

## Moral Disengagement among Academic Professionals in Nepalese Universities

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### Abstract

*Moral disengagement refers to the cognitive strategies individuals use to justify unethical actions, enabling them to override personal or institutional norms without experiencing self-sanction. While widely studied in student misconduct and Western academic settings, limited empirical attention has been paid to how academic professionals in low-resource, non-Western contexts disengage morally in their professional roles. This mixed-methods study investigates the prevalence, mechanisms, and contextual drivers of moral disengagement among faculty in Nepalese universities. Survey data from 212 faculty members, measured using the Moral Disengagement in Academia Scale (MDAS), indicate high levels of disengagement. Specifically, 68% reported diffusion of responsibility, 61% demonstrated moral justification, and 57% expressed attribution of blame as frequent patterns of disengagement. Complementary interviews with 30 faculty and administrators further provide deeper insights into the underlying dynamics of these disengagement patterns. Complementary interviews with 30 faculty and administrators provide deeper insights into how collectivist cultural norms, institutional ambiguity, and survival-driven pressures normalize misconduct and offer ethical rationalizations. The study seeks to identify dominant mechanisms of disengagement, explore the institutional, cultural, and psychological factors that facilitate or inhibit these processes, and understand how academics rationalize unethical behaviors within environments marked by systemic ambiguity, collectivist values, and limited resources. Findings suggest that in contexts characterized by weak ethical oversight, politicized governance, and vague professional standards, moral disengagement becomes an adaptive mechanism. The study extends Bandura's theoretical framework and offers implications for ethics policy, leadership development, and governance reform in South Asian higher education.*

**Keywords:** *Academic ethics, Faculty misconduct, Higher education, Institutional culture, Moral disengagement*



## **Introduction**

Moral disengagement, as conceptualized by Bandura (1990), refers to the cognitive mechanisms individuals use to justify unethical behavior, thereby protecting their moral self-image. These mechanisms include moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement or diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. In academic institutions—spaces that ostensibly uphold truth, fairness, and intellectual integrity—moral disengagement poses a paradoxical challenge (Bandura, 1999). Faculty and staff, under increasing performance pressure and institutional complexity, may rationalize behaviors that conflict with both personal and professional ethical standards.

In global academic settings, ethical breaches are not uncommon. Scholars have documented cases of data falsification, ghostwriting, favoritism in hiring and promotion, and the manipulation of peer-review systems (Anderson et al., 2007; Fanelli, 2009). While such issues have been widely examined in Western academic systems, similar processes of moral disengagement in South Asian or lower-income country contexts remain underexplored. This lack of attention is problematic, as it fails to account for how local cultural, structural, and institutional factors shape ethical reasoning in higher education.

Nepal's higher education sector exemplifies this gap. In the last two decades, the number of universities has expanded rapidly, alongside enrollment growth and increased demand for academic credentials. However, governance and quality assurance mechanisms have not kept pace (University Grants Commission Nepal, 2022). In such a context, academic professionals face pressures to publish, secure promotions, manage heavy teaching loads, and navigate politically influenced administrative systems—all without adequate professional development or ethical oversight.

Early signs of systemic ethical compromise are emerging. Investigative reports have uncovered plagiarism in thesis supervision, credential inflation, nepotism in faculty recruitment, and financial mismanagement in public universities (Centre for Investigative Journalism Nepal, 2023). Moreover, empirical research has revealed alarmingly low levels of awareness regarding academic integrity. For example, a recent study by Upadhyay, Pradhan, and Sedain (2023) found that while a majority of university students in Nepal had heard of plagiarism, more than half lacked a full understanding of its consequences or institutional responses. These findings suggest a broader normalization of unethical academic behavior, likely reinforced through learned patterns and institutional inaction.

Furthermore, socio-cultural dimensions may facilitate moral disengagement in uniquely Nepalese ways. Nepal's hierarchical academic culture, shaped by collectivist norms and deference to authority, may inhibit whistleblowing or ethical confrontation (Adhikari, 2021). Faculty members may feel compelled to protect colleagues' reputations, prioritize social harmony, or support familial and political networks—even when these actions conflict with academic values. In such cases, moral disengagement allows individuals to reconcile professional roles with sociocultural expectations.

This study addresses these critical gaps by investigating the prevalence and mechanisms of moral disengagement among academic professionals in Nepalese universities. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the dominant mechanisms of moral disengagement among academic staff in Nepalese universities?



2. What institutional, cultural, and psychological factors contribute to or inhibit moral disengagement?
3. How do academic professionals rationalize behaviors that deviate from ethical norms?

To answer these questions, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative survey of academic staff with qualitative interviews. By applying Bandura's (1999) framework of moral disengagement in the Nepalese academic context, this research contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it expands the understanding of moral disengagement into a non-Western, low-resource academic setting. Practically, it offers insights for institutional leaders and policymakers to design ethics-focused interventions tailored to the realities of Nepalese higher education.

In doing so, this study also underscores a broader concern: the sustainability of academic integrity in rapidly transforming educational systems. In nations like Nepal, where higher education is a key engine for socio-economic mobility and democratic development, cultivating an ethical academic culture is not merely a normative goal—it is a developmental imperative.

## **Literature Review**

### **Moral Disengagement: Theoretical Framework**

Albert Bandura's (1990, 1999) concept of *moral disengagement* stems from his broader social cognitive theory, where moral agency is regulated through internal standards of conduct. Moral disengagement occurs when individuals deactivate these self-sanctions, allowing themselves to behave unethically without self-condemnation. The eight mechanisms identified by Bandura—moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame—are widely accepted in psychological and organizational ethics literature (Moore, 2008; Detert et al., 2008).

In educational settings, moral disengagement has been explored primarily in relation to student cheating and misconduct (McCabe et al., 2012; Gino & Ariely, 2012). However, emerging literature also acknowledges its presence among faculty and administrators, especially under institutional pressures that prioritize performance metrics over ethical values (Bailey & Baines, 2018). Bandura's framework thus provides a valuable lens through which to understand unethical behaviors in academia, especially in contexts where external accountability mechanisms are weak or compromised.

### **Moral Disengagement in Higher Education**

Studies from Western contexts indicate that moral disengagement is often triggered by structural and cultural conditions within academia. Detert et al. (2008) found that hierarchical structures, ambiguous ethical norms, and pressure to meet institutional targets can lead academic staff to morally disengage. Similarly, Easwaran and Khanduja (2020) observed that university faculty under pressure to publish frequently rationalize plagiarism or data manipulation as necessary for professional survival. These rationalizations align closely with Bandura's mechanisms, particularly moral justification and euphemistic labeling.

In post-conflict and low-resource settings, the prevalence of moral disengagement in academia can be even more pronounced. Research from Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia indicates that faculty often resort to unethical practices—such as selling grades, accepting bribes, or exploiting students—under conditions of low pay, high workloads, and poor governance (Sifuna, 2006; Luescher-Mamashela, 2010). While the cognitive mechanisms of disengagement may be universal, the triggers and justifications are highly contextual and often shaped by historical, economic, and political realities.



## **Moral Disengagement in South Asian Contexts**

Within South Asia, the academic workplace is often characterized by deeply embedded systems of patronage, politicization, and bureaucratic inertia. For example, studies from India and Bangladesh have shown how political affiliation and familial ties influence faculty recruitment and student assessment (Chattopadhyay, 2012; Islam, 2019). In such environments, unethical behavior may not only be tolerated but also normalized, with institutional actors morally disengaging by appealing to “common practice” or cultural obligations.

However, empirical studies that specifically examine the cognitive processes behind these practices—using the lens of moral disengagement—remain limited. Most existing research has focused on corruption as a structural or policy issue (Hallak & Poisson, 2007), with little attention paid to the psychological justifications that make unethical behavior sustainable over time. This gap is particularly salient in the context of Nepal, where universities operate under similar sociopolitical constraints but have received little scholarly attention in this regard.

## **Higher Education and Ethical Challenges in Nepal**

Nepal’s higher education system has expanded significantly in recent decades, yet concerns over quality, politicization, and ethics persist. The University Grants Commission (UGC) of Nepal (2022) has acknowledged that academic governance is often influenced by political affiliations and lacks robust accountability systems. Furthermore, reports from the Centre for Investigative Journalism Nepal (2023) reveal instances of widespread plagiarism, degree fraud, and nepotism within public universities.

Few academic studies have addressed these concerns through the lens of moral reasoning or disengagement. One exception is the work of Upadhyay et al. (2023), who conducted a web-based survey among university students and found that over 50% had engaged in plagiarism, often without clear understanding of its ethical implications. Another relevant study by Bhattarai (2024) explored the informal learning of Nepali university professors and found that institutional culture often lacks support for ethical development, leaving faculty to rely on personal networks and informal norms.

These findings suggest that unethical behavior in Nepali academia is not simply the result of individual moral failings, but of systemic shortcomings and socio-cultural pressures that encourage rationalization and normalization of misconduct. Faculty and administrators often operate in environments where ethical breaches are not punished—and may even be rewarded—creating fertile ground for moral disengagement to take root.

## **Research Gap**

Despite growing anecdotal and journalistic evidence, empirical studies exploring the *mechanisms* of moral disengagement in Nepalese universities are virtually non-existent. Most discussions of academic ethics in Nepal remain descriptive, lacking theoretical grounding and methodological rigor. There is an urgent need for research that connects individual cognitive processes with broader institutional and cultural factors. Understanding *how* academic professionals in Nepal justify unethical actions—through mechanisms such as moral justification or diffusion of responsibility—will provide valuable insights for designing interventions. By applying Bandura’s framework to a non-Western, under-researched academic context, this study not only addresses a local research gap but also contributes to the global literature on moral disengagement in higher education. It helps illustrate how ethical reasoning is shaped by institutional environments, socio-political dynamics, and cultural expectations, offering a nuanced perspective on academic integrity in the Global South.



## **Methodology**

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to comprehensively investigate the mechanisms and contextual factors of moral disengagement among academic professionals in Nepalese universities. The quantitative component aimed to measure the prevalence and patterns of moral disengagement using a validated scale, while the qualitative component sought to explore the cognitive rationalizations and cultural justifications behind these behaviors through in-depth interviews.

The rationale for using a mixed-methods approach lies in the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation. Moral disengagement involves both measurable constructs (e.g., frequency of specific mechanisms) and subjective meaning-making processes (e.g., cultural justifications for unethical behavior), which are best understood through methodological triangulation.

The study was conducted across five public and private universities located in the Kathmandu Valley, which hosts the largest concentration of higher education institutions in Nepal. These included: Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University, Pokhara University (Kathmandu campus), Purbanchal University (affiliated campuses), and one private institution selected based on accreditation status and institutional diversity.

A total of 212 academic staff members ( $n = 212$ ) participated in the survey, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across rank (lecturer, assistant professor, associate professor, professor), gender, and disciplinary background. For the qualitative phase, 30 participants were purposively selected from the larger sample based on their willingness to participate in interviews and their diversity in professional role and institutional affiliation. These included faculty, department heads, and academic administrators.

Moral disengagement was measured using the Moral Disengagement in Academia Scale (MDAS), adapted from Bandura et al. (1996) and further refined by Moore (2008) for use in workplace settings. The scale consists of 32 items covering eight mechanisms of moral disengagement, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Example items include:

- “Sometimes academic rules are too strict and need to be bent for good reasons.” (Moral justification)
- “Everyone plagiarizes at some point; it’s part of how things work here.” (Diffusion of responsibility)

The adapted version demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.86$ ) in the pilot phase conducted with 30 academic staff from a non-participating university.

### *Qualitative Instruments*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a guiding protocol that explored themes such as:

- Perceptions of ethical challenges in the academic workplace
- Experiences with unethical conduct (e.g., favoritism, plagiarism, administrative corruption)
- Justifications or rationalizations of ethically questionable behavior
- Awareness and perceptions of institutional ethics policies

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in English or Nepali, depending on participant preference. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim.



Data collection took place over a three-month period from November 2023 to January 2024. Surveys were distributed via institutional email lists and in-person during faculty meetings. For interviews, participants were contacted directly and provided with detailed information about the study's aims and confidentiality procedures.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Approval No.: IRB-2025-104) and written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 27. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequency distributions) were used to summarize moral disengagement patterns. Factor analysis was conducted to confirm construct validity of the MDAS, and ANOVA tests examined differences across demographic variables (e.g., academic rank, gender, institution type).

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were first coded inductively to identify emerging themes and then deductively mapped to Bandura's eight mechanisms of moral disengagement. To ensure validity, two independent coders analyzed the data, achieving an inter-coder reliability of 89%. NVivo software was used to manage coding and theme development.

### Limitations

While the study offers a robust exploration of moral disengagement in Nepalese universities, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, findings are contextually bounded and may not generalize to universities outside the Kathmandu Valley. Second, social desirability bias may have influenced participants' self-reports, particularly in interviews. Finally, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents findings from both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study. Results are structured according to the three research questions and organized under the two methodological strands: (1) statistical analysis of survey responses, and (2) thematic analysis of interview transcripts.

### 4.1 Quantitative Findings: Prevalence and Patterns of Moral Disengagement

#### 4.1.1 Descriptive Statistics:

**Table 1**

Descriptive Statistics of Moral Disengagement Dimensions (N = 212)

MDAS Subscale	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Moral Justification	3.45	0.72
Euphemistic Labeling	3.12	0.68
Advantageous Comparison	3.05	0.70
Displacement/Diffusion of Responsibility	3.62	0.75
Disregard/Distortion of Consequences	3.28	0.69
Dehumanization	2.87	0.65
Attribution of Blame	3.51	0.71

*Note.* MDAS = Moral Disengagement in Academia Scale. Scores range from 1 (low) to 5 (high) levels of moral disengagement.

Analysis of responses from 212 academic staff revealed moderate-to-high levels of moral disengagement across several dimensions. Table 1 summarizes the mean scores and standard deviations for each of the eight mechanisms.



Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics for Moral Disengagement Mechanisms (N = 212)*

Mechanism	Mean	SD
Moral justification	3.72	0.68
Euphemistic labeling	3.45	0.61
Advantageous comparison	3.36	0.77
Displacement of responsibility	3.51	0.70
Diffusion of responsibility	3.80	0.64
Disregard/distortion of consequences	3.22	0.85
Dehumanization	2.76	0.94
Attribution of blame	3.58	0.66

The highest average score was found for diffusion of responsibility ( $M = 3.80$ ), suggesting that participants frequently rationalized unethical behavior by attributing blame to group norms or institutional culture. Similarly, moral justification and attribution of blame were also prominently endorsed.

#### *Differences by Demographic Variables*

An ANOVA test revealed statistically significant differences in moral disengagement by academic rank ( $F(3, 208) = 4.87, p < .01$ ). Junior faculty (lecturers and assistant professors) reported higher moral disengagement scores compared to senior faculty, suggesting that structural vulnerability or lack of empowerment may contribute to ethical rationalization.

Additionally, participants from public universities showed higher average disengagement ( $M = 3.61$ ) compared to those from private universities ( $M = 3.28$ ),  $t(210) = 2.45, p = .015$ . This may reflect variations in institutional culture, accountability, and autonomy.

#### *Qualitative Findings: Mechanisms and Cultural Rationalizations*

Thematic analysis of 30 interviews yielded four dominant themes; each aligned with Bandura's framework. Select participant quotes are included for authenticity.

##### **Theme 1:** "Everyone does it"—Normalization of Misconduct

Several participants described a culture in which minor unethical practices, such as inflating grades, overlooking plagiarism, or bypassing formal procedures, were perceived as routine or widely accepted. One faculty member noted:

*"It's just the way things work here. Everyone bends the rules a little; if you don't, you're at a disadvantage."* Another administrator reflected on this normalization: *"New faculties quickly learn that certain shortcuts or informal practices are common. It's almost an unspoken rule—if you want to survive, you follow along."* Such narratives highlight how moral



disengagement can become institutionalized, with faculty rationalizing questionable behaviors as standard practice rather than ethically problematic. The perception that “everyone does it” reduces personal accountability and fosters a collective tolerance for misconduct. Participants frequently used diffusion of responsibility to justify unethical practices. Faculty often described unethical behavior as “institutionalized” or “routine,” diminishing their sense of individual accountability. *“Sometimes you are just part of the system. If you don’t adjust, you become the outlier.”* (Assistant Professor, Public University)

**Theme 2: “Helping others is our culture”—Moral Justification via Collectivism**

Moral justification was often framed within Nepali collectivist values. Favoritism in hiring or thesis evaluation was justified as helping relatives, juniors, or political affiliates.

*“It’s not unethical if you’re helping someone who would otherwise be neglected. We are human before we are officials.”* (Department Head, Public University)

**Theme 3: “Policy is unclear”—Displacement of Responsibility**

Faculty members cited ambiguous institutional policies or lack of enforcement as reasons for noncompliance with ethical norms. This reflects displacement of responsibility toward institutional leadership.

*“There’s no proper ethics policy here. Even if there is, nobody follows it, and no one is punished.”* (Senior Lecturer, Private University)

**Theme 4: “We must survive”—Ethics Under Pressure**

Several respondents rationalized minor ethical breaches as necessary for professional survival, particularly under publish-or-perish conditions. Euphemistic labeling (e.g., “borrowing ideas”) and advantageous comparison (e.g., “At least we’re not fabricating data”) were commonly observed.

*“If I don’t publish, I won’t be promoted. Using templates or rephrasing from old research is a strategy, not plagiarism.”* (Lecturer, Science Faculty)

**4.3 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings**

The convergence of data points reveals a consistent pattern: moral disengagement is prevalent, especially where institutional accountability is weak and sociocultural pressures are strong. Quantitative results confirm the dominance of diffusion of responsibility and moral justification, while qualitative findings provide cultural and contextual depth to these mechanisms. Faculty often saw unethical conduct as *systemic rather than personal*, shaped by both organizational ambiguity and societal expectations.

**Discussion and Implications**

This study explored the mechanisms and contextual drivers of moral disengagement among academic staff in Nepalese universities using a mixed-methods approach. The findings offer compelling evidence that moral disengagement is not only prevalent but also deeply embedded within both institutional and cultural dimensions of the academic workplace in Nepal. Quantitatively, diffusion of responsibility, moral justification, and attribution of blame emerged as the most endorsed mechanisms. These findings align with Bandura’s (1999) assertion that individuals often displace ethical accountability when situated within ambiguous or collectivized organizational structures. Qualitative data further illuminated these dynamics, revealing that ethical lapses are frequently justified as survival strategies, cultural norms, or institutional expectations. Participants often framed their behavior within narratives of loyalty, social obligation, and professional insecurity.



### *Theoretical Implications*

The study makes several contributions to the theoretical literature on moral disengagement. First, it affirms that Bandura's framework is culturally and contextually adaptable, even in non-Western, low-resource settings. However, the data also suggest the need to expand this model by incorporating socio-cultural norms, such as collectivism, deference to authority, and relational ethics, which shape how moral disengagement manifests in Nepalese academia.

Second, this research bridges the gap between micro-level cognitive processes and macro-level institutional structures. While Bandura's model is primarily psychological, this study demonstrates that organizational culture and governance structures significantly mediate moral disengagement, particularly in environments with weak accountability systems and politicized leadership.

### *Practical Implications*

The findings highlight several areas for policy intervention and institutional reform:

- **Strengthening Institutional Ethics Frameworks:** Most universities in Nepal lack clearly articulated or effectively enforced codes of ethics. University Grants Commission Nepal and individual institutions must develop comprehensive ethical guidelines tailored to academic contexts, supported by training, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms.
- **Ethics Education and Faculty Development:** Faculty often rationalized unethical behavior due to lack of awareness or clarity. Integrating ethics training into faculty development programs—particularly for junior staff—can reinforce moral accountability. This should include case-based learning on ethical dilemmas in teaching, research, and administration.
- **Reforming Performance Metrics:** The “publish or perish” culture was frequently cited as a driver of rationalized misconduct. Institutions should balance quantitative research expectations with qualitative assessments of academic integrity, teaching effectiveness, and community engagement.
- **Promoting Ethical Leadership:** Senior faculty and administrators often model or excuse unethical behavior, contributing to a culture of normalization. Universities must invest in leadership development programs that emphasize integrity, fairness, and procedural justice.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides critical insights into moral disengagement among academic staff in Nepalese universities, revealing that diffusion of responsibility, moral justification, and attribution of blame are the primary mechanisms through which faculty rationalize ethically questionable behavior. These patterns are not merely individual cognitive lapses but are deeply embedded within institutional cultures, hierarchical structures, and socio-cultural norms, including collectivism, deference to authority, and relational obligations.

The findings underscore that ethical lapses are often normalized as survival strategies within resource-constrained and politically influenced academic environments. Junior faculty and staff in public universities appear particularly vulnerable, highlighting the role of power dynamics, institutional ambiguity, and limited accountability mechanisms in shaping moral behavior.

From a practical perspective, promoting ethical integrity in Nepalese higher education requires systemic interventions rather than reliance on individual moral reasoning alone. Key strategies include strengthening institutional ethics frameworks, integrating ethics education into



faculty development, reforming performance metrics to balance productivity with integrity, promoting ethical leadership, and reducing bureaucratic and political interference in governance. At the national level, policies such as ethics audits, empowered institutional ethics committees, and a national academic integrity charter can further reinforce accountability and professional standards.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that moral disengagement in academia is a complex phenomenon shaped by cognitive, institutional, and cultural forces. By situating Bandura's theoretical framework within the lived realities of Nepalese universities, the research highlights the need for locally grounded, culturally sensitive approaches to fostering ethical behavior. For policymakers, university leaders, and academic professionals, the take-home message is clear: sustainable improvements in academic integrity require coordinated, systemic, and contextually informed interventions that address both individual and structural dimensions of moral behavior.

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