

**The Silent Scales of Workplace Justice:**

**When Cheating Is About Who, Not What**

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Workplace ethics can seem to be a game of chance, except for those who are older or come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, for whom the odds are consistently stacked

against them. Workplace cheating is a pervasive problem that affects organizations worldwide, undermining trust, productivity, and morale. While unethical behavior can manifest across all demographics, how it is addressed varies depending on an employee's age and socioeconomic status. Ageism, discrimination based on a person's age, and social class biases in organizational settings contribute significantly to unequal treatment, where older workers and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to face more intense scrutiny and more severe consequences compared to their younger and more affluent counterparts. This disparity not only undermines the fairness of workplace policies but also perpetuates broader societal inequalities.

Ageism and social class dynamics intensify workplace cheating, leading to older employees and those from disadvantaged backgrounds often facing harsher penalties for unethical behaviors. Alternatively, employees from higher socioeconomic status may receive more leniency or are rewarded for similar actions due to the entrenched biases surrounding age and class in organizational cultures. Biases distort ethical standards in the workplace, perpetuating systemic inequities, and raising critical questions about whether organizations are truly committed to fairness or if hidden forces are quietly shaping their policies and decisions.

Addressing these systemic biases requires more than acknowledgment; organizations must actively confront and dismantle the prejudices that shape the way employees are treated. By implementing policies that emphasize fair treatment, where workers are evaluated based on their actions and merits rather than demographic factors, companies can stimulate conditions that support equitability and diversity. Furthermore, fostering a culture of inclusion and fairness will not only improve employee morale but also contribute to the long-term success and reputation of the organization. Only through sustained, intentional efforts to address these inequalities can we hope to create a workplace environment where all employees, regardless of age or socioeconomic status, are given equal opportunities to thrive, contribute, and succeed.

### **The Role of Ageism in Workplace Cheating**

Ageism in the workplace is a well-documented phenomenon that manifests in a variety of ways, often to the detriment of older employees. These individuals are frequently subjected to damaging stereotypes that make them seen as less adaptable, technologically behind, or resistant to change. Such assumptions diminish how their contributions are valued and shape the perception of their professional conduct. These biases become particularly evident when older workers are implicated in unethical behavior, such as workplace cheating. Rather than assessing their actions with objectivity, organizations tend to interpret their misconduct; viewing it as a symptom of deteriorating judgment or outdated moral reasoning.

A study by Smith et al. (2002) reinforces this pattern, revealing that older employees are more likely to be perceived as liable for unethical conduct, regardless of context. The research shows that demographic factors, such as age, strongly influence perceptions of cheating behavior, often leading to harsher punitive responses. For example, two employees might engage in the same minor ethical violation, such as inflating performance metrics or taking credit for another's idea. However, while the younger worker might be seen as making an understandable mistake or demonstrating initiative, the older worker is more likely to be viewed as deceptive or untrustworthy. This discrepancy in perception highlights how deeply ingrained ageist assumptions can distort organizational responses to misconduct.

Moreover, the findings by Smith et al. suggest that these age-based biases are not only common but also systematically reinforced through managerial decision-making and peer perceptions. This creates a workplace environment where older employees are not judged more harshly for the same actions, but also preemptively distrusted. As a result, they may face more severe consequences such as formal reprimands, demotion, or termination, while younger

employees might receive coaching or second chances. This uneven treatment underscores how ageism contributes to the erosion of fairness in ethical oversight and creates a culture in which older employees are seen as liabilities rather than assets.

Additionally, older workers often find themselves wrongfully scapegoated for organizational failures, as biases lead to perceptions that marginalize their contributions. In environments where youth is prized, older workers are seen as dispensable or less vital to the organization's future success. Their transgressions are more likely to be treated as evidence of their declining competence rather than as isolated lapses in judgment. This bias results in disproportionately severe consequences, such as termination or public censure, which can have long-lasting effects on their careers. Furthermore, research by Ameen et al. (1996) found older workers are perceived as more likely to engage in unethical behavior simply due to their age, despite there being no solid basis for such assumptions.

Ye, Wu, Kwan, and Liu (2024) highlight the broader impact of workplace cheating behavior, showing how unethical conduct can lead to coworker disliking and eventual ostracism: the social exclusion or deliberate ignoring of the individual by their peers, which can result in isolation and a loss of professional support within the organization. As seen in Figure 1 below, workplace cheating behavior contributes to negative interpersonal dynamics, exacerbating workplace tensions. Moreover, the influence of team ethical leadership plays a crucial role in shaping how such behavior is perceived and managed, further reinforcing the disparities in how employees are judged based on age and class.

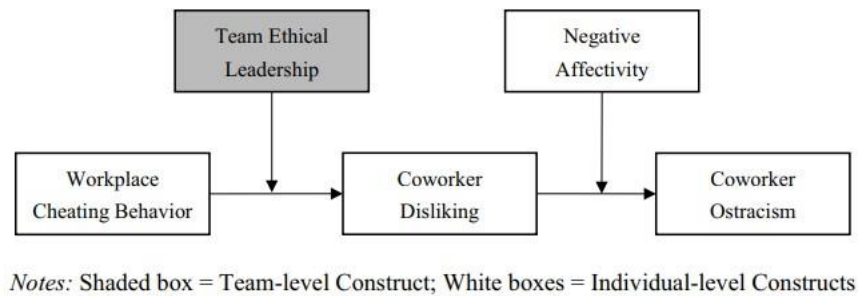


Figure 1: Process of How Unethical Conduct Can Lead to Ostracism (Ye, Liu, 2024, p. 3)

Furthermore, the increased scrutiny of older workers, in combination with their diminished prospects for career advancement, exacerbates feelings of alienation. These employees may feel that any mistake, even a minor ethical lapse, could be used to justify their dismissal. This heightened sense of vulnerability fosters an environment in which older workers may be more reluctant to report unethical behavior from others, fearing that they will be held to a higher standard of accountability than their younger counterparts. Smith et al. highlights this issue, noting that "older individuals were more likely to experience negative consequences when accused of misconduct," (2002, p.45) even in the absence of concrete evidence. This finding illustrates how age-related biases can lead to disproportionately harsh penalties for older employees, reinforcing a culture of scrutiny and inequity in workplace ethical decisions.

### **Social Class Biases and Their Impact on Workplace Ethics**

Social class dynamics play an equally significant role in shaping how workplace cheating is addressed. Employees from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face implicit biases that influence their treatment within organizational structures. These biases can manifest as assumptions about the worker's competence, trustworthiness, or work ethic. When these

employees engage in unethical behavior, the reaction from management and colleagues is influenced by these preconceived notions, resulting in harsher penalties (Roney, 2005).

Workers from lower socioeconomic strata are frequently perceived as prone to misconduct, attributing it to a lack of education or refinement, regardless of their actual actions. These workers are expected to adhere to higher ethical standards than their wealthier colleagues, and when they fall short, their actions are seen as further evidence of their unfitness for the workplace. This has been supported by various studies, such as those by Guliyeva and Susmus (2023), which found professionals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to be perceived as committing fraud due to class-based stereotypes.

In contrast, employees from higher social classes benefit from more favorable treatment. This group is frequently perceived as having more to lose and, therefore, more invested in preserving their reputations. Their mistakes may be interpreted as anomalies or attributed to factors beyond their control, such as stress or miscommunication (Mitchell et al., 2018). Additionally, employees from wealthier backgrounds have access to networks of influence within the organization, which can mitigate the consequences of their unethical actions. Consequently, their workplace transgressions may go unpunished, or they may receive more lenient consequences, further entrenching the disparity between different socioeconomic groups.

## The Intersection of Ageism and Social Class in the Treatment of Workplace Cheating

The intersection of ageism and social class biases creates a toxic environment in which the treatment of unethical behavior is heavily influenced by an employee's demographic profile. The dual impact of being both older and from a lower socioeconomic background intensifies the scrutiny and penalties faced by these workers. This convergence of age and class biases can lead to a more pronounced sense of vulnerability for older, lower-class employees, who may feel doubly marginalized within the workplace (Ye et al., 2024).

Further evidence of these disparities is presented in Figure 2, which illustrates how job insecurity interacts with job immobility to influence impression management motives (Ye,

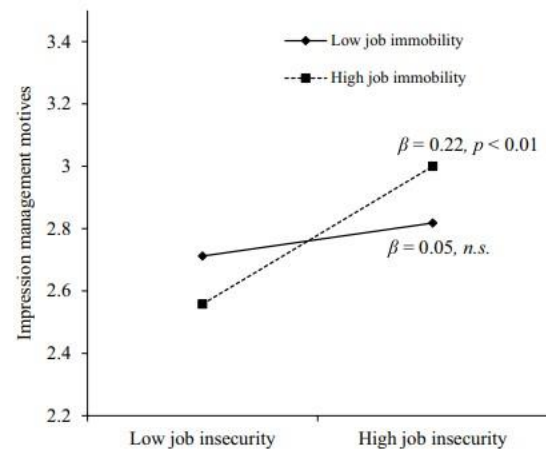


Figure 2: Job Insecurity & Job Immobility Interactions  
Liu, Wu, Cheng, & Kwan, 2024). The study

(Ye, Wu, 2024, p. 6)

finds that employees experiencing high job insecurity and high job immobility are more likely to engage in impression management strategies to safeguard their positions, taking actions aimed at maintaining their job security and professional reputation within the organization. This reflects the unequal burden placed on those with fewer resources and opportunities.

For instance, a worker who is both older and from a lower socioeconomic background may be more likely to be perceived as a liability when accused of unethical behavior. These workers are judged not only for their actions but also for their perceived lack of potential or social capital. In contrast, a younger employee from a more affluent background is less likely to face such judgment, even if their actions are similar. This discrepancy reinforces the idea that youth and affluence are inherently linked to competence and potential, while older age and lower

social class are associated with incompetence or moral failings. As noted by Allmon et al. (2000), age and class-based perceptions are not only pervasive but also have profound effects on how workplace behavior is interpreted and punished.

This inequitable system fosters double standards that ultimately compromise organizational integrity. Employees who fall within the most marginalized demographic groups, older individuals and those from lower social classes, are disproportionately penalized for their unethical behavior, while those who are younger or wealthier may escape serious consequences. This perpetuates a cycle of discrimination, where the treatment of ethical violations is not based on the merits of the action itself, but rather on the perceived value of the individual within the organization (Mitchell et al., 2018).

### **The Impact on Organizational Culture and Morale**

Such inequitable treatment significantly undermines organizational culture. Perceptions of preferential standards for certain demographics can harm workplace morale. Employees may begin to question the fairness of organizational policies and the integrity of their leaders, leading to diminished trust and a lack of confidence in the fairness of the workplace (Smith et al., 2002).

Furthermore, findings from Smith et al. indicate that age biases are prevalent and are often reinforced through managerial decisions and peer perceptions. If employees believe their actions will be judged because of their age or socioeconomic status, they may hesitate to speak about workplace misconduct. This can lead to a culture of silence, where unethical behavior goes unchallenged and becomes normalized. According to Pringle (2025), the normalization of cheating in the workplace is particularly problematic, as it sets a precedent for new hires and future generations of workers, perpetuating a culture of dishonesty across the organization.



On a broader scale, these biases can lead to a high turnover rate, especially among older and lower-class employees who believe they are not provided with fair opportunities to succeed or that they are unfairly penalized for mistakes. This turnover can be costly for organizations, resulting in the loss of experienced workers, while the costs of hiring and training replacements can strain resources. As Guliyeva and Susmus (2023) emphasize, organizations that neglect to address these issues are likely to experience not only higher attrition rates but also a decline in employee engagement. Their study highlights that the failure to create an inclusive and equitable work environment fosters disengagement, as employees who perceive unfair treatment may feel less motivated to contribute fully to the organization's goals, further exacerbating the negative impact of turnover.

### **Conclusion**

The pervasive influence of ageism and social class biases in the treatment of workplace cheating results in a highly inequitable and unjust environment. Older workers and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face harsher consequences for unethical behavior compared to their younger or more affluent colleagues, who may be afforded leniency or rewarded for similar actions. This disparity not only undermines fairness and justice within organizations but also reinforces broader societal inequalities, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination that affects both individual careers and organizational integrity.

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