

## Why and when does job satisfaction promote unethical pro-organizational behaviours? Testing a moderated mediation model

Kai Dou<sup>1</sup>, Yushuai Chen<sup>2</sup>, Junming Lu<sup>3</sup>, Jingjing Li<sup>1</sup>, and Yujie Wang<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Education, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, China

<sup>2</sup>Department of Applied Psychology, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Social and Public Administration, Guangdong Baiyun University, Guangzhou, China

<sup>4</sup>School of Marxism, Guangdong Industry Polytechnic, Guangzhou, China

**T**his study examined the relationship between job satisfaction and unethical pro-organizational behaviours (UPB) by testing a moderated mediation model that focused on how employees' belongingness mediates the relationship between job satisfaction and UPB and how corporate ethical values moderate this mediated relationship. Our investigation included 369 employees from different organizations in Southeast China. The regression analysis revealed that job satisfaction positively influences UPB through belongingness. In addition, a moderated regression analysis indicated that low corporate ethical values strengthen not only the effect of belongingness on UPB but also the indirect effect of job satisfaction on UPB. These findings deepen our understanding of UPB by showing that individuals with a high level of job satisfaction are more likely to engage in UPB through belongingness when corporate ethical values are low. Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications of these results are discussed.

**Keywords:** Job satisfaction; Belongingness; Corporate ethical values; Unethical pro-organizational behaviour.

As economies continue to rapidly grow, people are enjoying the positive changes in their lives brought by economic development. However, a number of business scandals have emerged alongside economic growth. From the Sanlu milk debacle exposing people to melamine-tainted dairy products to Germany's Volkswagen "dieselgate," the notorious "gutter oil" incidents and the more recent case of a Chinese hotpot restaurant reusing customers' leftover hotpot broth, these scandals are evidence of unethical behaviours appearing in companies (Chen & Liang, 2017). In the last 10 years, there has been a surge in the number of studies exploring unethical behaviour in the workplace (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). In these studies, researchers focus particularly on selfish unethical behaviour, such as the sabotage of machines and equipment and theft of company property (Belle & Cantarelli, 2017; Kalshoven, Dijk, & Boon, 2016). The fundamental hypothesis of these studies is

that unethical behaviour is triggered by selfish motives, while pro-society or pro-organizational behaviour is often seen as ethical (Chen, Chen, & Sheldon, 2016).

However, this hypothesis has been repeatedly challenged in reality. Employees may also engage in unethical behaviour to protect the interests of an organization, for example, by exaggerating the scope of a company's services or the functions of its products or by destroying important documents that could sully the image of the company. Umphress, Bingham, and Mitchell (2010) call such behaviour—which violates social moral codes and norms to protect the organization, its members, or both—unethical pro-organizational behaviour (UPB). Although the objective of UPB differs from that of selfish unethical behaviour, they both ultimately destroy the relationship between the organization and its stakeholders as well as the public reputation of the organization (Graham, Dust, & Ziegert, 2017; Umphress et al., 2010;

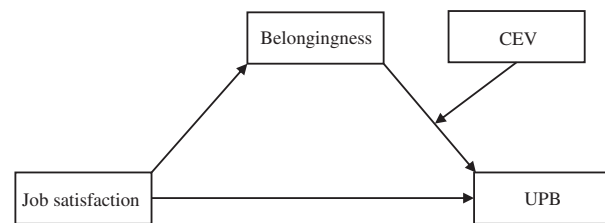
Correspondence should be addressed to Yushuai Chen, Department of Applied Psychology, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou 510006, China. (E-mail: chenysushuai1989@126.com).

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Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Studies have shown that positive social exchange (Umphress & Bingham, 2011), psychological entitlement (Lee, Schwarz, Newman, & Legood, in press) and organizational identification (Chen et al., 2016) have a significant positive influence on the emergence of UPB. Therefore, scholars are beginning to ask why these work attitudes and behaviours, which are positive from the perspective of the organization, drive employees to engage in unethical behaviour.

On the basis of this reality and theoretical background, this study chooses job satisfaction—an employee's positive working attitude—as an antecedent variable and mainly focuses on the impact of employees' job satisfaction on UPB. Past studies consistently agree that employees with high job satisfaction tend to display more pro-organizational behaviour, such as organizational citizenship behaviour, work engagement and innovative performance (Ayala, Peiró Silla, Tordera, Lorente, & Yeves, 2017). However, existing studies have ignored the fact that although job satisfaction drives employees to engage in pro-organizational behaviour, there could simultaneously be potential risks of their violating social norms or ethical codes. Because high job satisfaction is usually associated with employees' high autonomy (Carlson, Carlson, Zivnuska, Harris, & Harris, 2017), to a degree, these studies support that with high-job satisfaction, employees also possess high power to decide their working method, working progress and working standards. So, when high job satisfaction employees are trying to support their organizations, it is more likely that they will lower their internal moral standards and engage in UPB.

Based on this argument, our study uses social exchange theory and social identity theory as a framework to test whether, and if so, how and when, job satisfaction influences employees' UPB. Specifically, first, based on previous studies (Chen et al., 2016; Lee et al., in press; Umphress & Bingham, 2011), considering that positive and mutually beneficial relationships established between employees and organizations (e.g., psychological entitlement, organizational identification) promote employee engagement in UPB, we predict that perceived satisfaction brought by working will also lead to UPB in the workplace. Second, based on social exchange theory, we propose belongingness as a mediator to understand the relationship between job satisfaction and UPB. When the need for belonging—one of the most important basic needs of employees—is satisfied, employees will identify as a member of the organization. This identity as an organizational member will prompt them to engage in pro-organizational behaviour that contravenes ethical norms (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Last, to reveal the boundary conditions of the influence of job satisfaction on UPB through belongingness, we propose and test the moderating effect of corporate ethical values (CEV) on the influence of belongingness on UPB. Based on



**Figure 1.** Theoretical model.

Note: UPB = unethical pro-organizational behaviours; CEV = corporate ethical values.

studies of the relationship between ethical climate and UPB (Tian & Peterson, 2016; Xu, Loi, & Ngo, 2016), we predict that when CEV are weaker, the positive relationship between belongingness and UPB will be stronger. In summary, we propose using a moderated mediation model (as shown in Figure 1) to systematically analyse the psychological paths through which job satisfaction affects employees' UPB and the boundary conditions thereof; this model can help companies better understand the mechanisms that trigger UPB and thereby effectively avoid such behaviours in the workplace.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

### Effect of job satisfaction on UPB

As a key variable affecting employees' attitude, job satisfaction refers to an employee's psychological state whereby he/she has a positive view of his/her job in the organization and other relevant areas (Dou, Nie, Wang, & Liu, 2016; Weiss, 2002). Studies have shown that when organizations provide employees with fair promotion policies, generous remuneration, a good working environment or challenging work, employee job satisfaction is enhanced, enabling employees to develop a more positive attitude towards work (Li & Wang, 2016; Magee, 2015).

According to social exchange theory, the norm of reciprocity is the basic norm of interpersonal communication and the primary theoretical framework used to explain human behaviours (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Reciprocity implies that there are expectations and obligations of feedback between both sides (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012). Employees with a high level of job satisfaction obtain more benefits from their organizations. Thus, an organization expects a return when it satisfies its employees' needs (Banks et al., 2014; Wilson, Sin, & Conlon, 2010). Employees may focus on their duties and possible benefits to their organization rather than whether their behaviours are consistent with moral standards (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). For the above reasons, we hypothesised that

employees with higher job satisfaction levels will engage in UPB to provide a return to their organizations.

Hypothesis 1. Job satisfaction will be positively associated with unethical pro-organizational behaviours.

### Belongingness as a mediator

Belongingness is a deeply personal and contextual mediated experience that evolves in response to the degree to which an individual feels (a) secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a defined group; (b) connected with or integral to the group; and (c) that their professional and/or personal values are in harmony with those of the group (Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2009). In an organizational context, a strong sense of belonging can be conceptualised as a source of acceptance within the organization and a powerful guiding principle of human behaviour (Karanika-Murray, Duncan, Pontes, & Griffiths, 2015).

As previously stated, employee job satisfaction appears when certain fundamental psychological needs are satisfied, such as work autonomy, potential for career growth and interpersonal interactions (Magee, 2015). When those fundamental psychological needs are satisfied, employees demonstrate a strong sense of belonging towards their organizations (Brambilla & Riva, 2017). Therefore, driven by a high level of job satisfaction, individuals may experience positive feelings that are associated with inclusion in their organizations, and they form a high level of belongingness (Morganson, Major, Oborn, Verive, & Heelan, 2010).

People will be likely to engage in positive behaviours towards a group to which they feel they belong (Beatrice et al., 2017). This tendency is demonstrated in organizations in which leaders experience a high sense of belonging and feel aligned with the interests of their group or team, motivating them to take on personal costs to benefit their group (Hoogervorst, De Cremer, van Dijke, & Mayer, 2012). Kyei-Poku (2014) have also found that belongingness prompts employees to assign more weight to their group's interests, which might then promote pro-organizational behaviours in general. Meanwhile, people will be more likely to fail to recognise ethical conflicts of interest when the unethical behaviours favours their in-group; in addition, an ethical compromise is likely to occur when individuals value the goals of their organizations more than a particular moral value (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Thus, we predict that employees with a high level of job satisfaction will have a greater sense of belonging, leading them to prioritise their organization at the expense of moral standards and eventually to engage in UPB.

Hypothesis 2. Belongingness will mediate the positive relationship between job satisfaction and unethical pro-organizational behaviours.

### Corporate ethical values as a moderator

According to person-context interaction theories, individuals' behaviours are influenced not only by personal factors but also by context (Magnusson & Stattin, 1998). Umphress and Bingham (2011) have proposed that unethical behaviours may be regarded as being implicitly condoned if the organizational context is ambiguous. They proposed that employees within unethical organizations are more likely to engage in UPB than those in ethical organizations. In contrast, ethical values or ethical context is recognised as a factor that creates a greater sense of ethics in an organization (Andreoli & Lefkowitz, 2008). For this reason, we chose CEV, which are defined as "a composite of the individual ethical values of managers and both the formal and informal policies on ethics of the organization" (Hunt, Wood, & Chonko, 1989), as the moderator in our research.

A sense of belonging is the experience of personal involvement in an environment, such that individuals experience a fit or congruence with the organization in the spiritual dimension (Cockshaw, Shochet, & Obst, 2013). When employees experience social exchange with their organizations, under high CEV, the employees will clearly perceived the company's high requirements of their employees in terms of laws, regulations and ethical norms (Tang et al., 2018; Valentine, Godkin, Fleischman, & Kidwell, 2011); in this context, although employees may think it is necessary to generate returns for their organizations, their likelihood of engaging in unethical behaviour will decrease. On the contrary, under low CEV, employees will face an ethical dilemma because the lack of behavioural guidance may lead them to choose to benefit through unethical behaviour. In an egoistic ethical climate in particular, high belongingness employees will cover up unethical behaviours to maintain organizational interests and will offer moral justification for their behaviour, using excuses such as "I did this for us" and "organization's benefit interest first" (Martin, Kish-Gephart, & Detert, 2014), which ultimately leads to UPB.

Therefore, we suggest that CEV moderates the relationship between belongingness and UPB so that the positive relationship between belongingness and UPB will be significant only when CEV are weak.

Hypothesis 3. Belongingness has a stronger positive relationship with unethical pro-organizational behaviours under weak CEV.

Integrating the three hypotheses mentioned above, we further propose H4.

Hypothesis 4. Job satisfaction will be positively associated with unethical pro-organizational behaviours through belongingness when CEV are weak.

## METHOD

### Sample and procedures

A total of 378 full-time employees who worked in different companies in Southeast China were recruited through online advertisements in exchange for the chance to win 100 RMB (data were collected between October and December 2016). To mitigate the social desirability response bias, we assured all participants that their responses would be confidential, and the data they provided would be used only for research purposes.

After some copies of questionnaires were excluded because they contained too many identical answers, 369 valid surveys remained for the analysis (a response rate of 97.6%). Among these 369 employees, 19.5% were male. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 53 years ( $M = 32.65$  years,  $SD = 6.72$  years), and they averaged 10.56 years in their jobs ( $SD = 7.47$  years). The participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

### Measures

All English-based measures were translated into Chinese, based on “translation/back-translation” procedures. The coefficient alpha for each scale is presented in Table 2.

#### Job satisfaction

The Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) was used to assess the participants’ job satisfaction with their current job (Arvey, Bouchard, Segal, & Abraham, 1989). The present research used the Chinese version of the MSQ, which has been translated and validated in previous studies among Chinese samples (Li & Wang, 2016). The participants were required to indicate their degree of satisfaction on a 5-point scale (from “1 = very dissatisfied”

to “5 = very satisfied”), which included 20 items divided into two dimensions of intrinsic satisfaction (e.g., “being able to remain busy at all times”) and extrinsic satisfaction (e.g., “the way my boss handles people”). Summing the scores of all items yields a total score, and a higher score indicates greater job satisfaction.

#### Belongingness

The *Belongingness* subscale of the Psychological Ownership Scale developed by Avey, Avolio, Crossley, and Luthans (2009) was used to measure the employees’ sense of belonging. The measure includes 3 items rated on a 5-point scale (ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “5 = strongly agree”). Summing the scores of the 3 items yields a total score, and a higher score indicates feeling a stronger sense of belonging. A sample item is “I am totally comfortable being in this organization”.

#### Corporate ethical values

We used the *Corporate Ethical Value Scale*, with a 5-item measure developed by Hunt et al. (1989), to assess the employees’ beliefs about their organization’s generalised ethical practices. Sample items include “In order to succeed in my company, it is often necessary to compromise one’s ethics” and “Managers in my company often engage in behaviours that I consider to be unethical.” The items were rated on a 5-point scale (ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “5 = strongly agree”), and after reverse scoring two items and averaging the item scores, higher composite values indicated that individuals believed that the organization was ethical.

#### Unethical pro-organizational behaviours

We used a 7-item self-report scale developed by Umphress et al. (2010) to assess employees’ UPB. The items were rated on a 5-point scale (ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “5 = strongly agree”). A total score can be obtained by summing all 6 items, and a higher score indicates greater employee willingness to engage in UPB. Sample items include “If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good” and “If my organization needed me to, I would withhold issuing a refund to a customer or client accidentally overcharged.”

For the *control variables*, the meta-analytic findings of Kish-Gephart et al. (2010) have revealed a weak correlation between gender, age and unethical choices. Furthermore, previous research has also controlled for age, gender and work tenure when exploring the antecedents of UPB (Effelsberg, Solga, & Gurt, 2014). Hence, we measured *age*, *gender* and *work tenure* to control for their potentially spurious effects.

**TABLE 1**  
Description of the sample

Variables		N	%
Marital status	Unmarried	259	70.3
	Married	107	28.9
	Other (i.e., widowed)	3	.8
Gender	Male	72	19.5
	Female	297	80.5
Education	High school degree or below	16	4.3
	Bachelor’s degree	267	72.4
	Graduate degree or above	86	23.3
Type of industry	Foreign-funded or joint venture	29	7.9
	State-owned enterprise	12	3.3
	Government or public institution	154	41.7
	Private enterprise	158	42.8
	Other	16	4.3
Total		369	100



**TABLE 2**  
The means, standard deviations, correlations and reliabilities among the variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	32.65	6.72	—						
2. Gender	.20	.40	.09	—					
3. Tenure	10.56	7.47	.93***	.05	—				
4. Job satisfaction	3.35	.54	.13*	.05	.10	(.91)			
5. Belongingness	3.05	.84	.02	.00	.01	.66***	(.81)		
6. CEV	3.66	.66	-.05	-.08	-.04	.35***	.32***	(.72)	
7. UPB	2.63	.62	.10	.09	.10	.13*	.20***	-.23***	(.76)

Note: CEV = corporate ethical values; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behaviours. *N* = 369. Cronbach's alpha is reported along the diagonal.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

**TABLE 3**  
Model fit results from confirmatory factor analyses

Variable	$\chi^2$	df	$\Delta\chi^2$ ( $\Delta$ df)	RMSEA	CFI	NNFI	SRMR
M <sub>1</sub> : JS; B; CEV; UPB	279.93	113	—	.06	.92	.90	.07
M <sub>2</sub> : JS + B; CEV; UPB	354.08	116	74.15(3)	.08	.88	.86	.07
M <sub>3</sub> : JS + B; CEV + UPB	699.39	118	419.46(5)	.12	.71	.66	.13
M <sub>4</sub> : JS + B + CEV + UPB	1093.02	119	813.09(6)	.15	.51	.44	.15

Note: *N* = 369. B = belongingness; CEV = corporate ethical values; CFI = comparative fit index; JS = job satisfaction; NNFI = non-normed fit index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behaviours. All alternative models were compared with the hypothesised four-factor model. All  $\Delta\chi^2$  are significant at *p* < .01.

## Data analysis

We used linear regression analyses, combined with the bootstrapping method, to test our hypothetical moderated mediation model. Adopting a three-step procedure, we first examined the effect of job satisfaction on UPB (H1). Then, we examined the simple mediation model to test for H2, using the SPSS application provided by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Next, we integrated CEV to test for moderation and further moderated mediation. Before the analyses, we standardised all variables in our model, including the control variables. Furthermore, we initially conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to test for construct distinctiveness.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive statistics

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, correlations and coefficient alphas of the variables. Among the variables, job satisfaction was found to be positively correlated with belongingness ( $r = .66$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and UPB ( $r = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Belongingness was also positively correlated with UPB ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These findings provided preliminary support for the hypothesised relationships.

### Discriminant validity

We conducted CFAs to examine the discriminant validity of the employees' four self-reported variables (i.e., job

satisfaction, belongingness, CEV and UPB). As shown in Table 3, the chi-square of each of the other three models showed a significant increase compared with that of the four-factor model (M<sub>1</sub>), and the four-factor model was obviously better in the other fit indices, thus, we concluded that the four variables were empirically distinct from one another, representing four distinct constructs.

### Testing mediation effects

We tested the hypotheses regarding the mediating, moderating and moderated mediation effects (H1 to H4) using regression analysis, combined with the PROCESS macro for SPSS developed by Hayes (2013). Table 4 shows the results of our analyses. As for the mediating effect, we first examined the effect of job satisfaction on UPB, and we found that job satisfaction had a significantly positive effect on UPB ( $b = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ , Model 2), after accounting for the controls. Then, we incorporate belongingness into the model, and we found that the path coefficient between job satisfaction and belongingness was also significant ( $b = .67$ ,  $p < .001$ , Model 1). The same was true with regard to the relationship between belongingness and UPB ( $b = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ , Model 3). To further support the mediating effect, we performed the parametric bootstrapping procedure (2000 replications), following Preacher and Hayes (2008). The result shows that the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval was .06 to .26. These findings show that belongingness mediates the relationship between job satisfaction and UPB. The

**TABLE 4**  
Regression results for the analysis of the conditional indirect effects of job satisfaction on UPB

	Belongingness		UPB					
	M <sub>1</sub>		M <sub>2</sub>		M <sub>3</sub>		M <sub>4</sub>	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
<b>Controls</b>								
Age	-.07	.11	.00	.14	.01	.14	-.02	.13
Gender	-.02	.04	.08	.05	.08	.05	.06	.05
Work tenure	.00	.10	.09	.14	.08	.14	.09	.13
<b>Independent variable</b>								
Job satisfaction	.67***	.04	.11*	.05	-.04	.07	.06	.07
<b>Mediating variable</b>								
Belongingness					.23**	.07	.26***	.06
<b>Moderating variable</b>								
CEV							-.34***	.05
<b>Interaction term</b>								
Belongingness × CEV							-.13**	.05
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.44		.03		.06		.17	
$\Delta R^2$	—		—		.03		.11	
<i>F</i>	70.29***		2.67*		4.41**		10.54***	

Notes: Gender was dummy-coded as 0 (= female) and 1 (= male). The *b* values are unstandardized regression coefficients. The number of bootstrap samples for calculation of the bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals is 2000. CEV = corporate ethical values. UPB = unethical pro-organizational behaviours.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

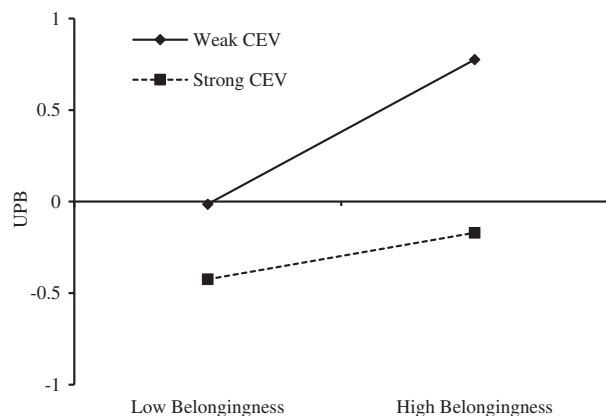
mediating effect is .15. Therefore, both H1 and H2 were verified.

### Testing moderation effects

H3 predicts that CEV moderate the relationship between belongingness and UPB. The linear regression analysis results are provided in Table 3: the interaction between belongingness and CEV was significantly related to UPB ( $\beta = -.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ). We further conducted simple slope analyses and generated Figure 1 to graphically illustrate the moderating effect of CEV on the link between belongingness and UPB (Aiken & West, 1991). As shown in Figure 2, belongingness has a stronger positive relationship with UPB when CEV are weak (*simple slope* = .40,  $p < .001$ ) than when CEV are strong (*simple slope* = .13,  $p = .13$ ). Thus, H3 was supported.

### Testing an integrative moderated mediation model

To test the moderated mediation model posited in H4, we applied the moderated mediation approach to calculate two sets of indirect effects, as well as their confidence intervals, in the high and low levels of the moderator (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). The results are presented in Table 5. The indirect effect of job satisfaction on UPB through belongingness is stronger when CEV are weak (an *indirect effect* when CEV are weak = .26,  $p < .001$ ; an *indirect effect* when CEV are strong = .08,  $p = .19$ ).



**Figure 2.** Moderating effect of CEV on the relationship between belongingness and UPB.

Note: UPB = unethical pro-organizational behaviours; CEV = corporate ethical values.

The difference between the indirect effects of weak and strong CEV was .18, with a 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval of .03 to .33. Based on these results, we concluded that employee job satisfaction has a stronger positive relationship with UPB through belongingness when CEV are weak. Thus, H4 was supported.

## DISCUSSION

The current study proposed and tested a moderated mediation model to examine the relationships among job satisfaction, belongingness, CEV and UPB.

**TABLE 5**  
Bootstrapping results for the *T*-test of conditional indirect effects

CEV	Indirect effect	95% confidence interval	
		Lower	Upper
Weak (−1 SD)	.26***	.16	.39
Strong (+1 SD)	.08	−.03	.22
Difference between weak and strong ( $\Delta\beta$ )	.18*	.03	.33

Note: *N* = 369. The results are based on 2000 bootstrap samples. For CEV, “weak” refers to one standard deviation below the mean of CEV, and “strong” refers to one standard deviation above the mean of CEV. The conditional indirect effect tests are two-tailed.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Specifically, the finding of this model is consistent with our hypotheses. Job satisfaction is positively correlated with UPB, and belongingness mediates the relationship between job satisfaction and UPB. We also found that CEV moderate the link between belongingness and UPB; thus, job satisfaction is greater when connected to UPB through belongingness under the condition of weak CEV but not strong CEV. The theoretical implications and practical significance of the present study are discussed in the following sections.

### Theoretical implications

First, our research supplemented the study of UPB in the aspect of antecedent variables. Since the concept of UPB was first proposed, an increasing number of studies have found that organizational identification (Chen et al., 2016; Umphress & Bingham, 2011) and ethical leadership (Kalshoven et al., 2016) are positive factors in an organization that may lead to employees' unethical behaviours. The results of our research are consistent with those of previous research. That is, employees with a high level of job satisfaction may be more likely to engage in UPB. In addition, for the first time, our research introduced job satisfaction as an antecedent variable to explore its potential impact on UPB.

Second, we advanced the research on job satisfaction. In previous studies, scholars have focused on the positive role of job satisfaction in employees' behaviours, such as organizational citizenship, job performance and creativity (Borrott, Day, Sedgwick, & Levett-Jones, 2016; Li, Liang, & Crant, 2010). However, few studies have investigated the negative aspects of job satisfaction. Our research showed that job satisfaction is positively related to UPB, thereby providing empirical evidence that job satisfaction causes beneficial behaviours that are linked to moral controversy. What must be emphasised is that the findings expand the research on the outcome variable of job satisfaction.

Third, Trevino and Youngblood (1990) have noted that it is necessary to consider the interaction between organizational and individual factors when investigating employees' behaviours. Our research supports this view, finding that UPB is influenced by the interaction of belongingness and CEV. Moreover, previous studies have found that CEV can restrain unethical behaviours (Vitell & Hidalgo, 2006). Our study reached a similar conclusion; that is, when the organization has strong CEV, even though employees experience a high level of belongingness, they will not exhibit unethical behaviours.

### Practical implications

In addition to the theoretical contributions, our research has some practical implications. First, it is necessary to promote employees' job satisfaction to increase their sense of reciprocity (Yao & Wang, 2008) and to encourage them to perform more pro-organizational behaviours. However, managers also should pay close attention to behaviours that may be contrary to moral standards, such as UPB. Such behaviours will benefit the organization in the short term but in the future would cause serious damage to the reputation and development of the organization. For this reason, managers should actively construct strong CEV within the organization and create a good moral atmosphere to enhance employees' ethical practices and guide them to reward the organization in an ethical manner.

### Limitations and future research

As with any study, our study is not without limitations. First, the research design was cross-sectional in nature, which limited our ability to allow for predictions of causality, even though the data were collected at the same time. Future studies should address this limitation by using a longitudinal approach to make the findings more persuasive. Second, UPB emphasises employee behaviours and real life influences; therefore, a field study might be able to provide stronger evidence with more insightful practical implications. Future studies should consider these aspects to improve research in this area. Finally, our study was conducted in China, and our findings may have been influenced by the cultural context, as employees' decision-making processes will be influenced by their culture (Li, Masuda, & Russell, 2015). Therefore, our conclusions should be tested in other cultures.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our study provided an empirical investigation of UPB. We illustrated a moderated mediation model to explain the association between job satisfaction and UPB and found that belongingness mediates the

relationship between high-level job satisfaction and UPB. We also found that this effect is stronger when CEV are weak. These findings are consistent with our hypothesis of the moderated mediation mechanism and extend our knowledge of UPB.

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