Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior: Concept, Measurement and Empirical Research

Yaozhong Liu, Caibao Qiu

Jinan University, Guangzhou, China
Email: 122142127@qq.com

Abstract

Along with the developing of the research on Organizational Behavior, more and more scholars pay attention to the unethical pro-organizational behavior. It gives us a more depth and a new aspect in understanding in all sorts of phenomenon of organizational behavior. This article firstly reviews the current research about the concept and measurement of unethical pro-organizational behavior; some relevant researches are also mentioned. Then in the second part, this article lists some relevant empirical research especially in the relationship between UPB and employee attitude and the relationship between UPB with leadership style. To promote the development of UPB, this article also provides some advises which can be enforced in the future.

Keywords

1. Introduction

The credibility of merchants has been a hot talked topic [1]. For their own development interests of business, some organizations often make some unethical behaviors. Currently, during the study of unethical behaviors, researchers have found an interesting phenomenon: when the employees need to explain their own unethical behavior, they often say that they do it for the benefit of the organization or for the boss (a colleague) benefits or both. This is an organization behavior which has a good purpose to the organization or in-group individuals; but to groups or individuals outside, it has a negative impact against. Similarly, it may lead to destructive consequences for the organization itself, both legally and financially [2].

Gurchiek (2006) found that more than a third of the staff witnessed unethical behavior in the workplace,

where 19 percent of unethical behavior is cheating employees, customers, suppliers or public [3]. These unethical behaviors are called unethical pro-organizational behavior, which is short of UPB. UPB is an immoral behavior in order to keep interests of members and the organization [4]. However, these deceptions are with great nociceptive. Firstly, these immoral behaviors sometimes are called workplace crimes [5]. Because these immoral behaviors such as deception, concealment to consumers and partners and other acts for the employees are good to interests of the organization in the subjective; but in fact, it impairs the long-term development of the organization. Secondarily, it impairs organization's reputation once the respective groups and public media have known the real situation [6]. Furthermore, it would influence the long-term development of enterprises, and even affect the healthy development of the industry pattern [7]. Thus, taken together, we should take care of employee UPB in order to know more about organization behaviors.

In this study, we will point out the concept of unethical pro-organizational behaviors, as well as measurement related to empirical research. Similarly, we will give some carding to unethical pro-organizational behavior from the relevant literature and put forward our own ideas related to research provided for the subsequent direction.

2. The Concept and Measurement of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

2.1. The Concept of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

Unethical behavior is defined as those behaviors are not legitimate or not received by the social and others [8]. According to this definition, the common unethical behaviors are in violation of the code of ethics including frauding, thefting and other forms of dishonesty. In the present study, we focus on a particular immoral behavior: unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Many researches about the immoral behavior in organization found that a lot of staffs explained their immoral behavior using the words "for the purposes of benefits of the organization". These unethical behaviors are in order to help either the boss or organization, or both [9]. Umphress and Bingham (2010) proposed a new concept called unethical pro-organizational behavior, UPB [4]. UPB is defined as unethical behaviors which focus on help members in the group or organizations, as a result that violate the core social values, customs, laws and standards of conduct appropriate behaviors. UPB consists of two core parts. Firstly, UPB is immoral behavior that does not comply with legal and acceptable social norms. It includes commission behavior such as giving false numbers to increase analysts forecast and stock value and tampering production date to customers; it also includes omission behavior, for examples, concealed information about pharmaceutical products hazards and failed to fully inform consumers' defective products. Secondly, UPB is a pro-organizational behavior which is benefit to organization without superior commanding. To some extent, as long as immoral behavior is conducive to the organization, it can be considered as UPB. While employees may make the pro-organizational unethical behavior for the purpose of helping organizations, but finally, the result may not conform with the purpose of staff, leading to organization damage. For instance, employees may damage documents to protect the organization, which may impel the external auditors doubting on the financial aspects of the company, thereby expanding the fines and the corresponding consequences [7].

At the same time, they made three boundary conditions on the concept of unethical pro-organizational behavior. Firstly, it should identify the behavior that employees may not be specific benefit from it and do immoral behavior. For example, employees did not inform consumers of a serious product defect because they don't understand the product. They distinguish UPB with work-related behaviors including mistakes, errors or unintended negligence. Because the purpose of these actions did not want to help the organization, so these behaviors are not called unethical pro-organizational behavior. Secondly, although the staffs want to help the organization or organizational members, but the result does not match with the purpose. Finally, they recognize that employees do immoral behaviors on the purpose of themselves. Those aims are just to themselves, rather than to members or organization, so it is not considered to be UPB [7]. Furthermore, Ilie (2012) thought that leader-member exchange, perceived organizational support, idiosyncratic deals may be antecedents of UPB, however, it still need to be explored [2].

2.2. The Measurement of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

In order to research on the UPB, Umphress and Binghan (2010) selected 516 MBA students finished the UPB questionnaire. They found that the questionnaire has good reliability and validity as a tool to test the unethical

pro-organizational behavior. They used exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, project analysis, and identification analysis to test the questionnaire [4].

Unethical pro-organizational behavior questionnaire use Likert 7 point score from very disagree to very agree. The measurement are self-reports. The questionnaire has seven items, but the last item's factor loading is relatively low, so some researchers who has used it often omitted. Seven items are "if it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good.", "If it would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company's products or services to customers and clients." and so on. At present, the questionnaire has been widely used in related studies (See **Appendix** for detailed measurement scale).

3. The Empirical Researches of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

At present, researches on unethical pro-organizational behaviors have focused on employee attitudes such as emotional commitment to organization, organization identity and so on. In addition, the relationship between leadership style and UPB has also been a hot topic that more and more researchers have explored. Therefore, this article selects some progress in these two areas in order to provide for future research directions.

3.1. The Research on Employee Attitude and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

3.1.1. UPB and Emotional Commitment of Employees

Matherne and Litchfield (2012) had made a study on the 137 employee form the southeastern of United States. After a long time survey, it has showed that employees with higher affective organizational commitment will engage in more unethical pro-organizational behavior. Similarity, This positive relationship is significant negatively moderated by the level of moral identity of staffs. Namely, when employees have higher level of moral identity, their commitment on the organization will be lower leading to engage in less unethical pro-organizational behavior; and when moral identity is relatively lower, employees have higher emotional commitment and will do more unethical pro-organizational behavior [10].

3.1.2. UPB and Organizational Identity

Employees' organizational identification is very important for the organization [11], for example, it will produce high-performance and extra work behavior. Umphress and Bingham (2011) have proposed a pro-organizational unethical behavior process model. This model is on the foundation of positive social exchange and organizations identify. They think that organizational identity and positive social exchange may lead to the occurrence of unethical pro-organizational behavior. The individual who has a strong organization identity may do pro-organizational unethical behavior, which may mean "good intentions but do bad things" [7]. However, they also admitted that neutralization could mediate this interaction effects. Neutralization is a process that the original ethical dimension is masked and ignored. By neutralizing, it can make individual behavior seem more reasonable and can be free from blame, thus it will reduce the cognitive dissonance which would make unethical behavior do not seem so objectionable. These two together play an effect in the neutralization process resulting in UPB [12]. Based on this theory, employees may do unethical pro-organizational behavior to repay a positive exchange relationship with their employer. So, individuals who have strong organizational identify may abandon their own moral standards, to support or protect organizations unethical behavior.

3.2. The Research on Leadership Style and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

3.2.1. UPB and Ethical Leadership

Miao, Newman, Yu & Xu (2012) have done a research on Chinese public sector staff. He surveyed 239 employees and found that the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB was an inverted U curve. It means that when the level of ethical leadership is from low to high till the highest, the UPB level will first increase to the highest point, then decrease. Researchers believe that when the level of ethical leadership is not particularly high, it can impel a high-quality social interactions between leaders and employees. Similarity, employees will highly identify and affiliate to organizations, but when the level of ethical leadership is very high, it will inhibit UPB of employees [6]. It seems that if the level is very high, leaders always pass information that employees must abide by ethics. This inverted U curve relationship will be affected by employee identify to leader; that is to say, when employee highly identify to the leader, this curve relationship will become more apparent. Because

it will make employees feel concerned by their leaders and treated fairly, finally it makes them think they should return to organizations or organizational leaders in a manner which they expected.

3.2.2. UPB and Transformational Leadership

Graham, Ziegert & Capitano (2015) explored the impact of leadership types and promotion regulatory focus on UPB of employees, and further studied the framework effect of leadership information. They have used the viewpoint of the interaction between human and environment, and designed three experiments. They used Mechanical Turk Amazon and finally collected 74 valid data. They utilized a 2×2 scenario-based experimental design. After the final data analysis, they found that when the framework of information is less, charm leadership and transformational leadership than transactional leadership will generate more employees' UPB, this effect will not occur on condition that the framework of information is much. In addition, the employees' promotion regulatory focus will have a moderating effect [13]. That is, when employees' promotion regulatory focus is low, the interaction between the framework effect and the leadership style will be more obvious.

Effelsberg, Solga & Gurt (2014) research further showed that there was a certain relationship between transformational leadership and UPB, namely that employees tend to make more unethical pro-organizational behaviors under the transformational leadership. It would be mediated by the organization identify. Furthermore, employee personal disposition toward ethical had a moderating effect. Effelsberg *et al.* (2014) invited 484 participants, and eventually recovered 290 questionnaires. He found that transformational leadership and employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior had a significant positive correlation. But it was mediated by the role of organizational identification, namely transformational leadership and organizational identity existed positive correlation, and organizational identification would motivate employees to produce more unethical pro-organizational behaviors. At the same time, the individual's personal disposition would moderate effects on organizational identification and UPB, that is to say, if employees personal disposition was high, the positive relationship between organizational identify and UPB would be higher, otherwise it was lower [14].

4. Future Research Orientation

Although there are more and more attention on the application of UPB in the organization, UPB is still a new field in the research of organizational behavior. Therefore, the researcher believes that the following aspects should be valued in the future research:

Firstly, pay more attention to the improvement of UPB measurement. At this stage, most of the research on UPB has used questionnaire which Umphress and Binghan formed in 2010. Although some studies have proved its probation, but since the questionnaire was used across self-reporting, the measurement content of the questionnaire is the intention of the employee to do UPB, neither the real UPB. The social desirability effect will affect the validity of the questionnaire. As a consequence, that how to overcome the social desirability effect to obtain the objective data remains to be further developed.

Secondly, attach importance to the theory studying of UPB. It is not difficult to find that the research of UPB is only around the empirical research, the theoretical research on UPB is still relatively little. Although Umphress and Binghan (2010) attempted to put forward the UPB effecting model but the applicability of the model remains to be tested [4]. Therefore, enriching the theoretical study of the UPB and further clarifying the consequences that UPB may lead is a priority in the current study.

Thirdly, the research of UPB should be fit for the reality of the organization. At present, the research about UPB is limited to a simple two layer relationship. But with the continuous development of the fine structure, most of the organization structure is no longer subject to such a simple way. As a future research, it can be studied the trick-down effect of UPB [15]. That is to say, we can explore whether the general manager of the leadership style will affect the middle managers of the UPB behavior and thus affect the bottom of the staff?

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article lists UPB's concept, measurement methods and the current application, as well as points out the direction of future research. The researchers hope that other researchers should study from a new perspective to study UPB. In so doing, we also maintain that managers should be aware of the potential unethical consequences of these often constructive variables.

References

[1] Schminke, M., Caldwell, J., Ambrose, M.L. and McMahon, S.R. (2014) Better than Ever? Employee Reactions to Ethical Failures in Organizations, and the Ethical Recovery Paradox. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, **123**, 206-219. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2013.10.002

[2] Ilie, A. (2012) Unethical Pro-Organizational Behaviors: Antecedents and Boundary Conditions.

[3] Gurchiek, K. (2006) US Workers Unlikely to Report Office Misconduct. *HR Magazine*, **51**, 38.

[4] Umphress, E.E., Bingham, J.B. and Mitchell, M.S. (2010) Unethical Behavior in the Name of the Company: The Moderating Effect of Organizational Identification and Positive Reciprocity Beliefs on Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **95**, 769. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0019214

[5] Vadera, A.K. and Pratt, M.G. (2013) Love, Hate, Ambivalence, or Indifference? A Conceptual Examination of Workplace Crimes and Organizational Identification. *Organization Science*, **24**, 172-188. http://dx.doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1110.0714

[6] Miao, Q., Newman, A., Yu, J. and Xu, L. (2013) The Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior: Linear or Curvilinear Effects? *Journal of Business Ethics*, **116**, 641-653. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1504-2

[7] Umphress, E.E. and Bingham, J.B. (2011) When Employees Do Bad Things for Good Reasons: Examining Unethical Pro-Organizational Behaviors. *Organization Science*, **22**, 621-640. http://dx.doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1100.0559

[8] Jones, T.M. (1991) Ethical Decision Making by Individuals in Organizations: An Issue-Contingent Mode. *Academy of Management Review*, **16**, 366-395.

[9] Knoll, M. and van Dick, R. (2013) Do I Hear the Whistle…? A First Attempt to Measure Four Forms of Employee Silence and Their Correlates. *Journal of Business Ethics*, **113**, 349-362. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1308-4

[10] Matherne III, C.F. and Litchfield, S.R. (2012) Investigating the Relationship between Affective Commitment and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behaviors: The Role of Moral Identity. *Journal of Leadership*, *Accountability and Ethics*, **9**, 35-46.

[11] He, H. and Brown, A.D. (2013) Organizational Identity and Organizational Identification: A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for Future Research. *Group & Organization Management*, **38**, 3-35. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1059601112473815

[12] Bandura, A. (1999) Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, **3**, 193-209. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3

[13] Graham, K.A., Ziegert, J.C. and Capitano, J. (2015) The Effect of Leadership Style, Framing, and Promotion Regulatory Focus on Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior. *Journal of Business Ethics*, **126**, 423-436. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1952-3

[14] Effelsberg, D., Solga, M. and Gurt, J. (2014) Transformational Leadership and Follower's Unethical Behavior for the Benefit of the Company: A Two-Study Investigation. *Journal of Business Ethics*, **120**, 81-93. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1644-z

[15] Chen, Y., Friedman, R. and Simons, T. (2014) The Gendered Trickle-Down Effect: How Mid-Level Managers' Satisfaction with Senior Managers' Supervision Affects Line Employee's Turnover Intentions. *Career Development International*, **19**, 836-856. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/CDI-02-2014-0031

Appendix

This is a questionnaire about how your agreement of your willingness to perform UPB, It ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). please match the number about your willingness.

1. If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good. ---1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. If it would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company's products or services to customers and clients. --1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. If it would benefit my organization, I would withhold negative information about my company or its products from customers and clients. ------------------------------1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. If my organization needed me to, I would give a good recommendation on the behalf of an incompetent employee in the hope that the person will become another organization's problem instead of my own. -- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. If my organization needed me to, I would withhold issuing a refund to a customer or client accidentally overcharged. --1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. If needed, I would conceal information from the public that could be damaging to my organization. --1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. I would do whatever it takes to help my organization. ---------------- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7