



Self-sacrificial leadership and employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior: Roles of identification with leaders and collectivism

Jianchun Yang¹, Lu Lu¹, Nan Yao¹, Chaochao Liang¹

¹School of Business Administration, Guizhou University of Finance and Economics, People's Republic of China

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Employee behavior that is unethical but that may potentially benefit the organization is termed unethical pro-organizational behavior. Based on social identity theory, we examined the influence of a self-sacrificial leadership style on employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior, as well as the mediating effect of identification with leader and the moderating role of collectivism. Participants were 336 Chinese employees in different industries including telecommunications, manufacturing, and catering. Results show that self-sacrificial leadership was positively related to the employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior, and the positive influence was mediated by identification with leader. Additionally, collectivism moderated the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and the employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior, such that the positive relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and unethical pro-organizational behavior was stronger when collectivism was higher. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords

unethical pro-
organizational behavior;
employees' identification
with leader; self-sacrificial
leadership style;
collectivism

Employee unethical behavior has long been the focus of research (Lawrence & Kacmar, 2017; Ni & Li, 2017). In relevant studies, researchers have reported that employee unethical behaviors are triggered by the desire to take revenge on colleagues (e.g., Thau, Aquino, & Poortvliet, 2007), or the organization (e.g., Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), as well as by the intention to obtain private benefits (e.g., Greenberg, 2002; Terpstra, Rozell, & Robinson, 1993). However, Umphress and her colleagues (Umphress & Bingham, 2011; Umphress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010) proposed that employee unethical behaviors may be performed in order to maintain the benefits of the organization or other members, such as exaggerating the level of performance of the company to obtain more investment, or concealing shortage of products to reduce the loss of the company.

The behaviors described above are conceptualized as *unethical pro-organizational behaviors*, which are defined as actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members, but which violate core societal values, mores, laws, or accepted standards of conduct" (Umphress & Bingham, 2011, p. 622). It has been found that different leadership styles could be crucial precursors of employee unethical pro-organizational behavior, such as transactional leadership (Graham, Ziegert, & Capitano, 2015), transformational leadership (Effelsberg & Solga, 2015; Effelsberg, Solga, & Gurt, 2014), ethical leadership (Kalshoven, van Dijk, & Boon, 2016; Miao, Newman, Yu, & Xu, 2013), and responsible leadership (Cheng, Wei, & Lin, 2019). The logic underlying those relationships is that if employees identify closely with the organization or leader, they may engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior as an act

CORRESPONDENCE Jianchun Yang, School of Business Administration, Guizhou University of Finance and Economics, Guiyang 550025, People's Republic of China. Email: 294934857@qq.com

of reciprocity.

Self-sacrificial leadership is theorized as the style of behavior whereby the leader is willing to assume risks, abandon privileges, and take no account of his or her own rewards for the sake of collective welfare, characterized by foregoing private benefits of leaders in order to achieve benefits for the whole organization (De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2005). Findings in research have confirmed that self-sacrificial leadership positively influences employee prosocial behavior, including citizenship behavior (De Cremer, Mayer, van Dijke, Schouten, & Bardes, 2009; He, Zhou, Long, Huang, & Hao, 2018), taking charge (Li, Zhang, & Tian, 2016), and followers' self-sacrificial behavior (Zhou, Long, & Hao, 2016). However, in extant research it has not been established if self-sacrificial leadership can promote followers' unethical behavior that is pro-organizational in essence.

Identification with leaders is the extent to which employees identify themselves with their leader according to their relationship with that leader (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), and the extent to which they conceive overlap between them and their leader in cognition, attitude, and behavior (Sluss, Ployhart, Cobb, & Ashforth, 2012). In comparison with studies on organizational identification, identification with the leader has not been sufficiently studied in terms of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974). Scholars have also called for enhancing of the research on the antecedents and results of employees' identification with leader (Sluss et al., 2012). In the current study, we examined the mediating role of identification with leader in the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and employee unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Additionally, in an examination of the effect of leadership in China, the influence of the country's traditional culture should not be neglected. *Collectivism* refers to the extent to which individuals construe the self as intertwined with others rather than as independent, and emphasizes collective interest over self-interest (Triandis, 1996); it is one of the most important cultural values in China. Employees with a high level of collectivism are concerned for the group goals, give the collective benefits priority, and are easily influenced by the needs and the possible outcome for their group, whereas employees with a low level of collectivism focus on their own interests, so that they are probably more driven by external rewards. We proposed that employees with different levels of collectivism may vary in their sensitivity to the influence of self-sacrificial leadership, that is, collectivism could moderate the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and employee unethical pro-organizational behavior. Thus, in our study we also examined the moderating role of collectivism in the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and employee unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Self-sacrificial Leadership and Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior

Self-sacrificial leaders have intrinsic altruism; they are very concerned about employee demands and growth, and create an environment for the development of employees, even sacrificing their own interests, such as rewards and privileges, for employee benefits and welfare (De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2005). To reciprocate the favor from leaders, employees may perform behaviors beneficial to the organization but unethical in essence. In addition, self-sacrificial leaders are virtuous and have a high sense of responsibility, which effectively eliminates the worries of employees about the negative consequence of unethical pro-organizational behaviors. When employees perceive psychological safety it is more likely that they will engage in unethical pro-organizational behaviors than if they do not perceive psychological safety. Therefore, self-sacrificial leadership might stimulate unethical pro-organizational behaviors among employees. The following hypothesis was then formulated.

Hypothesis 1: Self-sacrificial leadership will positively affect employee unethical pro-organizational behaviors.



Mediating Role of Identification with Leader

Employees who identify closely with their leader are more likely to internalize the leader's personal characteristics, values, and behavior patterns into their self-identity construction than are employees who do not identify closely with their leader. In social identity theory it is suggested that employees construct self-identity based on self-esteem, meaning of work, and psychological safety (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), which means that the building of those three determines employee's acknowledgement to the organization, group, or other organizational members.

We proposed that self-sacrificial leaders could influence identification with leader through stimulating followers' self-esteem, meaning of work, and psychological safety. First, self-sacrificial leaders believe in collective values, have concern for, and support their subordinates, which will stimulate employee self-esteem and affective attachment to leaders. Self-sacrificial leaders dare to take risks and defend benefits of members in the organization even at the expense of their personal needs, which will boost employees' perceived meaning of work to some extent. Lastly, self-sacrificial leadership embodies high ethical and moral standards on the part of the leader, respect and fairness for others, and abidance by rules and regulations in his or her management of the organization, which may increase the psychological safety of subordinates. Therefore, self-sacrificial leadership may have a positive effect on employees' identification with leader.

Researchers have also previously affirmed that employees' identification with leader is one of the important mediating variables in the influence of leadership style on subordinate cognition, attitude, and behavior. For example, identification with leader acts as a mediator in the effect of transformational leadership on employee innovative behavior, affective commitment, and turnover (Zhu, Wang, Zheng, Liu, & Miao, 2013). Given that this is so, self-sacrificial leadership may indirectly influence employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior through their identification with their leader. Hence, the following hypothesis was proposed.

Hypothesis 2: Identification with leader will mediate the relationship of self-sacrificial leadership with the unethical pro-organizational behaviors of employees.

Moderating Role of Collectivism

Collectivism refers to individuals who belong to one or more group, and who show relatively strong emotional attachment to one another (Triandis, 1996). Employees with a high level of collectivism pay attention to, and aim at attaining, collective goals by exerting efforts and allowing collective interests to take priority over personal interests (Oyserman, Coon, & Klemelmeier, 2002; Triandis, 2001). These employees are concerned about harmonious relationships with their team members and with emotional attachment to individuals (Hui & Triandis, 1986; Wagner, 1995). These employees are also more open to, and accepting of, organizational changes (Abbasi, Tarhini, Elyas, & Shah, 2015; Dierdorff, Bell, & Belohlav, 2011). In contrast, employees with a low level of collectivism consider their self-interest superior to collective benefits. Thus, they show considerable concern about accommodation of their personal needs and interests. Findings in empirical studies have corroborated that collectivism moderates the relationship between leadership styles and other work-related behaviors of employees (Kececi, 2017; Walumbwa & Lawler, 2003).

Unethical pro-organizational behaviors have both a bright and a dark aspect (that is, the motives for the behavior are both good and bad), but the dark aspect is obscured by the fact that the behaviors are pro-organizational in essence. Employees with high collectivism look forward to integrating into a team as a member (Oyserman et al., 2002). Thus, they voluntarily prioritize organizational interests, which is in line with the traits of self-sacrificial leadership. The leader who acts as a role model can better encourage employees to perform excessive pro-organizational behaviors for collective interests than can the leader who is not acting as a role model. Under this circumstance, employees are inclined to perform unethical pro-

organizational behaviors. On the contrary, employees with low collectivism tend to show more concern about personal interests, have a weaker sense of organizational identification, fulfill only the tasks assigned to them, and are less likely to be influenced by self-sacrificial leaders, because self-sacrificial leaders call for the consideration of collective benefits. Therefore, the following hypothesis was presented.

Hypothesis 3: Collectivism will positively moderate the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Specifically, a high level of collectivism will strengthen the positive relationship, whereas a low level of collectivism will impose no significant moderation impact on the relationship.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We collected data from people employed by 15 Chinese firms across industries including telecommunications, manufacturing, and catering. We asked the human resources personnel in those firms to help us distribute and collect our survey forms. The surveys for employees included items in terms of demographic information (including age, gender, and educational attainment), self-sacrificial leadership, their identification with leaders, collectivism, and unethical pro-organizational behavior. We received 360 survey forms, of which 336 were valid. Respondent characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Respondents

Demographic variable	Category	n	(F)
Gender	Male	153	(46%)
	Female	183	(54%)
Age	≤ 25 years	80	(24%)
	26–30 years	155	(46%)
	31–35 years	58	(17%)
Education level	≥ 36 years	43	(13%)
	High school or below	35	(10%)
	Junior college degree	64	(19%)
	Bachelor's degree	204	(61%)
Total	Master's degree or above	33	(10%)
		336	(100%)

Measures

All measurement items except for control variables were responded to on a Likert□type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Self-sacrificial leadership. Self-sacrificial leadership was measured with the five-item scale developed by De Cremer and van Knippenberg (2004). A sample item is "Supervisors act as role models for fulfilling group missions at the cost of personal free time, privileges, or easy life." Cronbach's alpha for our study was .87.

Identification with leader. Identification with leader was measured with a six-item scale adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992). A sample item for identification with leader is "I feel as if I have been insulted when others criticize my supervisor." Cronbach's alpha for our study was .90.

Collectivism. Collectivism was measured with a scale modified and adapted from Earley's (1993). Drawing on the experience of other scholars, out of the eight in the original scale, the five items with the highest



factor loadings were used in our scale to measure collectivism. A sample item is “I prefer to work in an organization rather than work alone.” Cronbach’s alpha for our study was .93.

Unethical pro-organizational behavior. Unethical pro-organizational behavior was assessed with a five-item measure developed by Umphress et al. (2010). A sample item is “For the benefit of my company, I exaggerate the quality of our company’s products or services in front of my customers or clients.” Cronbach’s alpha for our study was .94.

Control variables. We adopted as control variables employee’s gender (1 = male, 0 = female), age (1 = 25 years old or younger; 2 = 26 to 30 years; 3 = 31 to 35 years; 4 = older than 35 years) and educational level (1 = high school or below; 2 = junior college degree; 3 = bachelor’s degree; 4 = master’s degree or above).

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed for self-sacrificial leadership, identification with leader, collectivism, and unethical pro-organizational behavior to investigate their discriminant validity. As shown in Table 2, the four-factor model was the best fit with the actual data, and significantly outperformed the nested three-factor, two-factor, and one-factor models. Thus, discriminant validity was evidently highest in the four-factor model.

Table 2. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	$\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Zero-factor model	5,355.66	210	25.50				
Four-factor model	449.86	183	2.46	—	.95	.94	.07
Three-factor model	1,896.88	186	10.20	1,447.03*** (3)	.67	.63	.17
Two-factor model	2,625.28	188	13.96	2,175.43*** (5)	.53	.47	.20
One-factor model	3,468.27	189	18.35	3,018.42*** (6)	.36	.30	.23

Note. The four-factor model involved self-sacrificial leadership, identification with leaders, collectivism, and unethical pro-organizational behavior. The three-factor model included self-sacrificial leadership, identification with leaders + collectivism, and unethical pro-organizational behaviors. The two-factor model covered self-sacrificial leadership + unethical pro-organizational behaviors and identification with leaders + collectivism. The one-factor model comprised self-sacrificial leadership + identification with leaders + collectivism + unethical pro-organizational behaviors. CFI = comparative fit index, TLI = Tucker–Lewis index, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

*** $p < .001$.

Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of variables are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of Descriptive Statistical and Correlation Analysis of Study Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	0.46	0.50						
2. Age	2.20	0.94	-.10					
3. Education	2.70	0.79	.11*	-.09				
4. Self-sacrificial leadership	4.26	0.61	.00	-.17**	.11*			
5. Identification with leader	3.80	0.57	-.05	.08	.07	.39**		
6. Collectivism	3.58	1.23	-.03	-.09	-.01	-.08	-.04	
7. Unethical pro-organizational behavior	3.86	0.83	-.08	.03	.05	.22**	.42**	-.11*

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, two-tailed test.

The results for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 are shown in Tables 4 and 5. Self-sacrificial leadership had a positive relationship with unethical pro-organizational behavior (see Model 4 in Table 4). Hypothesis 1 was supported.

As shown in Table 4, self-sacrificial leadership had a positive relationship with identification with leader (Model 2), and identification with leader had a positive relationship with unethical pro-organizational behavior (Model 5). After controlling for identification with leaders, the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and unethical pro-organizational behavior was no longer significant (Model 6), suggesting the mediating effect of identification with leader.

We adopted a nonparametric bootstrap method (MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, & Lockwood, 2007) with Mplus to examine further the mediating effect. The results of the bootstrap method showed that the coefficient of the indirect effects of self-sacrificial leadership on employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior was .13 and that the confidence interval was [0.08, 0.21], excluding zero. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Table 4. Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Dependent variable	Identification with leader	Unethical pro-organizational behavior						
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Control variables	Gender	-.05	-.04	-.08	-.08	-.06	.06	-.08
	Age	.08	.15**	.02	.06	-.01	.01	.05
	Education	.09	.05	.06	.04	.03	.02	.02
Independent variable	Self-sacrificial leadership		.41***		.23***		.07	.22***
Mediator variable	Identification with leader					.41***	.38***	
Moderator variable	Collectivism							-.11*
Interaction	Self-sacrificial leadership × Collectivism	.02	.18	.01	.06	.18	.18	.10
<i>R</i> ²		—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Δ <i>R</i> ²		—	.16	—	.05	.17	.17	.09
<i>F</i>		1.69	18.00***	1.17	5.43***	17.98***	14.75***	6.32***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

As shown in Table 4, the interaction term of self-sacrificial leadership and collectivism had a significantly positive impact on unethical pro-organizational behavior (Model 7). To demonstrate the pattern of

interaction, we further plotted the moderation effect of collectivism according to Aiken and West's (1991) suggestions. As shown in Figure 1, the positive relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and unethical pro-organizational behavior was stronger when collectivism was high as opposed to when it was low. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

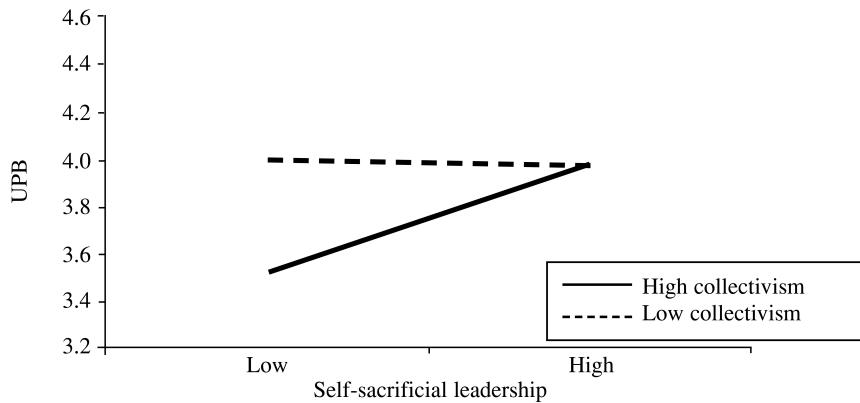


Figure 1. Moderating effect of collectivism on self-sacrificial leadership and unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB).

Discussion

We analyzed how self-sacrificial leadership influences employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior through the mediator of identification with leader, as well as the moderating role of collectivism. Results indicate that self-sacrificial leadership had a positive impact on our participants' unethical pro-organizational behavior, and that the level of their identification with leader mediated this relationship. Collectivism moderated this relationship such that the positive relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and the participants' unethical pro-organizational behavior was stronger when collectivism was higher.

Theoretical Implications

First, the verification of the relationship of self-sacrificial leadership with employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior provides new ways for explaining the factors that affect those behaviors. Researchers had previously discovered that self-sacrificial leadership could reduce employees' negative behaviors, such as deviant and destructive behaviors, and they also found that this kind of leadership successfully stimulated employees' positive, self-sacrificial behaviors, such as additional job involvement, organizational citizenship behaviors, interpersonal helping behaviors, and cooperative behaviors (De Cremer et al., 2009; Zhou et al., 2016). In our study, we explored how self-sacrificial leadership stimulates employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviors. By doing this, we helped to reveal further the effectiveness of self-sacrificial leadership. Our findings in this study also enrich knowledge about the antecedents of employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviors.

Second, identification with leaders was introduced as the mediator from the perspective of social identity, which effectively revealed the process through which self-sacrificial leadership influences unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Previously, researchers had verified the interaction between the leader's traits and employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviors from the perspective of social identity (Miao et al., 2013), but empirical research on the mechanism of how identification with leaders directly acts upon work



behaviors and attitudes of employees has remained scarce. Hence, in this study we developed research in regard to the mediating mechanism of identification with leaders from the perspective of social identity theory.

Finally, our findings in this study affirmed that collectivism positively moderated the relationship between self-sacrificial leadership and unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Previously researchers had validated that the work styles and attitudes of employees were affected by external factors, especially the leadership style (Effelsberg et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2015). The degree of the impact of leadership style on employees' work styles and attitudes depend on employees' values or personality. That is, employees with different values or personalities are affected differently some more, others less. Our research also supported prior findings (De Cremer et al., 2009) that suggested the effectiveness of self-sacrificial leadership is dependent upon the constraints of individuals' values and personality.

Managerial Implications

First, managers should be aware of the possible negative impact that self-sacrificial leadership may have on employee behaviors. In this study we confirmed that self-sacrificial leadership could trigger employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Hence, when managers perform self-sacrificial behaviors, they must establish moral standards that are always upheld and discipline themselves in strict compliance with these standards, thereby becoming role models in guiding and supervising subordinates. In addition, employees are expected to think from their own standpoint when developing values and regulating their behaviors, by examining whether their behaviors will bring about risks to, and crises in, their organization and society.

Second, identification with leaders deserves considerable attention from managers. In previous studies, identification with leaders was confirmed to impact subordinates' motivations and positive behaviors, such as job performance (Walumbwa & Hartnell, 2011). In this study we proved that a dark side exists in the identification with leaders, because employees who are closely identified with their leaders are prone to perform unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Therefore, managers must guide employees to behave correctly and bring the positive roles of identification into full play. Moreover, managers should eliminate the negative roles of unethical pro-organizational behaviors and encourage employees to make contributions to the organization by performing other types of organizational citizenship behaviors, and should resolutely prohibit employees from using unethical techniques when performing pro-organizational behaviors.

Third, managers should actively cultivate and build the firm's culture. The moral culture of the firm is critical for growth and development of employees and the firm. To avoid unethical pro-organizational behaviors, managers must improve the internal ethical atmosphere of the organization by setting up complete training agencies, and establishing rigorous reward and punishment systems, as well as protection mechanisms. In terms of the firm's culture, emphasis is placed upon investigating the social responsibilities of the firm to realize strategic objectives for long-term development. If employees are assessed for promotion, salary increase, and so on by the managers of their firm in terms of morals, and are supervised and evaluated by stakeholders in the course of the firm's development, then the employees may be restrained from performing unethical pro-organizational behaviors and, thus, will contribute to laying a foundation for the long-term development of the organization.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations. First, deducing causal relationships among self-sacrificial leadership, identification with leader, and unethical pro-organizational behavior by analyzing cross-sectional data remains extremely difficult. Hence, longitudinal research methods may be adopted in the future. Furthermore, in future studies, researchers can combine situational simulations and field studies to eliminate uncertainties. Second, cross-level research is progressively becoming a focus in academia, but in



in this study we examined unethical pro-organizational behaviors only from the perspective of employees. In future studies, researchers can take the perspective of leaders for a good understanding of the development of such behaviors. Third, in this study we focused only on exploring the effects of self-sacrificial leadership, collectivism, and identification with leader on employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior. However, other factors, such as power distance and leader-member exchange can also be integrated into future studies. Therefore, the mechanism between self-sacrificial leadership and employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior can be further illuminated by combining the features of power distance and leader-member exchange.

Conclusion

In this research we found that leaders' self-sacrificial behavior positively affected employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior. Identification with leaders mediated the relationship between leader self-sacrificial behavior and employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior, and collectivism positively moderated this relationship. These findings provide a new perspective for understanding the antecedents of employee unethical pro-organizational behavior from the perspective of social identity theory.

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