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Administrative Power, Promotion Motivation, and Ethical Deviation in Indian State Universities: A Psychological Analysis with Reference to Bihar

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Abstract

Public universities are expected to uphold ethical governance and institutional accountability, yet the convergence of administrative power and promotion ambition systematically generates ethical deviation. Drawing on three major theoretical frameworks — Keltner et al.'s power-approach model, Bandura's moral disengagement theory, and Ashforth and Anand's normalization-of-corruption thesis this study proposes a four-stage conceptual model situated within the context of Bihar's public universities. The model demonstrates how structural power, promotion-oriented instrumentalism, and weak accountability mechanisms may contribute to the normalization of ethically problematic organizational practices. The available literature indicates limited psychologically grounded research examining administrative ethics within Bihar's university system. This study therefore addresses a significant lacuna in both Indian higher education research and the organizational psychology literature as applied to regional institutional contexts, representing one of the few psychologically grounded analyses in this domain.

Keywords: administrative power, promotion motivation, moral disengagement, higher education governance.

Introduction

Universities occupy a distinctive position in modern society simultaneously charged with knowledge production and the upholding of values like equity, accountability, and transparency (Altbach,

2015). In the Indian context, public universities operate within complex administrative hierarchies whose governance carries significant implications not only for institutional effectiveness but also for the ethical cultures that shape the professional and academic lives of faculty members, staff, and students. Bihar's public university system serving one of India's most populous and historically underserved states presents a particularly important setting for examining the intersection of institutional power structures and individual behavioral psychology. While the analysis is contextually grounded in Bihar's public university system, the study addresses broader organizational and governance dynamics relevant to Indian public higher education.

Bihar's universities carry a history shaped by post-independence expansion drives, persistent resource constraints, and more recent pressures from national accreditation bodies like NAAC and the University Grants Commission (UGC). These structural conditions have historically produced an administrative environment in which decision-making authority is concentrated in a limited number of institutional offices. The administrative apparatus comprising Vice Chancellors, Registrars, Deans, Heads of Departments, and various committee structures wields substantial discretionary authority over resource allocation, faculty appointments, academic scheduling, internal transfers, and promotion decisions. Such concentrations of administrative discretion create conditions in which informal influence and interpersonal networks play a significant role in shaping institutional outcomes. Organizational psychologists have long recognized that the possession of power alters cognitive processes, risk perception, and moral reasoning (Keltner et al., 2003). When administrative authority combines with promotion-oriented ambitions where career advancement depends substantially on cultivating patronage networks the conditions for ethical compromise become structurally embedded rather than individually exceptional (Bandura, 1999; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006).

Recent scholarship has begun documenting some of these dynamics in Indian higher education. Notably, Kumar et al. (2025) examined how performance motivation and moral disengagement interact to shape unethical behavior among students in Indian higher education institutions. However, this and related studies have focused primarily on student-level behavior rather than on administrative ethics. No prior psychologically grounded study, to the best of available evidence, has examined the dynamics of administrative power, promotion motivation, and ethical deviation among university administrators in Bihar or in comparable regional Indian public university systems.

The present study addresses this documented gap. It undertakes a psychological analysis of the relationship between administrative power, promotion motivation, and ethical deviation in Bihar's public universities, adopting an analytical qualitative design that integrates established organizational psychology theory with observational data derived from the lead author's sustained institutional engagement. The study aims to: (a) identify the psychological mechanisms through which administrative power facilitates moral disengagement; (b) examine the role of promotion aspiration in shaping ethical behavior at the administrative level; (c) propose an integrated four-stage conceptual model; and (d) recommend governance reforms responsive to the psychological dynamics documented. Crucially, this study does not treat ethical deviation as a product of individual moral failure but situates it within structural, psychological, and cultural processes that operate systematically within hierarchical organizations a perspective increasingly recognized as essential for understanding organizational ethics (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Moore, 2008).

Review of Literature

Power, Cognition, and Behavioral Change

Keltner et al.'s (2003) foundational theoretical model posits that power activates an 'approach system' a motivational orientation characterized by increased sensitivity to reward, reduced attention to social constraints, and a tendency toward decisive, goal-directed action. Low-power states, conversely, activate an 'inhibition system' characterized by heightened awareness of social risks and threats. Em-

pirical research has documented multiple behavioral consequences of this dynamic in organizational settings: powerful individuals exhibit greater cognitive abstraction, reduced perspective-taking capacity, and self-interested decision-making that systematically under-weights the interests lower-power others (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003).

Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky (2010) further demonstrated that power increases both actual hypocrisy applying stricter moral standards to others than to oneself and the tendency to engage in rule violations. In Bihar's public universities, where administrative positions are often held for extended periods and formal accountability mechanisms may be weakly enforced, the behavioral consequences of sustained power possession are particularly consequential. Gruenfeld et al. (2008) suggest that habituated power effects may be more behaviorally significant than newly acquired ones, precisely because they operate below the threshold of explicit moral awareness. Administrators who have exercised extensive discretionary authority over extended tenures may develop behavioral patterns in which formally correct procedural compliance and substantively equitable outcomes systematically diverge a divergence that may not be subjectively experienced as ethical violation.

Moral Disengagement: Theory and Mechanisms

Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement provides the most comprehensive framework available for understanding how individuals who are not dispositionally unethical come to engage in ethically compromised behavior. The theory identifies eight cognitive mechanisms through which individuals selectively disengage their moral self-regulatory processes: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, dehumanization, attribution of blame, and distortion of consequences.

In university administrative contexts, these mechanisms take characteristic and contextually specific forms. Moral justification appears when an administrator rationalizes procedural irregularity as 'maintaining institutional stability' or 'ensuring the appointment of the most suitable candidate.' Displacement of responsibility manifests through appeals to superior directives or systemic constraints beyond one's control. Diffusion of responsibility is structurally facilitated by the committee-based decision-making structure of university governance, where shared accountability effectively neutralizes individual moral responsibility. Moore (2008) validated these mechanisms across organizational contexts, demonstrating their predictive validity for a range of unethical organizational behaviors. Detert, Treviño, and Sweitzer (2008) further showed that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between situational pressures and unethical conduct, confirming its role as a key psychological linking mechanism rather than merely a post-hoc rationalization.

Recent research by Kumar et al. (2025), studying 288 students from Indian higher education institutions, demonstrated that performance motivation is positively associated with moral disengagement, which in turn facilitates knowledge-hiding behavior. While this study focuses on student-level dynamics, it provides important confirmation that moral disengagement operates as an active mediating mechanism within Indian academic institutional environments — lending empirical credibility to the present study's application of the same framework at the administrative level.

Normalization of Organizational Deviance

Ashforth and Anand (2003) proposed that organizational corruption emerges not through dramatic moral ruptures but through processes of gradual normalization involving three interconnected dynamics: institutionalization (embedding irregular practices within standard organizational routines), rationalization (developing shared justificatory narratives), and socialization (transmitting normalized deviance to new organizational members through modeling and informal cultural education). Vaughan's (1999) concept of the 'normalization of deviance' further argues that organizations systematically develop cultural logics that incrementally redefine risk and deviance as within acceptable bounds. Each small violation renders the next slightly easier, producing organizational cultures in which significant

ethical deviation is structurally enabled despite the nominally strong ethical commitments of individual members.

Brief, Buttram, and Dukerich (2001) demonstrated that institutional factors including leadership behavior, organizational climate, and normative signals from authority figures substantially shape individual ethical decision-making, often more powerfully than individual moral dispositions. When administrative leaders model or tacitly endorse ethically questionable practices, subordinates receive powerful implicit messages about acceptable conduct regardless of formal policy statements. In the context of Bihar's public universities, the normalization of certain administrative irregularities informal adjustments to recruitment criteria, selective application of procedural rules may reflect precisely this kind of structural normalization, operating through the same mechanisms Ashforth and Anand identify.

New Managerialism, Career Motivation, and Ethical Risk

Deem and Brehony (2005) analyzed the emergence of 'new managerialism' in higher education, noting that importing business management principles into university administration may generate perverse incentives: prioritizing measurable outputs over quality, and individual career advancement over collective institutional mission. In the Indian context, increasing pressure from NAAC accreditation processes, UGC performance mandates, and competitive funding environments has introduced managerial pressures that create dual accountability demands for administrators to formal institutional rules on one hand, and to the performance metrics and political relationships that actually determine career outcomes on the other.

Treviño et al. (2006) documented that individuals in ethically complex organizational situations develop increasingly sophisticated techniques for managing the tension between ethical commitments and instrumental pressures including cognitive reframing, selective compartmentalization, and incremental boundary expansion. Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) termed this process 'ethical fading': the gradual disappearance of the ethical dimension from decisions as they become routine, removing ethically questionable behaviors from the domain of conscious moral deliberation. This concept is particularly significant in Bihar's public university administrative context, where practices that initially required conscious ethical compromise can, over time, become so thoroughly routinized that they are experienced as simply the normal way of conducting institutional business.

The Research Gap

The existing literature on organizational ethics in higher education, while theoretically rich, exhibits a significant regional limitation: the vast majority of empirical work has been conducted in Western institutional contexts, and the limited Indian scholarship that exists has focused predominantly on student-level behavioral dynamics (Kumar et al., 2025). The available literature indicates limited psychologically grounded research examining the psychological dynamics of administrative power, promotion motivation, and organizational ethics among university administrators in Bihar. This gap is particularly significant given Bihar's distinctive institutional context: a state university system operating under conditions of resource scarcity, strong hierarchical traditions, political entanglement in administrative appointments, and an accountability environment that is formally robust but practically constrained. Addressing this gap is not merely an academic exercise it has direct practical implications for the governance reform agenda shaping higher education policy across India.

Institutional Context: Bihar's Public University System

Administrative Structure and Power Distribution

Bihar's public universities are governed by multi-tiered administrative hierarchies established by state university acts and governed by statutory bodies including the Senate, Syndicate, and Academic Council. The Vice Chancellor, typically appointed by the Governor in the capacity of Chancellor, exer-

cises broad executive authority. The Registrar oversees day-to-day administration, while Deans, Heads of Departments, Finance Officers, Controllers of Examinations, and Directors of Research exercise domain-specific discretionary authority, creating numerous nodes of power whose exercise may or may not be subject to meaningful external review.

In practice, the actual operation of authority within this formal structure is substantially shaped by informal hierarchies and relationships. The personal connections between administrative officers, faculty members, and political actors frequently determine whose interests are prioritized in discretionary decisions, irrespective of formal procedural requirements. The close entanglement of university administration with state political dynamics may sometimes influence appointments to senior administrative positions, creating contexts in which political alignment may become strategically significant alongside professional competence. This generates a structural condition in which ethical constraints are selectively applied: strictly in domains where political oversight is strong, and loosely in domains that remain below the threshold of political scrutiny.

Promotion Dynamics and Accountability Mechanisms

Faculty career progression is formally governed by UGC regulations and state service rules specifying minimum eligibility criteria for appointment and promotion through the Career Advancement Scheme (CAS). However, the administrative implementation of these formally specified processes involves substantial discretionary space. Selection committees exercise judgment about qualification equivalence, publication quality, and experience interpretation. Administrative officers play key roles in constituting these committees, preparing documentation, scheduling proceedings, and implementing decisions meaning that proximity to administrative power centers can become a practically significant determinant of promotion outcomes, regardless of formal regulatory requirements.

Formal accountability mechanisms — internal audit functions, Right to Information (RTI) provisions, legislative oversight, and NAAC accreditation processes — are formally substantial but practically constrained. Internal audit functions are typically under-resourced and may lack independence from the administrative leadership they nominally review. RTI provisions require time, resources, and willingness to be identified as a complainant — practical barriers that are particularly significant for junior faculty who fear career consequences. NAAC accreditation processes are periodic and rely substantially on institutional self-reporting. The cumulative effect is an accountability environment that is formally robust but practically weak in the domains most relevant to the behavioral patterns this study examines — creating precisely the conditions that organizational psychology would predict to increase the incidence of ethical deviation.

Method

This study employs an analytical qualitative research design that integrates theoretical framework analysis with contextual institutional observation. This design brings established theoretical frameworks into productive dialogue with contextual observational data to generate interpretive insights and testable propositions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It is appropriate for the study's dual objectives of theoretical synthesis and contextual interpretation, and is well suited to producing theory-grounded institutional analysis that can inform governance reform in contexts where large-scale quantitative data collection remains difficult. This study is conceptual-analytical in nature and does not claim empirical generalization but aims to generate theoretically grounded propositions for future empirical testing.

The study draws on three primary data sources: (a) a systematic review of organizational psychology literature on power, moral disengagement, and organizational deviance, supplemented by literature on higher education governance in India; (b) policy documents including UGC governance guidelines, state university acts, and NAAC accreditation frameworks relevant to Bihar's public university system; and (c) qualitative observational data drawn from the lead author's sustained professional engagement with Bihar's public university system, spanning approximately nine years and encompassing adminis-

trative processes, committee functions, promotion procedures, and institutional decision-making.

The lead author's insider position represents both a significant methodological resource and a potential source of analytical bias. As a researcher embedded within the system under examination, the author has access to nuanced contextual knowledge — including informal norms, unspoken organizational logics, and behavioral patterns inaccessible to purely external observers — that substantially enriches the analysis. The study addresses the risks of insider bias through several methodological safeguards: the analytical framework is grounded in established international organizational psychology theory; observational data is used to illustrate and contextualize theoretical propositions rather than generate novel empirical claims; interpretive judgments are explicitly anchored in cited theoretical frameworks; and the study maintains a consistent systemic orientation, analyzing behavioral patterns as organizational and psychological phenomena rather than attributing them to named individuals or specific administrative units.

Administrative Power and Authority Bias

Authority bias — the tendency of individuals within organizations to defer to the judgments and preferences of those occupying higher positions — is a well-documented feature of hierarchical institutions (Galinsky et al., 2003). In strongly hierarchical institutional environments, this bias functions both as a cognitive shortcut and as a strategic adaptation: individuals defer to authority not only because they believe authority figures are more likely to be correct, but because challenging authority carries significant and calculable career risks. In Bihar's public universities, junior faculty and administrative staff who observe procedural irregularities or ethically questionable decisions often face a stark cost-benefit dilemma. The potential personal costs of raising concerns reputational damage, career disadvantage, or social sanctions associated with being perceived as a troublemaker frequently exceed the perceived institutional benefits. Such dynamics are particularly visible in decisions involving faculty promotion, guest faculty appointments, committee nominations, and internal administrative allocations. The result is a condition of organizational silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000) a systematic suppression of internal critical feedback that deprives administrative decision-makers of accurate information about the consequences of their decisions, insulates them from accountability, and gradually erodes the cultural norms that would otherwise constrain ethically problematic behavior. Organizational silence is self-reinforcing: as it becomes established that raising concerns is personally costly and institutionally ineffective, fewer concerns are raised, which further entrenches the silence and reduces the likelihood of effective accountability.

These dynamics may be further reinforced by what may be described as power habituation: the gradual erosion of ethical vigilance through sustained authority possession. Gruenfeld et al. (2008) demonstrated that the behavioral effects of sustained power may be more significant than those associated with newly acquired authority, precisely because they operate below the threshold of explicit moral awareness. Administrators who have held significant discretionary authority over extended periods may develop patterns of decision-making in which formally correct procedural compliance and substantively equitable outcomes systematically diverge — a divergence that is not subjectively experienced as ethical violation because the behavioral and cognitive effects of sustained power have normalized it. The approach-inhibition model (Keltner et al., 2003) predicts precisely this reduction in moral sensitivity as a consequence of sustained power possession, and Bihar's institutional conditions create a structural environment in which these dynamics may become particularly pronounced. Junior colleagues, meanwhile, learn quickly that what matters is not procedural regularity but relationship maintenance a lesson that, once learned, shapes their own behavior when they eventually occupy positions of administrative authority.

Promotion Motivation and Instrumental Behavior

Career advancement represents one of the most powerful motivational forces in professional orga-

nizations, and universities are no exception. In Bihar's public universities, where faculty and administrative positions carry significant social status, economic security, and community standing, promotion aspirations exert substantial influence over organizational behavior. When career advancement becomes the dominant organizational logic the primary framework through which individuals interpret their professional situations and guide their strategic behavior characteristic behavioral consequences follow: heightened attentiveness to evaluative cues from authority figures, intensified impression management, increased willingness to subordinate personal values to perceived organizational expectations, and greater behavioral flexibility in ethical domains (Treviño et al., 2006). This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in organizational behavior literature in which performance evaluation systems indirectly shape ethical decision-making processes.

Instrumental behavior refers to the use of organizational roles, relationships, and resources as means of career advancement rather than in service of the institutional mandates those roles are intended to fulfill. In the administrative structures of Bihar's public universities, this manifests principally through upward management: the strategic cultivation of relationships with those above oneself in the organizational hierarchy, whose preferences and decisions substantially determine career outcomes. Administrators may exercise their discretionary authority in ways that benefit senior figures' interests or preferred associates, even where this conflicts with procedural requirements or equitable treatment of others. They may selectively deploy institutional resources information, access to decision-makers, administrative facilitation of processes in ways that advance the interests of those whose support they cultivate. They may actively suppress internal dissent that might displease senior administrators, thereby contributing to the organizational silence described in the previous section.

Tenbrunsel and Messick's (2004) concept of ethical fading is particularly significant in this context. Administrators who begin their careers with strong commitments to procedural fairness may gradually accommodate small deviations that individually seem minor but cumulatively establish a pattern of ethical flexibility available for more significant deviations. Once routinized, these compromised behaviors lose their subjective character as ethical choices and come to be experienced as simply 'how things work here,' operating below the level of conscious moral deliberation. This represents a particularly insidious form of moral disengagement because it is structurally produced rather than individually chosen it is the organizational environment, not individual character, that primarily determines when and how ethical fading occurs.

An Integrated Conceptual Model

Model Description

Drawing on the theoretical review and institutional analysis presented above, the study proposes an integrated four-stage causal conceptual model of ethical deviation in public university administration. The model posits that administrative power, operating through specific psychological mechanisms, creates conditions for promotion-motivated instrumental behavior, thereby activating moral disengagement processes that may contribute to ethically problematic organizational conduct.

Administrative Power → Promotion Motivation → Moral Disengagement → Ethical Deviation

Stage 1— Administrative Power: Structural administrative authority, exercised within weakly accountable institutional environments, activates approach-system dominance (Keltner et al., 2003), reduces moral sensitivity through sustained power habituation (Gruenfeld et al., 2008), and generates organizational silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000) that insulates power-holders from critical feedback. These power effects are amplified when administrative authority is concentrated, when tenures in powerful positions are extended, and when cultural norms normalize hierarchical deference and suppress upward dissent.

Stage 2 — Promotion Motivation: Career advancement aspirations, operating within institutional environments where advancement is substantially determined by political relationships and patronage

networks rather than purely meritocratic criteria, generate instrumental behavioral orientations. Administrators develop managing-upward strategies, loyalty network participation, and strategic resource deployment that prioritize career advancement over institutional mandate fulfillment. The interaction of power and promotion motivation intensifies ethical risk: powerful actors whose continued power is contingent on patronage network participation face particularly strong and structurally embedded instrumentalizing pressures.

Stage 3— Moral Disengagement: The conjunction of approach-system activation, reduced moral sensitivity through power habituation, and promotion-driven instrumental pressure creates conditions highly conducive to moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). Domain-specific mechanisms — institutional moral justification, organizational displacement of responsibility, committee-facilitated diffusion of accountability, and collective cultural rationalization — operate to selectively suspend ethical self-regulatory processes in the domains most relevant to career advancement and institutional power maintenance. Ethical fading (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004) further removes routinized compromised behavior from the domain of conscious moral deliberation, normalizing deviation at the cognitive level.

Stage 4— Ethical Deviation: Outcomes include procedurally irregular promotion and appointment decisions; selective application of institutional rules to advantage preferred individuals; resource allocation serving patronage rather than institutional interests; suppression of legitimate internal dissent; and distortion of academic and administrative processes to serve power-maintenance goals. Crucially, these behaviors may not be subjectively experienced as ethical violations — moral disengagement has functionally removed their ethical character from the actor's self-perception, making them resistant to the kind of individual-level moral appeals that governance reform often relies upon.

Moderating Factors

Several factors moderate the relationships between the model's constituent stages. Accountability mechanism strength is a primary moderator: robust external oversight, meaningful whistleblower protections, and active internal audit functions reduce the behavioral consequences of approach-system activation by maintaining the subjective expectation of sanction. Institutional culture is a second key moderator: organizations that model ethical leadership at senior administrative levels, maintain strong norms of collegial governance, and actively protect those who raise concerns increase the cognitive effort required for moral disengagement, making it less likely. Individual difference variables — including moral identity, ethical ideology, and dispositional sensitivity to injustice — modify but do not override the primarily structural dynamic. The practical implication is that effective governance interventions must target structural and cultural features rather than relying primarily on the recruitment of dispositionally ethical individuals into administrative roles, important though that consideration remains.

Discussion

Structural Determinants of Administrative Ethics

The analysis presented in this study suggests that administrative ethics in Bihar's public universities cannot be adequately understood through a lens that treats ethical deviation as primarily the product of individual moral failure. The psychological mechanisms documented in the organizational psychology literature operate systematically and predictably in response to structural conditions: concentrated power, weak accountability, promotion-oriented instrumentalism, and normalized deviance collectively generate conditions in which ethical compromise becomes structurally enabled and morally rationalized. This structural perspective carries important practical implications. Governance reforms focused primarily on creating stronger penalties for identified ethical violations — treating ethics as a compliance problem are likely to have limited impact in environments where the probability of detection and sanction is itself structurally constrained.

The institutional culture of Bihar's public universities plays a mediating role between structural

features and behavioral outcomes. Cultural norms that treat hierarchical deference as paramount, interpret procedural regularity as secondary to relationship-based accommodation, and sanction critical feedback as disloyalty amplify the behavioral consequences of structural power concentrations and accountability weaknesses. Culture change in universities is notoriously difficult because academic institutional cultures are strongly self-reproducing — transmitted through socialization processes that begin with graduate education and continue through career-long professional development. Nevertheless, leadership behavior at senior administrative levels has documented effects on cultural norms (Schein, 2010), suggesting that changes in how administrative positions are filled, how administrators are developed, and how leadership behavior is evaluated could create meaningful cultural leverage over time.

Extending the Moral Disengagement Literature to Administrative Contexts

This study makes a specific contribution to the moral disengagement literature by demonstrating the applicability of Bandura's (1999) framework to the administrative governance context of Indian public universities. While prior work, including the important contribution of Kumar et al. (2025) in the Indian higher education context, has examined moral disengagement primarily among students, the present analysis demonstrates how the same cognitive mechanisms operate at the administrative level — shaped by the distinctive pressures of bureaucratic authority, hierarchical accountability relationships, and promotion-driven instrumentalism. The finding that moral disengagement at the administrative level is structurally produced rather than merely dispositionally determined extends the framework's implications for institutional design: effective intervention requires engineering structural conditions that make moral disengagement cognitively effortful rather than relying on appeals to individual ethical commitment.

Implications for UGC Policy and Institutional Governance

The University Grants Commission's guidelines on good governance and ethical practices provide an important normative framework, but their practical impact is constrained by implementation mechanisms that rely predominantly on periodic self-reporting by the institutions under review. The present analysis suggests several directions for regulatory strengthening: mandatory external peer review of administrative processes including promotion and appointment procedures; meaningful whistleblower protection mechanisms with confidential reporting channels and explicit anti-retaliation provisions backed by monitoring and enforcement capacity; and institutional integrity assessment frameworks that evaluate actual behavioral patterns rather than purely formal procedural compliance.

At the institutional level, participatory governance mechanisms faculty senates with genuine decision-making authority, transparent committee constitutions with external membership, and systematic rotation of administrative roles would reduce the structural concentration of discretionary power that the model identifies as a primary driver of ethical deviation. Professional development programs for administrative personnel that explicitly address the psychological dynamics documented in this study — power effects on cognition, moral disengagement mechanisms, and ethical fading would increase administrators' capacity for reflective ethical practice in high-pressure career environments.

Limitations and Future Research

This study carries important limitations. As an analytical qualitative study, it does not provide the systematic empirical evidence that would be available from large-scale survey research or longitudinal behavioral data collection. A key limitation of the study is the absence of primary empirical data, as the analysis is based on theoretical integration and contextual observational insights rather than systematic field-based data collection. The observational component reflects the perspective of a single embedded observer whose position inevitably shapes what is visible and how it is interpreted. The study does not claim to represent the full diversity of institutional cultures and administrative practices across Bihar's

many public universities — systematic variation across institutions in leadership quality, institutional history, disciplinary composition, and specific accountability mechanisms creates contextual heterogeneity that this study's design cannot fully capture.

Future research should employ multi-method designs that triangulate across qualitative, quantitative, and documentary data sources. Longitudinal examination of the relationship between administrative tenure duration and ethical boundary expansion, survey-based measurement of moral disengagement among university administrators in Bihar and comparable Indian states, and experimental investigation of accountability mechanism designs would all substantially advance the research agenda that this study opens. Comparative institutional analysis examining how Bihar's public university administrative culture compares with universities in other Indian states and international comparators would further contextualize and refine the conceptual model proposed here.

Conclusion

This study has undertaken what is, to the best of the authors' knowledge, one of the first systematic psychological analyses of the relationship between administrative power, promotion motivation, and ethical deviation in Bihar's public universities. By developing an integrated four-stage conceptual model and situating it within the specific institutional context of Bihar's public university system, the study addresses a significant and previously underexplored gap in both Indian higher education research and the organizational psychology literature applied to regional institutional contexts.

The core argument is that when administrative authority is concentrated, accountability mechanisms are weak, and career advancement is substantially determined by political relationships rather than meritocratic criteria, the conditions for approach-system dominance, moral disengagement, and normalized ethical deviation are structurally created. These conditions operate through well-documented psychological mechanisms that function independently of — and often despite — the individual moral commitments of those they affect. Moral disengagement, as documented both in classic organizational psychology literature and in more recent Indian higher education research (Kumar et al., 2025), operates as the key psychological linking mechanism through which structural pressures translate into individual ethical deviation.

Addressing these dynamics in Bihar's public universities requires governance reforms that target structural and cultural determinants rather than relying primarily on individual moral exhortation or punitive compliance frameworks. Specific priorities include strengthening external oversight of administrative processes, developing meaningful whistleblower protections with enforcement mechanisms, cultivating ethical leadership at senior administrative levels, and creating institutional cultures that normalize critical feedback and protect those who provide it.

Beyond its practical implications, this study makes a conceptual contribution by demonstrating that the moral disengagement framework previously applied to student populations in the Indian context is equally applicable and perhaps even more consequential when applied to the administrative governance level, where the structural conditions for its activation are more systematically embedded. As Bihar continues to develop its higher education infrastructure in response to growing student demand and aspirations for research excellence, the governance dimensions of this development deserve sustained and serious attention. Sustainable institutional improvement requires not only resource investment and regulatory compliance but also genuine cultural transformation one that begins with honest acknowledgment of the behavioral realities that current structural conditions produce, and proceeds through the patient construction of institutional environments in which ethical administrative practice is structurally enabled rather than structurally undermined.

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