Literature Review and Future Directions of Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior Research in China*

Bo Huang[1] Xin Wei[1,**]

[1] School of Business, Yunnan University of Finance and Economics, Kunming, Yunnan 650032, China
[**]Corresponding author. Email: 202002110130@stu.ynufe.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of economy, employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviors (UPB) emerge one after another, they violate social values, moral customs, codes of conduct and laws for the interests of the company. The concept of UPB has been widely concerned in the field of organizational behavior since it was proposed. However, there are still few studies on this topic, and there is a lack of systematic theoretical comb. In view of this, this paper analyzes the concept and connotation of UPB based on related research in China, expounds the research status of UPB and the impact mechanism of different influencing factors on UPB from three aspects: individual, organization and leadership. Finally, in view of the shortcomings of the existing research, the future research directions are prospected.

Keywords: Unethical pro-organizational behaviour, Unethical behaviour, Literature review.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Volkswagen cheated in emission tests, Luckin coffee's financial fraud and other enterprises' unethical behaviors have attracted the attention of scholars. Unethical behaviors are defined as behaviors that violate widely accepted social ethics. It is very common in organizations. Their starting point may be for their own interests or retaliation against the organization. Umphress supplements this with a new concept unethical pro-organizational behavior, that is, in order to promote the operation and interests of the organization, the behavior that violates the core social values, customs, laws or standards of proper behavior [1], such as in order to sell company products, exaggerate the quality of the company's products to customers or selling products with quality problems to customers. It has the characteristics of pro-organizational and unethical. Because of its pro-organizational nature, it can bring short-term benefits to the organization, so it is often ignored, acquiesced or even supported in the organization.

But because it's unethical, it will eventually bring damage to the organization and society. Therefore, it is necessary to systematically summarize and sort out the related researches on UPB, so as to trigger organizations to attach importance to such behaviors and help organizations suppress or reduce such behaviors.

In view of the importance of UPB research, this paper firstly clarifies the concept of UPB, then systematically summarizes and sorts out various influencing factors of UPB on the basis of reviewing previous scholars' research, analyzes the deficiencies of existing research, and finally prospects future research directions.

2. CONCEPT OF UPB

The concept of unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) was first proposed by Umphress. It refers to the unethical behavior intentionally performed by employees that violates the social moral code but is beneficial to the organization. Subsequently, Umphress gave a more detailed formulation of the original concept, defining it as an act that aims to promote the effective operation of an organization or its members but violates the

core social values, customs, laws or norms of proper behaviour. This definition has two key components, one is unethical, the other is pro-organizational. Three UPB boundary conditions are also given. First, it distinguishes the UPB from work-related behaviors involving errors or unconscious negligence. UPB is a purposeful behavior that benefits the organization. Second, UPB's judgment is based on the starting point of the behavior rather than the result. The result of UPB may be inconsistent with the employee's intention. As long as the starting point of the behavior is for the interests of the organization, no matter whether the result is ultimately beneficial to the organization, it can be called UPB. Third, the unethical behavior taken by employees for their own interests, even if the result is beneficial to the organization, can not be called UPB. At the same time, the theoretical model of UPB is outlined, as shown in "Figure 1".
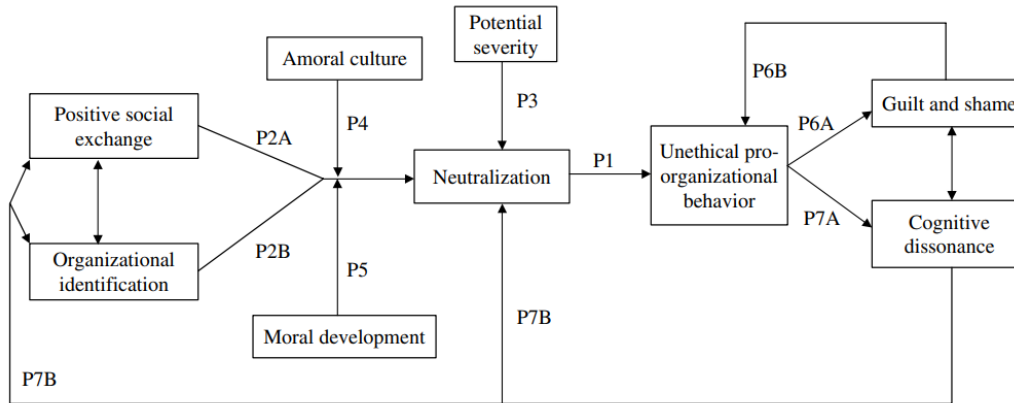

Figure 1 Theoretical model of Unethical Pro-organizational behaviour.

3. INFLUENCING FACTORS OF UPB

UPB is pro-organizational and unethical, so its influencing factors are more complex and the influencing mechanism is more diversified than unethical behaviour. By sorting out the existing research, this paper divides the influencing factors of UPB into three categories: individual factors, organizational factors, leadership factors. Individual factors include personal characteristics and values, emotional state, perception and attitude, organizational factors mainly include organizational norms, systems, management models, and ethical atmosphere, and leadership factors are mainly the influence of different leadership styles. Previous studies have covered these aspects but are too fragmented. This paper systematically summarizes the research on the influencing factors of UPB and its mechanism by Chinese scholars to provide reference for future research.

3.1 Individual Factors

As the subject of implementing UPB, individuals' personality characteristics and values, emotional state, perception and attitude will have a significant impact on individual behavior intention. In terms of personality characteristics and values, studies have shown that Machiavellism has a positive impact on the emergence of UPB [2]. Tian et al (2016) regarded accounting earnings management as a UPB. Through the investigation and research on Chinese accountants, it is shown that the relationship between ethical pressure and ethical judgments of earnings management was stronger for accountants with a high power distance orientation. This influence process is mediated by the beliefs in support of organization. The research results of Qi Lei and Liu Bing (2020) based on the regulatory focus theory show that employees with promotional and defensive work focus are committed to completing the work tasks within their roles, so as to negatively predict the generation of UPB [6]. In addition, some scholars have shown that the regulation focus of employees regulates the inverted U-shaped relationship between ethical leadership and UPB [7]. In the context of Chinese culture, individual tradition is regarded as an important value variable that restricts individual organizational behavior, employees with high tradition are more likely to implement UPB [8].

There is little research on emotional state at the individual level. The research based on emotional cognitive evaluation theory by Li Zhicheng, Wang Zhen, Zhu Zhenbing and Zhan Xiaojun (2021) shows that employees' workplace anxiety plays a

mediating role in the relationship between performance stress and UPB, and there is a positive correlation between workplace anxiety and UPB [9]. Yin Liping and Zhang Xiangqian (2019) discussed the impact of emotional labor (surface acting and deep acting) on employees' UPB. Through the follow-up survey of 99 employees in the service industry for 10 working days, the results confirm that the surface acting plays a significant positive impact on UPB and the deep acting plays a significant negative impact on UPB [10].

Perceptions and attitudes include: organizational identity, organizational commitment, organizational support, moral identity, moral disengagement, perceived overqualification and psychological entitlement. Existing studies have shown that both organizational identity and organizational commitment have a positive impact on UPB [11][12], but some scholars agree that organizational identity is not related to UPB. For this problem, Cheng Ken and Lin Yinghui (2019) believe that there are boundary conditions for the impact of organizational identity on UPB. Therefore, they selected social responsibility human resource management as the clue of organizational morality, and discussed its moderating effect on the relationship between organizational identity and UPB and its direct impact on UPB. The results show that when the level of socially responsible human resource management is low, organizational identity has a positive impact on UPB; When the level of social responsibility human resource management is high, organizational identity has no significant impact on UPB. Socially responsible human resource management can directly inhibit the UPB [13].

For perceived organizational support by individuals, Wang Xiao Yu et al. (2021) believed that the positive social exchange relationship between employees and the organization (reflected in organizational support) did not necessarily lead to the UPB of employees. Only for employees with low performance in the organization, they thought they owed the organization debt, so they would compensate the organization through the implementation of UPB [14]. Moral identity is an important psychological mechanism to help individuals process moral-related information and make corresponding moral judgment and moral behavior [15]. Studies have found that moral identity is negatively correlated with UPB and negatively regulates the formation process of UPB [16-17]. Moral disengagement can make individuals' moral mechanisms ineffective, thereby

inducing individuals to make unethical behaviors [18], so it can promote the production of UPB and play a mediating role in the formation of UPB [19]. In addition, Chu Fulei and Wang Rui (2019) used self-evaluation theory to explore the relationship between perceived overqualification and UPB and the mechanism of psychological entitlement in the relationship.

3.2 Organizational Factors

As the main object of UPB, organizations have an important impact on the generation of such behaviors [21]. In particular, organizational environmental factors, such as organizational norms, systems and ethical atmosphere, will affect individual cognition, and the change of cognition will promote the generation of unethical behavior [22]. When discussing the influencing factors of UPB, existing studies relatively focus on the variables related to individuals and lack sufficient attention to organizational factors.

Organizational factors include social exchange relationship, organizational performance pressure, high commitment human resource management practice, high performance work system, ethical atmosphere and so on. Since Umphress put forward the concept of UPB, the social exchange relationship in organizations has attracted the attention of scholars. As an important influencing factor of UPB, it has been first and most widely discussed. Lin Yinghui and Cheng Ken (2016) discussed the influence mechanism of leader member exchange on employees' UPB from the differential mode perspective based on Chinese traditional cultural background, the study show that leader member exchange has a significant positive impact on UPB [16]. Some studies have also shown that leader member exchange plays an important regulatory role in the formation of UPB [23]. On the basis of previous research, Gao Riguang and Ouyang Jinfeng (2019) proposed that the leader member exchange was developed in the western context. In order to accurately describe the relationship between leaders and employees in the Chinese organizational context, the concept of supervisor-subordinate guanxi was adopted for research. The results show that the superior-subordinate guanxi plays an intermediary role between service-oriented leadership and UPB [24].

The influence of work requirements and pressure on UPB has also been discussed. Chen Mo and Liang Jian (2017) discussed the impact mechanism of high performance requirements on

UPB in the organization. It is found that high performance requirements will induce individuals to start the moral shirking mechanism, and then promote the occurrence of UPB [17]. Similarly, the research of Li Zhicheng, Wang Zhen, Zhu Zhenbing and Zhan Xiaojun (2018) also found that when employees face the performance pressure brought by the organization, they will have workplace anxiety, so they tend to implement UPB to deal with the pressure [9].

As an institutional arrangement of organizational management, organizational punishment can inhibit the generation of UPB in the organization [25]. The management mode in the organization will also have an important impact on the behavior of employees in the organization. Luo fan and Xu Ruihua (2017) paid attention to the negative impact of high commitment human resource management practice. Through empirical research, they found that high commitment human resource management practice has a positive correlation with employee UPB, employee organizational support plays a mediating role, and moral identity negatively moderates the positive impact of high commitment human resource management practice on UPB [26]. Xu Ting and LV Zhike (2018) tested whether the high performance work system impact employee's UPB. The research results confirmed that high performance work system is positively correlated with the UPB, and the mediating role of psychological ownership and the moderating role of moral identity [27].

In addition, the ethical climate of an organization is an important factor affecting employees' moral decision-making, and is closely related to unethical behaviors [28]. Zhang Yongjun, Jiang Xiaoyan, Zhao Guoxiang (2017) explored the impact of three common ethical climates on UPB, the results showed that, instrumental and caring ethical climates are positively correlated with UPB, while principle ethical climate inhibits the production of UPB, and moral justification plays a partial mediating role among the effects of the three ethical climates on UPB [19]. Zhao Hongdan and Zhou Jun (2017) discussed the impact of corporate hypocrisy on employees' UPB. Based on the social cognitive theory, they inferred that employees will have moral disengagement when facing corporate hypocrisy, so as to promote the generation of UPB. They also paid attention to the negative moderating role of moral identity in the relationship between corporate hypocrisy and UPB. Finally, this view was proved by empirical analysis [18].

3.3 Leadership Factors

Leader is the example of employee in organizations and has an important impact on employees' cognition and behavior [29]. At present, most of the research on the influence of leadership on employee UPB is from the perspective of leadership style [30], most of them are western research results. The research based on Chinese cultural context is still very limited, which needs to be further explored. As one of the popular leadership styles in Chinese organizations, paternalistic leadership has a certain impact on UPB. Zhang Yongjun (2017) discussed the relationship between the three dimensions of paternalistic leadership and UPB. The study found that authoritarian leadership was positively correlated with UPB, moral leadership and UPB showed an inverted U-shaped curve, and the hypothesis of positive correlation between benevolent leadership and UPB was not supported by empirical research [31].

However, later scholars did not get the same results. Shao Kanghua and Liao Zhenyi (2019) found that authoritarian leadership and benevolent leadership had a positive impact on UPB and moral leadership was negatively correlated with UPB [32]. The research results of Li Zhiyong (2019) also found a positive correlation between authoritarian leadership and UPB, the relationship between benevolent leadership and moral leadership and UPB is not significant. However, the binary interaction of benevolent leadership and authoritarian leadership, moral leadership and authoritarian leadership has a significant predictive effect on UPB [23]. Lin Yinghui and Cheng Ken (2017) also discussed the influence mechanism of differential leadership style developed on the traditional differential order pattern in China on UPB, and found that differential leadership has a positive impact on UPB [29].

Other leadership styles, such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, empowering leadership, inclusive leadership and self-sacrificial leadership, have been proved to have a positive relationship with UPB [6][24][34][35]. Li genqiang (2016) found that ethical leadership is not a simple linear relationship with UPB, but an inverted U-shaped curve relationship, that is, compared with low-level and high-level situations, employees are more likely to engage in UPB under medium-level ethical leadership [7]. Similarly, Liang Fu et al. (2021) found an inverted U-shaped relationship between authentic leadership and

employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior. At present, there are few studies on the leadership style of inhibiting the generation of UPB [36]. Cheng Ken and Lin Yinghui (2020) have confirmed the inhibitory effect of responsible leadership on UPB based on social learning theory and leadership substitution theory through questionnaire survey and situational experiment [25]. Qi Lei, Liu Bing, Xu lu, Ren Zhishuai (2020) discussed the influence mechanism of temporal leadership on UPB in construction project teams, and constructed a sequential two-meditation research with time focus and work focus as mediating variables. The results confirmed the negative relationship between temporal leadership and UPB [37].

In addition to the leadership style, a few scholars have discussed variables such as supervisor's organizational embodiment, supervisor bottom-line mentality, leadership ostracism on UPB. Supervisor's organizational embodiment can moderate the impact of leadership on employees' UPB. According to the research of Wang Xiaochen and Ying yuan (2018), the leadership with high organizational embodiment will make employees believe that the behavior of leadership represents the behavior of the organization. Under the condition of high organizational embodiment, the positive relationship between transformational leadership and UPB is stronger [33]. The research of Lin Yinghui and Cheng Ken (2017) also got the same conclusion, that is, under the condition of high supervisor's organizational embodiment, the positive relationship between differential leadership and employee UPB is stronger [29]. Zhang Yun, He Bin, Huang Qihai, Xie Jun(2020) showed that supervisor bottom-line mentality is positively correlated with employees' UPB, and when employees have a high power distance orientation, This positive relationship is stronger [38]. Guo Jinyuan and Chen zhixia (2021) discussed the impact of leadership ostracism on employees' UPB from the perspective of self-enhancement motivation. The results show that when employees perceive leadership ostracism, they will have self-enhancement motivation and promote employees to implement UPB [2].

4. SHORTCOMINGS OF EXISTING RESEARCH

In recent years, UPB has attracted extensive attention of scholars. Compared with western countries, China's academic research on UPB lags behind, mainly in the following aspects:

4.1 Lack of Relevant Research

Although UPB is very common in organizations, it has received less attention in China, resulting in insufficient empirical research on UPB and even less literature review. The research on UPB in China is mainly based on the research results of western countries. Few studies can investigate the formation mechanism and influence mechanism of UPB under China's unique cultural context. Domestic research pays more attention to the antecedent variables of UPB. The research on antecedent variables mainly focuses on the research on the individual and leadership level. Most of the research on leadership factors is to explore the influence of different leadership styles on UPB, and there is a lack of research on other influencing factors at the leadership level. There is very little research on organizational influencing factors, and almost no research on the impact of social variables. In recent years, the research focus of UPB in Western countries has shifted to the study of the impact mechanism of UPB, but there is only very little empirical research on the possible consequences of UPB in China [39].

4.2 Vague Concept

There is a certain ambiguity in the conceptual connotation of UPB. The concept of UPB is a supplement and in-depth study of different motivations for unethical behavior. The ambiguity of the concept leads to the diversity of UPB types. According to the definition of UPB, the purpose of UPB is to promote the effective operation of organizations or members, but in the existing research, it is concerned about the pro-organizational unethical behavior, and there is a lack of attention to unethical behavior through organization members. Umphress (2019) proposed a refined concept of UPB, namely unethical pro-supervisor behavior (UPSB) [40], compared with UPB, UPSB is more in line with China's organizational culture, but domestic scholars pay less attention to the subdivision types of UPB.

4.3 Limited Research Perspective

Most of the existing studies discuss the formation mechanism of UPB from the theoretical perspectives of social exchange and social learning, or based on the internal perspective of the organization, such as from the perspective of employee, leader and organization. The existing research perspectives are relatively fixed. However,

due to the richness of the UPB concept, future research can be carried out from other perspectives. The current research on UPB often separates the three aspects of individual, organization and leadership, and conducts research based on one level alone, and the corresponding cross-level research is very scarce [13]. The comprehensive cross-influence of the organizational level and leadership to individual UPB helps to fully elucidate the formation mechanism of UPB [41]. Future research can make improvements in this regard.

4.4 Single Research Method

At present, the measurement of UPB in China is mainly based on the traditional questionnaire survey method, but because UPB is a sensitive topic, it will be affected by social approbability. Moreover, the data source is relatively single, and to a certain extent, there is a problem of homology bias, which affects the final survey results. The current widely used measurement tool for UPB is developed by Umphress (2010) based on the western organizational context. It only measures the pro-organizational dimension of UPB and ignores the altruistic dimension. Some measurement items may have low matching problems with the actual situation in China [34].

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, with the proliferation of unethical behaviors in enterprises, UPB, as a special kind of non-ethical behavior, has become a hot topic of scholars' research. However, the current research on UPB in China is still limited and has the following shortcomings: First of all, although the number of empirical studies on UPB by Chinese scholars has increased significantly in recent three years, it still lags behind western developed countries in terms of quantity and quality. Secondly, the definition of UPB is vague. Current studies only focus on the unethical behaviors in the aspect of pro-organization, and lack of attention to the unethical behavior realized through organization members and the subdivision types of UPB. The research perspective is relatively limited, and the research level is relatively single. Finally, the traditional questionnaire survey method cannot avoid problems such as social desirability and homology deviation. The measurement items of UPB scale may not match the situation of Chinese organizational culture.

Future research should pay attention to the following aspects: First, expand the empirical research and literature review on UPB. We can continue to expand the influencing factors of UPB, such as the bottom-line mentality, sense of belonging, calling, self-esteem and other variables at the individual level, or not stick to the specific leadership type, but combine the leader's quality, behavior characteristics, relationship with employees and the organizational situation of the leader to conduct research and verification, and deeply explore various factors that promote employees to engage in UPB.

On the basis of exploring the inducing factors of UPB, future research can deeply investigate the potential consequences of UPB and its horizontal diffusion among colleagues in the organization and the vertical top-down diffusion mechanism. Second, due to the ambiguity of the concept of UPB, there are many types of UPB, which can be subdivided according to different benefit groups or motivations in the future [33], so as to promote the theoretical research process of UPB. Then, explore new research perspectives, future research can explore the influence of UPB from the perspective of outside the enterprise, such as customers, or investigate the transmission mechanism of UPB within the organization from the perspective of social network. Finally, optimize the research methods and promote the research and practice of UPB in the context of Chinese organizational culture. Future research can combine in-depth interviews, experimental methods and other research methods to reduce the psychological defenses of the subjects. When designing the questionnaire, take social desirability as the control variable or adopt multi-source evaluation method, such as asking the subjects to report their colleagues' UPB to increase the authenticity and validity of the data.

In a word, the above directions contain the possible breakthrough directions for scholars in the field of UPB research in the future. With the continuous expansion of UPB research and the continuous enrichment of research objects, methods and research perspectives, our understanding of UPB phenomenon and theory will also be deepened.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Xin Wei wrote the manuscript and Bo Huang contributed to revising and editing.

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