Article

Does Benevolent Leadership Promote Follower Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior? A Social Identity Perspective

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Abstract

This study uses the social identity perspective to explore the influence of benevolent leadership on followers' unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). We also investigate the mediating role of supervisor identification and the moderating role of moral identity in the relationship between benevolent leadership and the followers' UPB. We used a questionnaire survey to collect followers' data in China at two points in time, resulting in 257 usable followers' responses to test our hypotheses. The results show that benevolent leadership can predict follower UPB through supervisor identification. Moreover, moral identity moderates the relationship between benevolent leadership and follower UPB, as well as that between supervisor identification and follower UPB. Finally, moderated-mediation analysis revealed moral identity moderated the benevolent leadership indirect effect on the follower UPB via supervisor identification. Managers can use the insights in this study to monitor the influence of benevolence on UPB.

Keywords

benevolent leadership, unethical pro-organizational behavior, social identity perspective, supervisor identification, moral identity

Benevolent leadership refers to behavior that demonstrates individualized, holistic concern for the follower's well-being (Farh & Cheng, 2000), and care for the follower within the workplace (e.g., providing mentoring and career development; Farh et al., 2008). According to the leadership literature (Chan et al., 2013; Farh et al., 2008; Karakas & Sarigollu, 2011; W. Lin et al., 2018), highly benevolent leaders require their followers to improve performance and behaviors in organizations. Extensive research has shown that benevolent leadership is conducive after examining its positive influence on follower outcomes, such as organizational citizenship behavior (Tang & Naumann, 2015), innovative behavior (Gumusluoglu et al., 2017), and job performance (Chan & Mak, 2012). Therefore, high benevolent leadership is an effective style of leadership because it increases followers' efforts and positive actions on behalf of the organization.

Contrary to the benefits of benevolent leadership for the organizations and followers, some studies suggested a negative influence on followers. For example, G. Li et al. (2018) assessed whether high levels of benevolent leadership hinder team goals, thereby negatively affecting team performance. R. Li et al. (2015) found that benevolent leadership is positively related to follower's prosocial rule-breaking. These studies have prompted further examination of the potential psychological mechanism and boundary conditions underlying benevolent leadership influence on follower outcomes (Farh et al., 2008).

The antecedents and processes of follower outcomes merit attention by researchers and practitioners. In an organization, leaders represent organizations; therefore, follower behavior is vulnerable to the leaders' influence (Bass & Avolio, 1990). The mixed findings regarding the relationship between benevolent leadership and follower outcomes propose two possible explanations. First, the psychological processes of the influence of benevolent leadership on follower outcomes are diverse. Cheng et al. (2004) mention that the existing mechanisms used to explore the relationship have not fully grasped the practical effects of benevolent leadership. Second, a majority of studies on benevolent leadership support its positive influence on follower behavior; however, the actual influence of benevolent leadership on followers depends on certain conditions (e.g., individual identity). Therefore, some studies suggest that benevolent leaders have a negative influence on followers under certain

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conditions. A detailed examination of boundary conditions may help explain the different effects of benevolent leadership on followers.

To address the aforementioned gap, we take a social identity perspective and a follower-centered perspective to examine the psychological process that links benevolent leadership and follower unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB)—which is seen as a negative extra-role behavior—and the contextual factors that may mitigate this process. From the social identity perspective and follower-centered perspective, we can better understand how leadership shapes the follower UPB through the followers' self-concept. Specifically, based on the social identity perspective, we assume that benevolent leadership can be positively related to follower UPB by affecting the supervisor identification of followers. Effelsberg et al. (2014) claim that organizational identification plays a mediating role between transformational leadership and UPB; conversely, our study argues that supervisor identification is one of the important mediation variables in an organization. Supervisor identification occurs when individual beliefs, values, and self-concepts coincide with those of their leaders (Kark et al., 2003), which can enhance their work outcomes. Furthermore, we posit that moral identity is a primary moderator of follower UPB. Leaders may influence their followers by affecting certain elements of a follower's self-concept based on the social identity perspective (D. van Knippenberg et al., 2004). In this context of follower self-concept, moral identity is an important element of the personal self (Aquino & Reed, 2002), prompting followers to act in accordance with moral standards (Mulder & Aquino, 2013), and it presents high prosocial behavior (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Therefore, we investigated the mediating role of supervisor identification and the moderating role of the moral identity of follower UPB from a follower-centered perspective.

By extending the research on benevolent leadership, our study makes three contributions to the current literature. First, we discuss the possibility that benevolent leadership may exert a negative influence on followers. Benevolent leadership is considered a widespread and caring leadership style (Cheng et al., 2004). Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that benevolent leadership may cause a negative effect on follower behavior in organizations. Second, this study also deepens our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between benevolent leadership and UPB under the social identity perspective. Thus, we extend this research stream by considering the mediating role of supervisor identification. Furthermore, this study also investigates a boundary condition by testing moral identity as a moderator to further understand how benevolent leadership triggers UPB. As such, the theoretical model clarifies how and when benevolent leadership affects follower UPB. Regarding management practice, this study

also provides a direction for how an organization should manage follower UPB.

Theory and Hypotheses

Benevolent Leadership and Follower Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

Benevolent leadership builds a workplace that supports followers (A. C. Wang & Cheng, 2010) and generates greater follower satisfaction and productivity (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). Contrary to transformational leadership, which is concerned with follower demands and experiences within the workplace (Cheng et al., 2004), benevolent leadership helps followers beyond the formal work environment (Farh et al., 2008). Moreover, unlike other leadership concepts, benevolent leadership emphasizes the creation of observable benefits, actions, or outcomes for the organization (Karakas & Sarigollu, 2011). Thus, benevolent leaders transmit role expectations to their followers and tend to act kindly and compassionately to stimulate a follower's sense of obligation and loyalty to expected roles. In addition, benevolent leadership is not necessarily a form of exchange leadership style. For instance, benevolent leaders may still demonstrate amicable behavior to fulfill their role, even though nothing is needed from followers (Farh & Cheng, 2000). Consequently, followers may defend the expected role of their leaders, or they may accept, recommunicate, or refuse the prescribed roles of their leaders depending on their identification.

Social identity theory refers to people's concerns regarding their self-definition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979); that is, how they tend to define themselves based on the attributes of their affiliated organization. Many scholars have used this theory for multiperspective studies on organizational and team processes (D. van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Organizational identification, one of the multiperspective studies, has been reviewed as a series of positive effects at the organizational and individual levels (Ashforth et al., 2008; He & Brown, 2013). However, employees consider themselves to be closer to their team than to their organization (S. Zhang et al., 2014). Furthermore, because followers are more inclined to generate a stronger team identification than organizational identification (Riketta & van Dick, 2005), many scholars pay considerable attention to team identification (Huettermann et al., 2014). There is a distinction between collective identification and relational identification (Postmes et al., 2005), and studies have examined that relational identification helps promote interindividual cooperation, employee creativity, and outcomes (S. Zhang et al., 2014). Studies on organizational identification and team identification focus more on the collective attribute of identity, while there exists a paucity of research investigating the relational identification (Ashforth et al., 2008; S. Zhang et al., 2014).

In social identity, individuals distinguish between the in-group and out-group. The prototype is a cognitive representation of the group, which can reflect the differences in beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and behaviors between in-group and out-group members (Hogg, 2001; D. van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Leader prototypicality is one of the core concepts in the social identity model of organizational leadership (Hogg, 2001; D. van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), and it is the matching degree between the leader's own attribute and group prototypes (B. van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). Therefore, the more the employee agrees with his or her group, the easier it is to establish the self-concept based on the group prototype; that is, the employee will show compliance or love for the group prototype characteristics. If the prototypical characteristics of the leader are stronger—which means the higher the degree of matching with the group prototype—the employee will be more likely to regard the leader as the representative of the group's norms and entrust such a leader with the role to seek the best interests of the group (D. van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Many empirical studies have shown that leader prototypicality has a positive impact on many indicators of leadership effectiveness (such as performance, creativity, and organizational citizenship behavior; D. van Knippenberg, 2011). Previous studies show that, at the individual level, supervisor identification mediates the positive relationship between transformational leadership and employee dependency (Kark et al., 2003), and individual performance (X. F. Wang & Howell, 2012).

The more the followers identify with their leaders, the closer they become to the organization. Such followers can help their organizations through positive actions or exhibit negative behaviors such as corruption and UPB (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; M. Chen et al., 2016). This may occur when they put the organization's interests before their own interests or other stakeholders' interests. Furthermore, they may act unethically to benefit their organization (Ashforth & Anand, 2003).

Umphress and Bingham (2011) posit that followers might show their loyalty and compliance to an organization through unethical actions that appear to help in the short-term. For example, Volkswagen explored the "exhaust valve" incident in 2015. To achieve environmental protection compliance, the company designed diesel vehicles, which reduced the pollutant content in the exhaust emission test by up to 40 times. According to the survey by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, this case that shocked the world had been hidden for a long time. As early as 2009, the internal auditors had been aware of the situation. However, to cope with the rising cost pressure caused by strategic expansion, the auditors chose to keep this information secret, which resulted in as many as 10 diesel vehicles being suspected of violations in a period of up to 7 years.

In our study, we propose that benevolent leadership would enhance follower UPB based on the following reasons. First, due to violations of moral standards, UPB is usually accompanied by a certain risk, that is, when followers' unethical behavior is discovered by the leader or exposed by other colleagues, it is easy to bring negative consequences to themselves, such as leader or organizational penalties and damaged individual reputation. Moreover, it may adversely affect their career development. Followers need stronger positive incentives to commit UPB, such as a good identification relationship between leaders and followers. Based on the social identity perspective, when benevolent leaders are concerned with follower feelings and needs, and engender trust and security among their followers (A. C. Wang & Cheng, 2010), they are likely to enhance follower recognition (Cheng et al., 2004) and trust (Wasti et al., 2011). Thus, the followers show loyalty to their leader and may internalize organizational goals, considering them to form a strong dependency relationship with their leaders and organization. Accordingly, followers with higher levels of identification pursue positive actions to increase their contributions for their leader and the collective organization. Consequently, they may be willing to take any action on behalf of the organization, including damaging the interests of others. At the same time, a leader's benevolence would make followers perceive trust and psychological safety on their psychological level (A. C. Wang & Cheng, 2010) so that they can alleviate their concerns about the risks of UPB to a certain extent. Second, due to the implication of power in the organization, the leaders' styles would be the implicit model of acceptable behavior, and the demonstration effect will encourage followers to learn and imitate their leaders' behavior. In other words, once the leader is identified by the followers as a role model, they would agree with the behavior of that leader and proceed from the same value orientation and behavior (Lin & Cheng, 2012). Thus, benevolent leadership, which draws attention and care for the followers' needs, would trigger the motivation of followers to care and fulfill the interests of the stakeholders, colleagues, or organization, and then encourage them to portray an altruistic behavior that presents their kindness. Moreover, leaders with power have resources to encourage followers to portray a beneficial behavior to the organization. From a resource perspective, a positive social resource such as a benevolent leader should lead to prosocial behavior (Foa & Foa, 1976). Therefore, we expect to observe a positive relationship between benevolent leadership and follower unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Hypothesis 1: Benevolent leadership is positively related to follower UPB.

The Mediating Role of Supervisor Identification

Relational identification refers to an individual's perception of another person in the group (Brewer & Pierce, 2005). Contrary to organizational identification, individuals who are relationally identified with another person do not become depersonalized to adopt the norms or values of the group (Ashforth et al., 2008). On the contrary, the sense of unity with another individual would lead to the definition of another individual's attributes, including evaluating and actively treating another person's attributes. Based on relational identification (Ashforth et al., 2008; Brewer & Pierce, 2005), we relate the supervisor's identification to how the followers perceived their supervisor. Supervisor identification occurs when followers identify with their supervisors in terms of behaviors and values based on close relations with particular leaders and their own self-definition; this is different from social identity, which is based on identification with a team or organizational membership (Kark et al., 2003; P. Wang & Rode, 2010). Moreover, our definition is consistent with how other studies measured the identity of supervisors, that is, to ask followers the extent to which their leaders are their achievements, or to what extent do the leaders use "we" instead of "he/she" (Johnson & Umphress, 2019; Young & Steelman, 2014). Thus, when individuals position their leaders at the level of relational identification, they would pay more attention to the behavioral roles implied in the interpersonal relationship, and tend to take the beneficial actions to their leaders and colleagues. Specifically, supervisor identification is the reflection of the follower's self-concept as it relates to a particular leader (P. Wang & Rode, 2010). Previous research has shown that there is an important relationship between benevolent leadership and follower attitude and behavior (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). As benevolent leaders express holistic concerns for followers and their families (Farh & Cheng, 2000) and followers recognize such support and encouragement, supervisor identification could also occur (Kark et al., 2003).

From the social identity perspective, we believe that benevolent leadership may strengthen followers' supervisor identification. Supervisor identification may motivate followers to alter their self-concepts so that their values and beliefs become more similar to those of their leaders (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). When followers identify with their leaders, they may assimilate this into their self-concepts by internalizing their group targets (Deci & Ryan, 2000); after they strengthen their self-concepts, they will be willing to disregard the individuals' interest for the benefit of the organization and set the goals of the organization as their own goals (Bass, 1985). Because benevolent leaders may use their power on behalf of the organization and display job devotion, their followers may tend to identify them as representing their organization or group (Gu et al., 2015).

Consequently, following benevolent leadership, supervisor identification could motivate followers to concentrate on their required tasks and encourage them to show great interest in achieving work goals (Hirst et al., 2009).

Supervisor identification further influences follower UPB. The extant literature has found that followers who are highly identified with their leaders are more likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (Y. Zhang & Chen, 2013). When followers are more identified with their leader, they are willing to conduct unethical actions to help their leaders. This is similar to conducting organizational citizenship behavior, which is an extra-role behavior when the followers evaluate their leaders positively. Here, we assume that followers with benevolent leaders are more likely to develop supervisor identification, as such leadership is a highly valued leadership behavior (Cheng et al., 2004). We know that the identification is extended to the workplace (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008) and that benevolent leadership is concerned with the follower's workplace (Cheng et al., 2004). In the organizational context, leaders are the ones who build relationships with their followers (Sluss et al., 2012). Benevolent leadership is aimed at fulfilling followers' psychosocial needs and helping them achieve the organization's mission. Accordingly, we expect that followers who identify with their benevolent supervisors will strive to benefit their organizations, possibly in unethical ways. Thus, in this supportive and caring environment, followers who share the same values as their leaders and, thereby, identify with their supervisors, may display pro-organizational behavior, even if it is unethical. According to the social identity perspective (Kark et al., 2003), followers will shape their self-concepts in line with their leaders' values and beliefs based on supervisor identification. Specifically, this study assumes that benevolent leadership will enhance follower supervisor identification and encourage followers to put themselves in their supervisors' positions. Therefore, they will work hard accordingly to recognize the gratitude they feel toward their leaders, even though they portray UPB. Given this, we propose the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 2:** Supervisor identification mediates the relationship between benevolent leadership and follower UPB.

The Moderating Role of Moral Identity

Despite benevolent leadership triggering the unethical behavior of followers, the ethical nature of moral identity may influence the effect of identification on UPB. In this section, we propose that concerning the boundary conditions for the influence on UPB, moral identity is a self-regulating mechanism that drives moral actions (Aquino et al., 2011; Aquino & Reed, 2002), which means that an

individual has significant moral values that evoke altruistic or moral behavior (Blasi, 1983; Mulder & Aquino, 2013). In addition, a key focus in the study of moral behavior is ascertaining when people act to benefit the welfare of others (Aquino & Reed, 2002). In line with the theoretical identity of Erikson (1964), moral identity has two dimensions. One dimension is internalization, which is internal of one's self-concept to catch the importance of moral qualities. The other dimension is symbolization, which explicitly conveys the external expression of moral traits, such as the products that people buy (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moral identity as a conception of trait makes individuals maintain consistency between moral standards and their actions. Moreover, moral identity helps predict the attitude and behavior of a member of an out-group (Aquino et al., 2007). Many studies have shown that based on self-regulating mechanisms, moral identity can trigger one's moral cognition and behavior (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Xu & Ma, 2015; Zhu et al., 2016). Thus, extending this logic, we argue that people respond to benevolent leadership and supervisor identification impact on follower UPB based on their moral identity. Specifically, compared with people with low moral identity, those with high moral identity are more moral, caring, and honest (Aquino & Reed, 2002); they may display integrity when solving problems. In the workplace, a high moral individual is more likely to display altruistic behavior, self-regulation, and ethical conduct (Aquino et al., 2011).

We propose that followers with high moral identity may be more likely to avoid UPB under benevolent leadership compared with those with low moral identity. Thus, moral identity is an important concept of moral cognition that stimulates ethical behavior (Aquino et al., 2009), and if followers have different levels of moral identity, their behaviors might also differ. Y. Zhang et al. (2018) demonstrated that moral identity could weaken the effects of a leader's UPB on a follower's UPB. From the analysis above, we infer that followers with high moral identity under benevolent leadership will engage in less UPB, and we propose the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 3:** Moral identity moderates the relationship between benevolent leadership and follower UPB such that the relationship is stronger when moral identity is low than when moral identity is high.

We also argue that moral identity would weaken the effect of supervisor identification on UPB. That is, a follower's decision to act unethically is influenced not only by the work context but also by his or her personal moral traits (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Specifically, followers exhibit moral deviations when making decisions. Therefore, we can assume that followers with high moral identities will prompt supervisor identification to influence follower UPB differently. Even when followers agree with their managers,

they have their own responsibilities and obligations to manage in the organization. Therefore, followers in the work context must use their own moral judgment before acting unethically. He and Harris (2014) have indicated that moral identity can restrain unethical behavior. Thus, when supervisor identification motivates followers to participate in pro-organizational behavior, being guided by their own moral traits is quite important; otherwise, they may engage in unethical actions. Thus, high moral identity followers will be more honest and moral. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 4: Moral identity moderates the relationship between supervisor identification and follower UPB such that the relationship is stronger when moral identity is low than when moral identity is high.

Moreover, as discussed above, supervisor identification is often triggered by benevolent leadership. It then plays a mediating role between benevolent leadership and follower UPB. Therefore, this study further explores whether moral identity also moderates the mediating effect of supervisor identification on benevolent leadership and UPB. Based on Hypotheses 2 and 4, from the perspective of the moderated-mediation effect of moral identity, a follower with low moral identity will see supervisor identification triggered by benevolent leadership as encouraging UPB. Conversely, this process is weakened for followers with high moral identities. Taking these predictions together, we further propose a moderated-mediation model as follows:

> **Hypothesis 5:** The conditional indirect effect of benevolent leadership on follower UPB via supervisor identification will be stronger when moral identity is low than when moral identity is high.

We propose that moral identity will moderate the indirect relationship of benevolent leadership on follower UPB through supervisor identification. Therefore, we develop a moderated-mediation model. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model.

Research Method

Sample and Procedure

Our sample comprised full-time employees of several companies in Shandong, China. We examined the hypotheses using the survey data from the questionnaires, which were arranged randomly—as suggested by Podsakoff and Organ (1986)—and distributed to the companies by a highly reputable panel data research firm (wjx.cn). After completing the online survey, each respondent anonymously returned it to the authors. Since the data were
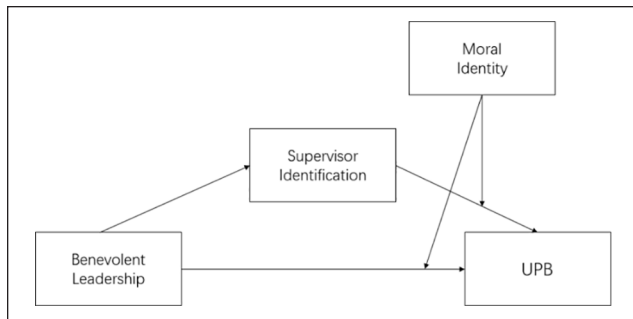
Figure 1. Conceptual model.

collected using a questionnaire from a single source, the potential for common method bias was a concern. To reduce the problem of causal confusion and common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012), we tested the hypotheses with data collected at two points in time and hidden the definition of the variable concept. We collected 382 questionnaires in the first survey, where we measured benevolent leadership, supervisor identification, and moral identity. We collected 262 questionnaires in the second survey (2 weeks later), which were sent to the first survey respondents to measure follower UPB. After excluding five incomplete surveys, 257 employee responses to both surveys were used (67.3% response rate). Among the respondents, 52.9% were female, and 75.1% were college graduates. The average age was 30.23 years (*SD* = 4.78), and the average organizational tenure was 5.67 years (*SD* = 3.67). In terms of the company demographics, 51.4% of the respondents were from private enterprises, and 37.7% were engaged in the manufacturing industry.

Measures

Following the translation and back-translation procedure suggested by Brislin (1986), we created Chinese versions of the measures for supervisor identification, moral identity, and UPB.

Benevolent Leadership. Benevolent leadership was measured using the 11-item scale developed by Cheng et al. (2000). We followed empirical studies that have used this scale to measure benevolent leadership (X. P. Chen et al., 2014; A. C. Wang & Cheng, 2010). Respondents were asked to rate the frequency of their immediate supervisors' benevolent leadership behavior using a 6-point Likert-type scale (where 1 = *not at all* and 6 = *frequently*). Sample items included "My supervisor tries to understand the cause when I do not perform well," and "My supervisor will help me when I am in an emergency." The Cronbach alpha for this scale was 0.92.

Supervisor Identification. Our measure of supervisor identification was based on previous research on identifying the

organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). We used a four-item scale because two items such as "When I talk about this school, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they'" and "If a story in the media criticized the school, I would feel embarrassed" cannot be adapted to the measurement of the supervisor by directly modifying the object. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they identified with their immediate supervisor using a 6-point Likert-type scale (where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 6 = *strongly agree*). Sample items included "When someone criticizes my supervisor, it feels like a personal insult," and "I am very interested in what others think about my supervisor." The Cronbach α for this scale was .89.

Moral Identity. Moral identity was measured using the 10-item scale developed by Aquino and Reed (2002). Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they identified with morality using a 6-point Likert-type scale (where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 6 = *strongly agree*). Sample items included "It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics," and "Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am." The Cronbach α for this scale was .80.

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior. UPB was measured using the six-item scale developed by Umphress et al. (2010). Respondents were required to rate the extent to which they engaged in UPB using a 6-point Likert-type scale (where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 6 = *strongly agree*). Sample items included "If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good," and "If it would benefit my organization, I would withhold negative information about my organization." The Cronbach α for this scale was .86.

Control Variables. As prior research has shown that demographic characteristics may influence the extent to which individuals engage in unethical behavior (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Keem et al., 2018) and that job tenure may affect the work behavior (Wright & Bonett, 2002), we controlled for the effects of demographic characteristics. Besides the demographics, we included age (in years), gender (1 = male, 2 = female), organizational tenure (in years), and education (1 = high school, 2 = college, 3 = university, 4 = master, 5 = PhD). In addition, researchers suggest accounting for the tendency to choose a "social desirability response" when answering sensitive-report items (e.g., UPB; M. Chen et al., 2016; Umphress et al., 2010). Therefore, we also controlled individual social desirability response by using a five-item scale from Hays et al. (1989). Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they engaged in social desirability response using a 6-point Likert-type scale (where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 6 = *strongly agree*). Sample items included "I am always courteous even to people who are disagreeable."

Table 1. Results of the Measurement Model Analysis.

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	NFI	NNFI
Four-factor model	1351.95	428	—	0.09	0.94	0.94	0.91	0.94
Three-factor model	1581.89	429	229.94**	0.10	0.93	0.93	0.90	0.92
Two-factor model	2790.53	431	1438.58**	0.15	0.89	0.89	0.86	0.88
One-factor model	4232.07	434	2880.12**	0.18	0.80	0.80	0.77	0.78

Note. The four-factor model was hypothesized; the three-factor model combined benevolent leadership and supervisor identification; the two-factor model combined benevolent leadership and two kinds of identity; the one-factor model combined all variables. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CFI = comparative fit index; IFI = incremental fit index; NFI = normed fit index; NNFI = nonnormed fit index.
**$p < .01$.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	1.53	0.50	—								
2. Age	30.23	4.78	−.12	—							
3. Education	2.91	0.57	−.03	−.06	—						
4. Tenure	5.67	3.67	−.14*	.79**	.05	—					
5. SDR	0.22	0.21	.01	−.00	−.10	.06	—				
6. BL	4.01	0.89	−.12	.10	.13*	.14*	.15*	—			
7. SI	4.02	1.04	−.18**	.13*	.16*	.17**	.16**	.74**	—		
8. MI	4.73	0.61	.03	−.01	.02	.03	.37**	.23**	.27**	—	
9. UPB	3.45	0.91	−.05	−.09	.12*	.01	−.31**	.07	.14*	−.17**	—

Note. N = 257. SDR = social desirability response; BL = benevolent leadership; SI = supervisor identification; MI = moral identity; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Results

Measurement Model Analysis

Following the recommendations of Anderson and Gerbing (1988) concerning convergent and discriminant validities, we formed a four-factor confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model (as shown in Table 1). Inspections of the fit indices indicated that although the chi-square was significant, $\chi^2(428) = 1351.95$, $p < .05$, other practical-fit indices fell within acceptable ranges (root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.09, comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.94, incremental fit index [IFI] = 0.94, normed fit index [NFI] = 0.91, nonnormed fit index [NNFI] = 0.94), suggesting that the model was acceptable (Hu & Bentler, 1999). We also conducted (a) a three-factor model by combining benevolent leadership and supervisor identification into one factor, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 229.94$, $p < .01$; (b) a two-factor model by combining benevolent leadership, supervisor identification, and moral identity into one factor, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 1438.58$, $p < .01$; and (c) a one-factor model by combining all items into one factor, $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 2880.12$, $p < .01$. The results showed that the proposed four-factor model provided a better fit to the data than these models. The results of these analyses further supported the convergent and discriminant validity of the four-factor model.

Assessing Common Method Bias

We conducted Harman's one-factor test by using exploratory factor analysis for all the independent variables (except demographics) to check common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The first factor only accounted for 29.4% of the total variance. No single factor emerged to explain the majority of the variance involved in the model, and the result showed that no substantial common method bias existed in the data. As Harman's one-factor test and the CFA both showed, the variables were distinct; thus, common method bias may not be a serious issue in this study.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Analysis

Table 2 lists the means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of the variables. As expected, benevolent leadership was positively correlated with supervisor identification ($r = .74$, $p < .01$) and supervisor identification was positively correlated with follower UPB ($r = .14$, $p < .05$). In addition, follower moral identity was significantly negatively correlated with follower UPB ($r = −.17$, $p < .01$).

Table 3. Results of the Hierarchical Regression Analysis.

Variables	Supervisor identification		UPB				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Controls							
Gender	−0.14*	−0.08	−0.06	−0.05	−0.03	−0.04	−0.03
Age	0.05	0.04	−0.26**	−0.26**	−0.27**	−0.26**	−0.29**
Education	0.19**	0.08†	0.06	0.04	0.02	0.06	0.03
Tenure	0.09	0.02	0.22*	0.20*	0.20*	0.21*	0.21*
SDR	0.25***	0.10*	−0.27**	−0.30***	−0.32***	−0.24***	−0.25***
Predictors							
BL		0.69***		0.11†	0.05	0.15*	
SI					0.24**		0.25***
MI						−0.12†	−0.15*
Interaction							
BL × MI						−0.15*	
SI × MI							−0.13*
R^2	0.14	0.57	0.11	0.12	0.15	0.15	0.17
ΔR^2	0.14***	0.43***	0.11***	0.01†	0.03**	0.02*	0.02*
F	7.88***	54.29***	6.16***	5.733***	6.06***	5.45***	6.52***

Note. Standardized beta coefficients were reported in this table. $N = 257$. SDR = social desirability response; BL = benevolent leadership; SI = supervisor identification; MI = moral identity; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior.
†$p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Tests of Mediating Effect

To test our main and mediating hypothesis, we performed the procedure and conducted hierarchical regressions utilizing SPSS 23. As shown in Table 3, after controlling for the effects of demographic variables and social desirability response, benevolent leadership positively related to supervisor identification ($\beta = .69$, $p < .001$, Model 2) and also positively influenced UPB ($\beta = .11$, $p < .1$, Model 4). Consistent with our Hypothesis 2, the results showed that when both benevolent leadership and supervisor identification were included as predictors, supervisor identification was positively related to follower unethical pro-organizational behavior ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$, Model 5), but benevolent leadership was not positively related ($\beta = .05$, *ns*, Model 5). Consequently, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were verified.

Furthermore, we used SPSS PROCESS macro (Model 4) proposed by Hayes (2013) to test the statistical significance of the indirect effects of benevolent leadership on UPB via supervisor identification (Hypothesis 2). With our sample, we conducted the bootstrapping procedure with 2,000 random samples at 95% confidence level. After we controlled for demographic variables and social desirability response, the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on UPB through supervisor identification was significant ($\beta = .17$, standard error [*SE*] = 0.06, 95% CI [0.06, 0.30]). Thus, this additional analysis lends further support to Hypothesis 2, that indirect effects were significant; we concluded that supervisor identification fully mediated the relationship between benevolent leadership and UPB.

Tests of Moderating Effect

Our moderating hypotheses predicted that moral identity moderates the benevolent leadership and UPB (Hypothesis 3), and the relationship between supervisor identification and UPB (Hypotheses 4). After controlling for the effects of demographic variables and social desirability response (Table 3), the regression coefficients of the interaction terms in Model 6 ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$) were significant. A simple slope test of the moderating effect (Aiken & West, 1991) showed that benevolent leadership was positively related to UPB when moral identity was low ($\beta = .26$, $p < .01$). When moral identity was high, the association between benevolent leadership and UPB disappeared ($\beta = .01$, *ns*). These results indicate that the higher the moral identity of followers, the lower the possibility of increased UPB caused by benevolent leadership. Moral identity can effectively inhibit a number of negative consequences attributed to benevolent leadership. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Moreover, the regression coefficients of the interaction terms in M7 ($\beta = -0.13$, $p < .05$) were significant. A simple slope test of the moderating effect showed that supervisor identification was positively related to UPB when moral identity was low ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$). When moral identity was high, the association between supervisor identification and UPB disappeared ($\beta = .09$, *ns*). These results indicate that the higher the moral identity of followers, the lower the possibility of increased UPB caused by supervisor identification. Moral identity can effectively inhibit a number of
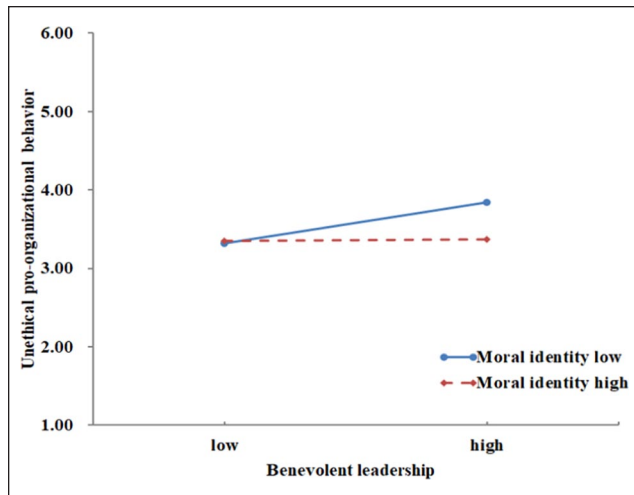
Figure 2. Interaction between benevolent leadership and moral identity on UPB.
Note. UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Figure 3. Interaction between supervisor identification and moral identity on UPB.
Note. UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior.

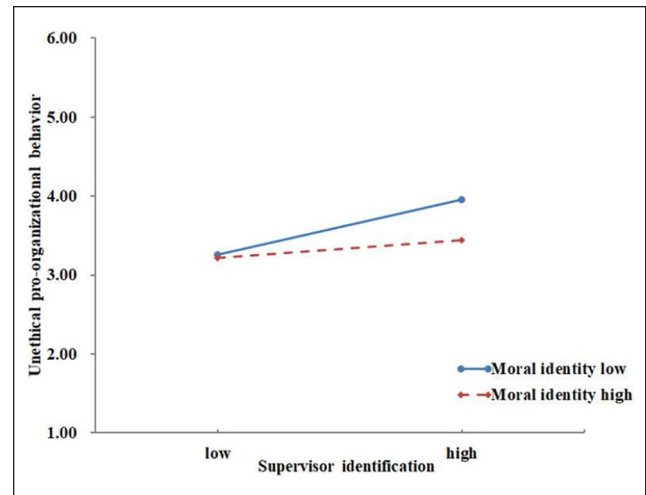negative consequences attributed to supervisor identification. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported as well.

To explore further whether the interaction terms are in the hypothesized direction, following Aiken and West (1991), we plotted the interaction effect, as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Tests of Moderated-Mediating Effect

To test our moderated-mediating hypothesis regarding which moral identities moderate the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on UPB through supervisor identification (Hypothesis 5), we used SPSS PROCESS macro (Model 5) proposed by Hayes (2013) to estimate the equations presented earlier and obtained bias-corrected bootstrapped CIs (using 2,000 bootstrap samples) for the conditional indirect effect. The estimates and bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% CIs for the conditional indirect effects are presented in Table 4. After we controlled for demographic variables and social desirability response, the conditional indirect effects of benevolent leadership on UPB were significant when follower moral identity was low (-1 SD; $\beta = .28$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% confidence interval [CI: 0.13, 0.44]). The conditional indirect effects were not significant when follower moral identity was high ($+1$ SD; $\beta = 0.11$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.28]). These results indicated that the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on follower UPB via supervisor identification was not significant under high moral identity. Hence, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the relationship between leadership style and follower UPB from a

Table 4. Results of Conditional Indirect Effect Analysis.

	UPB	
Level of moral identity	Estimate (*SE*)[a]	CI
-1 *SD* Moral identity	0.28 (0.08)	[0.13, 0.44]
$+1$ *SD* Moral identity	0.11 (0.08)	[-0.04, 0.28]

Note. $N = 257$; CI = confidence interval; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior.
[a]Bootstrapped estimates for the standard error (*SE*) are presented.

social identity perspective. We examined the relationships among benevolent leadership, supervisor identification, moral identity, and follower UPB. To achieve our objective, we developed models to test why and when benevolent leadership influences follower UPB. Based on the social identity perspective (Kark et al., 2003), the results from the field study provide empirical evidence that benevolent leadership positively relates to follower UPB, and supervisor identification plays a mediating role in the relationship between benevolent leadership and follower UPB. In addition, when examining the moderating effect of moral identity, we found that the effects of benevolent leadership and supervisor identification on UPB are stronger when followers have lower moral identity levels. Furthermore, our moderated-mediation analysis revealed that moral identity moderated the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on follower UPB via supervisor identification.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, previous studies in benevolent leadership have

primarily emphasized its positive features (Farh et al., 2008). Conversely, recent studies have shifted focus to the potential negative influence of benevolent leadership (R. Li et al., 2015), suggesting that the impact of benevolent leadership on follower outcomes still needs further investigation. Our study examines whether benevolent leadership is detrimental or beneficial to follower UPB; thus, we find that benevolent leadership positively relates to follower UPB. In this respect, this study contributes to leadership literature by demonstrating the importance of benevolent leadership in explaining the determinants of follower UPB.

Another contribution of the current study is the use of supervisor identification to explain how benevolent leadership influences follower UPB; to date, there has been limited attention to how self-cognition contributes to UPB. In addition, it is not clear how follower UPB occurs in an organization (Treviño et al., 2014). Our results show that when followers perceive benevolence in their leaders, they are likely to identify with them and engage in UPB. Thus, this study uses the social identity perspective to discuss UPB; by examining the effect of supervisor identification as a mediator in the relationship between benevolent leadership and follower UPB, it contributes to the social identity perspective.

Finally, this study contributes further to the contextual understanding of benevolent leadership's influence on various identity perceptions by investigating important individual differences and contributes to identification literature by focusing on the negative effects of supervisor identification. As noted above, supervisor identification is always considered an organizational benefit (Wing et al., 2018). Thus, we consider the boundary conditions of self-identity in this study. Our research indicates that followers who have a high moral identity tend to have a high moral standard (Hardy et al., 2010). We find that followers' higher moral identity responds negatively to UPB. More broadly, to understand which types of followers might respond negatively to the influence of benevolent leadership on follower UPB, our study establishes the boundary conditions under which benevolent leadership is more effective. It also contributes to the growing research that examines the individual differences among followers that influence their reactions to their leaders. Moreover, we focus on the interactions of different identities, specifically for followers who simultaneously have different identities that influence their attitudes and behaviors. For example, higher levels of supervisor identification can increase follower UPB, whereas higher levels of moral identity can reduce follower UPB. Our research demonstrates that supervisor identification and moral identity coexist, and the interactions of both identities affect follower attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, this study contributes massively to the social identity perspective.

Practical Implications

In addition to theoretical implications, our study has practical implications for organizations seeking to decrease the levels of follower UPB. First, we found that benevolent leadership and supervisor identification have a positive influence on follower UPB. Thus, in order to reduce follower UPB, managers should pay more attention to leadership behaviors. They should understand the positive relationship between benevolent leadership and follower UPB. Specifically, managers should monitor the appropriate speech and actions associated with benevolent leadership and pay attention to the possibility of encouraging follower UPB through heightened supervisor identification. Second, managers should assess the moral identity of their followers and, through the regulation of self-control, strengthen the moral consciousness of followers to create an ethical organizational norm, because followers' moral identity levels can inhibit their UPB.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current research has some limitations. First, the sample is composed of followers who self-rated the sensitive answers, which may lead to common method bias (e.g., UPB); we used social desirability response as a control variable to control for potentially inaccurate responses. In addition, even though the study collected the data in two waves, followers answered the item scale for benevolent leadership and the item scale for supervisor identification at the same time, which may cause a high correlation between them ($r = .74$). Thus, future research could conduct a longitudinal study (collect the data in three waves: benevolent leadership at Time 1, supervisor identification at Time 2, and follower UPB at Time 3) or collect variables from different sources to strengthen causal inference. Second, our study did not control for other leadership styles; to ensure the increased variance can be explained by benevolent leadership, further studies could consider multiple leadership styles simultaneously (e.g., three components of paternalistic leadership) to identify the unique variance that can be attributed to a specific leadership style. Moreover, to prevent the tendency among Chinese respondents to choose the midpoint on a Likert-type scale, we converted the original 5- or 7-point scales into 6-point scales. Although the results of the CFA showed that the validity of the scales was good, such a conversion could still harm the validity of the items. Therefore, future research should be conducted using the original scales on the questionnaire. Third, in this research, we theoretically explain the impact of the identity mechanism of benevolent leadership on follower UPB; subsequent studies might investigate the specific underlying psychological mechanisms and other boundary conditions. Fourth, scholars overlook benevolent leadership's prevalence in the

Chinese culture (Farh & Cheng, 2000); however, recent research has challenged this stereotype and assumed that benevolent leadership is not unique to the Chinese culture (A. C. Wang et al., 2018). The effects observed may be examined in non-Chinese contexts where paternalism is valued as well, such as in South American and Eastern European countries (Aycan et al., 2000). Thus, future research could replicate the findings outside of China.

Conclusion

This study examines how and when benevolent leadership influences follower UPB. The findings reveal that there is an indirect, postive effect of benevolent leadership on follower UPB through supervisor identification. Moreover, the association between benevolent leadership and follower UPB as well as that between supervisor identification and follower UPB, is stronger when follower moral identity is low. Finally, moderated-mediation analysis revealed that moral identity moderated the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on the follower UPB via supervisor identification.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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