combining self-report measures with objective data may enhance the overall quality of the data. The study also encourages the exploration of additional leader behaviors, such as Leader Machiavellianism and leader ethical voice, as antecedents of authentic leadership perceptions. Further investigations into the impact of authentic leadership perceptions on various group behaviors, such as group cooperation, group sanctioning, and group social undermining, are recommended. Additionally, delving into the moderating impact of leader emotions (e.g., leader guilt) on the relationship between a leader's moral courage and followers' perceptions, as well as examining the correlation between a leader's moral courage and different leadership styles, present promising avenues for future research.

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