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Ethical Ideologies, Work Experience, and Moral Development in Public Sector Auditors

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A B S T R A C T

This study explores the interplay between organizational socialization, ethical ideology, and the moral decision-making processes of public-sector auditors. Using a descriptive-survey design, data were collected from 98 Iranian public-sector auditors in 2023. Employing multinomial logistic and OLS regression analyses, the study examines how tenure and ethical frameworks influence cognitive moral development and ethical behavioral intentions. Findings reveal that increased tenure is inversely associated with moral development and ethical intention. This decline is interpreted not as a byproduct of aging, but as a byproduct of organizational socialization, where "institutionalized conformity" and the "normalization of deviance" gradually erode principled sensitivity. Furthermore, ethical ideology acts as a critical cognitive filter: idealism is positively correlated with advanced moral reasoning and strict ethical intentions, whereas relativism facilitates "unethical flexibility," enabling auditors to justify situational compromises under bureaucratic pressure. Notably, absolutism emerges as a stabilizing posture that buffers against the erosive effects of long-term organizational exposure. These results underscore that professional experience in high-pressure public-sector environments can inadvertently dampen principled decision-making. Consequently, the study emphasizes the need for ethics training that focuses on building "cognitive resilience" and reinforcing universal principles to counteract bureaucratic inertia. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how institutional culture and individual ideology intersect to shape the ethical landscape of public auditing in developing economies.

Introduction

Corruption is a pervasive challenge with significant socioeconomic consequences. In 2022, Iran ranked 147th out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perception Index (Transparency Organization, 2023), reflecting systemic vulnerabilities such as rent-seeking, embezzlement, and tax evasion. Shahroudi (2022) estimates that smuggling constitutes 20–30% of Iran's total trade, underscoring the severity of these issues. Financial and economic corruption in this context is often inseparable from broader institutional arrangements and political influence (Ellini, 2022). Addressing such systemic challenges requires not only structural reforms but also enhanced employee motivation and ethical frameworks (Curtis et al., 2012). This study investigates these vulnerabilities through the lens of workplace socialization, focusing on the cognitive moral development and ethical intentions of public sector auditors.

Experience is a primary driver of moral development (Killen & Dahl, 2021). Through professional socialization, employees internalize organizational values and tacit norms (Kjeldsen & Jacobsen, 2013). However, the ethical trajectory of this socialization varies; while tenure may foster professional virtues in

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some environments, it may also lead to "institutionalized conformity" or the normalization of deviance, where informal norms gradually redefine acceptable practice. Therefore, this study examines whether years of service—as a proxy for socialization—correlates with cognitive moral development and ethical behavioral intentions. Furthermore, it explores the moderating role of ethical ideology, defined as the stable cognitive filter individuals use to resolve ethical dilemmas (McFerran et al., 2010).

Much of the existing literature on this nexus stems from developed economies characterized by high transparency and legal accountability (Bailey et al., 2010). Consequently, these findings may not generalize to developing economies, where public management structures, incentive systems, and informal norms differ significantly (Stewart et al., 2002). While socialization in developed public sectors is often associated with higher moral reasoning due to public scrutiny (Pandey et al., 2016), evidence remains scarce in developing contexts.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides empirical evidence on how socialization and ethical ideologies shape the moral reasoning of auditors. Distinguishing between ethical intentions and actions is challenging (Jones et al., 2003), and professional pressures often interact with moral development in complex ways (Jenkins et al., 2008). This study addresses a critical gap by analyzing how years of service influence these dynamics in a public sector audit environment.

Second, the study utilizes scenario-based analysis to elicit nuanced responses regarding moral development and behavioral intentions. This is theoretically significant, as the ambiguity of a dilemma often dictates the level of moral reasoning activated (Doyle et al., 2013), and professionals navigating uncertain dilemmas offer vital insights into organizational pressure points (Fleming et al., 2009).

Third, by highlighting the impact of ethical dilemmas, the study underscores the necessity for targeted ethics education to counteract the erosive effects of bureaucratic inertia on principled decision-making. The remainder of this paper reviews the relevant literature and hypotheses, followed by the methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusions.

Theoretical Background

This section reviews the literature underlying the study. It first examines organizational socialization and how, in public-sector contexts, it may foster institutionalized conformity and the normalization of deviance, shaping auditors' moral reasoning. It then discusses ethical ideologies as a cognitive filter influencing responses to dilemmas and managerial pressure. Next, it outlines cognitive moral development as the basis of ethical judgment. Finally, drawing on Rest's model (Rest, 1986), it motivates the focus on ethical behavioral intention.

Socialization and Moral Reasoning

Socialization is the primary mechanism through which individuals internalize organizational values and adapt to professional norms (Chen, 2012). While often framed as a tool for integration, socialization within audit settings can foster "Institutionalized Conformity." Here, auditors may prioritize unwritten internal rules over formal ethical standards to ensure survival and career advancement. As explored by Bailey et al. (2010) and Craft (2013), this process reshapes the auditor's cognitive framework; rather than fostering professional ethics, organizations may unintentionally incentivize a compliance-driven culture where conformity serves as the primary metric for internal success.

This dynamic facilitates the "Normalization of Deviance," where ethical compromises become routine responses to organizational pressures. Research by Ponemon (1992) and Abdolmohammadi and Ariail (2009) suggests that, over time, auditors may gravitate toward lower levels of ethical reasoning by aligning with compromised informal norms. Consequently, individuals may fail to internalize universal moral principles, becoming highly susceptible to the firm's prevailing climate. As Ponemon (1990) observes, firms risk reinforcing this cycle by promoting individuals who exhibit such conformity, thereby entrenching diminished moral reasoning among senior staff.

Although scholars argue that public service environments should foster higher moral reasoning through civic values (Perry et al., 2010; Malagueño et al., 2020), this potential is often undermined by internal dynamics. Vandenabeele (2008) notes that socialization instills specific institutional logics; however, in the Iranian public sector, this logic is filtered through hierarchical dependencies and strong traditional ties (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). In this context, employees frequently exhibit an 'external locus of control,' perceiving outcomes as dependent on external political hierarchies rather than independent standards (Ferreira et al., 2012).

Consequently, the cultural predisposition toward 'externalized decision-making,' combined with long-term exposure to bureaucratic pressures, accelerates the 'normalization of deviance' (Maesschalck, 2004). While some studies suggest tenure may correlate with increased social principles (Kjeldsen & Jacobsen, 2013), this study posits that within the Iranian public sector, socialization reinforces conformity to ethically compromised norms. Thus, increased tenure likely acts as a mechanism that diminishes, rather than enhances, moral development over time.

Ethical Ideologies

Ethical ideologies serve as a value-based framework that guides auditors in navigating complex dilemmas. According to Forsyth (1980), these ideologies are evaluated along two dimensions: relativism and idealism. Crucially, these dimensions function as a "Cognitive Filter" through which auditors process professional challenges. This filter moderates moral judgment: auditors with high relativism may experience a form of "unethical flexibility" when facing managerial pressures, perceiving moral rules as situational; conversely, idealists tend to uphold universal principles, acting as a barrier against compromise (Gala et al., 2023).

Forsyth (1980) categorizes these tendencies into four distinct ethical postures—Situationists, Absolutists, Subjectivists, and Exceptionists—each representing a different strategic approach to moral decision-making. While Situationists and Subjectivists often prioritize context-dependent or personal values, Absolutists and Exceptionists maintain a stronger adherence to universal moral rules, albeit with varying degrees of pragmatic flexibility. Research indicates that these postures are not merely theoretical; they significantly influence cognitive moral development and professional behavior (Ishida, 2006; Marques & Azevedo-Pereira, 2009). By understanding these ideologies as cognitive filters—as illustrated in the framework proposed by Forsyth (1980) (see Figure 1)—this study examines how they dictate the auditors' propensity for ethical behavior under institutional constraints.

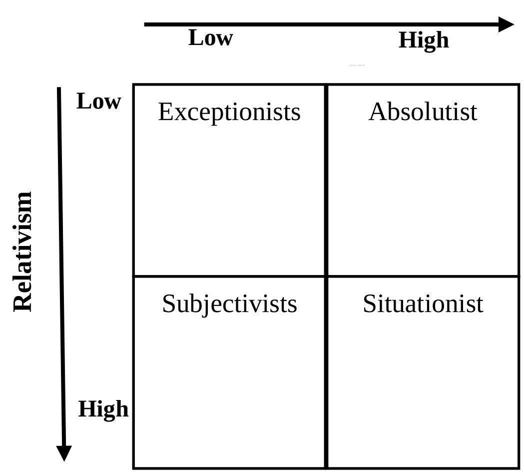

Figure -1: Representation of ethical ideologies
Source: Forsyth (1980)

Moral Development

Moral development refers to the cognitive progression in how individuals justify and prioritize principles when resolving ethical dilemmas. Kohlberg (1969) provides the foundational framework, emphasizing the underlying logic of decision-making rather than the outcome. His model posits three levels of reasoning, reflecting a shift from external control to internal commitment (Frecknall-Hughes et al., 2017).

At the pre-conventional level, reasoning is self-referential and instrumental. Compliance is driven by the avoidance of punishment or the pursuit of rewards, rather than internalized ethical standards.

At the conventional level, judgment becomes socially anchored. Reasoning is guided by role expectations, social order, and the need for peer or organizational approval. Here, ethical behavior is often synonymous with conformity, where individuals act to maintain legitimacy within their reference group.

At the post-conventional level, reasoning is grounded in principles independent of immediate social pressures. Through (i) contractual ethics and (ii) conscience-based decisions, individuals prioritize universalizable values like justice over interpersonal or bureaucratic expectations (Warming-Rasmussen & Windsor, 2003). In organizational contexts, this level is particularly critical; it indicates a professional capacity to resist "normalized" but unethical routines. By transitioning toward post-conventional reasoning, individuals demonstrate the autonomy to challenge status-quo behaviors that conflict with broader ethical obligations. This cognitive evolution is essential for understanding how professional socialization—either through ethics education or institutional culture—can effectively shape decision-making in high-pressure public sector environments.

Ethical Behavioral Intention

Ethical behavioral intention, defined as the individual's commitment to prioritize morally justifiable actions (Ruiz-Palomino & Martinez-Cañas, 2011), serves as the focal point of this study. While Rest's (1986) four-component model provides a comprehensive taxonomy of moral decision-making—encompassing awareness, judgment, intention, and action—this research concentrates specifically on "ethical behavioral intention." Within the hierarchy of cognitive moral processes, intention represents the critical juncture where internal moral deliberation crystallizes into a clear orientation toward future conduct.

Focusing on intention is analytically advantageous, as it serves as the final, observable outcome of the internal mental process and the most immediate psychological precursor to actual behavior (Craft, 2013; Malagueño et al., 2020). By capturing the auditor's inclination toward either strict or lenient moral responses when confronted with dilemmas (Shafer & Simmons, 2011), this metric effectively bypasses the volatility of actual behavioral execution, which is often constrained by external organizational factors beyond the individual's control. Consequently, behavioral intention provides a more precise lens for evaluating the auditor's moral predisposition within the public sector context.

Hypotheses Development

Length of Service: Effects on Moral Development and Ethical Behavioral Intentions

Research suggests that in developed countries, public sector employees with more experience tend to exhibit higher moral reasoning. For instance, Lim Choi (2006) found that length of service has a significant positive effect on post-conventional reasoning in the U.S. public sector, indicating that more experienced employees are inclined to use post-conventional reasoning to address moral dilemmas. However, this finding contrasts with Jurkiewicz (2007), who suggests that identity and culture significantly contribute to moral failures among public sector employees.

Perry et al. (2010) notes that motivations for working in the public sector are not always altruistic or socially driven. For example, Stewart et al. (2002) identified a negative relationship between length of service and moral reasoning in the Russian public sector, suggesting that longer service may align with workplace dynamics that influence ethical behavior. Similarly, Bigel (2000) found a negative relationship between length of service and moral reasoning among financial planners in the U.S. Overall, length of service significantly impacts job satisfaction and moral reasoning.

The public sector reflects societal values, including in-group and out-group collectivism (Malagueño et al., 2020). Public perception often views senior managers as having privileges, such as unequal access to justice (Husted, 2002). In such contexts, selection and socialization processes may encourage cognitive reasoning based on obedience or self-interest. Many individuals prioritize the preferences of friends and family over universal moral principles. When family or social expectations take precedence, public sector employees with longer service tend to exhibit lower and more uniform levels of moral reasoning. Consequently, length of service influences the moral development and ethical behavioral intentions of public sector auditors. Specifically, auditors with less experience tend to demonstrate higher moral development and stricter ethical behavioral intentions. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: In the public sector, auditors with less length of service exhibit higher moral development compared to those with more length of service.

H2: In the public sector, there is a significant relationship between shorter length of service and stricter ethical behavioral intentions.

Ethical Ideology: Effects on Moral Development and Ethical Behavioral Intentions

Ethical ideologies provide a framework for understanding differences in moral reasoning and ethical behavior (Waldman et al., 2017; Nayir et al., 2018). Ishida (2006) identified a significant relationship between ethical ideology and cognitive moral development. Forsyth (1980) notes that moral development varies across the two dimensions of ethical ideology: relativism and idealism. Relativists prioritize personal values and beliefs when addressing moral dilemmas, while idealists aim to achieve optimal outcomes by adhering to universal moral principles.

Wakefield (2008) suggests that idealists tend to exhibit high levels of honesty. Curtis et al. (2012, 2017) found that moral reasoning and ethical ideologies, as well as their interactions, vary across nations. Although Craft (2013) argued that relativists typically have lower levels of moral development compared to idealists, there is insufficient evidence to fully support this claim.

Forsyth (1980) explains that relativists are skeptical of universal moral principles and believe ethical behavior should align with specific contexts. In contrast, idealists value positive outcomes and avoid actions that may harm others. Forsyth et al. (2008) suggest that relativists are more likely to make lenient decisions compared to idealists. Additionally, Bobek et al. (2015) found that American auditors tend to have more lenient ethical behavioral intentions. Nayir et al. (2018) demonstrated a significant relationship between ethical ideologies and moral behavioral intentions in the Turkish public sector, noting that Turkish public sector employees are more idealistic and less inclined to report organizational violations to authorities.

Research on ethical ideologies in the accounting profession is limited, with Marques and Azevedo-Pereira (2009) being among the few to explore this area. They found no significant difference in ethical judgment across the dimensions of ethical ideology. Douglas et al. (2001) suggest that ethical ideology significantly influences ethical judgments only when moral development is high. Public sector auditors face numerous challenges and are expected to rely on clear and reliable reasoning to address complex ethical dilemmas in the workplace. Consequently, ethical ideologies shape their moral development and ethical behavioral intentions.

Public sector auditors with a more relativistic ideology are likely at lower stages of moral development, and relativistic or idealistic ideologies are associated with lenient or stricter moral behavioral intentions, respectively. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: In the public sector, auditors classified as relativists exhibit lower stages of moral development compared to idealist auditors.

H4: In the public sector, there is a positive and significant relationship between relativistic/idealistic ideologies and lenient/stricter moral behavioral intentions.

Length of Service and Ethical Ideologies: Effects on Moral Development

Absolutists, one of the four ethical ideologies proposed by Forsyth et al. (2008), tend to make stricter ethical judgments. They believe their actions should yield positive outcomes and consider it unacceptable to pursue paths that could harm others (Sivadas et al., 2003). Hartikainen and Torstila (2004) found that absolutists are stricter, while idealists are more lenient in their ethical judgments, based on their study of financial analysts.

According to Buelens and Van den Broeck (2007), the primary role of the public sector is to serve citizens, and its success hinges on avoiding harm to beneficiaries. Limited information exists on the ethical performance of public sector employees in developing societies. Given the highly collectivist nature and relatively weak legal systems in such contexts, it is critical to understand how public sector employees balance community and group interests when addressing ethical dilemmas. Limited empirical evidence suggests that different ethical ideologies influence ethical behavioral intentions in developing economies. Specifically, absolutist public sector auditors tend to exhibit stricter ethical behavior compared to auditors with other ethical ideologies. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: In the public sector, absolutist auditors demonstrate stricter ethical behavioral intentions compared to auditors with other ethical ideologies.

According to Ishida (2006), among the four ethical ideologies, absolutism uniquely correlates with cognitive moral behavior, with absolutists generally exhibiting higher stages of moral development. Socialization influences the ethical decision-making of public sector employees, including absolutists. In strongly collectivist societies, a longer length of service may lead individuals to prioritize obedience and meeting the expectations of their social group over universal values and principles. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: In the public sector, absolutist auditors with shorter lengths of service exhibit higher stages of moral development compared to those with longer lengths of service.

Based on the research literature, the conceptual model is outlined as follows.

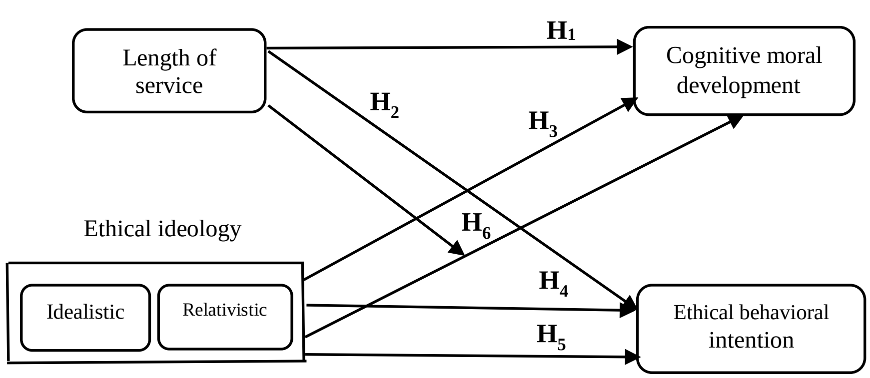

Figure- 2: the research conceptual model

Methodology

This study employs an applied, descriptive-exploratory research design. The population consists of public sector auditors. Based on the standard sample size formula for infinite populations, an initial sample of 96 was determined; to enhance statistical power, this was increased by 25%. A total of 98 valid responses were obtained through online and offline distribution. Although this sample size is modest, it meets the minimum threshold for the conducted multivariate analyses, including Multinomial Logistic Regression, ensuring sufficient power for the observed effects.

Due to practical constraints and the need to align moral dilemmas with the specific professional reality of Iranian public sector auditors, a scenario-based approach, adapted from Rest (1986), was preferred over the standardized DIT. This ensures high ecological validity within the audit context. Reliability was assessed through Cronbach's alpha, and convergent validity was verified, confirming the instruments' appropriateness for the current sample.

Variable Measurement

- **Length of Service:** Assessed via years of experience (Tuggle et al., 2010) and categorized into <5, 5-15, and >15 years.
- **Cognitive Moral Development (CMD):** Three professional scenarios (adapted from Rest, 1986; Frecknall-Hughes et al., 2017) were utilized. Scores were classified into pre-conventional, conventional/contractual, and post-conventional stages (Malagueño et al., 2020).
- **Ethical Ideology:** Measured using the Ethics Position Questionnaire (Forsyth, 1980), assessing idealism and relativism. Scores were split into high/low categories to identify Situationists, Absolutists, Subjectivists, and Exceptionists.
- **Ethical Behavioral Intention:** Measured using a 5-point Likert scale, assessing agreement with the ethical choices presented in the scenarios.
- **Control Variables:** Age and gender were included to account for potential confounding effects (Bailey et al., 2010; Craft, 2013).

Statistical Procedures

Multinomial logistic regression was conducted to test H1 and H6, while Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was applied for H3–H5. H2 was evaluated using one-way ANOVA. To ensure the robustness of the models, multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), which remained within acceptable limits (VIF<5), indicating that predictors were sufficiently independent for valid estimation.

Findings

The findings are presented in two parts. First, a brief profile of the respondents is provided. Second, the hypotheses are tested using discriminant analysis, ANOVA, OLS regression, and multinomial logistic regression.

Sample characteristics

It was observed that the majority of respondents were male (76.5%), and most held a Master's degree (57.1%). The largest age group was 30–40 years (37.8%). Regarding tenure, 37.8% had less than five years of experience, 36.7% had 5–15 years, and 25.5% had more than 15 years of experience. These distributions indicate that the sample included substantial representation from early- and mid-career auditors, which is informative for evaluating tenure-related patterns in ethical decision-making.

Preliminary analysis: Distinctiveness of ethical ideologies across moral development levels

To examine whether ethical ideology meaningfully differentiates auditors across levels of cognitive moral development (pre-conventional, conventional/contractual, and post-conventional), discriminant analysis was conducted. As reported in Tables 1 and 2, the discriminant functions were statistically significant (Wilks' Lambda = 0.612, $\chi^2 = 46.417$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that idealism and relativism vary systematically across the three moral development groups.

Table – 1: Eigenvalues

Function	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Canonical Correlation
1	0.481	0.823	0.570
2	0.103	0.177	0.306

Table – 2: Wilks' Lambda

Test of Function(s)	Wilks' Lambda	Chi-square	df	Sig.
1 through 2	0.612	46.417	4	0.000
2	0.906	9.303	1	0.002

This pattern is consistent with the notion that ethical ideology operates as a cognitive filter, shaping how auditors interpret dilemmas and justify professional choices; therefore, differences in ideology would be expected to manifest as differences in moral reasoning structure. (See Tables 1 and 2).

Multicollinearity diagnostics

To ensure the validity of the multivariate models, multicollinearity among the independent variables was systematically assessed prior to hypothesis testing. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance statistics were examined for all predictors. All observed VIF values remained well below the common threshold of 10 (with corresponding Tolerance values exceeding 0.1), confirming that multicollinearity does not pose a significant threat to the stability of the regression coefficients. This diagnostic verification ensures that the estimated effects are robust and not distorted by redundancy among the predictor variables.

Hypothesis testing

H1: Length of service and cognitive moral development

H1 was tested using multinomial logistic regression, where the post-conventional level was treated as the reference category (Table 3). It was observed that increases in job experience were associated with higher odds of being classified in the pre-conventional (Exp(B)=10.406, p<0.001) and conventional categories (Exp(B)=4.447, p=0.001), relative to the post-conventional category. This implies that auditors with longer tenure were more likely to be positioned in lower stages of cognitive moral development than those with shorter tenure.

Table- 3: Parameter Estimates of Cognitive Moral Development

Subject		B	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
pre-conventional	Intercept	-4.072	18.037	1	0.000	-
	Experience	2.342	19.600	1	0.000	10.406
conventional	Intercept	-1.713	5.840	1	0.016	-
	Experience	1.492	10.509	1	0.001	4.447

Dependent variable: Ethical behavior intention
The reference category is post-conventional

In the Iranian public-sector context, the negative tenure pattern is plausibly explained by organizational socialization: prolonged exposure to bureaucratic constraints and informal expectations may shift auditors toward "what works" rather than principled judgment. This trajectory can foster institutionalized conformity and the normalization of deviance, making minor ethical compromises routine and defensible. Accordingly, Table 3 shows that longer service is associated with lower moral development, providing support for H1 (see Table 3).

H2: Length of service and ethical behavioral intention

H2 was examined through one-way ANOVA with pairwise comparisons (Table 4). It was observed that auditors with less than five years of experience reported significantly higher ethical behavioral intention than auditors with more than fifteen years (Mean Difference = 1.078, $p<0.001$). Differences between the 5–15 years group and the >15 years group were also significant (Mean Difference = 0.712, $p=0.006$), whereas the contrast between <5 and 5–15 years was not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p=0.113$).

Table – 4: one-way ANOVA; Pairwise Comparisons

(I) Cycle	(J) Cycle	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Under 5 years	5-15 years	0.366	0.229	0.113
	Above 15 years	1.078	0.253	0.000
5-15 years	Under 5 years	-0.366	0.229	0.113
	Above 15 years	0.712	0.254	0.006
Above 15 years	Under 5 years	-1.078	0.253	0.000
	5-15 years	-0.712	0.254	0.006

Dependent variable: Ethical behavior intention

This pattern suggests that early-career auditors, who are less embedded in organizational routines, may adhere more strictly to formal rules and professional expectations. With longer tenure, however, ongoing exposure to managerial pressures and bureaucratic realities can encourage pragmatic accommodation, gradually reducing ethical strictness. Such a shift aligns with normalization-of-deviance arguments in high-pressure compliance environments, where incremental compromises become normalized over time. Accordingly, the evidence in Table 4 indicates an overall pattern consistent with H2 (see Table 4).

H3: Ethical ideology and cognitive moral development

H3 was tested using OLS regression (Table 5). It was observed that idealism had a positive and statistically significant association with cognitive moral development ($B=0.651$, $p<0.001$), whereas relativism had a negative association ($B=-0.353$, $p=0.010$). The model explained a meaningful proportion of variance ($R^2=0.324$).

Table – 5: coefficients

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	1.732	0.132	-	13.118	0.000
Idealism	0.651	0.136	0.436	4.803	0.000
Relativism	-0.353	0.133	-0.240	-2.643	0.010

Dependent variable: Moral development; R = 0.570; R Square = 0.324

These results suggest that idealism tends to reinforce principled moral reasoning by keeping harm-avoidance and universalizable standards salient during ethical evaluation. By contrast, relativism may enable more context-dependent justifications, which can weaken principled moral structure—especially in settings where informal organizational norms may conflict with formal audit mandates. Consistent with this logic, the relationships reported in Table 5 provide robust empirical support for H3 (see Table 5).

H4: Ethical ideology and ethical behavioral intention

H4 was tested using OLS regression (Table 6). It was observed that idealism was positively associated with ethical behavioral intention (B=0.811, p<0.001), while relativism showed a negative association (B=-0.622, p=0.002). The explanatory power was substantial (R^2=0.309).

Table – 6: coefficients

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	3.199	0.193	-	16.615	0.000
Idealism	0.811	0.198	0.376	4.102	0.000
Relativism	-0.622	0.195	-0.293	-0.197	0.002

Dependent variable: Moral development; R = 0.556; R Square = 0.309

When ethical ideology is viewed as a cognitive filter, higher idealism is likely to constrain "ethical flexibility" under pressure by anchoring judgment in harm-avoidance and principle-based standards. In contrast, higher relativism may increase accommodation to situational demands (e.g., managerial pressure), allowing rule awareness to coexist with weaker ethical intention. Consistent with this interpretation, the effects reported in Table 6 indicate a pattern that supports H4 (see Table 6).

H5: Absolutism and ethical behavioral intention

H5 was evaluated using OLS regression (Table 7). It was observed that absolutism had a strong positive association with ethical behavioral intention (B=1.267, p<0.001), explaining a notable share of variance (R^2=0.359).

Table – 7: coefficients

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	2.873	0.115	-	25.080	0.000
Absolutism	1.267	0.173	0.599	7.326	0.000

Dependent variable: Ethical behavior intention; R = 0.599; R Square = 0.359

Absolutists, by definition, treat universal moral rules as consistently binding and are therefore less inclined to rationalize exceptions. In audit dilemmas—especially those involving reporting or whistleblowing—this orientation should translate into stricter ethical intentions because decisions are anchored in non-negotiable principles rather than situational trade-offs. Consistent with this logic, the pattern reported in Table 7 provides strong empirical support for H5 (see Table 7).

H6: Joint effect of experience and ideology on cognitive moral development

H6 was tested using multinomial logistic regression with post-conventional as the reference category (Table 8). It was observed that higher job experience increased the odds of being categorized as pre-conventional (Exp(B)=11.147, p<0.001) and conventional (Exp(B)=5.034, p=0.003) rather than post-conventional. Moreover, compared with absolutists, auditors holding other ideologies showed markedly higher odds of being classified as pre-conventional (Exp(B)=92.840, p<0.001) and conventional (Exp(B)=11.081, p=0.001).

Table – 8: Parameter Estimates of Cognitive Moral Development

Subject		B	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
pre-conventional	Intercept	-6.583	22.623	1	0.000	-
	Experience	2.411	14.735	1	0.000	11.147
	Other ideologies	4.531	19.090	1	0.000	92.840
	Absolutism	0^b	-	0	-	-
conventional	Intercept	-2.667	8.963	1	0.003	-
	Experience	1.616	9.033	1	0.003	5/034
	Other ideologies	2.405	10.712	1	0.001	11/081
	Absolutism	0^b	-	0	-	-

Dependent variable: Ethical behavior intention
The reference category is post-conventional

The interactional pattern indicates that absolutism may operate as a protective cognitive anchor, buffering auditors against the erosive ethical effects of organizational socialization over time. By contrast, non-absolutist orientations—particularly those higher in relativism—appear more permeable to informal norms and situational rationalizations, which can intensify the tenure-related drift toward less principled reasoning. Taken together, the effects reported in Table 8 are consistent with this moderating logic and provide empirical support for H6 (see Table 8).

Synthesis

Overall, the results indicate that tenure, ethical ideology, and cognitive moral development operate as a connected system shaping ethical behavioral intention among Iranian public-sector auditors. First, longer length of service was associated with lower principled moral positioning and weaker ethical intention, consistent with a tenure-related drift rather than a simple accumulation of experience. Second, ethical ideology showed a clear structuring role: idealism was positively related to both moral development and ethical intention, whereas relativism was negatively related to these outcomes, suggesting greater scope for situational justification under pressure. Third, absolutism emerged as a stabilizing posture, being associated with stronger ethical intention and comparatively higher moral positioning. Finally, the interaction results suggest that ideology can buffer or amplify tenure effects, with absolutism mitigating the tenure-related decline in principled reasoning. Taken together, these findings justify moving beyond isolated effects and interpreting the model as an integrated mechanism linking organizational exposure, cognitive moral structure, and intention.

Discussion

The present study investigated the interplay between length of service, ethical ideologies, and the moral decision-making processes of public sector auditors.

The Impact of Tenure and Socialization: The findings demonstrate that increased length of service is inversely associated with cognitive moral development and ethical behavioral intentions. While prior research (e.g., Abdolmohammadi & Ariail, 2009) has documented this tenure-related shift, our analysis suggests that this is not merely a byproduct of aging, but a functional response to organizational socialization. In the Iranian public sector, long-term tenure often involves progressive exposure to bureaucratic hierarchies where “institutionalized conformity” becomes a survival mechanism. This process may facilitate a “normalization of deviance,” where ethical compromises—initially perceived as small deviations to satisfy organizational demands—gradually become embedded within the auditor’s routine professional behavior. Consequently, as auditors spend more years navigating this environment, their reliance on principled moral reasoning may diminish, replaced by pragmatic, compliance-oriented decision-making.

The Role of Ethical Ideology as a Cognitive Filter: Our results reveal that ethical ideologies serve as cognitive filters that predetermine how auditors interpret dilemmas. Unlike studies suggesting minimal impact of ideology on professional judgment (e.g., Shafer, 2008), we observed that idealism and relativism are significant predictors of ethical behavioral intention. Specifically, high relativism appears to provide the cognitive flexibility necessary to justify lenient decisions under situational pressure. From a structural perspective, this “unethical flexibility” suggests that auditors with relativistic tendencies may be more susceptible to the aforementioned normalization of deviance. In contrast, absolutism acts as a stabilizing force, providing a rigid adherence to universal principles that may buffer against the erosive effects of organizational socialization.

Interactional Dynamics: The observed interaction between tenure and ideology—where absolutism appears to mitigate the decline in moral reasoning—suggests that ideology is not static. It functions as an anchor. When auditors lack this rigid ideological anchor, they are more easily influenced by the informal norms and bureaucratic inertia inherent in public sector institutions. This highlights that ethical education is not merely about awareness, but about strengthening the “cognitive resilience” of auditors against the pressure to conform.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence on how socialization and ethical ideologies intersect to shape the moral landscape of public sector auditing.

Theoretical and Practical Implications: The findings indicate that the “ethics gap” often observed in the public sector is not purely an individual failure but a structural outcome of organizational culture. By identifying that long-term tenure, coupled with certain ideological orientations, facilitates a drift toward pre-conventional moral reasoning, this research underscores the necessity of moving beyond traditional ethics training. Policymakers should consider implementing an “ethical early warning system” that identifies when auditors are transitioning into high-risk professional phases, particularly those demonstrating high relativism. Furthermore, fostering an organizational culture that rewards principled moral thinking—rather than mere procedural compliance—is essential to counteract the normalization of deviance.

Limitations and Future Directions: While this research provides a nuanced view of the public sector environment, it is subject to certain limitations. First, socialization was proxied by length of service; future research should employ more direct measures of organizational socialization, such as the internalization of informal norms and workplace cultural values. Second, while we identified differences in how ethical ideologies manifest, future comparative studies between the public and private sectors could clarify whether the “unethical flexibility” observed here is specific to the public sector’s unique incentive structures or a general trait of the auditing profession. Finally, given that our findings are localized to the Iranian public sector, we recommend further cross-cultural validation to determine how varying degrees of bureaucratic centralization influence the trajectory of moral development among professionals.

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