

Explanatory Mechanisms and Theoretical Models of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

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Abstract

Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior (UPB) is defined as unethical actions undertaken by organizational employees with the intent to safeguard organizational interests. UPB is difficult to identify within organizations, yet it may bring about severe negative consequences for the organization. Due to its dual characteristics of being both pro-organizational and unethical, UPB research has garnered extensive attention from various fields. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the origins and conceptual boundaries of UPB; it is also essential to draw upon explanatory frameworks of “unethical behavior” and, through two explanatory mechanisms—rational decision-making and intuitive judgment—systematically synthesize the theoretical advances in antecedent research on UPB to construct a theoretical model. On this basis, future research directions are proposed: refined investigations into unethical pro-leader behavior and unethical pro-team behavior, the potential moderating role of enterprise ownership forms on UPB theoretical models within the Chinese indigenous context, and the impact of role stress on UPB.

Full Text

Explanatory Mechanisms and Theoretical Models of Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior

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Abstract: Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior (UPB) refers to unethical actions undertaken by organizational employees to protect organizational interests. UPB is difficult to detect within organizations yet can inflict serious negative consequences. Because it combines both pro-organizational and unethical characteristics, UPB research has attracted widespread attention across various

fields. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the origins and definition of UPB, and to draw upon explanatory frameworks from unethical behavior research to theoretically synthesize progress in UPB antecedent studies from two explanatory mechanisms—rational decision-making and intuitive judgment—thereby forming a theoretical model. Based on this foundation, future research directions are proposed: refined studies on the subtypes of Unethical Pro-leader Behavior and Unethical Pro-group Behavior, the moderating effect of corporate ownership forms on UPB theoretical models within the Chinese indigenous context, and the impact of role stress on UPB.

Keywords: Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior; social identity; social exchange; intuitive judgment; corporate ownership; role stress

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In recent years, a series of high-profile corporate scandals have drawn widespread societal attention. Cases such as Wells Fargo employees opening unauthorized customer accounts to embellish sales performance (Conti-brown, 2017), Mitsubishi's admission to falsifying fuel efficiency test data (Riley, 2016), and Hampton Creek's deliberate deception of consumers through misleading marketing practices (Zaleski, 2017) have prompted academic interest in corporate ethical issues. Within the broader study of corporate ethics, unethical behavior by organizational members is considered a more fundamental research problem (Tenbrunsel, 1998). Notably, previous research has defined unethical behavior within organizations rather broadly, emphasizing only its unethical nature—that is, actions violating socially accepted moral standards (Kishgephart et al., 2010; Treviño et al., 2006)—while rarely conducting conceptual subdivisions at the motivational level. However, the aforementioned cases demonstrate that beyond self-interested motives, employees may also engage in unethical actions to protect organizational rather than personal interests.

Such behaviors include concealing negative information about the organization on public platforms, exaggerating the efficacy of organizational products and services to the public, and assisting in financial fraud (Umphress et al., 2010). These actions, which combine both unethical and pro-organizational characteristics, differ significantly from the unethical behaviors examined in previous research and cannot be easily conflated (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Consequently, to better understand unethical behavior driven by such “unconventional motives,” Umphress and Bingham (2011) proposed the concept of “Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior” to investigate the phenomenon of employees engaging in unethical actions to protect organizational interests.

It should be noted that although UPB originates from motives to protect organizational interests, it remains essentially unethical and will generate negative consequences for organizations (Liang et al., 2019). For instance, from a social learning perspective, unethical behavior by some individuals can spread to other organizational members through peer influence, thereby undermining the organization's overall ethical climate (O' Fallon & Butterfield, 2012). From

a bounded morality perspective, unethical behavior by buyer organizations can affect seller firms' trust levels, hindering cooperation (Hill et al., 2009). From a corporate social image standpoint, exposure of unethical behavior can cause a decline in corporate reputation (Bullard & Resnik, 1983) and ultimately create career crises for individuals, even leading to legal risks (Liu et al., 2019). Therefore, beyond contributing to theoretical enrichment, studying UPB can also provide recommendations for behavior control in organizational management practice.

This paper will achieve three research objectives by reviewing existing research findings: first, analyzing the basic concepts and theoretical framework of UPB; second, synthesizing research findings on UPB from different theoretical perspectives; and third, proposing future research directions based on the current state of research.

1.1 Conceptual Origins of Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior

The concept of UPB initially emerged from observations of phenomena in management practice. Scholars discovered that employees might engage in harmful behaviors in the workplace to help their organizations, leading to the gradual emergence of a pro-organizational motivation perspective in organizational unethical behavior research (Pinto et al., 2008; Vardi & Wiener, 1996). For example, Vardi and Wiener (1996) categorized organizational misbehavior into three types based on behavioral intentions, including misbehavior aimed at benefiting the entire organization. Their research found that organization-benefiting misbehavior was widespread and could negatively impact organizations. Pinto et al. (2008), when studying corruption in organizations, used behavioral beneficiaries as a dimension for classification, arguing that corruption intended to benefit the organization constituted an important component of organizational corruption and that differences along this dimension would elicit different organizational attitudes toward corrupt behavior. Synthesizing these research findings, Umphress et al. (2011) proposed the concept of UPB, arguing that understanding unethical behavior with pro-organizational characteristics from a motivational perspective holds both theoretical value and practical significance.

1.2 Conceptual Definition of Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior

UPB is defined as behavior intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization as a whole or its members (such as leaders) that violates core social values, laws and regulations, public order and good customs, or moral standards (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). As such, UPB comprises two essential components: pro-organizational motivation and behavioral unethicality, both of which are indispensable.

First, the pro-organizational nature of the behavior refers to the motivation behind the unethical act, not its outcome. Therefore, unethical behavior driven by self-interested motives cannot be classified as UPB even if it objectively produces

beneficial results for the organization. For instance, if a financial officer falsifies reports to cover up personal mistakes, although this action might embellish the organization's financial condition, its origin lies in the officer's self-interest, thus failing to meet the pro-organizational motivation requirement of UPB. Conversely, unethical behavior motivated by organizational interests should fall within the conceptual scope of UPB even if it ultimately fails to deliver actual benefits or even causes harm to the organization. For example, an employee might make false statements to customers about product information to protect corporate image. Although such behavior, once exposed, would severely damage corporate reputation, because its motivation is pro-organizational, it remains within the category of UPB regardless of consequences.

Second, the criterion for judging the moral nature of behavior is based on more absolute, universally accepted social standards, including laws, justice, and broadly recognized moral requirements (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994), rather than relative organizational ethical standards. Previous research has identified various manifestations of organizational unethical behavior, including workplace misbehavior studied by Vardi and Weitz (2003), rule breaking discussed by Tyler and Blader (2005), and corruption examined by Ashforth and Anand (2003). Kaptein (2008) concluded that posing a threat to others' fundamental interests represents a distinctive feature of unethical behavior. That is, not all misbehaviors are unethical; if no threat is posed to others' interests, even improper actions do not fall within the category of unethical behavior (Velasquez & Velazquez, 2002). Additionally, unethical behavior is not limited to violations of official and explicit standards but also includes breaches of informal and implicit norms (Kaptein, 2008), with the determination of such informal and implicit norms relying on the moral judgments of the majority of society (Kishgephart et al., 2010; Vardi & Weitz, 2003).

Furthermore, engaging in unethical behavior must be voluntary, meaning the actor must be aware that the behavior violates universal moral standards before acting, thereby distinguishing UPB from "unintentional mistakes." For example, a salesperson's aggressive promotion of a product without prior knowledge of its fatal defects does not fall within the conceptual scope of UPB.

2 Research Progress on Theoretical Models of Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior

Rest's (1986) four-stage model of moral decision-making has guided the majority of behavioral ethics research (Kishgephart et al., 2010). According to this model, individuals undergo four stages when making moral or unethical behavioral decisions: recognizing the moral nature of the issue, making a moral judgment, establishing moral intent, and engaging in moral behavior (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Rest, 1986). Research on unethical behavior guided by the four-stage model emphasizes rational engagement at each stage, positing that individuals' moral decisions are made through controlled cognitive processing (e.g., Chang, 1998). In UPB research, some scholars have also approached the general mech-

anism of unethical behavior formation, interpreting individuals' engagement in UPB as the result of rational decision-making. They argue that individuals' rational consciousness fully participates in the UPB decision-making process, while the pro-organizational nature of the behavior itself strengthens the impetus for rational attribution and serves as a justification for self-persuasion (Chen et al., 2016; Umphress et al., 2010). Given that conscious rational engagement is the key to this explanatory perspective, this paper summarizes this pathway as the "rational decision-making" perspective.

In contrast to the rational decision-making viewpoint, some scholars have proposed an alternative explanatory pathway for unethical behavior. Research has confirmed that decisions regarding unethical behavior may be made without individuals' awareness, with moral decision feedback occurring automatically and lacking conscious rational engagement (Chartrand & Bargh, 2002; Haidt, 2001). Studies conducted from this perspective interpret UPB as individuals' unconscious decisions, emphasizing the role of stable variables in this decision-making process without conscious participation (e.g., Castille et al., 2018). Therefore, this paper summarizes this explanatory pathway as the "intuitive judgment" perspective.

Based on the above analysis, this paper summarizes the research progress on "Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior" and forms the theoretical framework shown in the figure below.

2.1 Rational Decision-Making Perspective: The Mediating Role of Moral Disengagement/Decoupling

Umphress and Bingham (2011) were the first to examine the formation mechanism of UPB from the perspective of moral decision-making processes. They argued that moral judgments are made after rational deliberation, and that the "pro-organizational" nature of UPB weakens its "unethical" dimension, limiting the constraining effect of moral standards on individuals' moral judgments and thereby influencing organizational members' moral decisions. Social cognitive theory posits that individuals' moral decisions are made after moral judgments by their cognitive mechanisms (Bandura, 1991). Meanwhile, individuals' moral cognitive mechanisms are not static and may be influenced by numerous internal and external factors (Bandura, 1986). Based on the assumption that moral choices are rational decisions, the moral decisions individuals ultimately make are all considered morally acceptable under their own moral cognition, or the unethical nature of the act itself falls within an acceptable range compared to the positive consequences the behavior may bring (Bandura, 1999). In moral decision-making, different influencing factors may lower individuals' original moral standards, providing seemingly "moral" excuses for engaging in unethical behavior or weakening individuals' moral sensitivity. This process is defined as moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). Subsequently, the important role of moral disengagement in organizational unethical behavior has also been confirmed (Kishgephart et al., 2010). For example, Detert et al. (2008) demon-

strated through three rounds of surveys that moral disengagement positively correlates with unethical decisions and verified the mediating role of moral disengagement between individual differences and unethical behavior. Cheng et al. (2019) also argued through theoretical analysis that moral disengagement is a proximal influencing factor of UPB, through which individuals feel more justified in engaging in UPB. Furthermore, beyond moral disengagement, other moral attribution mechanisms, such as moral decoupling, have also been shown to influence UPB. Fehr et al. (2019) confirmed the important role of moral decoupling in UPB and argued that, unlike moral disengagement, moral decoupling does not require individuals to rationalize unethical behavior but only requires them to selectively emphasize the “pro-organizational” behavioral motivation, representing another pathway for individuals to rationalize UPB.

From the rational decision-making explanatory perspective, antecedent research on UPB has yielded rich findings. The basis for distinguishing between “rational decision-making” and “intuitive judgment” in this paper lies in whether the decision-making process involves conscious participation. As long as antecedent factors influence the UPB decision-making process with conscious involvement, they should be categorized under the “rational decision-making” perspective. As previously mentioned, moral disengagement/decoupling plays a mediating role in the rational decision-making model, meaning that antecedent variables first affect moral disengagement/decoupling, which in turn influences UPB. Therefore, investigations of antecedent variables under the rational decision-making model should focus on factors that may affect moral disengagement/decoupling.

Research has confirmed that individuals’ conscious rational decision-making in organizations is influenced by the “psychological relationship between the individual and the organization,” which can be analyzed from two perspectives: “social identity” and “social exchange” (Van Knippenberg et al., 2007). As logically parallel explanatory theories, social identity and social exchange exhibit significant differences in their explanatory mechanisms for UPB. Under social identity theory, individuals have high identification with the organization/leader/team, and based on this need for identification, they desire to “contribute” and “sacrifice” for the organization, leading them to engage in moral disengagement/decoupling and subsequently triggering UPB. Under social exchange theory, the organization/leader/team provides positive exchanges to individuals, and based on the need for “reciprocal relationships” and “repaying positive exchanges,” individuals engage in moral disengagement/decoupling, which in turn triggers UPB. Thus, social identity theory emphasizes individuals’ identification with the organization, which can be a unidirectional relationship, whereas social exchange theory emphasizes reciprocity between individuals and organizations, necessarily involving bidirectional positive exchanges. In other organizational behavior research, social identity and social exchange are also considered distinct explanatory theories that should be explained and modeled separately (e.g., Jones, 2010).

Therefore, moral disengagement/decoupling based on “social identity” and moral

disengagement/decoupling based on “social exchange” constitute the two major aspects for reviewing antecedent variables from the rational decision-making perspective.

2.1.1 Moral Disengagement/Decoupling Based on Social Identity

Tajfel and Turner (1986) proposed the distinction between personal identity and social identity. They argued that in personal contexts, individuals' behavior is primarily controlled by personality factors, whereas in group contexts, behavior is more influenced by group-based factors. The resulting social identity theory posits that through social categorization, individuals develop identification with their groups (identification, Brown, 2000). Individuals' identification with groups forms the basis for engaging in group behaviors, as they incorporate group characteristics into their self-concept through self-categorization, thereby exhibiting in-group favoritism. Simultaneously, individuals acquire or maintain their social identity through various organizational behaviors to obtain positive self-motivation and self-evaluation, satisfying their need for positive social connections and membership (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Hogg et al., 1995). Driven by the need to pursue positive self-evaluation and fulfill self-esteem requirements, individuals' moral cognitive mechanisms may be affected. When individuals face needs to enhance social identity or threats to their social identity, they may engage in moral disengagement/decoupling—disregarding their original moral standards and believing that the organization-benefiting unethical behavior they are about to commit is actually moral and serves organizational interests (Jachimowicz et al., 2018; Johnson & Umphress, 2019; Umphress et al., 2010). Thus, individuals' social identity may generate moral disengagement/decoupling, which may in turn prompt individuals to engage in UPB. This process aligns with the four classic steps in Rest's (1986) rational moral decision-making framework (O' Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). In organizations, moral disengagement/decoupling from the social identity perspective primarily stems from two sources: the need to obtain organizational identification or enhance its level, and the need to counter threats to social identity.

(1) Need to Obtain Social Identification: Organizational Identification

Organizational identification, as a specific form of social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), has been confirmed to produce beneficial effects for organizations, such as lower employee turnover intentions (Cole & Bruch, 2006) and higher job performance (Ashforth et al., 2008). However, excessive organizational identification has also been shown to induce individuals' unethical behavior (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Michel & Jehn, 2003).

Chen et al. (2016) confirmed through experiments implementing internal competitions in chain enterprises that organizational identification positively influences UPB. Additionally, using scale measurements, they verified the mediating effect of moral disengagement between organizational identification and UPB, as well as the moderating effect of inter-organizational competition. Umphress

et al. (2010) also demonstrated that individuals with strong organizational identification are more likely to engage in UPB because organizational identification provides the motivation for such behavior.

Based on differences in what the concept of “organization” specifically refers to, UPB in practice has differentiated into two subtypes: “Unethical Pro-leader Behavior” (UPLB) or “Unethical Pro-supervisor Behavior” (UPSB) (Johnson & Umphress, 2019; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019), and “Unethical Pro-group Behavior” (UPGB) (Thau et al., 2015), representing unethical behaviors intended to benefit leaders and teams, respectively. In both subtypes, organizational identification has also been shown to significantly influence UPB. For instance, in research on unethical pro-leader behavior, both organization-level organizational identification and individual-level supervisor identification have been confirmed to significantly and positively influence unethical pro-leader behavior, with the relationship between supervisor identification and unethical pro-leader behavior moderated by moral identity (Johnson & Umphress, 2019).

Matherne et al. (2012) extended antecedent research on UPB to the domain of individual emotional attachment, confirming that employees’ affective commitment has a significant relationship with UPB, moderated by moral identity. The authors noted that although affective commitment is typically regarded as a positive factor in organizational contexts (Riketta, 2005), their findings demonstrate the potential negative effects of affective commitment, which helps promote a more comprehensive understanding of affective commitment in organizational management practice.

Ebrahimi and Yurtkoru (2017) further confirmed the positive effect of employee affective commitment on UPB from the perspective of moral disengagement mechanisms, while also highlighting the role of ethical leadership, arguing that ethical leadership positively moderates the relationship between employee affective commitment and UPB.

In summary, high organizational identification instills in individuals a strong belief in sacrificing for and protecting the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). When organizational interests are threatened, employees with high organizational identification may violate moral standards and engage in UPB out of a strong desire to protect the organization. In the moral decision-making process, high organizational identification makes unethical behavior appear highly “moral,” thereby serving as a justification for actors to achieve moral disengagement.

(2) Defending Against Threats to Social Identity: Passion Gap and Ostracism Risk

In the influence mechanism of social identity on UPB, beyond the pathway where individuals actively maintain or enhance organizational identification to trigger unethical behavior, we must also consider that individuals’ need to defend or restore identity when social identity is threatened may also lead to unethical behavior.

Based on social identity theory, individuals' identification with various social organizations constitutes an important component of personal self-worth (Dutton et al., 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Individuals derive self-worth through social identity and are therefore particularly sensitive to factors that may threaten social identity (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Consequently, threats to social identity also negatively impact employees' self-identity (Dutton et al., 2010). When individuals perceive threats to their social identity, they choose to respond by altering their own behavior (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001), specifically by increasing their contributions to the organization to elevate their status within it (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). From this we can infer that under threat to social identity, employees may break moral constraints and counter the threat by engaging in UPB out of consideration for contributing to the organization.

When exploring the origins of identity threat, Jachimowicz et al. (2018) proposed that passion gap constitutes the root of self-threat. Passion gap is defined as the discrepancy between the level of work passion organizations expect employees to possess and employees' actual level of work passion (Jachimowicz et al., 2018). Nowadays, organizations strongly emphasize employee work passion, yet employees' passion levels typically fail to meet organizational expectations, making passion gap a widespread phenomenon (Jachimowicz et al., 2018). However, insufficient work passion may cause employees to perceive a gap between themselves and organizational requirements, thereby feeling a threat to organizational identification (Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010), which can trigger unethical behavior. Meanwhile, previous research indicates that observers can make relatively clear and rapid judgments about others' passion levels (Cardon et al., 2009), so organizational members experiencing passion gap worry that their lack of passion will be clearly recognized by the organization/leader/team, exacerbating their perceived identity threat. Accordingly, research has confirmed that identity threat caused by passion gap may lead employees to engage in threat-countering behaviors, one of which is committing UPB (Jachimowicz et al., 2018).

Beyond passion gap, individuals' perceived risk of ostracism also represents an important source of identity threat. Based on social identity theory, team members have a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and members' contributions to the team largely determine their level of integration (Hirshleifer & Rasmusen, 1989). Research shows that when other team members recognize that certain members contribute insufficiently to team goals, those lacking contribution face ostracism risk, thereby triggering identity threat (Robinson et al., 2013). To cope with identity threat, when individuals perceive ostracism risk from the team, they adopt various strategies to strengthen their contributions to the organization and increase their team integration level (Allen & Badcock, 2003). From a decision-making process perspective, individuals first perceive ostracism risk from the team, which triggers identity threat. To counter this threat, individuals may break moral rules and enhance their contributions through unethical behavior. Based on this, when studying employees' unethical pro-group behavior at the team level, Thau et al. (2015) confirmed that team

members' perceived ostracism risk from the team stimulates their engagement in UPB, particularly when team members have a strong need for team integration. This study confirmed the close connection between team members' moral decisions and their perceived ostracism risk, enriching the explanatory mechanism of UPB arising from identity threat.

2.1.2 Moral Disengagement/Decoupling Based on Social Exchange

Beyond social identity theory, understanding UPB from social exchange theory has also yielded rich findings (e.g., Luo & Xu, 2017; Jia et al., 2014; Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Research suggests that individuals' organizational behavior is essentially exchange behavior premised on the norm of reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When responding to positive exchanges from the organization, individuals tend to focus on their responsibility for engaging in the behavior and the beneficial consequences it may bring to the organization, potentially overlooking the moral nature of the behavior itself and its moral implications (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989).

Therefore, when individuals face behavioral choices that combine both pro-organizational and unethical characteristics, positive social exchange responsibilities cause individuals to separate behavioral risks from their own responsibilities, thereby reducing their sense of responsibility and ultimately making unethical behavioral choices. In existing research, studies understanding UPB from social exchange theory have primarily focused on specific exchange behaviors that organizations provide to employees, including two concrete aspects: establishing high-inducement employee-organization relationships and implementing high-commitment human resource management practices.

(1) High-Inducement Employee-Organization Relationships

Wang et al. (2018) confirmed in the Chinese cultural context that high-inducement employee-organization relationships (mutual investment and over-investment employee-organization relationships) positively correlate with employee UPB. They found that the relationship between mutual-investment employee-organization relationships and UPB is negatively moderated by individual moral identity; however, contrary to hypotheses, the relationship between over-investment employee-organization relationships and UPB was not moderated by social exchange. The authors speculated this might be because employees in Chinese cultural contexts are more inclined to accept reciprocity-based exchanges rather than rule-based exchanges. Similarly, Umphress and Bingham's (2011) research also confirmed that positive reciprocal beliefs between organizations and employees may lead to unethical pro-organizational behavior, with this process mediated by social exchange. In summary, these studies emphasize that from a social exchange perspective, employee-organization relationships significantly influence individuals' behaviors in organizations, particularly when this relationship is over-invested, inappropriately stimulating employees to engage in UPB.

(2) High-Commitment Human Resource Management Practices

Luo and Xu (2017) confirmed that high-commitment human resource management practices positively stimulate employees' engagement in UPB, with this process mediated by perceived organizational support and negatively moderated by moral identity. Research has shown that implementing high-commitment HR practices within organizations, such as providing employees with ample growth space and work autonomy, helps enhance mutual trust between employees and the organization, thereby stimulating employees' positive behavioral feedback toward the organization (Farndale et al., 2011). This psychological mechanism continues to translate into concrete pro-organizational behaviors and work outcomes, such as pursuing higher productivity and performance (McClellan & Collins, 2011). Therefore, based on social exchange theory, high-commitment HR practices can be viewed as positive exchange behaviors by the organization toward employees, and employees spontaneously reciprocate through pro-organizational behaviors (Luo & Xu, 2017).

However, when individuals perceive that their capabilities cannot effectively reciprocate the organization's positive exchanges, their moral cognitive mechanisms may face dissonance pressure. Driven by this pressure, employees may break moral constraints and use unethical means to contribute to organizational interests to balance the exchange relationship, with UPB being one common choice (Luo & Xu, 2017).

2.2 Intuitive Judgment Perspective

The assertion that "moral judgments are derived through rational reasoning" underpins the rational decision-making perspective's explanation of UPB. Traditional cognitive psychologists believe that moral judgment is a rational reasoning process; although some steps in this process may operate unconsciously, the critical steps necessarily involve conscious participation (Xu & Chi, 2007). However, the social intuitionist model of moral judgment challenges this view, arguing that moral judgments originate from individuals' subconscious intuitions, with rational reasoning serving merely as a post-judgment psychological processing step rather than the process generating moral judgment, which is produced by moral intuition (Haidt, 2001). Consequently, when constructing models of UPB influencing factors, the rational decision-making perspective focuses on variables that may affect the consciously engaged reasoning process, whereas the intuitive judgment perspective, based on the social intuitionist model, focuses on variables that may affect subconscious judgment processes. Examining the rational decision-making process, conscious reasoning is profoundly influenced by individuals' relationships with society (Rousseau & Parks, 1993), leading the rational decision-making perspective to focus on attitudinal variables under social identity and social exchange theories (Van Knippenberg et al., 2007). In contrast, examining the intuitive judgment process, cognitive psychology experiments have confirmed that brain regions responsible for emotional processing play important roles in intuitive judgment (Greene et al., 2001; Moll et al.,

2002; Moll et al., 2001), while individuals' dispositional factors and situational variables are key elements affecting emotional processing (Tan et al., 2003). Therefore, when individuals make moral judgments subconsciously, the absence of rational decision-making processes leaves little room for attitudinal variables to operate, whereas relatively stable personality traits and environmental influences can still function in unconsciously engaged judgments, affecting individuals' subconscious behavior. However, current research on UPB influencing factors predominantly adopts the rational decision-making perspective, focusing mainly on attitudinal variables and considering dispositional and environmental variables only as moderators (Castille et al., 2018). Thus, introducing the intuitive judgment perspective allows dispositional and environmental variables to be explained as antecedent variables, thereby expanding the scope of UPB influencing factors.

2.2.1 Work Stress Previous research has confirmed that workplace stress significantly impacts moral decision-making of individuals in organizations (e.g., Boyd, 1997; Selart & Johansen, 2011). Work stress is considered an important factor affecting individuals' emotions (Lazarus, 1995, 1999; Spector & Fox, 2005), and negative emotions caused by work stress can prompt individuals to make subconscious coping behaviors within intuitive judgment mechanisms, which are often unethical. For example, in a U.S. survey, 48% of respondents indicated they would engage in unethical or illegal activities to cope with work stress (Mcshulskis, 1997). Boyd (1997) also confirmed that work stress causes decision-makers to take shortcuts in quality control, potentially leading to unethical behaviors such as covering up work errors and deceiving customers. From this we can infer that to cope with work stress, individuals are more likely to unconsciously make unethical behavioral decisions under emotional influence, with UPB being included among such behaviors.

(1) Organizational Pressure: High Performance Expectations

As market competition intensifies, organizations inevitably impose above-normal performance requirements on employees for their own development (Locke & Latham, 2002). However, the mismatch between high performance requirements set by organizations and employees' available resources makes performance demands the primary source of stress for employees within organizations (Zhao et al., 2011). Chen and Liang (2017) found through empirical analysis that when facing high performance requirements, employees' willingness to engage in UPB shows a significant increasing trend, with this process mediated by moral disengagement and positively moderated by employees' perceived market competition. This demonstrates that when facing high performance pressure, employees inevitably adopt unconventional methods to alleviate stress caused by excessive performance demands in order to satisfy their social integration needs and self-motivation requirements. Consequently, when facing behavioral choices, they are more likely to subconsciously select actions that violate moral standards. For example, Volkswagen's "dieselgate"

scandal represents organizational employees' breach of moral standards under performance pressure where limited design budgets could not meet current high environmental standards (Levin, 2015), fully confirming the potential negative impacts of excessive performance demands on long-term corporate development and healthy market competition.

(2) Supervisory Pressure: Leader Bottom-Line Mentality

Within organizations, leader bottom-line mentality has been confirmed to significantly impact employee behavior, specifically manifesting in that leader bottom-line mentality promotes employees' unethical pro-leader behavior, and through the mediation of UPB, leader bottom-line mentality also positively affects employees' turnover intentions (Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). Research confirms that people frequently focus on the achievement of their own bottom-line requirements (Wolf, 1998), and leaders with high bottom-line mentality levels place greater emphasis on their personal success in competitive environments. For such leaders, achieving bottom-line requirements represents an important goal in their pursuit of self-actualization (Bonner et al., 2017). Furthermore, leaders with high bottom-line mentality may prioritize their bottom-line requirements above moral constraints (Greenbaum et al., 2012). That is, leaders with high bottom-line mentality may engage in behavior that breaches moral constraints to achieve bottom-line goals. Additionally, through clear reward and punishment measures, leaders with high bottom-line mentality implicitly push subordinates to do whatever is necessary to help achieve their bottom-line requirements (Callahan, 2007; Greenbaum et al., 2012). Under pressure to achieve supervisors' bottom-line goals, subordinates inevitably subconsciously intensify their desire to fulfill these requirements, subsequently making unconventional choices, with unethical pro-leader behavior being one possible consequence (Zhang et al., 2020).

2.2.2 Individual Disposition As previously mentioned, the intuitive judgment perspective emphasizes the unconscious nature of moral decision-making. In unconscious moral decision-making, factors that can influence individual decisions typically exhibit stable characteristics (Haidt, 2001; Reynolds, 2006). That is, because moral decision-making under the intuitive judgment perspective lacks conscious participation, antecedent variables describing individuals' social exchange relationships, which are premised on conscious participation in the rational decision-making perspective, lack room to operate. Consequently, dispositional variables that focus on individuals themselves and describe their stable personality traits should be considered important factors influencing UPB from the intuitive judgment perspective. Among numerous dispositional variables, those that may drive individuals to break internal moral constraints receive particular attention. For example, Machiavellianism, which describes high utilitarian moral sense; psychological entitlement, which describes subconscious pursuit of higher organizational status; and individual traditionality, which emphasizes compliance with obligations, have all been confirmed to stimulate indi-

viduals to break moral constraints and engage in UPB in subconscious intuitive judgments.

(1) Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is one source of motivation that stimulates individuals to subconsciously break internal moral constraints, and research confirms that Machiavellians are more likely to engage in UPB (Castille et al., 2018). Conceptually, Machiavellianism is a personality trait defined by four stable and highly correlated characteristics: amoral manipulation, distrust of others, desire for control, and desire for status (Dahling et al., 2009; Wu & Lebreton, 2011). Consequently, first, Machiavellians have been shown to exhibit strong economic opportunism tendencies in moral behavior (Sakalaki et al., 2007). Second, Machiavellians' utilitarian moral sense—using ends to justify means—causes them to 倾向于做任何事 to satisfy their selfish goals (Castille et al., 2018). This utilitarian moral sense operates stably as a personality trait that directly affects subconscious decision-making independent of individuals' social relationships. Thus, when facing moral decisions, Machiavellians' stable utilitarian moral sense causes them to subconsciously make economically rational responses that serve their self-interest, even when such responses are unethical (Gustafson, 2000).

(2) Psychological Entitlement

Similar to Machiavellianism's mechanism, psychological entitlement also operates in individuals' subconscious moral judgment processes, stimulating them to break moral constraints and make unethical behavioral choices. Conceptually, psychological entitlement is a stable trait characterized by individuals' belief that they deserve to gain more and lose less than others, even when this demand is disproportionate to their actual abilities and contributions (Campbell et al., 2004). Lee et al. (2019) confirmed that individuals high in psychological entitlement are more likely to engage in UPB. This is because individuals high in psychological entitlement subconsciously pursue and focus on their status in the organization and recognition from others (Rose & Anastasio, 2014), and the goal of seeking benefits for the organization frequently overlaps with individuals' need to enhance organizational status (Bishop & Lane, 2002; Lee et al., 2019). Consequently, individuals high in psychological entitlement naturally 倾向于选择 behaviors that facilitate obtaining higher organizational status in moral judgments, and subconsciously treat UPB as a shortcut to achieve their goals in intuitive judgments. For these employees, UPB serves as a defensive mechanism to maintain and protect their inflated self-concept (Lee et al., 2019). Chu et al. (2019) also confirmed that psychological entitlement mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and UPB, as employees highly confident in their abilities develop strong psychological entitlement needs, making them more likely to engage in UPB.

(3) Traditionality

Special cultural backgrounds endow individuals with stable value traits. From this perspective, individual traditionality also plays a role in stimulating indi-

viduals to break moral constraints in subconscious moral decision-making. In organizational behavior research conducted in Chinese contexts, individual traditionalness is considered an important value variable that constrains Chinese people and significantly influences individuals' organizational behaviors (e.g., Farh et al., 2007; J. Liu et al., 2013; J. Liu et al., 2010; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Individual traditionalness is often manifested as submission to authority, filial piety, and ancestor worship. Research has confirmed that traditionalness plays a positive moderating role in the mechanism of employee UPB. Employees high in traditionalness are more compliant with traditional roles, view meeting leader expectations as their obligation, and are more likely to engage in UPB. In contrast, employees low in traditionalness view superior-subordinate relationships as equal exchanges, apply equality principles more frequently in interactions with leaders, have relatively weaker obligation bonds with the organization, and lack the internal drive to break their own moral constraints to engage in UPB (Shao & Liao, 2019; Zhang et al., 2017; Farh et al., 2007).

3 Summary and Future Directions

The two explanatory perspectives on UPB—rational decision-making and intuitive judgment—each have their own theoretical foci and have contributed rich research findings to explaining UPB. As research deepens, future UPB studies will have even richer directions and propositions. From a conceptual level, the relatively broad concept of “Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior” can no longer fully accommodate research needs for the two major subtypes that have emerged in practice: “Unethical Pro-leader Behavior” and “Unethical Pro-group Behavior.” Thus, future research needs to further refine conceptual subdivisions. From an indigenous research perspective, existing studies have already attended to the special manifestations of UPB in Chinese cultural contexts, focusing on “individual traditionalness” to conduct indigenous research. However, the special Chinese cultural background is not only reflected in individual values but can also be expanded to broader and more generalized organizational culture levels. Starting from corporate ownership nature—a typification standard with Chinese characteristics—and focusing on how different organizational cultures affect UPB will more comprehensively demonstrate the particularity of Chinese cultural contexts in UPB research. Additionally, as evident from the previous review, existing research mostly adopts the rational decision-making perspective, with insufficient attention paid to the intuitive judgment perspective. Therefore, future research should strengthen studies on UPB from the intuitive judgment perspective, uncovering richer antecedent variables under this perspective.

3.1 Conceptual Refinement

Current literature remains somewhat ambiguous regarding the conceptual refinement of UPB itself. Existing studies have examined unethical pro-leader behavior and unethical pro-group behavior as manifestations of UPB, and such pro-leader and pro-group expressions also exist in management practice. Con-

sequently, the blanket theoretical concept of “Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior” can no longer accommodate theoretical research development, making it necessary to further clarify the conceptual hierarchy of UPB and study differences in unethical behaviors enacted by employees with different beneficiary motives.

The reason UPB has differentiated into “pro-leader” and “pro-group” subtypes beyond the general “pro-organization” motive is that employees may view “leaders” or “teams” as “agents” of the “organization,” believing that being pro-leader or pro-team equates to being pro-organization. For example, research on employee-organization relationships suggests that employees may perceive leaders as organizational agents (Eisenberger et al., 2010) and generalize their relationship with leaders as a relationship with the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2002). For organizational individuals with strong perceptions of “supervisor’s organizational embodiment,” “unethical pro-leader behavior” enacted for “leader benefit” also satisfies the definition of UPB. Thus, based on organizational individuals’ cognitive differences regarding “organizational” agents, UPB encompasses two special forms: “unethical pro-leader behavior” and “unethical pro-group behavior.”

Therefore, future research should further subdivide the concept of UPB specifically, because ignoring differences in beneficiary intent obscures the mechanisms and effects of variables at the leader and team levels. For example, team-level ostracism risk (the sake of group) emphasizes the need for integration into work teams within the organization and is an important variable proposed at the team level that significantly influences unethical pro-group behavior (Thau et al., 2015). However, whether it remains significant for unethical behavior at the overall organizational level has not yet been confirmed and requires further in-depth verification. Another example is that unethical pro-leader behavior emphasizes that the actor is independent of the beneficiary subject of the motive. Individuals and leaders are independent actors, and unethical pro-leader behavior can better exclude potential influences of the actor’s “self-interested motives” and better focus on how relationship elements between individuals and leaders affect individual behavioral decisions (Johnson & Umphress, 2019). Therefore, as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper], subdividing differences in motivational focus will enable a deeper and more complete understanding of UPB.

Research Direction 1: Due to differences in motivational focus of UPB, distinguishing the refined concepts of unethical pro-leader behavior and unethical pro-group behavior holds significant importance. Differences in beneficiary subjects within behavioral motives lead to variations in variable mechanisms and effects, warranting separate in-depth studies.

3.2 Indigenous Research Based on Ownership Structure

Existing research has validated UPB theoretical models in Chinese cultural contexts (Chen & Liang, 2017; Zhang et al., 2017), proposing influencing factors based on Chinese cultural backgrounds such as traditionality. However, there remains room for deeper investigation of UPB in Chinese cultural contexts. Beyond considering traditionality, focusing on the three distinct categories of Chinese enterprise types—state-owned enterprises, domestic private enterprises, and foreign-invested enterprises—and the differences in organizational culture under different ownership types holds important significance for indigenous research on employee behavior in Chinese cultural contexts (Wang et al., 2018).

Organizational culture is defined as a form of shared social knowledge, manifested as universal rules, norms, or values aimed at shaping participants' preferences or behaviors (Tsui et al., 2006). Organizational culture not only guides employees' behavioral decisions but also motivates employees to internalize corporate values as criteria for their own behavior (Tsui et al., 2006; Xin, Tsui et al., 2002). Previous research, through inductive and contextualized methods, identified five dimensions of organizational culture: organizational harmony, employee development, customer orientation, organizational innovation, and social responsibility, forming four types of organizational culture: high integration culture, market-oriented culture, moderate integration culture, and hierarchical culture (Tsui et al., 2006).

Some research has attempted to study differences in Chinese organizational culture from an ownership perspective; for example, private enterprises have been confirmed to possess stronger organizational learning culture than state-owned enterprises (Wang et al., 2010). However, the impact of organizational culture differences reflected by ownership nature on organizations still requires more in-depth verification. In China, significant differences in cultural types and cultural intensity exist among enterprises with different ownership forms, making corporate ownership form a summary indicator representing Chinese corporate culture and an important pathway for explaining employee behavioral decision-making in Chinese cultural contexts, which will significantly influence research on organizational members' behavior.

Meanwhile, enterprises may also contain “subcultures” that differ from the overall corporate culture. Differences between subcultures and overall corporate culture may manifest in relationships between the enterprise and internal teams, thereby significantly influencing team-level employee behavior research. Therefore, in indigenous research on UPB, corporate ownership nature will exert important moderating effects on existing theoretical models, adjusting the intensity of antecedent variables' impact on UPB and even changing the direction of influence. This paper argues that understanding UPB from the perspective of corporate ownership forms is a research endeavor worth pursuing in depth.

Research Direction 2: In Chinese cultural contexts, different corporate ownership natures represent different organizational cultures that will produce im-

portant moderating effects on UPB theoretical models.

3.3 Impact of Role Stress on Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior

As previously discussed, intuitive judgment perspective research on UPB focuses on the impact of stress. However, current research primarily concentrates on stress from organizations and leaders, lacking examination of stress originating from the behavioral individuals themselves. Thus, exploring stress factors from behavioral individuals may become an important direction for future UPB research. Among stress factors from individuals, role stress is considered an important factor affecting individual behavior in organizations (Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006).

Role theory posits that individuals play corresponding roles in society, with each role carrying societal expectations for the role-holder's behavior. These expectations form behavioral requirements and constraints for individuals "performing" their roles (Rizzo et al., 1970). When role expectations cannot be fulfilled, individuals experience role stress, including three specific stressors: role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload. Role conflict refers to situations where individuals hold multiple roles and face multiple expectations, creating conflicts among different role expectations that cannot be satisfied simultaneously (Levinson et al., 1965). Role ambiguity arises when individuals cannot identify what their role expectations are and are unclear about what actions to take to meet role expectations (Levinson et al., 1965). Role overload refers to individuals feeling that their time and resources are insufficient to fulfill role commitments and achieve role expectations (Peterson et al., 1995). All three conditions cause individuals to perceive role stress, thereby triggering negative emotions.

Similar to work stress from organizations and leaders, we infer that negative emotions triggered by role stress will also affect individuals' subconsciousness and influence their intuitive judgments. Research has found that role stress consumes individuals' emotional energy, causing anxiety (Peterson et al., 1995) and even emotional breakdown (Posig & Kickul, 2003). Negative emotions caused by stress have also been confirmed to prompt organizational individuals to engage in unethical behaviors such as aggressive behavior and theft (Chen & Spector, 1992). Thus, under the influence of negative emotions, individuals' subconscious need to alleviate emotional burden may be strengthened, causing them to unconsciously choose behaviors in intuitive judgment that help counter role stress. One possibility is choosing behaviors that violate moral norms but can fulfill role expectations. Because the existence of role stress implies that individuals may struggle to find feasible paths to achieve role expectations within the constraint framework of moral norms, they unconsciously break moral norm constraints. Considering that role expectations within organizations typically align with organizational interests, UPB may become individuals' unconscious choice when facing role stress. Based on this, this paper proposes the following research direction:

Research Direction 3: Role stress may positively influence UPB through individuals' negative emotions.

Based on the analysis of previous research, this paper defines the concept of UPB, reviews current explanatory models of UPB from rational decision-making and intuitive judgment perspectives, and proposes future research directions based on the current research status. Due to limited literature, when reviewing influencing factors, this paper did not separately categorize according to the three concepts of "Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior," "Unethical Pro-leader Behavior," and "Unethical Pro-group Behavior"; some moderating variables mentioned only in individual literature were not fully covered, hoping to be supplemented in future research. As an emerging research field in organizational behavior studies, UPB holds important significance for enriching organizational behavior theory. With gradual research deepening, UPB research findings will undoubtedly create greater value for organizational management practice.

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