



# Moral cleansing or moral licensing? A study of unethical pro-organizational behavior's differentiating Effects

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Accepted: 28 January 2022

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## Abstract

Unethical Pro-organization Behavior (UPB) refers to the unethical behavior which can benefit the organization. Whereas previous studies focus on UPB's antecedents and its formation mechanisms, this paper mainly explores UPB's differentiating effects, that is, individuals' moral decision and the corresponding psychological mechanisms after engaging in UPB based on moral balance model. The empirical results indicated that UPB has moral cleansing and moral licensing effect simultaneously: On the one hand, UPB can induce guilt and then result in Organizational Citizenship Behavior towards social charity (OCB-S). On the other hand, UPB can stimulate psychological entitlement and then generate self-interested unethical behavior (SUB). Reflective moral attentiveness moderates the mediated relationship between UPB and SUB via psychological entitlement, such that this relationship will be stronger for individuals with lower reflective moral attentiveness.

**Keywords** Unethical pro-organizational behavior · Guilt · Psychological entitlement · Organizational citizenship behavior towards social charity · Self-interested unethical behavior · Reflective moral attentiveness

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## Introduction

Unethical behavior is a persistent topic among theoretical research and management practice (Treviño et al., 2014). Interestingly, much of these studies have taken unethical behavior as a self-interested behavior (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010)—that is, actions intended for personal gain or benefit. However, some scholars recently have begun to question this assumption, and found employees sometimes engage in unethical behaviors intended to benefit their organizations (Gino & Pierce, 2009; Umphress et al., 2010). For example, employees misrepresented financial data to improve their organization's reputation, hid bad news or exaggerated results to customers or the public. Scholars used Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior (UPB) to refer to this type of behavior, which specifically involves employee actions that are intended to benefit the organization but violate social ethical norms (Umphress & Bingham, 2011).

Given its prevalence in organizations, scholars seek to understand why UPB occurs by paying particular attention to its antecedents and formation mechanisms (Umphress et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2016). However, up to now, we have yet to know what employees would do after conducting such behavior (Tang et al., 2020). UPB comprises two distinct characteristics, namely, it is both pro-organizational and unethical behavior (Chen et al., 2016). Accordingly, we theorize that these characteristics may influence employees' moral judgment and ethical decision-making in different ways. According to moral balance model, individuals calculate a sort of moral balance for themselves based on all their morally relevant actions within a given time span (Monin & Jordan, 2009). Thus, on the one hand, its unethical character will lower an individual's moral self-worth than his or her ideal moral level after conducting UPB. In order to maintain moral balance, the moral cleansing effect will make individual exhibit pro-social behavior such as social charity dimension of Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB-S) in order to alleviate feelings of guilt (Sachdeva et al., 2009). However, on the other hand, moral balance model also points out that an individual's current moral behavior unfolds in the contest of past moral behavior such that past good deeds can license future bad deeds (Merritt et al., 2010; Miller & Effron, 2010). After conducting UPB, its pro-organizational characteristic may also result in perpetrators believing their behaviors are good actions and their self-concept may rise and experience of psychological entitlement which can push them to think they had credits to commit bad deeds with exemption (Miller & Effron, 2010). That means moral licensing effect may encourage individuals to conduct self-interested unethical behavior (SUB) because of psychological entitlement. This entails that UPB may has differentiating effects such that employees may exhibit OCB-S as feelings of guilt because its unethical feature or engage in SUB as a result of moral licensing for its pro-organizational feature.

This prompts another question of why some people feel guilt while others seek licensing after engaging in UPB. It has been found that the parallel moral mediation effect of moral balance model varies depending on individuals' moral character (Mullen & Monin, 2016). Drawing on behavioral ethics research, we think moral attentiveness may act as a key moderator in the differentiation of UPB. Moral attentiveness refers to the extent to which an individual chronically perceives and consid-

ers morality and moral elements in his/her experiences (Reynolds, 2008). Individuals with high moral attentiveness often consider, ponder and ruminate on moral matters, and are more sensitive to moral dilemma and engage in more moral behaviors (Reynolds & Miller, 2015; Liao et al., 2018). Therefore, after engaging in UPB, individuals with high moral attentiveness may feel more guilt and then exhibit pro-social behaviors. In contrast, individuals with low moral attentiveness may not ponder their deeds with or without morality but consider their actions are OCBs and induce more moral licensing psychology and then conduct SUB.

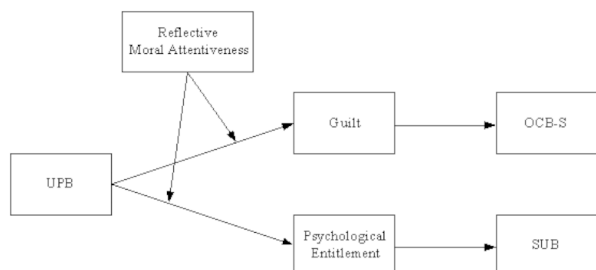
Taken together, the main purpose of this study is to investigate UPB's differentiating effects by testing moral cleansing/licensing effect and its boundary condition based on moral balance model. Figure 1 is the theoretical model of UPB's differentiating effects. This study makes at least three theoretical contributions. First, it enriches UPB theory by exploring its positive and negative differentiating behavior results. According to its pro-organizational and unethical features, we have verified UPB can differentiate into OCB-S and SUB at the same time. That means UPB is a combination of angel and devil and its differentiating results include both moral cleansing and moral licensing effect. Second, it reveals the psychological mechanisms of UPB's differentiating results by verifying the emotional and cognitive mediating mechanisms. By moral cleansing effect, UPB can induce OCB-S for compensation via feeling guilty. By moral licensing effect, UPB can motivate SUB via psychological entitlement. Thus, we have explored the emotional (guilt) and cognitive (psychological entitlement) mediating mechanisms of differentiation effects of UPB. Finally, it expands the boundary condition of UPB's differentiating effects. We have found the differentiation process of UPB vary depend on individuals' reflective moral attentiveness. Therefore, this result could reveal whether the moral cleansing effect works or the moral licensing effect works is a matter of individuals' reflective moral attentiveness.

## Literature review and hypothesis development

### Moral cleansing: The influence of UPB on OCB-S via guilt

UPB refers to "actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members, and violate core societal values, mores, laws, or stan-

**Fig. 1** Theoretical model (Notes: UPB: Unethical pro-organizational behavior; OCB-S: OCB towards social charity; SUB: Self-interested unethical behavior)



dards of proper conduct” (Umphress & Bingham, 2011, p. 622). As noted, UPB is both pro-organization and non-ethics—that is, employees seek to benefit their organization but violate the general social moral code in doing so. Many scholars regard UPB as the result of positive exchange relationship or high organizational identification (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). For example, it has found that an individual’s organizational identification has a positive effect on UPB when he or she holds positive reciprocity belief (Umphress et al., 2010). Meanwhile, three studies conducted by Chen et al. (2016) showed that organizational identification has a positive influence on UPB through the mediation of moral disengagement. Wang et al. (2019) showed that high-inducement employee-organization relationships have a positive effect on UPB via perceived social exchange. Kong et al. (2020) found that work effort via moral credential can induce employees’ UPB. By a systematic review, Mishra et al. (2021) pointed out social identity, social exchange, social learning and social cognitive these four formation mechanisms of UPB, and list the corresponding antecedent variables.

Guilt is defined as an agitation-based emotion involving regret over a wrong action or decision (Ferguson & Stegge, 1998). More specifically, guilt is a self-conscious moral emotion arises when individuals perceive that they have violated moral norms and standards (Baumeister et al., 1994). Eliciting guilt involves a process of negative moral self-appraisal in which individuals realize that their moral transgressions have caused negative consequences for other people and they need to take responsibility. Therefore, guilt focuses on the behavior rather than on the agent (Tangney et al., 2007). As a beneficial negative emotion, it has been found that guilt could motivate individuals’ compensating intention, thereby inducing helping, pro-social, and organizational citizenship behavior (Ghorbani et al., 2013; Tangney et al., 2007).

Moral balance model proposes individual’s moral self-concept is a dynamic process that fluctuates around an equilibrium point (Nisan, 1990). When an individual’s actual moral self-perception does not match his or her ideal moral self-worth, he or she will make a corresponding moral decision in order to correct his or her internal moral balance (Zhong et al., 2009). Because people tend to strive for a balanced moral equilibrium (Zhong et al., 2009), they are generally motivated to boost their moral self-concept through good deeds when it is below the equilibrium point (moral cleansing effect) (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006), or try to deflate via transgressions when it is above the equilibrium point (moral licensing effect) (Monin & Miller, 2001).

As mentioned before, UPB is an unethical behavior that can cause harm to stakeholders outside organization. After engaging in it, the unethical characteristic of UPB may make employees realize that they have committed bad deeds for which they are primarily responsible. Under this situation, these employees may engage in moral reflection and feel self-condemnation. In their UPB theoretical model, Umphress and Bingham (2011) had proposed that guilt may be an emotional reaction to UPB. Meanwhile, other studies also found that people will feel guilty when they are aware of their negative behavior at work or after engaging in unethical behavior (Ilies et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2020).

Moral cleansing effect refers to the compensatory behaviors people engage in when their moral self-worth has been threatened; moreover, it can explain the posi-

tive relationship between UPB and OCB via guilt. Individuals may reflect upon and appraise their actions after engaging in UPB, and may feel their moral self-worth has been threatened because they have committed unethical deeds, thus eliciting feelings of guilt. In order to alleviate inner unease and maintain internal moral balance, such individuals may generate compensatory motivation and engage in pro-social behavior such as OCB. It has found that people who engaged in counternormative and undesirable behavior would experience guilt and then conducted compensatory behavior such as OCB (Ilies et al., 2013.; Unethical behavior/UPB can induce employees' exemplification via shame (Bonner et al., 2017). Burmeister et al. (2019) pointed out that knowledge hiding, an unethical behavior, can evoke guilt and subsequently induce the perpetrator's motivation to correct their transgression by OCB. Liao et al. (2018) have identified the moral cleansing effect in abusive supervision. Indeed, the results of two experience sampling studies showed that perpetrating abusive supervisor behavior led to an increased feeling of guilt, and then motivated leaders to engage in constructive person- and task-oriented leadership behaviors. Tang et al. (2020) even tested the moral cleansing effect of UPB, and found UPB has a positive influence on OCB-customer via guilt. Wang et al. (2021) also tested a moral cleansing process of UPB which can increase individuals' voice via guilt. Based on the foregoing, we propose that individuals may engage in OCB as a form of compensation after engaging in UPB because they feel guilt.

However, the special meaning of OCB still needs to be defined in this paper. OCB refers to "individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promote the effective functioning of the organization" (Organ, 1988, p. 4). UPB can be seen as OCB because it can benefit organization, but at the cost of external stakeholders. Therefore, individual would not commit routine OCB again as for feeling guilty after engaging in UPB, because this from "pro-organization" to "pro-organization" phenomenon does not fit moral cleansing effect. In contrast, conducting some social welfare activities such as charity can better reflect individuals' compensating motivation. Therefore, we mainly focus on social welfare participation dimension of OCB (OCB-S) (Farh et al., 2004) which can contribute to public welfare such as planting trees, donating money. Accordingly, this study posits the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Guilt will mediate the positive relationship between UPB and OCB-S.

### **Moral licensing: The influence of UPB on SUB via psychological entitlement**

Moral licensing effect states that an individual's current moral behavior unfolds in the context of past moral behavior such that past good deeds can license future bad deeds (Merritt et al., 2010). Its main idea is "when people can call to mind previous instances of their own socially desirable or morally laudable behaviors, they will feel more comfortable taking actions that could be seen as socially undesirable or morally questionable" (Miller & Effron, 2010, p. 118). Therefore, moral licensing effect often was used to explain why good people commit bad behavior (Merritt et al., 2010; Klotz & Bolino, 2013).

Psychological entitlement refers to a psychological state that individual consistently believe that he/she deserves preferential rewards and treatment, often with little consideration of actual qualities or performance levels (Campbell et al., 2004). It has found psychological entitlement is similar to moral licensing. For example, Zhong et al. (2009) argued that when people engage in good deeds, moral licensing produces a sense of entitlement to some moral laxity. Merritt et al. (2010) also pointed that after individual conduct good deeds, they feel entitled to transgress. In this paper, consistent with other studies, psychological entitlement was used to represent the key psychological state of moral licensing (Yam et al., 2017).

UPB is characteristically pro-organization. Individuals sometimes may believe that their UPB is OCB because it benefits organization. Under this situation, individuals may think their actual moral perception is higher than their ideal self-concept and experience a sense of entitlement to moral laxity. This entitled psychology further licensing their transgression, because they think they are heroes and qualified to commit bad things and should be exempted. It has been found that after engaging in moral or social desirable behavior, individual would produce psychological entitlement and then licensing he/she to commit immoral actions, especially self-interested unethical behavior (Harvey & Martinko, 2009). For example, Klotz and Bolino (2013) constructed a theoretical model to state how OCB caused Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) through moral licensing psychology. This model has been tested by Yam et al. (2017), and found OCB through psychological entitlement has a positive influence on organizational deviance. Lin et al. (2016) found that leaders' ethical behavior was positively associated with increased amount of abusive behavior the following day, because leader's moral licensing psychology was increased owing to their earlier displays of ethical behavior. Loi et al. (2020) found that employee volunteering behavior can lead to deviant workplace behavior because of individual's moral licensing psychology and experience of psychological entitlement. In the future direction, Tang et al. (2020) also pointed that UPB may give individual moral credit for helping the organization and may cause bad results. Based on the foregoing, this study posits the following hypothesis:

**H2:** Psychological entitlement will mediate the positive relationship between UPB and SUB.

## Moral attentiveness as a moderator

Moral attentiveness is defined as “the extent to which an individual chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences” (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1028). Moral attentiveness includes perceptual moral attentiveness and reflective moral attentiveness. Perceptual moral attentiveness captures the extent to which the individual recognized moral aspects in everyday experiences, focuses on recognition of moral issues now; and reflective moral attentiveness measures the extent to which the individual considered, pondered, and ruminated on past moral matters (Reynolds, 2008). Previous studies have found reflective moral attentive-

ness is particularly critical to processing preceding moral transgressions and it affects subsequent moral decisions (Reynolds, 2008; Liao et al., 2018). Because we are interested in how individual will do after conducting UPB, we thus focus on the moderating effect of reflective moral attentiveness.

We speculate that individuals with high reflective moral attentiveness will experience higher guilt after engaging in UPB; in contrast, individuals with low reflective moral attentiveness will have a stronger sense of psychological entitlement. Morally attentive individuals often ponder the moral elements of their behaviors at work, such individuals are more cognizant of the moral aspects of their decisions (Reynolds, 2008). In other words, individuals with high reflective moral attentiveness are more likely to rethink what they have done from moral view. After conducting UPB, individuals with high reflective moral attentiveness may reflect on their prior wrongdoings, and are more likely to imagine how their behaviors produce harms (Whitaker & Godwin, 2013). Such pondering, ruminating may result in individuals realizing their UPB is an unethical behavior in its nature, a stronger deprived moral self-concept may result in them experiencing higher levels of guilt, and lower level of psychological entitlement. In contrast, after conducting UPB, individuals with low reflective moral attentiveness are less aware of morality what they had done, not likely to ponder the harm caused by their actions (Reynolds, 2008). Instead, they may pay more attention to its pro-organizational character and consider themselves are heroes. This may lead to less feelings of guilt but more sense of psychological entitlement.

**H3a:** Individual's reflective moral attentiveness will moderate the positive relationship of UPB with guilt, such that this relationship will be stronger when individual's reflective moral attentiveness is high.

**H3b:** Individual's reflective moral attentiveness will moderate the positive relationship of UPB with psychological entitlement, such that this relationship will be stronger when individual's reflective moral attentiveness is low.

Integrating the theoretical model arguments presented in H1-3, we further posit following moderated mediation hypotheses.

**H4a:** Reflective moral attentiveness will moderate the mediated relationship between UPB and OCB-S via guilt, such that this relationship will be stronger for individuals with higher (vs. lower) reflective moral attentiveness.

**H4b:** Reflective moral attentiveness will moderate the mediated relationship between UPB and SUB via psychological entitlement, such that this relationship will be stronger for individuals with lower (vs. higher) reflective moral attentiveness.

## Methodology

### Participants and design

This study collected samples from MBA students (also full-time working now) of a university in Henan province, China. Given its sensitive nature, we had explained the research purpose and the anonymous method to ensure respondents' confidentiality. In order to reduce common method variance and test the causal relationship, we collected data at two different time points. During the first wave (T1), participants were required to rate their UPB, guilt, psychological entitlement, as well as their demographic information. The second wave (T2) was conducted two weeks later. During this wave, the same participants were asked to rate their OCB-S, SUB and reflective moral attentiveness.

A total of 290 survey questionnaires were collected during T1 (response rate as 100%), and 282 MBA students completed questionnaires during T2 (response rate as 97.24%). By deleting incomplete and careless fillings, there are 263 valid surveys for analysis at last. We had compared the deleting samples (19) with the valid samples (263) on demographic variables, T test results showed that there is no significant difference. Of the 263 samples, 50.2% of respondents were female. Most participants were in 26–30 (35.7%) and 31–40 (42.6%) age groups. 74.1% of participants held a bachelor's degree, the other 25.9% were junior college. 72.6% of the respondents range from 1 to 10 years of tenure, less than 1 year was 4.6% and more than 10 years was 22.8%.

### Measures

All scales were translated into Chinese by two OB/HRM master students, and translation-back translation technology was adopted to ensure all items were accurately translated from English to Chinese (Brislin et al., 1973). Before formal investigation, we had recruited several MBA students to fill in questionnaires to make finally checking.

We measured *UPB* by using scale first introduced by Umphress et al. (2010) and then modified by Tang et al. (2020). This scale contains four items such as "I withheld negative information about my company or its products from customers and clients" and asked participants to rate their own UPB over the last month using 5-point Likert type scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*;  $\alpha = 0.73$ ).

*Guilt* was measured by PANAS-X, developed by Watson and Clark (1994). This scale includes six items such as "angry at self" "guilty" "blameworthy" and asked participants to rate their own recent sense of guilt using 5-point Likert type scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*;  $\alpha = 0.85$ ).

*Psychological entitlement* was measured by the scale developed by Yam et al. (2017). This scale includes four items such as "I honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others". We asked participants to rate their own recent sense of psychological entitlement using 5-point Likert type scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*;  $\alpha = 0.70$ ).

We chose two items in OCB's social welfare participation dimension in China that were developed by Farh et al. (2004) to measure *OCB-S*. Sample items include state-



ments such as “Contribute to public welfare (e.g., donate money/blood, plant trees).” We asked participants to rate their OCB-S in the last 2 weeks using 5-point Likert type scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*;  $\alpha = 0.70$ ).

*Reflective moral attentiveness* was measured by four items from the scale developed by Reynolds (2008), such as “I like to think about ethics.” we asked participants to rate their choice using 5-point Likert type scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*;  $\alpha = 0.83$ ).

*SUB* was measured by nine items from the scale developed by Akaah (1996), such as “using company services for personal use,” “doing personal business on company time,” and “falsified a receipt to get reimbursed for more money than I spent on business expense.” We chose these SUBs for two reasons: First, these SUBs are quite prevalent in Chinese workplace, and we had discussed with MBA students about its typicality before investigating. Second, these SUBs are direct toward organization that can bring material benefits to the actor in the same way as their UPB can bring benefits to the organizations. Therefore, it can reflect actor’s self-interested decision after conducting UPB with psychological entitlement. We asked participants to assess their SUB in last 2 weeks using 5-point Likert type scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*;  $\alpha = 0.89$ ).

We have controlled gender, age, tenure and education, because these demographic variables have a weak effect on unethical behavior (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010); and previous studies had also controlled them (Umphress et al., 2010).

**Table 1** CFA results

Model description	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	IFI	CFI	RMSEA
Six-factor model (a)	776.41	362	2.14	0.91	0.90	0.066
Five-factor model (b)	929.01	367	2.53	0.82	0.81	0.076
Five-factor model (c)	932.58	367	2.54	0.81	0.81	0.077
Four-factor model (d)	1093.18	371	2.95	0.76	0.75	0.086
Three-factor model (e)	1487.67	374	3.97	0.63	0.62	0.107
Two-factor model (f)	1689.41	376	4.49	0.57	0.56	0.115
One-factor model (g)	2115.04	377	5.61	0.43	0.42	0.133

Notes: UPB: Unethical pro-organizational behavior; OCB-S: OCB towards social charity; SUB: Self-interested unethical behavior; PE = Psychological entitlement; RMA = Reflective moral attentiveness

<sup>a</sup> six-factor model: UPB/Guilt/PE/OCB-S/SUB/RMA

<sup>b</sup> five-factor model: UPB+OCB-S/Guilt/PE/RMA/SUB

<sup>c</sup> five-factor model: UPB+SUB/Guilt/PE/RMA/OCB-S

<sup>d</sup> four-factor model: UPB+SUB+OCB-S/Guilt/PE/RMA

<sup>e</sup> three-factor model: UPB+SUB+OCB-S/Guilt+RMA/PE

<sup>f</sup> two-factor model: UPB+SUB+OCB-S/Guilt+RMA+PE

<sup>g</sup> one-factor model: UPB+SUB+OCB-S+Guilt+RMA+PE

## Analysis and results

### Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted for UPB, guilt, psychological entitlement, reflective moral attentiveness, OCB-S and SUB using AMOS. Results indicated that the hypothesized six-factor model fits the data well ( $\chi^2=776.41$ ,  $\chi^2/df=2.14$ , IFI=0.91, CFI=0.90, RMSEA=0.066). As shown in Table 1, the baseline six-factor model displayed significantly better goodness-of-fit indices than other models. We also tested common method variance according to Harman's recommendations (22.42%).

### Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of this study.

### Hypotheses tests

Besides the above hypotheses, we also included the relationship between guilt and SUB, the relationship between psychological entitlement and OCB-S in our model. The hierarchical regression analysis results in Table 3 indicated that the relationship between UPB and guilt (Model 1,  $\beta=0.22$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), UPB and OCB-S (Model 7,  $\beta=0.13$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) was positive respectively. Model 8 indicated that the relationship between UPB and OCB-S was positive but non-significant ( $\beta=0.09$ , *ns*), while the relationship between guilt and OCB-S was positive and significant ( $\beta=0.22$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), the relationship between psychological entitlement and OCB-S was nega-

**Table 2** Means, standard deviations, and correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	1.50	0.50									
2. Age	2.41	0.89	-0.14*								
3. Education	3.74	0.44	-0.03	-0.09							
4. Tenure	3.39	1.18	-0.07	0.77**	0.06						
5. UPB	2.57	0.71	-0.04	0.17**	0.06	0.19**					
6. Guilt	2.67	0.92	0.04	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.22**				
7. PE	2.31	0.82	-0.11	0.11	0.01	0.08	0.37**	0.12			
8. RMA	3.98	0.76	0.21**	0.05	0.02	0.07	-0.04	0.10	-0.18**		
8. OCB-S	3.71	0.85	0.11	0.18*	-0.02	0.21**	0.17**	0.26**	0.05	0.47**	
9. SUB	2.33	0.78	-0.15*	0.18*	0.10	0.17**	0.41**	-0.09	0.29**	-0.12*	0.09

Notes: Gender was coded as 1=male and 2=female. Age was coded as 1=below 25, 2=26–30, 3=31–40, 4=41–50 and 5=above 51. Education was coded as 1=junior college, 2=bachelor's degree and 3=graduate degree. Tenure was coded as 1=less than 1 year, 2=1–3 years, 3=4–6 years, 4=7–10 years and 5=more than 10 years

UPB: Unethical pro-organizational behavior; OCB-S: OCB towards social charity; SUB: Self-interested unethical behavior; PE=Psychological entitlement; RMA=Reflective moral attentiveness

\* $p<0.05$ , \*\* $p<0.01$ , \*\*\* $p<0.001$

**Table 3** Results of hierarchical regression analysis

Variable	Guilt			PE			OCB-S		SUB	
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10
Gender	0.06	0.03	0.04	-0.09	-0.06	-0.06	0.13*	0.12*	-0.12*	-0.11*
Age	0.08	0.07	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.09	0.06	0.04	0.10	0.08
Education	0.05	0.05	0.05	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.03	-0.04	0.08	0.08
Tenure	-0.05	-0.05	-0.06	-0.04	-0.03	-0.07	0.15	0.16	0.01	0.02
UPB	0.22***	0.22***	0.22***	0.37***	0.36***	0.34***	0.13*	0.09	0.37***	0.29***
Guilt								0.22***		-0.06
PE								-0.01		0.14*
RMA		0.10	0.10		-0.15**	-0.20**				
UPB*RMA			-0.01			-0.15*				
$\Delta R^2$	0.05***	0.01	0.00	0.15***	0.02**	0.02*	0.01*	0.04***	0.14***	0.04**
F	3.18	3.11	2.71	9.39	9.15	8.81	4.52	5.39	13.42	11.87

Notes: UPB: Unethical pro-organizational behavior; OCB-S: OCB towards social charity; SUB: self-interested unethical behavior; PE= Psychological entitlement; RMA= Reflective moral attentiveness

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

tive but non-significant ( $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $ns$ ). Sobel test result was significant ( $z = 2.52$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, these results fully support H1 that guilt has a full mediation effect between UPB and OCB-S. The results in Table 3 also indicated that the relationship between UPB and psychological entitlement, SUB was positive respectively (Model 4,  $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Model 9,  $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Model 10 indicated that the relationship between UPB and SUB was positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while the relationship between psychological entitlement and SUB was positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and the relationship between guilt and SUB was negative but non-significant ( $\beta = -0.06$ ,  $ns$ ). Sobel test result also was significant ( $z = 2.29$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, these results support H2 that psychological entitlement has a partial mediation effect between UPB and SUB.

We used bootstrapping (with 5000 resamples) to test the mediating effects again. The results showed that the direct effect of UPB on OCB-S was 0.10 and the estimated 95% confidence interval was  $[-0.0708, 0.2726]$ , contained zero. The indirect effect of UPB on OCB-S, via guilt, was 0.05, and the 95% confidence interval excluded zero  $[0.0192, 0.1166]$ . These results once again supported H1, confirmed that guilt has a full mediating effect in the relationship between UPB and OCB-S. Bootstrapping results showed that the direct effect of UPB on SUB was 0.34 and the estimated 95% confidence interval was  $[0.2070, 0.4891]$ , did not contain zero. The indirect effect of UPB on SUB, via psychological entitlement, was 0.06, and the 95% confidence interval excluded zero  $[0.0132, 0.1297]$ . H2 was tested again and psychological entitlement has a partial mediating effect in the relationship between UPB and SUB.

Results of the moderating effect of reflective moral attentiveness (RMA) were in Table 3. It indicated that the interaction effect of UPB and RMA on guilt was negative but non-significant (Model 3,  $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $ns$ ). Therefore, H3a was not supported. However, the interaction effect of UPB and RMA on psychological entitlement was negative and significant (Model 6,  $\beta = -0.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). As we expected, the relationship between UPB and psychological entitlement was positive and significant

at low level of RMA ( $\beta=0.52, p<0.001$ ), and it was also positive and significant at high level RMA ( $\beta=0.25, p<0.05$ ), but the group difference was significant ( $\beta=0.27, p<0.01$ ). We plotted the simple slopes at one standard deviation below and above the mean value of RMA as shown in Fig. 2.

We used bootstrapping to test the moderated mediation hypotheses, and the results in Table 4. It indicated that the conditional indirect effect of UPB on SUB was mediated by psychological entitlement, which was positive and significant when individual's RMA was low ( $B=0.07, SE=0.03, 95\%CI [0.0166, 0.1622]$ ), and still significant in the positive direction when individual's RMA was high ( $B=0.03, SE=0.02, 95\%CI [0.0063, 0.0948]$ ), but the group difference of two slopes was significant ( $B=0.04, SE=0.03, 95\%CI [0.0012, 0.0391]$ ). These results provided support for H4b.

## Discussion

Although UPB was a popular research topic in recent years (Umphress & Bingham, 2011; Mishra et al., 2021), little was known about what would happen after individuals engaging in it (Bonner et al., 2017; Tang et al., 2020). This study explored UPB's differentiating effects based on moral balance model and found through different mechanisms and under different conditions UPB would turn into OCB-S and SUB.

The results indicate that guilt has a mediating effect between UPB and OCB-S. This means after engaging in UPB, individuals may feel guilt for having done some-

**Fig. 2** RMA moderates the relationship between UPB and PE (Notes: UPB: Unethical pro-organizational behavior; PE=Psychological entitlement; RMA=Reflective moral attentiveness)

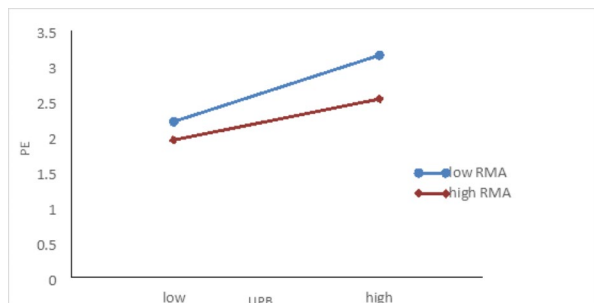


Fig. 2 RMA moderates the relationship between UPB and PE

**Table 4** The moderated mediating effect

Notes: UPB: Unethical pro-organizational behavior; SUB: self-interested unethical behavior; RMA=Reflective moral attentiveness

Conditional indirect effect of UPB on SUB	Effect	SE	95% CI
Low RMA(-1SD)	0.07	0.03	[0.0166, 0.1622]
High RMA(+1SD)	0.03	0.02	[0.0063, 0.0948]
Difference	0.04	0.03	[0.0012, 0.0391]

thing unethical that can harm stakeholders outside organization. In order to reduce resultant pain and feel better, they may conduct pro-social behavior such as OCB-S, which mostly are social charity activities to benefit social public to make compensation. This phenomenon constitutes a type of moral cleansing effect (Tang et al., 2020). Accordingly, the unethical characteristic of UPB can make individuals generate moral emotion (guilt) and result in positive consequences.

The research results indicate that psychological entitlement has a mediating effect between UPB and SUB. This means individuals will become morally licensed after engaging in UPB. Moral licensing causes individuals to feel a sense of psychological entitlement, which pushes them to think they have qualified to commit bad actions and should be exempted. As such, the pro-organizational characteristic of UPB is puzzling. It can inflate individuals' moral sense, induce moral licensing psychology and then result in negative outcomes (Merritt et al., 2010).

We found that the relationship between guilt and SUB was negative but non-significant, the relationship between psychological entitlement and OCB-S also was negative but non-significant. That means after engaging in UPB, individuals who feel guilt will commit OCB-S but not necessarily reduce SUB, and psychological entitled people will commit SUB but not necessarily reduce OCB-S. So, even moral cleansing and moral licensing are two common moral balance processes during UPB's differentiation, but they indeed have distinct psychological and behavioral processes. When individuals feel guilty (moral cleansing), their main motivation is to compensate those who had been hurt by them, it has nothing to do with whether they want to reduce SUB. When individuals are psychological entitled (moral licensing), they just think they are heroes, qualified to do SUB and should be exempted, it has nothing to do with reducing OCB-S. This means in the process of UPB differentiation, the *object* of moral cleansing is different from the *object* of moral licensing and they have no cross impact. This finding is very interesting and need to be test again in the future.

The results partially support H3 and H4 that the differentiating effects of UPB vary is a matter of individual's moral attentiveness. It has found that individuals with low reflective moral attentiveness would generate a stronger sense of psychological entitlement and commit more SUB. However, we didn't find UPB will induce more guilt and then perform OCB-S for high reflective moral attentiveness individuals. This may be due to two reasons: First, high reflective moral attentiveness individual has stronger moral sense (Reynolds, 2008), and rarely commits UPB. If they had performed UPB, they may firmly believe what they had done were moral actions, and did not induce feeling guilt. Second, the pro-organizational feature of UPB is extremely puzzling. As mentioned before, UPB was often taken as the result of social exchange or social identity (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). After engaging in UPB, many people think they have done pro-organizational behavior, and easily produce moral licensing psychology (H2). This may even puzzle individuals with high moral attentiveness and restrict their moral ruminating. Therefore, whether the moral cleansing effect or the moral licensing effect works in the process of UPB's differentiation, sometimes it depends on individual's moral character. However, we still call for strengthening research the moderating effect of RMA in UPB's differentiating effects.

## Theoretical contribution

This study has explored the positive and negative differentiating outcomes of UPB. While scholars have paid significant attention to its antecedents and formation mechanisms, we know little what individuals will do after engaging in UPB (Umphress & Bingham, 2011; Mishra et al., 2021). Addressing this gap, this paper has investigated UPB's differentiating effects from moral balance view. The empirical results show that the unethical feature of UPB can motivate individuals to perform OCB-S in order to compensate for their bad actions, while its pro-organizational character can induce individuals to commit SUB because of moral licensing psychology. Our results indicate that UPB not only has moral cleansing effect (Bonner et al., 2017; Tang et al., 2020), but also has moral licensing effect. Therefore, as far as we know, this may be the first study to explore UPB's differentiating effects by testing its moral cleansing and moral licensing effect simultaneously. Taken together, our research demonstrates that the unethical and pro-organizational characteristics of UPB make it like angel and evil simultaneously, and different characteristics further determine different differentiation results.

Additionally, this study has explored the psychological mechanisms of UPB's differentiating effects. Based on the moral balance model, we have elucidated both the emotional and cognitive mechanisms of UPB's differentiating effects. On the one hand, UPB can result in OCB-S through guilt. It is a moral cleansing effect because the perpetrators want to compensate for their bad behaviors. The full mediating effect of guilt indicates that moral emotion is a key path in the transformation of UPB into ethical ones (Bonner et al., 2017). On the other hand, psychological entitlement plays an important mediating role when UPB changes into SUB. This indicates that psychological entitlement is the key state of moral licensing in which good actions evolve into unethical ones (Lin et al., 2016; Loi et al., 2020). However, its partial mediating effect also indicates that there are other mediating mechanisms need to be explored. Taken together, these results show that there are two pathways for UPB's differentiating effects. By revealing these mechanisms, this study not only retested the emotional differentiating mechanisms of UPB (Bonner et al., 2017; Tang et al., 2020), but also expanded the cognitive mechanisms that are called for by scholars (Tang et al., 2020).

Furthermore, we have explored the boundary condition of UPB's differentiating effects. UPB's differentiating process consists of moral cleansing effect and moral licensing effect, but we don't know under which conditions which effect will play a leading role. Our empirical results showed that UPB will more likely differentiate into SUB via psychological entitlement for individuals with low reflective moral attentiveness. It indicated that to a certain extent, individual's moral attentiveness can determine whether moral cleansing effect or moral licensing effect works of UPB's differentiating effects. These results not only indicate that reflective moral attentiveness will influence moral behavior (Reynolds, 2008), but also show that the parallel mediating mechanisms of moral balance vary depending on individual's moral character (Mullen & Monin, 2016). Thus, it can explore the boundary condition of the differentiating effects of UPB.

## Management implications

According to our research conclusions, the main practical implication is to guide organization on how to manage UPB. UPB is different from SUB, individuals often perform it to express they love or identify with their organization/leaders. Even some studies have pointed out UPB may benefit organization in short term (Umphress et al., 2010) and our research has tested it can evolve into OCB-S, but managers still need to be alert that UPB can evolve into SUB and it is an unethical behavior in its nature. During its differentiation process, the pro-organizational character of UPB has powerful puzzling that it inflates one's moral entitlement to license him or her to conduct unethical behavior, even individual with high reflective moral attentiveness. Therefore, In the long term, managers not only don't implement UPB by themselves, but also have a firmly negative attitude to individual's UPB, and through various tactics to eliminate any purpose, any form of unethical behavior.

## Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations even though we have found some valuable research conclusions. First, although self-report is a useful means to capture data on unethical behavior (Treviño et al., 2006), it also risks the issue of common method bias. Accordingly, we used a longitudinal survey design in order to reduce common method bias as much as possible. Future research can use experience sampling method (ESM) to collect data and test our model again, because it is a good means for measuring how an individual's emotional and cognitive states change after engaging in UPB. Scenario experiment is also a good method because it can measure a specific UPB, OCB-S and SUB, and test the causal relationship.

Second, our measurements have some flaws. Although we chose moral licensing to analyze the differentiation effect of UPB, we didn't measure moral licensing directly but used psychological entitlement to capture the key psychological state of moral licensing. Moral licensing has two different mechanisms: moral credits and moral credentials (Miller & Effron, 2010), and we mainly rely on moral credits as the analysis basis. In future, we can consider moral credits and moral credentials at the same time, and explore the relationship between these two moral licensing psychologies and psychological entitlement in the differentiation of UPB.

Third, the complicated relationship between guilt and psychological entitlement was not explored. In this paper, we just take them as parallel and opposite relationship. However, whether there is a causal relationship between them or concurrence we don't know. For example, after engaging UPB, an individual develop both guilt and entitlement psychology is likely to happen (cognitive dissonance). Under these situations, what kind of moral decisions the individual will make is worth exploring.

Finally, this study didn't consider the other mediating or moderating mechanisms. For example, after engaging in UPB, its pro-organizational character may induce individual to feel pride (Tang et al., 2020). So does this positive emotion induce individual to conduct more pro-organizational behavior or lead one to produce licensed psychology to commit bad things need to test. The unethical and pro-organizational characters make individual to feel cognitive dissonance (Umphress &

Bingham, 2011), and what kind of moral decisions an individual will make is also worth exploring. In future, we also need to expand other potential moderators such as organizational culture. Some culture pursues results regardless of means, while others emphasize means as well as results. Therefore, employees may experience different emotion or entitled psychology after conducting UPB in different types of organizational culture.

## Conclusions

This study provides the first empirical examination of the differentiation effect of UPB. In doing so, it demonstrates that there is a positive relationship between UPB has a positive effect on OCB through guilt, as well as on SUB via psychological entitlement. For individuals with low reflective moral attentiveness, UPB can induce more psychological entitlement and result in more SUB.

**Funding** Supported by National Natural Science Foundation of China (No: 71602050); Scientific and Technological Innovation Talents Support Program for Colleges and Universities of Henan Province (Humanities and Social Sciences) (No: 2020-cx-28); Basic research project of Philosophy and Social Science in Henan Province (CN) (No: 2022-JCZD-04).

## Statements

This manuscript has not been published or presented elsewhere in part or in entirety and is not under consideration by another journal. All study participants provided informed consent, and the study design was approved by the appropriate ethics review board. We have read and understood your journal's policies, and we believe that neither the manuscript nor the study violates any of these. There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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