

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEVIANT WORKPLACE BEHAVIOUR AND MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AMONG AUTO MECHANICS

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**Abstract.** In Latvia, over the past year a large number of complaints related to the quality of repair and maintenance in car service stations have been recorded. Among the claims of customers, there are price deceptions, unjustified replacement of parts, imposing unnecessary repairs or replacement of parts, deliberate delayed repairs, which refers to deviant workplace behaviour. Among factors leading to this behaviour researchers attribute moral disengagement and immorality of the employees. This study empirically tested the relationship between deviant workplace behaviour and moral disengagement among auto mechanics. The study revealed that auto mechanics not prone to deviant workplace behaviour use such moral disengagement mechanisms that allow them to rationalise their behaviour by justifying its acceptability and morality, whereas automechanics with recurrent and regular deviant workplace behaviour use such moral disengagement mechanisms that distort the effects of their destructive behaviour making it possible to relieve themselves of responsibility or cover it up by shifting responsibility to the victims, other people or circumstances. The results can be applied in improving professional competences of service managers.

**Keywords:** deviant workplace behaviour, moral disengagement, auto mechanics.

### Introduction

Latvia ranks the 18th in Europe in terms of the age of cars in service (in 2019, the average age of passenger cars in Europe was 8.3 years, in Latvia - 13.9 years) [1]. Increased wear and tear of components and materials of vehicles with an expired warranty period requires more frequent and complex repairs, a high level of professionalism of employees. However, customers of car services are not always satisfied with the quality of work of specialists, including auto mechanics. Among the customer complaints are obvious manifestations of employees' *service dysfunction*: failure to provide receipts, price deception, unjustified replacement of parts, imposing unnecessary repairs or replacement of parts, delaying repairs, deliberate damage to components and elements. Service dysfunction has been defined as the deviant behaviour of the service sector employees [2].

In theoretical studies, the concept of deviant workplace behaviour is considered both in a general sense [3] and in a narrower one [4; 5]. A number of authors [3] believe that the essence of deviant workplace behaviour is a violation of social norms and harming others. At the same time, till now a list or understanding of professional norms, violation of which can be considered as deviant workplace behaviour, has not yet been developed [6]. Some authors [4] emphasise planning and intentionality of employees' purposeful actions aiming at harming the organization; however, within this understanding the actions of a specific employee within a specific organization should be considered [5].

Most studies understand [7] deviant workplace behaviour as voluntary harm to the organization as a result of the employees' lack of motivation to comply with the organization's regulatory requirements and/or their motivation to violate these norms. Theoretical models explain the causes of deviant workplace behaviour, indicating, among others, employees' retaliation against unsatisfactory working conditions or unfair treatment by engaging in behaviour that is harmful to the organization or other employees [8].

There are three different approaches to studying deviant workplace behaviour [9]: studies of deviation as a reaction to negative work experience; studies of deviation as a reflection of personality traits of employees, and studies of deviation as an adaptation to the social context at work. Scientific reviews indicate that, despite a large number of described categories, types, and forms of deviant behaviour [10-11], the role of cognitive processes in making decisions about unethical behaviour in the workplace has not been sufficiently studied [12-13]. Currently, there is no universal typology of deviant workplace behaviour, which is associated with a different understanding of its mechanisms [4]. At the same time, most empirical studies are based on the model [7], which distinguishes and describes two types of deviant behaviour at work depending on the object/subject at which the behaviour is directed:

to the organization itself (*organizational deviance*) or to the members of the organization (*interpersonal deviance*).

According to the authors' knowledge, there were no studies focused on car service employees' deviant behaviour. However, the specifics of car service work organization and organizational culture can suggest that there can be identified different types of deviant workplace behaviour, such as unauthorized use of customers' cars for personal purposes, price deception, fraud with materials and parts, imposing unnecessary repairs or replacement of parts, delaying repairs, manipulating the client, substance (alcohol) use at work, being late for work or unauthorised absenteeism. It is assumed that deviant behaviour of auto mechanics may be due to either the desire to make money by shifting the blame on employers or the actions of others, for example, colleagues, managers, or customer behaviour, or low individual sensitivity to certain ethical principles.

A number of authors [14-16] focus on just recently defined moral disengagement as one of the factors causing deviant workplace behaviour. The concept of moral disengagement as a cognitive process, through which individuals rationalize their unethical behaviour, stems theoretically and empirically from Bandura's socio-cognitive theory and has been confirmed by empirical research in this direction [17-19]. Moral disengagement is a mechanism by which individuals' ethical restraints are not consciously applied to themselves (that is, alienated) in order to justify and explain their unethical behaviour, portraying it as socially acceptable or serving moral objectives [19-20]. Moral disengagement is a widespread phenomenon and can be used by any person or group, depending on their personal characteristics and situation [15].

In the theoretical works [17-19], eight mechanisms of moral disengagement are distinguished, belonging to four groups (*loci*) depending on their direction:

1. The behavioural locus is aimed at behaviour justification and is implemented through three mechanisms: *moral justification*, *euphemistic labels*, *palliative comparisons*, which all lead to redefinition of behaviour allowing reducing or avoiding responsibility for unethical actions.
2. The agency locus is aimed at concealing the fault of a person behaving in a harmful way using such mechanisms as *displacement of responsibility* and *diffusion of responsibility*.
3. The effects locus refers to attempts to explain the outcomes of unethical behaviour, thus, redefining the consequences of behaviour using such mechanisms as *distorting* or *obscuring the relationship between behaviour and its harmful consequences*.
4. The victim locus is aimed at distorting the image of the victim of cruel or unethical behaviour using such mechanisms as *dehumanization* and *attribution of blame to the victim*.

Further specification of the theoretical description of moral disengagement mechanisms [21] was based on the empirical research analysis [20; 22]. Research demonstrates [23-25], that moral disengagement motivates such unethical behaviour in the workplace as theft, deception, damage to company's property, deliberate attempts to offend others, substance (alcohol) use while working. It was revealed that employees demonstrate a higher level of moral disengagement when there is a possibility to obtain personal gain while performing professional duties in the absence of control from the head of the organisation [26].

At the same time, it is noted [14] that there has been very little research into the relationship between moral disengagement and deviant workplace behaviour. As to the authors knowledge, there are no studies focused on moral disengagement among auto mechanics.

## Materials and method

The theoretical basis for formulating the purpose of this study are the theoretical provisions of the deviant workplace behaviour model [7], theoretical explanations of the moral disengagement concept and the results of empirical research [17-19; 21-22; 24].

*The purpose of the study:* to study the relationship between deviant workplace behaviour and moral disengagement among car service auto mechanics.

*Research question:* "Whether there is a link between deviant workplace behaviour and moral disengagement among car service auto mechanics?"

The study will expand the understanding of the mechanisms of moral disengagement among auto mechanics with different levels of deviant workplace behaviour.

#### *Study participants*

The study was conducted among car service auto mechanics. The sample size was 75 respondents. The sample was homogeneous. All participants were men aged 25 to 58 years ( $M = 40.8$ ,  $SD = 8.47$ ). 50% of participants were not older than  $Mdn = 41.0$  years. Possibility sample. The sample size is sufficient to obtain reliable results.

#### *Study methods*

- Workplace Deviance Behaviour (WDB) scale by Bennett & Robinson (2000) [27], a self-report measure based on the authors' 2-factor model. The questionnaire consists of 19 questions that relate to 2 scales: (1) *Interpersonal deviant behaviour scale* (ID) - a total of 7 items and (2) *Organizational deviant behaviour scale* (OD) - 12 items of the scale. Participants were asked to rate how often they engaged in each behaviour. The results were assessed on a seven-point Likert scale: from 1 (never engaging in the behaviour) to 7 (engaging in the behaviour daily). Participants' responses were summed up the mean was calculated as a total WDB indicator for ID and OD scales. The WDB scales provides an opportunity to assess the degree of deviant workplace behaviour among auto mechanics: aimed at the organization and people working for it.

Saplavska and Kalinnikova (2020) carried out linguistic adaptation of the scale. The adaptation consisted of 5 stages, whereas stages 1-3 were essentially linguistic:

1. Translation of the original.
2. Evaluation of the translation by linguistic experts.
3. Reverse translation to confirm the equivalence of the translation.
4. Reliability check.
5. Verification of retest reliability.

Both organizational deviant behaviour scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and interpersonal deviant behaviour scale ( $\alpha = .84$ ) demonstrated high internal consistency.

- Moral Disengagement Scale (MD-24) by Moore, Detert, Baker & Mayer (2012) [22] in adaptation of Ledovaya, Tikhonov, Bogolyubova, Kazennaya and Sorokina (2016) [20]. The scale is designed to identify eight mechanisms, united in four loci, which variably describe different sides of one construct – moral disengagement. The scale helps deepen the understanding of individual differences in implementing the moral disengagement mechanisms and to explain unethical behaviour. The questionnaire consists of 24 questions. Each of the eight moral disengagement mechanisms described in the works [17; 18] is tackled by 3 questions. The results are assessed on a seven-point Likert scale. Participants are asked to rate the degree of their agreement or disagreement with each statement using a scale from 1 – “Completely disagree” (completely disagree with a statement related to a specific mechanism of moral disengagement) to 7 – “Completely agree” (completely agree with a statement related to a specific mechanism of moral disengagement). The degree of agreement or disagreement indicates the acceptability or unacceptability of a particular mechanism of moral disengagement, which will be implemented under certain conditions. The participants' responses were summed up for each mechanism and locus, and then the mean was calculated for each component. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the MD-24 scale is .89.

## **Results**

The processing of the obtained data was carried out using the SPSS 20.0 software.

The choice of statistical procedures corresponds to the research question: “Whether there is a link between deviant workplace behaviour and moral disengagement among car service auto mechanics?”

The scales of the Workplace Deviance Behaviour (WDB) questionnaire were converted to nominal, each of which had three levels: low, medium, high and a certain number of observations  $n$ .

The division into three groups was carried out using quartiles  $Q_1$  and  $Q_3$ . Empirical data scoring above  $Q_3$  were attributed to high, in the range between  $Q_1$  and  $Q_3$  to medium, and below  $Q_1$  – to low levels.

Each level was described in accordance with the auto mechanics’ reported frequency of engaging in deviant workplace behaviour (Table 1).

Table 1

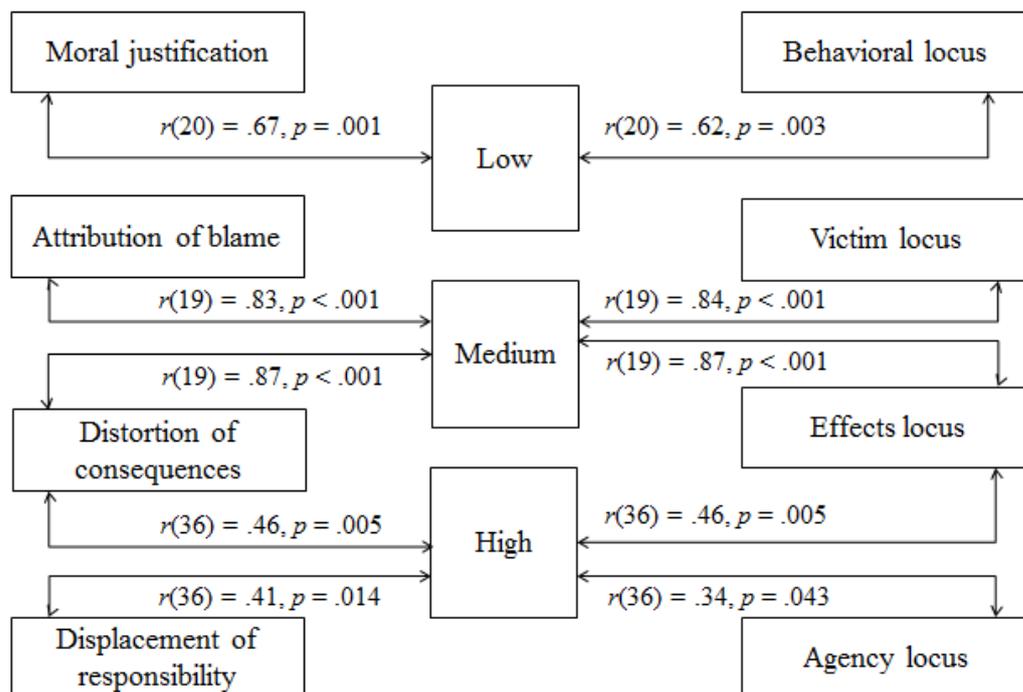
**Distribution of study participants depending on the types of deviant workplace behaviour**

Deviant workplace behaviour type	Deviant workplace behaviour level		Number of observations, <i>n</i>
	Level	Description	
Aimed at the members of the organisation	Low	once a year; never	20
	Medium	twice a year; several times a year; monthly	19
	High	weekly; daily	36
Aimed at the organisation	Low	once a year; never	20
	Medium	twice a year; several times a year; monthly; weekly	18
	High	daily	37

To determine which tests, parametric or nonparametric, to implement to study the relationships between variables, the distribution of empirical data was checked using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test with Lillifor’s correction. Since not all the distributions of the empirical variables corresponded to normal distribution, both the non-parametric Spearman’s correlation coefficient, as well as the parametric Pearson’s correlation coefficient were used to investigate to relationship between the variables.

*Correlation analysis*

As a result of the correlation analysis, statistically significant positive correlations (large and medium effect size) were revealed between the levels (low/medium/high) of deviant workplace behaviour (aimed at the members of the organisation and aimed at the organisation) and mechanisms/ loci of moral disengagement (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).



**Fig. 1. Correlations between the type of deviant workplace behavior, aimed at members of organization, and the mechanisms and loci of moral disengagement**

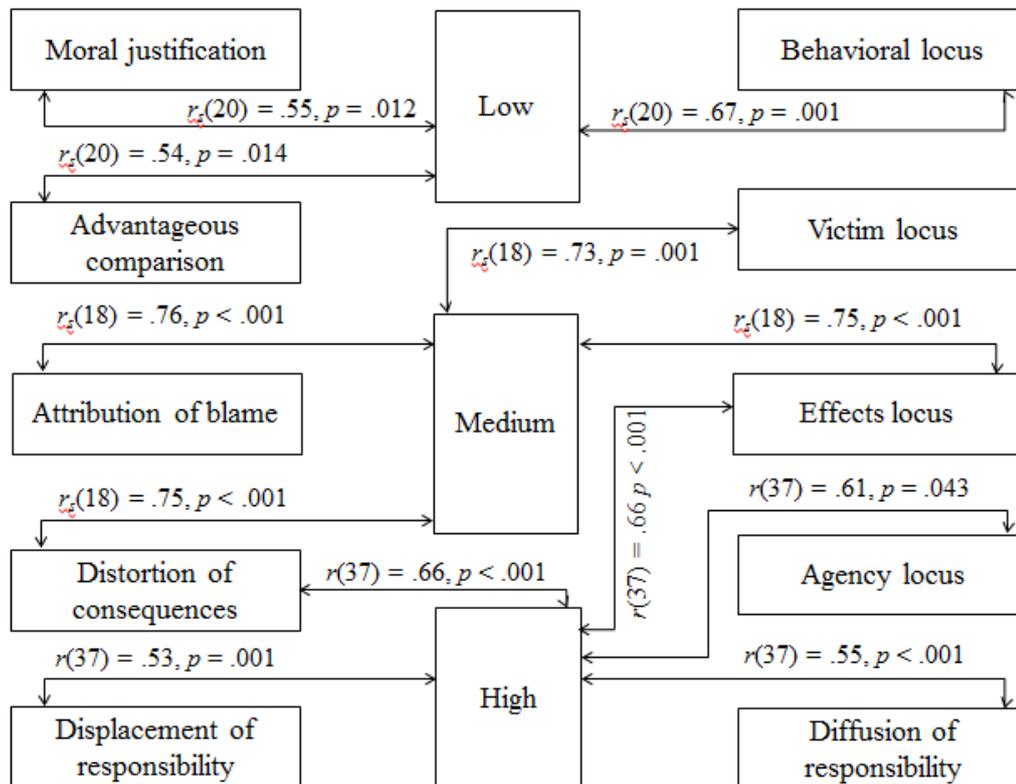


Fig. 2. Correlations between the type of deviant workplace behavior, aimed at organization, and the mechanisms and loci of moral disengagement

## Discussion

As a result of the study, a feature of the sample was revealed: there is the largest proportion of auto mechanics with a high level of deviant workplace behaviour aimed at members of the organization - 48%; and a high level of deviant workplace behaviour aimed at the organization - 49.3%. For this category of research participants, the most likely behaviour can be described as weekly and/or daily participation in conflicts, use of verbal aggression, accusations of colleagues and management, deception [7], as well as daily breaches of labour discipline, delaying repairs, work in the state of alcohol intoxication, being late for work and unauthorised absenteeism [7].

As a result of the study, a positive answer was received to the research question: "Whether there is a link between deviant workplace behaviour and moral disengagement among car service auto mechanics?" The obtained result corresponds to the concept explaining individual preferences in the use of the mechanisms of moral disengagement by individual characteristics and varying degrees of manifestation of moral identity [22].

As the result of the study, positive correlation (effect size large) between the low level of deviant workplace behaviour aimed at members of the organization and the moral disengagement mechanism *Moral justification* and *Behavioural locus of moral disengagement* were revealed. *Moral justification* allows avoiding feelings of guilt and excusing unethical behaviour by presenting it as acceptable and serving social or moral purposes [19]. The choice of this mechanism can be described as natural for auto mechanics that are not prone to conflicts with colleagues and management, gossip, accusations, and deception in the workplace. *Behavioural locus* of moral disengagement in general leads to redefinition of behaviour.

The study revealed positive correlation (effect size large) between the medium level of deviant workplace behaviour aimed at members of the organization and such mechanisms of moral disengagement as *Distortion of consequences* and *Attribution of blame*, as well as *Effects locus* and *Victim locus*. *Attribution of blame* allows shifting responsibility for unethical behaviour to the fellow car service employee or a customer who are the targets of such an action. An auto mechanic may accuse another of being provocative, or a client of improper operation of the car or of being too late in contacting

the car service. *Effects locus* contributes to the distortion of understanding the outcomes of unethical behaviour using the *Distortion of consequences* mechanism, misconstruing actions or underestimating the consequences of such a behaviour [19]. The choice of the above moral disengagement mechanisms by auto mechanics of this category is associated with the desire to relieve themselves of responsibility for their unethical behaviour in interpersonal communication.

The study revealed positive correlation between the high level of deviant workplace behaviour aimed at members of the organization and moral disengagement mechanism *Distortion of consequences*, *Effects locus* (large effect size), as well as the mechanism of moral disengagement *Displacement of responsibility* and *Agency locus* (medium effect size). The respondents of this group engage in daily/weekly conflicts using verbal aggression, accusing colleagues and management, resorting to a deception [7]. The choice of these mechanisms of moral disengagement allows to shift responsibility for unethical behaviour onto others, or a situation, or emotions, as well as distort the understanding of the outcomes of unethical behaviour [18-19], possibly strengthening an attitude that determines a negative or indifferent attitude towards other people.

For the low level of deviant workplace behaviour aimed at organisation, the study revealed positive correlations (large effect) with such moral disengagement mechanisms as *Moral justification* and *Advantageous comparison*, as well as the *Behavioural locus* of moral disengagement. Based on the descriptions of the mechanisms of moral responsibility [19], *Moral justification* and *Advantageous comparison* allow auto mechanics, in rare and exceptional situations for them (for example, being late for work or being late from a break, contamination of the car service territory), to justify destructive behaviour by actions that are significant for others or to compare their misdeeds with more destructive actions that harm the organisation. The *Behavioural locus* of moral disengagement allows alleviating guilt feeling for harming the organisation.

As the result of the study, positive correlations (large effect size) between the medium levels of deviant workplace behaviour aimed at organization and moral disengagement mechanisms *Distortion of consequences* and *Attribution of blame*, as well as *Effects locus* и *Victim locus* revealed. *Attribution of blame* and *Distortion of consequences* allow shifting responsibility for unethical workplace behaviour (the frequency of manifestations varies) to management, suppliers, colleagues, or to deliberately downplay and ignore the consequences of this unethical behaviour faced by the car service.

The study revealed positive correlations (effect size large) between the high level of deviant workplace behaviour aimed at organization and such mechanisms of moral disengagement as *Distortion of consequences*, *Displacement of responsibility* and *Diffusion of responsibility*, as well as *Effects locus* и *Agency locus*. In accordance with the theoretical explanation of the purpose of the moral disengagement loci [18-19], auto mechanics who regularly violate discipline, deliberately delay the execution of work, ignore the instructions of the management, work in the state of alcohol intoxication, use moral disengagement mechanisms that allow them to cover up their guilt (*Agency locus*) and explain the negative effects of their constant destructive workplace behaviour (*Effects locus*) faced by the car service. This is likely due to the risk of larger losses, if their unethical behaviour aimed at the organization is uncovered.

Certain limitations of this study were, on the one hand, the thorough focus only on identifying the links between the deviant workplace behaviour and moral disengagement, which was, however, in accordance with the purpose of the study. On the other hand, the obtained results can describe tendencies specific only for the sample being studied.

## Conclusions

1. Almost half of the study participants use deviant workplace behaviour aimed at the organization daily, and deviant workplace behaviour aimed at employees of the organization daily or weekly.
2. Among car mechanics, positive correlations of large size effect were revealed between all levels and types of deviant workplace behaviour and various mechanisms and loci of moral disengagement.
3. The mechanisms of moral disengagement among auto mechanics with high and medium levels of deviant workplace behaviour differ from the mechanisms of moral disengagement among auto mechanics with the low level of deviant workplace behaviour.

4. Auto mechanics not prone to deviant workplace behaviour use such moral disengagement mechanisms that allow them to rationalise their behaviour by justifying its acceptability and morality, probably to alleviate the guilt feeling for harming others as well as the car service.
5. Auto mechanics with recurrent deviant workplace behaviour use such moral disengagement mechanisms that make it possible to relieve themselves of responsibility for the consequences of their actions harmful to the car service and employees by shifting responsibility to the victims and distorting the effects of their destructive behaviour.
6. Auto mechanics with regular deviant workplace behaviour use such moral disengagement mechanisms that allow them to cover up their guilt and explain the negative consequences of their behaviour faced by the car service and employees by shifting responsibility to others and external circumstances, as well as distorting the effects of their destructive behaviour.
7. The study revealed that auto mechanics with regular deviant workplace behaviour aimed at organisation use more mechanisms of moral disengagement than auto mechanics with regular deviant workplace behaviour aimed at members of the organization.
8. To prevent destructive behaviour at the workplace of mechanics at car service centres, it is recommended to ensure favourable working conditions that allow to preserve the physical and psychological health of employees, ensure “transparent” remuneration system, introduce a system for monitoring the quality of work and a system for systematic improvement of professional competence, and develop a Professional Ethics Code in each service.
9. Further research can improve and empirically verify the obtained results, taking into account the noted limitations.

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