Motivation Analysis of Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior

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Abstract: Unethical pro-organizational behavior, which have garnered attention in recent years, refer to unethical actions that serve the short-term interests of an organization but ultimately inflict severe damage on its long-term prospects. While the initial intention behind these behaviors may be to safeguard organizational interests, it is crucial not to forsake the long-term sustainable development of the enterprise. Therefore, comprehending the underlying causes of unethical pro-organizational behavior becomes imperative for fostering effective prevention strategies within enterprises. This study systematically examines the motivations driving unethical pro-organizational behavior by employing the theory of planned behavior, renowned for its explanatory power concerning individual unethical conduct. By integrating and analyzing antecedent variables at both individual, interpersonal levels, and organizational perspectives within existing research studies, we aim to explore a comprehensive and systematic explanatory mechanism for understanding these motivations.

Keywords: unethical pro-organizational behavior, theory of planned behavior, motivation

1. Introduction

With the progress of businesses, there has been a growing interest in the topic of business ethics from both academia and industry. The incessant exposure of corporate unethical incidents in recent years not only exerts a detrimental impact on the business environment but also inflicts severe damage to the reputation and long-term development of enterprises. Although not all employee unethical behavior is driven by destructive intentions, it can still have a negative impact on the enterprise, whether unintentional or even well-intentioned. The unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), observed in recent years, refers to actions that prioritize the short-term interests of an organization while ultimately inflicting seriously damage on its long-term prospects. The original intention of UPB, although aimed at safeguarding the interests of the organization, should not neglect the long-term sustainable development of the organization. For instance, prominent executives like Warren Buffett have acknowledged that individuals may engage in unethical practices within their professional domains to align with the expectations of Wall Street.[1] However, such conducts can potentially tarnish a company's reputation and erode public trust. Therefore, the investigation of the underlying causes behind UPB is crucial in ensuring the robust development of enterprises and contributes to the enhancement of social business civilization.

In the past decade, the phenomenon of individuals engaging in UPB has received considerable attention in the field of management research, and has been extensively investigated by researchers, who have examined the temporal and motivational factors underlying such behaviors, as well as their subsequent consequences. This body of work sheds light on numerous theoretical perspectives and enhances our understanding of the antecedents and consequences associated with these behaviors. Yet current studies on the motivational factors of UPB face the challenge in providing a cohesive and comprehensive explanation of UPB motivation from a systematic perspective. The aim of this review is to synthesize existing research findings and provide a systematic discussion on the motivation of UPB by adopting theory of planned behavior from behavioral generation perspective, based on the planning characteristics of UPB.

2. Unethical pro-organizational behavior

2.1 Definition and conceptualization of UPB

Research on the factors driving employees' engagement in unethical conduct within an organization

has identified a distinct form of unethical behavior, which is motivated by the pursuit of organizational profits. Given this, UPB is defined as actions that are intended to enhance the effective functioning of the organization or its members (e.g., leaders), but at the same time, they violate fundamental core societal values, norms, laws, or standards of proper conduct.[2] The definition encompasses two essential components. Firstly, UPB refers to immoral conduct that deviates from moral norms or general social standards. Secondly, it emphasizes the concealed motive behind such behavior, which is driven by the interests of the organization or its members (or both).[3] This definition compensates for the previously overlooked unethical conduct in prior studies, wherein certain studies did involve advantageous unethical behavior but failed to consider whether such behavior was motivated by organizational assistance. In addition, the previous research on unethical behavior has extensively examined the outcome of such behavior, providing both theoretical explanations and empirical evidence. However, the concept of UPB shifts its focus towards the pro-organizational nature of the behavior rather than solely emphasizing its ultimate behavioral consequences.[4]

The concept of UPB is characterized by three boundary conditions. Firstly, UPB originates from a deliberate intention to safeguard the interests of the organization, which is different from errors, mistakes, or unconscious negligence related to work that lack a specific purpose of benefit or harm. Secondly, the outcomes of engaging in UPB may not align with the initial objective of safeguarding the organization's interests. Finally, the ultimate objective of the UPB is to ensure the long-term viability of the organization; therefore, any unethical conduct driven solely by self-interest cannot be categorized as UPB. In other words, while egoistic motives may be present in UPB, it must also consider organizational factors in its decision-making process.[3]

2.2 The planned characteristics of UPB

Of the three boundaries, the deliberate intention refers to "those behaviors that are purposely intended to benefit". In other words, when employees decide to commit UPB, they have the expectation of being rewarded by the organization in the future while safeguarding the interests of the organization.[3] Thus, it can be seen, the determination of UPB is made by employees through a careful evaluation of the pros and cons, taking into consideration various factors. UPB is not just a single action, but rather a series of interconnected steps that are methodically executed to achieve a specific goal. It involves a deep understanding of the company's objectives, the market dynamics, and the internal and external resources available. Employees consider factors such as time constraints, budget limitations, and potential risks, adjusting as necessary to ensure the success of their plans. Moreover, UPB is characterized by its forward-thinking and proactive approach to problem-solving. Employees are not just reacting to situations as they arise, but instead are proactively making plans to mitigate potential issues before they even arise. This predictive mindset allows for a more strategic and efficient use of resources, as well as a smoother overall execution of plans. In conclusion, UPB is a kind of behavior with the characteristic of planning.

The recent studies also offer a theoretical foundation for the application of planned behavior theory in elucidating UPB conduct. Research on social exclusion and unethical pro-group behavior suggests that exclusion risk promotes planned behavior aimed at organizational integration.[5] The theory of planned behavior is utilized to explain the association among organizational identity, the superior-subordinate relationship and UPB.[6] Moreover, the impact of individual psychological factors (such as perceived obligation and organizational identity), on UPB is illustrated within the framework of the planned behavior theory.[7] Hence, we employ the theory of planned behavior model to study the motivation behind engaging in UPB under two conditions: firstly, considering the planned characteristics of UPB; and secondly, acknowledging that numerous scholars have extensively referenced and verified the theory of planned behavior's robust explanatory power concerning both general actions generation and unethical behaviors.[8]

3. Motivation Analysis of UPB Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior

3.1 Theory of Planned Behavior

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) is extended by the introduction of perceived behavioral control, which enhances the theoretical model of rational behavior.[8] According to this theory, a strong intention to engage in a particular behavior increases the likelihood of actualizing that behavior. Behavioral intention is formed through the joint influence of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control.[9] The term "attitude" refers to the positive or negative affective states that an individual holds

towards a specific behavior, which is formed through the individual's evaluation and conceptualization of the behavior. "Subjective norm" means the social pressure that individuals experience in relation to their decision of whether to adopt a specific behavior. In other words, when predicting the behavior of others, the influential individuals or groups who have an impact on their decision-making process play a crucial role in determining whether an individual will adopt the behavior. The concept of "perceived behavioral control" encompasses the reflection of an individual's past experiences and anticipated obstacles. As an individual perceives greater access to resources and opportunities, coupled with reduced expectations of obstacles, their perceived behavioral control over their actions strengthens. TPB illustrates that attitudes, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control are predictors of behavioral intentions, and behavioral intentions are predictors of behaviors. It is worth noting that the later introduction of perceptual behavioral control directly affects behavior and interacts with behavioral intentions, i.e. behavioral intentions are affected by foreseeable obstacles. In the theory of planned behavior, it is the perception of behavior control rather than the actual behavior control that is adopted. Therefore, in some situations, it may be different from the fact, and the predictive power of perceived behavior control on behavior will also be reduced. Therefore, only when the perception of behavior control is consistent with the actual behavior control of individuals, can the path of perceived behavior control directly predict behavior be established.[10] As shown in Figure 1, the model of planned behavior theory posits that attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavior control synergistically influence behavioral intention.

The TPB theory indicates that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are all interconnected with beliefs, which serve as manifestations of the underlying cognitive structure. Each behavioral belief links an action to a potential consequence or cost. The individual's attitude is influenced by the strength of belief generated through their assessment of potential behavioral outcomes, in accordance with the principle of the expected value model. In addition, the subjective norms are associated with the external pressure of attitudes on individual behaviors. The underlying normative beliefs and the attitudes of other individuals or organizations serve as references that influence individuals' engagement in specific behaviors. The control beliefs serve as precursors to the perception of behavioral control and are associated with an individual's assessment of specific factors that impact their decision to engage in a particular behavior, such as available resources, opportunities, and obstacles hindering the desired action.[10]

The theory of planned behavior delves into the individual decision-making processes influenced by social and psychological factors, making it a widely utilized framework in behavioral interpretation and social psychology research. This model proves particularly valuable in the examination of deliberate actions.[10] The existing research on behavior offers empirical support for the TPB model as an explanatory framework for individual behavior. TPB elucidates the process of individual behavior generation from a sociological and psychological perspective, particularly when applied to the examination of intentional behavior, it exhibits substantial explanatory powers.[11] Currently, the theory model of planned behavior is extensively employed in behavioral management research, particularly in investigating positive behaviors such as purchase intention and knowledge sharing, including but not limited to knowledge sharing,[12] destination and accommodation choice,[13] and business ethics[14]. However, the theory of planned behavior is seldom used in the study of negative behaviors such as unethical behaviors, and only a few studies apply it to the explanation of unethical behaviors, such as piracy and dishonesty[15]. The study conducted by Randall and Gibson[14] compared the explanatory power of rational behavior theory and planned behavior theory in relation to immoral behaviors, concluding that most immoral behaviors necessitate access to potential resources and opportunities for implementation. Consequently, planned behavior theory, encompassing perceived behavioral control, proves more suitable for investigating immoral behaviors.
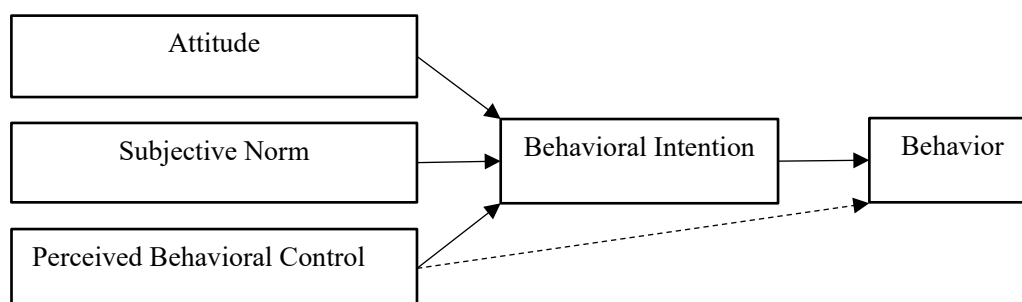

Figure 1: Theory of Planned Behavior Model (Ajzen, 1989)

3.2 Motivation Analysis of UPB

Considering the explanatory power of the theory of planned behavior towards unethical behavior, we apply it to the explanation of UPB motivation.

Firstly, in TPB, attitude pertains to the affective or evaluative belief regarding a specific behavior, which stems from an individual's assessment of its potential consequences.[10] The intentional and purposeful nature of UPB signifies that individuals possess a distinct subjective preference towards such conduct. In UPB studies, organizational identification is the most extensively researched antecedent.[16] Most research have indicated that excessive organizational identification may lead employees to disregard ethical standards in pursuit of organizational objectives and view UPB as a necessary means of fulfilling their obligations to the organization.[3] The employees who possess a strong sense of organizational identification exhibit favorable attitudes towards engaging in UPB.[2][17][18] Therefore, the concept of organizational identification can be considered as an exemplary illustration of attitude-related antecedent variables of UPB. Similarly, antecedent variables pertaining to attitudes, which bear resemblance to organizational identification (e.g. activated mood, desire for status, reciprocity beliefs)[19], can be comprehended through the perspective of attitude in TPB as well. These variables are primarily concerned with the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of individuals within an organization. In the context of UPB, these antecedent variables can be more fully understood by examining them through the lens of the TPB model. By doing so, we can gain a deeper insight into the complex interplay between an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and contextual factors, which ultimately shapes their behavior within the organization. These antecedent variables are intimately connected with the TPB model of attitude, which posits that an individual's behavior is determined by their attitudes, which in turn are influenced by their underlying beliefs and the context in which they are situated. This integration of the UPB and TPB models provides a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals form and maintain their attitudes towards their organization, and how these attitudes influence their behavior and performance.

Secondly, the subjective norms, as defined by TPB, encompass a wide range of social, familial, organizational norms and internalized moral standards that exert influence over an individual's decision to engage in a particular behavior. These can be perceived as the impact of societal or ethical pressures on an individual's behavior.[10] The prioritization of organizational interests as a primary concern demonstrates UPB's altruistic motivation in addressing external influences. The commitment of individuals to UPB is not solely determined by personal factors but is also influenced, to some extent, by organizational norms, the attitudes of others, and their own moral standards. When faced with a decision to adhere to organizational or personal moral norms, individuals will meticulously consider the potential consequences and evaluate how their actions might be perceived by society. Considering the unethical nature of UPB, individuals are influenced by external pressures and various factors that contribute to their engagement in such behaviors. Consequently, subjective norms play a crucial role in shaping the influence of both positive and negative external pressures on their conduct. As such, the variables associated with environmental and social pressures or influences in the antecedent factors of UPB can be examined from the perspective of subjective norms.[15] Therefore, the variables associated with environmental and social pressures or influences in the antecedent factors of UPB can be examined from the perspective of subjective norms, such as behavior rules, moral culture, moral identity level, etc. Behavior rules, for instance, refer to the guidelines or principles that govern how individuals should act in specific situations. These rules can be based on cultural, social, or personal beliefs and values, and they can vary across different contexts. By examining the role of behavior rules in UPB, we can gain insights into how individuals perceive and respond to different environmental and social pressures.

Thirdly, the concept of perceived behavioral control pertains to individuals' perception of the level of difficulty associated with performing a specific behavior. This perception is influenced by various factors that can either facilitate or hinder the execution of said behavior, as well as the challenges these factors pose for individual engagement in such behavior. It typically stems from personal experiences and perceptions regarding potential obstacles and opportunities, thereby reflecting individuals' sense of control over their actions at work.[10] The presence of organizational regulations, the potential long-term harm of UPB to the organization, its corresponding impact on individuals, and the requirement for specific resources or opportunities in implementing UPB may impede individuals from engaging in such behavior. In other words, when employees perceive both the opportunity and capability to engage in UPB at work, they exhibit strong behavioral intentions. The variables associated with the perceived difficulty of UPB antecedent variables can be comprehended from the perspective of perceptual behavioral control, such as empowerment, sense of organizational support, etc.

In summary, by applying TPB to the explanation of antecedent variables of the UPB, we can gain a deeper understanding of the motivation behind such behavior. This approach allows us to explore the factors that may contribute to the generation of UPB, elucidate the interconnections between these factors, and discern the interactions on the motivation of UPB from multiple perspectives.

4. Conclusion

UPB is a sort of employee behavior in organizations that has gradually been recognized in recent years. However, existing research mainly analyze its antecedent variables, and do not systematically analyze its mechanism.   TPB has been extensively cited by scholars, and its theoretical model has been empirically validated to possess a robust explanatory power for the examination of individual behavior. The present study systematically investigates the underlying mechanism of UPB by employing TPB, thereby offering a novel research paradigm for examining this behavior. The existing research on UPB primarily adopts a personal, interpersonal, and organizational perspective to examine the predictive effect of antecedent variables on motivation for this behavior. However, there is a lack of systematic analysis in these studies. This study has established an explanatory mechanism that integrates antecedent variables of UPB with the theory of planned behavior, aiming to enhance our understanding of the underlying motivations and determinants behind UPB. This study has also contributed valuable insights into the various influencing factors the complexities and multifaceted nature of UPB, highlighting the complex interplay between factors related to attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control respectively. Furthermore, the integration of antecedent variables with the theory of planned behavior provides a nuanced understanding of UPB, which goes beyond mere descriptive analysis. This holistic approach allows for a deeper exploration of the motivation of UPB, thereby enriching our understanding of the subject matter.

Acknowledgement

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