ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Unethical pro-organizational behavior: A review of existing literature

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Abstract. *Purpose*. This review paper aims at systematically identifying the unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) based on published literature available. The paper has discussed the general issues such as concept, motives, examples, influencing factors and consequences of UPB. *Methodology*. The author has made an extensive literature survey reviewing 53 papers collected from different databases such as Web of Science and Scopus published from 2010 to April, 2020. As per literature, there are a number of reasons for employees to be engaged in UPBs. However, although the motives behind such behavioral tendencies are multiple, the ultimate consequence of UPB is the severe damage of organizational reputation and trust of stakeholders. *Findings*. As per literature, there are a number of reasons for employees to be engaged in UPBs. However, although the motives behind such behavioral tendencies are multiple, the ultimate consequence of UPB is the severe damage of organizational reputation and trust of stakeholders. Implications for practice. This paper is expected to guide further theoretical and empirical investigations regarding this recent and wide-discussed phenomenon. Additionally, top executives can have some clues regarding the underlying factors influencing such behavior and take essential measures to de-motivate such intentions. *Value of the results*. Unethical pro-organizational behavior is a widely discussed issue at present at the behavioral academicians and policymakers are trying to discourage such behavioral actions at any cost. However, there is still a lack of proper and adequate research regarding this. The author is confident that this review paper based on 53 existing papers can be a baseline for novel investigations in terms of theory and practice.

Keywords: unethical pro-organizational behavior, organization, employee, morality, underlying factors.

Introduction

The present business organizations are increasingly experiencing fight for survival and competition for profit. As a result, employees of many organizations, profit or even non-profit orientations, are being involved in a few unique behavioral actions popularly termed as "Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB)" particularly from the last two decades (Hosain, 2019). As for multiple examples, we can highlight the most discussed similar behavioral tendencies such as Sanlu milk disorder (Duo et al., 2018) exposing consumers to melamine-tainted dairy goods, Volkswagen outrage (Castille et al., 2016) of toxic emissions, Catholic churches' child abuse outrage (Castille et al., 2016), Barings bank disgrace in the UK (Shaw, Liao, 2018) and Chinese hotpot scandal (Chen, Liang, 2017) of using the customers' food wastes. It is important to note that although such behavioral intentions are unfair and unethical from general viewpoints, the outcomes go to the favor of concerned organizations for

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the time being or short term length. As a matter of fact, those employees involved in UPBs claim that they actually serve their organizations by engaging into such acts (Umphress et al., 2010).

The concept of UPB as a novel behavioral dimension was first introduced to academia by E. E. Umphress, J. B. Bingham and M. S. Mitchell, where they termed such actions likely to uphold the successful procedure of the organization or top level management (e.g., leaders, CEOs) and violating the foundation social standards, norms, prevailing laws or principles of appropriate code of conducts (Umphress, Bingham, Mitchell, 2010; Umphress, Bingham, 2011). Therefore, while the core interest of a deviant workplace behavior is targeted against the organization, the basic intention of an UPB is to benefit the organization at the cost of general stakeholders' or public interests. A popular and most frequently used UPB is the hiding of real negativity of products in order to boost sales that ultimately add profit to the organization.

However, such UPBs can produce a number of negative consequences once such facts are revealed publicly. As UPBs have close interaction on a societal level, such actions can possibly generate disastrous consequences on organizational status towards its external stakeholders even though anticipated to make short term gain for the concerned organization (Umphress, Bingham, 2011; Vadera, Pratt, 2013). It should be admitted that the stakeholders outside the organization (e. g. customers and shareholders) are as significant as internal ones to whom the organization has the similar accountability by keeping the corporate reputation and utmost ethical standard (Hosain, 2019). Once such ethical standards and corporate social responsibilities are denied through the engagement in UPBs, the acceptability of an organization can be severely damaged that may lead to even winding up. A typical example of such an incident is the Enron scandal in the US that ultimately went bankrupt as a result of adopting dubious accounting practices (Britannica.com).

As a fairly unique dimension of employee behavior, UPBs have succeeded to attract sufficient attention from the scholars as we can see extensive ongoing efforts to reveal such behavioral intentions. However, the contents of such efforts (published and ongoing researches) are scattered and there is a need of logical organization and systematic integration of such outcomes. This review paper aims at exploring the existing published literature available, with a brief highlight of published sources, concepts and results. For due purpose, the author identified 53 papers published online from 2010 to April, 2020 from different databases such as Web of Science and Scopus. The contents and findings of those papers have been summarized in order to write this review paper.

A brief overview of UPBs: Concept, motives, examples, influencing factors and consequences

UPB: A brief concept

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the idea of UPB was initially introduced by E. E. Umphress, J. B. Bingham and M. S. Mitchell in 2010, indicating to the unethical, unfair and anti-social behavioral tendencies deliberately committed by some employees violating the norms, usual responsibilities and ethical standards while benefitting some of the stakeholders of an organization (Umphress et al., 2010). Such a definition brings forward two key components of UPBs. First, such a behavior is negative in terms of all ethical, moral and social standards. Second, those behaviors are intended to benefit a few stakeholders of an organization mostly internal (e.g. Board of Directors, top management). However, those who engage in such intentions are often short-sighted and ultimately damage the reputation of and trust on an organization that cannot be recovered in most cases.

Motives of UPBs

A really interesting question that is still under investigation and subject to mass scale research is what motivates the employees in engaging UPBs. This area of research is still scarce and due to

the complicated psychological nature of human mind that is attached to such behavioral intentions. However, one most discussed motive the researchers have already discovered is to benefit the respective organization in terms of profit. Quite a few research efforts have been conducted to spot the driving factors behind UPBs including Machiavellianism (Castille et al., 2016), organizational identification (Chen et al., 2016), psychological entitlement (Lee et al., 2017), inter-personal level factors including transformational leadership (Effelsberg et al., 2014), ethical leadership (Miao et al., 2013) and employee-organizational relationship (Wang et al., 2018). However, the notable motives of UPBs collected from published sources have been summarized and highlighted in table 1.

Table1. Motives behind UPBs

Author(s)	Motive(s)
Umphress, Bingham, Mitchell, 2010	Strong reciprocity beliefs with an expectation of a future reward from organization
Umphress, Bingham, 2011	Positive social exchange
Matherne, Litchfield, 2012	Affective commitment towards organization
Miao, Newman, Yu, Xu, 2013	Low to moderate ethical leadership
Graham, Ziegert, Capitano, 2015	Inspirational and charismatic transformational leadership
Shu, 2015	Organizational identification and co-workers' moral justification
Thau, Derfler-Rozin, Pitesa, Mitchell, Pillutla, 2015	Higher need for inclusion but higher risk of exclusion from the group or organization
Castille, Buckner, Thoroughgood, 2016	Dark trait of "Machiavellianism" and the perception that ethical standards matter less than organizational performance
Umphress, Bingham, 2011; Chen, Chen, Sheldon, 2016	Organizational identification and recognition
Ebrahimi, Yurtkoru, 2017	Higher affective commitment towards organization
Lee, Schwarz, Newman, Legood, 2017	Psychological entitlement
Shaw, Liao, 2018	Positive leadership influence
Duo, Chen, Lu, Li, Wang, 2018	Job satisfaction and organizational belongingness
Xu, Lv, 2018	High performance working systems
Bryant, Merritt, 2019	Higher leader-employee interpersonal relationship

Source: Literature survey

Table 2. Examples of UPBs

Author(s)	Examples of UPB
Cialdini, Petrova, Goldstein, 2004	Fabricating or exaggerating the accomplishments of their employing company to boost its reputation or to maintain its competitive advantage over a rival company
Gino, Pierce, 2009; Umphress, Bingham, Mitchell, 2010; Umphress, Bingham, 2011	Destructing incriminating files to protect an organization's reputation
Gino, Pierce, 2009; Umphress, Bingham, Mitchell, 2010; Umphress, Bingham, 2011	Disclosing false or exaggerated information to the public
Balko, 2011	Helping the colleagues, groups or organization to over-perform through unethical or illegal action
Palazzolo, 2011	Not properly reporting to the authorities regarding inappropriate actions of the supervisors or leader
Hoyt, Price, Poatsy, 2013	Internalized expectations of realizing collective goals associated
Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, Kish-Gephart, 2014	Alluring the employers of the competitors
Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, Kish-Gephart, 2014	Deceiving customers through misinformation
Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, Kish-Gephart, 2014, Ying, 2017	Forging or misrepresenting financial and social performance data
Kalshoven, van Dijk, Boon, 2016	Overlooking the ethical implications of their (employees') behaviors and the benefits of external stakeholders.
Xu, Lv, 2018	Employees hiding negative information about their company or products from customers for the interests of company

Source: Hosain, 2019.

However, the scholars are still investigating the factors motivating UPBs and such investigations are really have paramount importance in reducing or curving such behaviors.

A few examples of UPB

A number of examples of UPBs have been identified and noted in different published works. This paper has adopted some summarized results highlighted by Hosain (2019) in table 2.

Table 3 Factors affecting UPBs

Level	Factors	Author(s)
Individual level	Positive reciprocity beliefs	Umphress, Bingham, Mitchel, 2010; Umphress, Bingham, 2011
	Moral development of individuals	Umphress, Bingham, Mitchel, 2010; Umphres, Bingham, 2011
	Personal disposition toward ethical/unethical behavior	David, Marc, Jochen, 2014
	Recognition and approval from the organization	Thau, Derfler-Rozin, Pitesa, Mitchell, Pillutla, 2015; Zhang, 2016
	Moral identity	Wu, Shen, Sun, 2016
	High performance expectation	Chen, Liang, 2017
	Moral disengagement	Zhao, Zhou, 2017
	Psychological ownership	Xu, Lv, 2018
	Level of ego orientation of employees through the impact of its moral disengagement	Liu, 2018
	High performance pressure	Li, Wang, Zhu, Zhan, 2018
	Perceived job insecurity	Jiang, 2018
Organizational level	Organizational identity	Umphress, Bingham, Mitchel, 2010
	Organizational support	Alexandra, 2012
	Commitment towards organization	Matherne, Litchfield, 2012
	Organizational culture	Herchen, 2015
	Organizational ethical climate	Zhang, Jiang, Zhao, 2017
	Human resource management practices	Luo, Xu, 2017
Social level	Perceived social exchange relationship	Blau, 1964; Umphress, Bingham, 2011
	Perceived social exchange and organizational identity	Umphress, Bingham, 2011
Leadership / Supervisor level	Leaders'/supervisors' moral norms	Aquino, Reed, 2002
	Identification with leader/supervisor	Miao, Newman, Yu, Xu, 2013
	Leaders' moral identity internalization level	Mulder, Aquino, 2013
	Transformational leadership	David, Marc, Jochen, 2014
	Leaders' influence on employees' ethical cognition and behavior	David, Marc, Jochen, 2014; Kalshoven, Van, Dijk, Boon, 2016
	Influence of leadership style	Graham, Ziegert, Capitano, 2015
	Chronic regulatory focus	Li, 2016
	Ethical leadership	Kalshoven, Van, Dijk, Boon, 2016
	Servant leadership	Wu, Shao, Sun, Li, 2017
	Leader-subordinate exchange and differential leadership	Lin, Cheng, 2016; 2017
	Organizational embodiment	Wang, Ying, 2018
	Psychological empowerment	Xu, Wang, Fan, 2018
	Superior-subordinate relationship	Zhong, Wang, Luo, Song, 2018
	Paternalistic leadership	Li, Li, Xu, Wu, 2019

Source: Literature survey.

UPBs: The influencing factors

Different studies have exposed that UPBs are affected by numerous factors at different levels (individual, organization, leadership and society) and those factors at different levels have a

significant impact on it. As a matter of fact, such factors were introduced as the moderators and/ or mediators by the researchers in their empirical investigations (Zhang, Xiao, 2020). In order to reveal which factors affect UPBs and the influence of such factors on it, this paper has summarized the pertinent literature available. Table 3 lists the factors influencing UPBs at different four levels of their mechanisms of action.

UPBs: Unintended consequences

Although, UPBs are directed towards short term gains, such tendencies and actions might bring severe consequences for any organization. First of all, the external stakeholders such as customers and suppliers are affected due to hiding or misrepresentation of information and being uninformed about the real facts. As a result, once such fabrications or hidings are unmasked, they (those who are affected) loss their trust on the respective organizations that might reduce the consumption of company products or services. Second, UPBs might create a kind of unhealthy competition among the employees in order to gain recognition from the top management with such unethical actions. Finally, UPBs can demolish the organization by dropping the organizational reputation sharply and even lead them towards legal sue or bankruptcy once such actions are revealed. The ultimate consequence may even turn to winding up. However, based on literature, this paper has listed the following consequences of UPBs:

1) obliteration of organizational image to the industry and societal levels;
2) upsetting interpersonal relationship through creating competition for UPBs;
3) sacrificing competitive advantage to the competitions once UPBs are reported;
4) facing legal actions by the civil activist groups and the Government;
5) reduction in sales volume as a result of negative image;
6) winding up of the organization due to bankruptcy or unfavorable court order.

Discouraging unethical practices

UPBs should be discouraged at any cost in order to save the organizations from final destruction. In this regard, the top management such as supervisors / leaders should take the leading roles in discouraging such practices and encourage healthy and fair competition inside and outside the organization. Organizations should formulate and implement their policies and practices in such a manner that punish UPBs conducted by the employees and reward the fair, competitive actions undertaken by the employees.

Regarding supervisors or leaders, employees are required to be motivated, trained and appreciated for not engaging in UPBs. Those leaders can arrange informal training sessions or meetings time to time to discuss such issues or agendas with proper follow ups. However, every supervisor has an important role in this case to observe the activities and actions performed by the employees under him / her.

All of the above measures suggested, if taken properly, can de-motivate the unethical intentions of both top level mangers and general employees regarding UPBs. However, preventing and discouraging UPBs it is a tricky and time consuming process and only the combined efforts supported by ethical and moral beliefs can curb such behavioral practices.

Theoretical and practical implications

The paper has summarized almost all the essential components of UPBs based on published sources of literature. Although, there are several attempts to identify and examine different

influencing factors (e.g. variables, mediators and moderators) through empirical quantitative investigations, theoretical attempts to identify and analyze UPBs are still scarce in academia (Liu, Qiu, 2015). Therefore, it is expected that a rich, informative theoretical paper can fill such gap to a substantial extent that will act as the baseline for further theoretical and empirical investigations.

On the other hand, the managers or policymakers can get enough ideas regarding the negative role of UPBs for their respective organizations. Further, they might get sufficient clues or identifiers from such a paper so as to avoid or discourage UPBs in their organizations.

Limitations and further scope

This is a very theoretical paper that discusses the basic details of UPBs. Further studies should be conducted on this precise area of organizational psychology since the identification and reduction of UPBs is vital from not only ethical standpoint, but also to protect the organizations from ultimate demolition.

Rationally, such behaviors are required to be studied from different angles, cultures and management perspectives. Therefore, elevating the theoretical study of UPBs and additionally illuminating the consequences are the priority concerns of the current study.

Conclusion

Presently, ethics, corporate social responsibility and sustainable competitive advantage are the three most widely discussed issues in management academia. As a fairly recent issue in ethical perspective, the importance to identify and work on UPBs is not only limited to individual and organizational scopes, but also to greater societal aspects considering its far-reaching effects.

As a matter of fact, it cannot be denied that an organization itself and the leaders (supervisors) can promote (or discourage) such behavioral actions to a large extent through honest, transparent and open policies as well as their leadership influence. A more rigorous, cooperative and sustainable organizational culture with a strong ethical leadership practice and organizational influence can only reduce UPBs. Organizations can arrange ethical training for the general employees in order to dishearten such behaviors. To be in general, UPBs can be reduced to a greater extent through organizational intentions and actions.

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Неэтичное про-организационное поведение: обзор существующей литературы

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Аннотация. *Цель*. Этот обзорный документ направлен на систематическое выявление неэтичного про-организационного поведения (UPB) на основе доступной опубликованной литературы. В статье обсуждаются общие вопросы, такие как концепция, мотивы, примеры, влияющие факторы и последствия UPB. *Методология*. Автор провел обширный обзор литературы, в котором рассмотрены 53 статьи, собранные из различных баз данных, таких как Web of Science и Scopus, опубликованные с 2010 по апрель 2020 года. Согласно литературным источникам, есть ряд причин, по которым сотрудники должны участвовать в UPB. Однако, хотя мотивы, лежащие в основе таких поведенческих тенденций, многочисленны, конечным следствием UPB является серьезный ущерб репутации организации и доверию заинтересованных сторон. *Результаты*. Согласно литературным источникам, есть ряд причин, по которым сотрудники могут работать в UPB. Однако, хотя мотивы, стоящие за такими поведенческими тенденциями, многочисленны, конечным следствием UPB является серьезный ущерб репутации организации и доверию заинтересованных сторон. *Значение для практики*. Ожидается, что эта статья послужит руководством для дальнейших теоретических и эмпирических исследований этого недавнего и широко обсуждаемого явления. Кроме того, высшее руководство может иметь некоторые подсказки относительно основных факторов, влияющих на такое поведение, и принимать необходимые меры для демотивирования таких намерений. *Ценность результатов*. Неэтичное про-организационное поведение — это широко обсуждаемая проблема в настоящее время в академиках, занимающихся поведением, и разработчики политики пытаются любой ценой воспрепятствовать подобным поведенческим действиям. Однако до сих пор нет надлежащих и адекватных исследований по этому поводу. Автор уверен, что эта обзорная статья, основанная на 53 существующих статьях, может стать основой для новых исследований с точки зрения теории и практики.

Ключевые слова: неэтичное проорганизационное поведение, организация, сотрудник, мораль, лежащие в основе факторы.