

Responsible Leadership and Employee Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior: Applying the Theory of Planned Behavior

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ABSTRACT: *Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) advances the short-term interests but eventually harm the long-term interests of the organization. It is very important to clarify what kind of leadership styles could help the organization to regulate UPB. Applying the theory of planned behaviour, We suggest that responsible leadership may regulate UPB of employees effectively via shaping employees' perceptions of UPB (attitude toward UPB, subjective norm toward UPB, and perceived behavior control toward UPB). The proposed model shows how responsible leadership has potential to address UPB. Theoretical and practical implications of our proposed model are discussed.*

KEY WORD: *Unethical pro-organizational behavior, Responsible leadership, Theory of planned behavior*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The corporate scandals such as Volkswagen emission crisis and Facebook data leak have triggered a heated public outcry for rethinking business ethics. These scandals reveal that unethical behavior is widespread in organizations (Umphress et al. 2010). An extensive body of research has focused on behavior that is counterproductive to organization development (e.g. Greenberg 2002). However, scholars have shown that employees may engage in unethical behavior with the intention of benefiting the organization, its members or both, referred to in the literature as unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB; Umphress & Bingham 2011). A specific case of UPB is earning management that accountants manipulate reporting earning in order to achieve performance goal (Tian & Peterson 2016).

From a practical standpoint, UPB can be seen as organization-gain unethical behavior which advances the short-term interests but eventually harm the long-term interests of the organization (Cullinan et al. 2008), given that the revelation of UPB adversely affect not only the external stakeholders but also internal stakeholders (Umphress & Bingham 2011). For example, selling unsafe products might help organizations get better profits, which are considered as being pro-organizational, but it might be a great hidden danger in the future, because deceived consumers will lose confidence on products and may take legal action. As illustrated above, once UPB is unmasked, organizational reputations and public trust are exposed to serious damage (Graham et al. 2013; Umphress & Bingham 2011), and it is significant to understand the underlying mechanisms which help explain when employees would engage in unethical but pro-organizational behavior.

Given that leaders play a critical role in influencing employee behavior regarding to ethical issues (Brown & Treviño 2006; Brown et al. 2005), research on determinants of UPB has raised concerns on leadership, such as transformational leadership (Effelsberg et al. 2014) and ethical leadership (Miao et al 2013). Previous research emphasizes on the ethical dimension of leadership directed at supervisory levels in regulating the UPB of employees. However, as mentioned above, the revelation of UPB has an adverse impact on both internal and external stakeholders, especially in a global and interconnected world, which calls for leadership directed at higher organizational levels in regulating UPB. Kotter (1990) suggested that the behavior of leadership can be concluded as establishing direction, motivating and inspiring organizational members, and aligning people, which contributes to leadership effectiveness. That is to say, appropriate leadership is an essential for regulating UPB of employees. Drawing on theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen 1991), we argue that responsible leadership (RL; Pless 2007), as a social-relational and value-based phenomenon (Maak & Pless 2006), may influence employees' perceptions of UPB (attitude toward UPB, subjective norm toward UPB, and perceived behavior control toward UPB) negatively.

The remainder of this study is organized as follows: First, we review the literature regarding UPB and RL. Second, we present a proposed model and advance propositions. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the proposed model and significant implications for research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB)

UPB refers to behaviors that seek to benefit the organization, its members or both but violate core societal values, mores, laws, or standards of proper conduct (Umphress & Bingham 2011). The concept of UPB highlights two key components. First, UPB is unethical behavior, meaning that behavior is “either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community” (Jones 1991), such as exaggerating the company’s performance to attract more investment and concealing negative information to defend the company image. Second, UPB is pro-organizational behavior, from which the UPB perpetrator intends to advance the organization, members of the organization, or both simultaneously (Matherne & Litchfield 2012). Unethical behaviors of only self-serving purposes are excluded from the conceptualization of UPB since it primarily does not consider the organization or its members. Nevertheless, Umphress et al. (2010) argued that the UPB perpetrator may also get benefits while UPB benefiting the organization. As such, UPB motivation is often a mixture of altruism and egoism.

To limit the conceptualization of UPB, the main boundary conditions are identified to ensure that inappropriate behavior will not fall into the UPB category (Umphress & Bingham 2011). First of all, if unethical behaviors are committed without a specific aim, they should not constitute UPB. Secondly, as long as unethical behaviors are committed with the starting point of benefiting the organization, its members or both, those acts are classified as UPB regardless of the outcomes. Finally, as noted earlier, unethical actions with the intention of benefiting the self alone are not considered as UPB.

Extent research on the driving forces of UPB can be categorized into three types of factors, including individual factors, leadership factors, and contextual factors. Firstly, individual factors have largely focused on attitudinal predictors, such as organizational identification (Effelsberg et al. 2014; Umphress et al. 2010), affective commitment (Matherne & Litchfield 2012) and psychological entitlement (Lee et al. 2017), as well as dispositional factors, such as Machiavellianism (Castille et al. 2016). Notably, according to Umphress et al. (2010), individuals with strong organizational identification alone do not engage in UPB unless individuals feel strong organizational identification in combination with positive reciprocity beliefs. Secondly, as for leadership factors, Effelsberg et al. (2014) indicated that transformational leadership has a positive impact on UPB, while there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between ethical leadership and UPB (Miao et al. 2013). Additionally, Graham et al. (2013) suggested that employees of inspirational and charismatic transformational leaders are more likely to commit UPB than employees of transactional leaders when losing frame is used. Thirdly, contextual factors have received limited attention. Wang et al. (2018) revealed that high-inducement employee-organization relationships as an organizational-level antecedent of employees UPB.

2.2 Responsible Leadership (RL)

Primarily driven by normative stakeholder theory (Waldman 2011), Pless(2007) defines responsible leadership (RL) as a “values-based and through ethical principles driven relationship between leaders and stakeholders who are connected through a sheared sense of meaning and purpose through which they raise one another to higher levels of motivation and commitment for achieving sustainable values creation and social change”. The concept of RL combines theories of social responsibility and leadership (Waldman& Siegel 2008; Maak & Pless 2006). In other words, delivering on the triple bottom line (economic sustainability, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability; Elkington 1997) is at the heart of RL (Miska & Mendenhall 2018).

RL focus on sustainable relationship between organization leaders and internal stakeholders as well as external stakeholders (Cameron 2011).According to Waldman (2011), little is known about leadership theory in allusion to organizational level, while most of leadership theories have focused on inter-organizational relationship (e.g. leader-follower relationship; team-oriented relationship). Compared with ethical leadership (Brown & Trevino 2006), the main difference exists in paradigmatic outlooks (Pless & Maak 2011). That is, ethical leadership focuses on leader-follower relationship outcomes (e.g. leader effectiveness and employee job satisfaction), whereas RL emphasizes on sustainable value creation through taking stakeholders into account from a relational point of view. Several scholars (Maak 2007; Maak & Pless 2006) have suggested that RL goes beyond the internal perspective of leadership and broaden the view from a leader-follower relationship to a leader-stakeholder relationship in a global setting.

Expect quality stakeholder relationships mentioned above, Doh and Stumpf (2005) argue that responsible leadership and governance contains two more dimensions: (1) values-based leadership; (2) ethical decision making. According to Voegtlin et al. (2012), RL is rooted on normative framework of discourse ethics and societal deliberation. However, the concept of RL is expressed implicitly in ethical characteristics (Voegtlin et al. 2012).Given ethical characteristics of a particular context lead to ambiguity in a global setting (Waldman 2011), several scholars (Voegtlin et al.2010) have noted that ethical characteristics are internalized as antecedents of RL, which allows for a critical justification in cases where descriptive ethical characteristics cause confusion regarding to intercultural justification (Voegtlin et al. 2012). Most leadership theories conceptualize leader effectiveness in leader traits (e.g. honesty, integrity and trustworthiness; Brown et al. 2005), whereas RL is a process model of

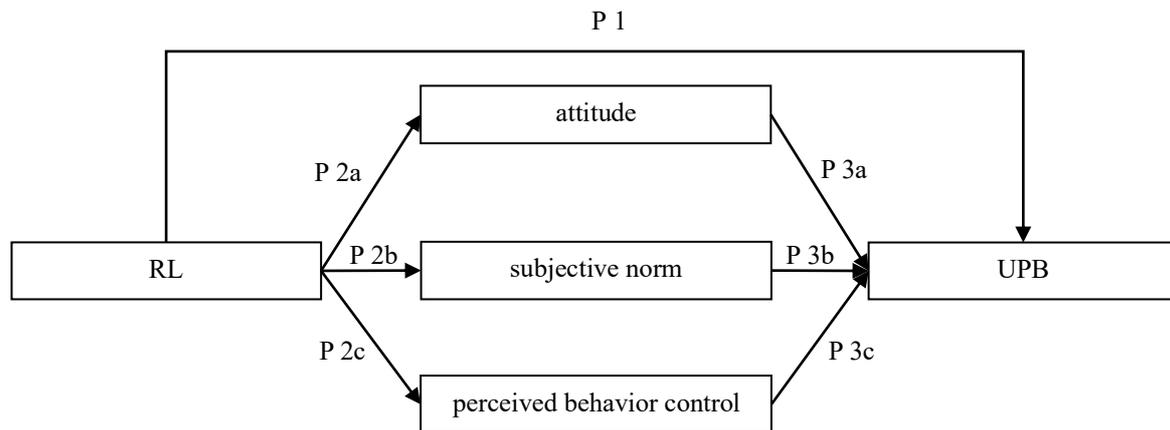
leadership conceptualizing effectiveness in seeking consensual solutions with stakeholders (Voegtlin et al. 2012). In a nutshell, RL adopts ethical means to multi-stakeholder goals (Maak & Pless 2006).

A growing number of studies have investigated the outcomes of RL, such as turnover intention (Doh et al. 2011). However, little is known about how RL affects employees' unethical behaviors. The current study focuses on RL from an individual perspective and the effect of RL on employees' intentions to unethical behavior for benefits of the organization (i.e. UPB).

III. PROPOSED MODEL

3.1 RL and Employee UPB

Figure 1: Proposed Model



Little is known about the relationship between the relatively new idea of RL and employee UPB. However, previous studies have found that various leadership approaches influence employee UPB (e.g. Effelsberg et al. 2014; Miao et al. 2013). According to Bandura (1986), being salient authority figures, leaders who have the power to control reward are served as effective role model, whose behavior is as essential for employees learning within organizations. Therefore, considering leaders function as role models influencing employee's behavior, we use social learning theory (SLT) to explain the link between RL and employee UPB.

SLT (Bandura 1986) proposes that in addition to direct experience, an individual can also learn through indirect experience, which suggests that learning can also occur by observing others' behavior and its outcome. SLT has been applied to examining various organizational issues, ranging from understanding the leadership-employee outcomes relationship (e.g. Brown et al. 2005) to explaining the contagion of unethical behavior between peers (e.g. Fallon & Butterfield 2012). SLT has been empirically validated in leadership studies (e.g. Tucker et al. 2010), recognizing that an individual can learn and reinforce the behavior exhibited by positive role models (e.g. leaders; Bandura 1997).

Responsible leaders consider employees as a primary stakeholder group (Pless & Maak 2011), which contributes to a climate of psychological trust and respect (Doh & Quigley 2014), thus leading employees to regard their leaders as trustworthy role models. Following SLT, employees attracted by leaders are likely to imitate leaders' behavior. Responsible leaders as attractive role models can provide employees with a clear roadmap for ethically sound decision-making because employees learn from leaders decision-making process in which responsible leaders engage all stakeholders both internal and external (Cameron 2011). Furthermore, for reaching a consensus with multiple stakeholders, responsible leaders get into the relational work through using their influence to initiate active stakeholder dialogues (Voegtlin et al. 2012). According to Gargiulo and Benassi (2000), occupying brokerage positions makes leaders benefit from better access to information, thus enabling responsible leaders to remain influential power (Maak 2007). Even though employees are generally less powerful than leaders, it is likely that the decision-making process displayed by responsible leaders will be molded by employees who realize that stakeholder engagement is essential for ethical business practices and sustainable development (Maak 2007). Employees working for responsible leaders are less likely to help the organization (the pro-organization) at the expense of violating law or morality (unethical behavior), because these behaviors tend to damage stakeholders' interests, such as lying to customers for increased sales. In addition, according to Umphress and Bingham (2011), employees commit UPB stemming from positive social exchange relationships with their organization and employer, especially when hoping to get the favorable treatment of exchange gifts. Employees who want to have the favorable repaid from UPB may lose sight of moral standards of society (Umphress & Bingham 2011), which may lead to catastrophic consequences for the organization itself and its stakeholders in the fields of morals, economy and even law. De Luque et al. (2008) suggest that leaders emphasizing economic values are perceived as the short-term orientation leadership, while leaders attaching importance to stakeholder

values is conducive to cultivating employees a broad and long-term view, thus increasing employee's willing to sacrifice their own personal needs for a big picture. When employees are aware of the potentially detrimental effects of UPB in the long run, the short-term interests of the chase are not advocated which may result in inhibiting employee UPB.

Proposition 1: There is a negative relationship between RL and employee UPB.

3.2 RL and TPB

As the extension of the theory of reasoned action (TRA; Ajzen & Fishbein 1980), TPB is a parsimonious theory model for explaining various behaviors (Armitage & Conner 2001). The TRA postulates that behavior can be predicted by the behavioral intention which are influenced by two significant factors: attitudes and subjective norm (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). Attitude refers to the positive or negative emotion that an individual hold in engaging in a behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975), whereas subjective norm reflects the perceived social pressure from the significant others, such as family members and colleagues (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975).

Ajzen (1985) found that the intention focuses solely on the prediction of whether or not an individual attempt to perform the behavior under TRA, yet it has neglected factors beyond person's control (i.e. nonvolitional factors), which leads to an over predicted value of the actual behavior. Based on TRA, TPB was developed by adding a new factor, perceived behavior control (PBC; Ajzen 1991). PBC refers to the degree to which an individual expects to be able to control regarding the target behavior, that is, the individual's perception of the promotion or impediment of executing a behavior (Ajzen 1991).

Deci and Ryan (1985) noted that original antecedents of behavior are often overlooked. According to Ajzen (1988), intrinsic beliefs, namely attitude, normative beliefs and PBC can be influenced by personal attitudes and personality traits, social norms and values, and the environmental conditions surrounding a person, while employee cognitions of social norms and organizational conditions are mainly shaped by leadership. This indicated that RL is an original source for understanding employee UPB within the TPB model.

3.2.1 RL and Attitude toward UPB

In this study, attitude toward UPB refers to the degree to which an individual evaluation of UPB positively. Within an organization, leadership strongly shapes employees' attitude toward unethical behavior through influencing three key components consisting of employee's attitude, namely cognition, affect and conation (Allport 1954).

In terms of cognition, the cognitive structures of employees are influenced by two main routes, refreshing cognitive structures (e.g. by communications) that are already rooted in employee cognitive library, and developing and cultivating new cognitive structures, both of which affected by symbolic actions of leaders (Lord & Brown 2001). Firstly, responsible leaders emphasizing stakeholders' values and long-term consequences of decisions with their employees in the communication, which may directly prime some employees the pre-existing cognition of considering internal and external stakeholder groups. Especially in the Confucian culture context, responsible leaders may evoke a strong cognitive response in employees believing Confucian faithful which advocates to comply with the code of ethics (i.e. Yi in Chinese) in the face of benefits (Jianlisiyi in Chinese). Secondly, as role models, responsible leaders provide an ethical vision of discursive conflict resolution for employees by initiating active stakeholder dialogues (Voegtlin et al. 2012), which chronically influences employees' cognitive structures through leaders' actions, internalizing responsible leaders' value.

Employees engaging in UPB violates societal values, which defies responsible leaders' expectations, to enhance the and sustainability and legitimacy of business (Maak 2007). Employees tend to see only the potential benefit associated with UPB and push aside the potential severity of the unethical act (Umphress & Bingham 2011). Responsible leaders inspire employees by envisioning a desired future in the context of a stakeholder society rather than merely pursuing profits (Maak & Pless 2006), which promotes social capital that creates stakeholder goodwill and that facilitate responsible action in the pursuit of responsible change (Maak 2007). Hence, if leaders stress that behavior really worthwhile comes up only by ethical means, engaging in UPB would not be reciprocated by their organization, especially for those who desire to future reward in return for committing UPB. Responsible leaders help employees evoke or develop cognitive structures about the multi-stakeholder responsibility, produce negative affectivity towards irresponsible behaviors like UPB and unwillingly to commit UPB.

Proposition 2a: RL is negatively related to employees' attitude toward UPB.

3.2.2 RL and Subjective Norm toward UPB

Subjective norm toward UPB reflects an individual's perceived social pressure from significant others (i.e. leaders and peers) on committing UPB. In the organizational context, leaders who act as salient role models have the authority and power to tell employees what to do by virtue of leaders' legitimate status (Brown et al. 2005) and as such they represent "significant others". This means that employers pay close attention to their

leaders who have the power to allocate significant resources (Brown & Treviño 2006), thus regulating employers' behavior. Under these conditions, responsible leaders care about more long-term instead of short-term economic gains in the pursuit of sustainable future, which can be achieved by mobilizing employees through RL charisma (Maak 2007). Moreover, RL is "a social-relational and ethical phenomenon, which occurs in social processes of interaction" (Maak & Pless 2006). For mobilizing stakeholders both insider and outside, responsible leaders serve as weavers of social ties (i.e. social capital) to future the common good (Maak & Pless 2006). Notably, responsible leaders, as social-relational weavers, are more likely to aware that the relational symmetry of resources inherent in social capital is critical in mutually beneficial responsible action (Maak 2007). Specifically, emphasizing societal welfare (Miska & Mendenhall 2018) require responsible leaders to align social responsibility with profit maximization (Waldman & Siegel 2008), instead of solely focusing on shareholder value (Jensen 2001). Hence, employees bear less pressure from significant others, namely responsible leaders, on committing UPB, since UPB is a temporary expedient for helping organization itself but devoid of thorough consideration of stakeholders.

Abrams et al. (1998) found that subjective norm are significant in the collectivistic context of Japan, suggesting that the self-concept of people under collectivism more underlines interdependent relationships. That is to say: people act in accordance with significant other expectation in the context of China. Therefore, employees confronted with ethical conflicts act according to organization culture (Trevino 1986), because organizational culture that provide the collective norm is established mainly by leaders (Schein 1985). According to Voegtlin et al. (2012), responsible leaders set an example for employees by concerning long-term consequences of decisions and initiating stakeholder dialogues for mutual benefit through ethical means, which gradually influences the ethical culture in organizations. The ethical culture stimulates employees to act ethically, which impedes unethical behavior (Craft 2013).

Proposition 2b: RL is negatively related to employees' subjective norm toward UPB.

3.2.3 RL and PBC toward UPB

PBC toward UPB reflects the degree to which individuals' perceived control over factors that may foster the commitment of UPB, including internal (e.g., skill) and external factors (e.g. social support). According to Ajzen (1991), PBC and self-efficacy belief can be used interchangeably, since both of two constructs emphasize on the perceived control over performance of a behavior (Ajzen 2010). Bandura (1991) suggest that self-efficacy is influenced by social factors such as leadership.

Employees may feel they have a "mandate" from their leaders to engage in UPB in two cases. First, when leaders support amoral initiatives, employees are likely to consider that goals trump societal code (Umphress & Bingham 2011). Second, according to Miao et al. (2013), moderate levels of ethical leadership surprisingly will stimulate employees to commit greater UPB than those guided by both low and high levels of ethical leadership, which mainly result from leaders who exhibit moderate levels of ethical leadership may not always confirmedly walk the talk in ethical issues (Kalshoven et al. 2011). This leads employees not to take ethical issues seriously. According to Cameron (2011), "responsible leadership is equated with virtuous leadership" who evaluate what is good and wrong on the basis of universal moral principles. Responsible leaders whose moral development in highest stages (Kohlberg 1969) behave more ethically than those who attain lower level of moral development (Greenberg 2002), providing employees with a clear message to act in an ethical manner, similar to high levels of ethical leadership (Miao et al 2013). In this way, employees who are influenced by responsible leaders are less likely to authorize UPB as a suggestive signal from their leaders.

Three ways, namely mastery experiences, vicarious learning, and social persuasion, contribute to enhance self-efficacy (Bandura 1986). As mentioned early, responsible leaders who serve as a role model provides behavioral guidelines for employees. Observing how their leaders perform ethically as vicarious learning is a self-reinforcing (Cameron 2012). In other words, employees act ethically they can based on what their leaders act. Moreover, Responsible leaders actively communicate with their employees who are seen as primary stakeholders (Pless 2007; Maak & Pless 2006). This communicating process is likely to serve as persuasive process, thereby enhancing employees' self-efficacy to behave ethically (Bandura 1997). According to Umphress and Bingham (2011), the neutralization process is a key mechanism through which employees engage in UPB confidently, because employees can mask, overlook, or dismiss the ethicality associated with UPB in the neutralizing process (Sykes & Matza 1957). Increased self-efficacy required to act ethically are likely to reduce employee PBC toward UPB, an unethical behavior threatening the perpetrator self-image.

Proposition 2c: RL is negatively related to employees' PBC toward UPB.

3.3 TPB and UPB

TPB has been applied to predict different human social behaviors effectively, such as blood donation (Armitage & Conner(a) 2001). Moreover, according to the meta-analytic review (Armitage & Conner(b), 2001), the efficacy of TPB in predicting behaviors has been confirmed, especially unethical behavior (Man 1998). Our current study focuses on the effect of attitude, subjective norm and PBC toward UPB to execute UPB.

Proposition 3a: Employees' attitude toward UPB is positively related to UPB.

Proposition 3b: Employees' subjective norm toward UPB is positively related to UPB.

Proposition 3c: Employees' PBC toward UPB is positively related to UPB.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article has focused on how RL regulates UPB of employees through TPB. The breeding and spreading of UPB will do great harm to the development of organizations. The proposed model we have advanced here helps to understand how to control UPB. RL is different from most of leadership theories, as it broadens the view from a leader-follower relationship to a leader-stakeholder relationship to handle the relationship with various stakeholders. We proposed RL has the potential to influence employees' perceptions of UPB, regulating their unethical behavior on behalf of the organization. The contributions of this study are threefold. First, UPB offers a unique perspective that allows us to examine unethical behavior within organizations critically. Thus, exploring the managerial leadership by the adoption of a multi-stakeholder perspective and the processes regulating UPB of employees have practical implications for leaders who want to prevent such behavior from occurring. Second, by considering attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavior control as a mechanism underlying the relationship between RL and UPB, we attempt to uncover how RL influences employees to engage in UPB in a comprehensive way through TPB. Finally, the present study contributes to the existing literature by answering the call of scholars to explore the outcomes of RL (Miska & Mendenhall 2018; Voegtlin et al. 2012). We encourage future research to exam our propositions empirically, which promotes the further development of the RL field and the understanding of UPB.

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