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Leader–Follower Congruence in MD Propensity and UPB: A Polynomial Regression Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on previous work on moral disengagement and balance theory, the (in)congruence effect of leader and follower moral disengagement (MD) propensity on followers' unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) was examined in this study. Dyad data were gathered from 185 CEOs and 555 followers from 185 firms located in China. The polynomial regression analysis results suggest that followers in the presence of leader–follower congruence in MD propensity conduct more UPBs. Moreover, followers conduct more UPBs with MD propensity in the presence of congruence. We also found asymmetrical incongruence effects. Followers engage more in UPBs when their MD propensity exceeds their leaders' MD propensity than when their leaders' MD propensity exceeds their own. Overall, the findings emphasize the value of considering followers' and leaders' traits for shedding light on the occurrence of UPBs.

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In recent years, unethical pro-organizational behaviors (UPBs), which are unethical behaviors that benefit an organization (e.g. withholding negative information about the organization from the public or deliberately exaggerating facts for the sake of the organization; Umphress et al., 2010), have gained increasing amounts of attention. Previous studies have recognized leader (e.g. Cheng et al., 2019; Kalshoven et al., 2016) and employee (e.g. Ghosh, 2017; Kong, 2016) factors as predictors of UPB. Recent works on business ethics have suggested that follower–leader characteristic (in)congruence is particularly influential in explaining an individual's unethical behavior (Qin et al., 2018, 2019). However, little is known about whether there is a joint effect of leader and follower characteristics on UPB. This scenario is a critical theoretical issue because considering leader and follower factors (i.e. personal traits) simultaneously is believed to provide a more accurate and nuanced picture than considering only the information provided by either party (Qin et al., 2018). To fill this important yet unexplored research gap, the current study aims to explore whether there is a joint effect of leader and follower moral disengagement (MD) propensity on follower UPB.

MD propensity is a kind of personality trait related to ethics that is conceptualized as one's tendency to deal with ethical issues through cognitive disengagement from moral

norms (Aquino et al., 2007; Paciello et al., 2008). Individuals with high MD propensity are more inclined to employ morally disengaged tactics that free them from accompanying self-sanctions and guilt when behaving unethically than those with low MD propensity (Fehr et al., 2020; Knoll et al., 2016). An individual's decision to perform unethical behaviors is also influenced by his/her leader's characteristics (e.g. MD propensity; Bonner et al., 2016), implying that leader and follower MD propensity jointly affect the follower's unethical behaviors. Moreover, balance theory (Heider, 1958; Korman, 1970) indicates that leader–follower congruence makes the follower perceive a favorable relationship with his/her leader. A high-quality relationship between leaders and followers has been found to stimulate followers to work for leaders and organizations represented by the leaders (Bryant & Merritt, 2019). Therefore, we can infer that leader–follower congruence and MD propensity influence the pro-organizational side and unethical side of behavior independently, which raises the following questions: Does leader–follower MD propensity (in)congruence influence follower UPB? If so, how?

To address this question, we integrate balance theory with the MD literature to investigate how follower UPB is shaped by various combinations of leader–follower (in)congruence in MD propensity by performing polynomial regression and response surface model. Our research contributes to the behavioral ethics and MD literature in three ways. First, in contrast to previous research on UPB that separately but not simultaneously examined the roles played by leaders and followers, this study is among the first to explore how leader and follower factors jointly influence UPB. By adopting a leader–follower congruence approach, our knowledge on the predictors of UPB is enriched. Second, by considering MD propensity held by multiple entities (i.e. leaders and followers) rather than a single entity, our study moves beyond the extant literature on moral disengagement, which has mainly focused on the effect of follower MD propensity on one's unethical decisions (e.g. Dang et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2012; Samnani et al., 2014), thereby providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complicated process of how MD propensity influences one's unethical behavior. Third, by revealing the positive impact of leader–follower congruence in MD propensity on follower UPB, our study provides evidence for the flip side of leader–follower congruence and further extends the prior research (et al., Kang et al., 2014; Strauss et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2012) that exclusively highlights the beneficial side of leader–follower congruence.

Theory and Hypotheses

Leader–Follower Congruence in MD Propensity and UPB

The (in)congruence of leader–follower MD propensity has been proposed to explain the causes of UPB. Particularly, the core point of balance theory is that the goal of a human being is to pursue a balanced state (i.e. a harmonious context where the entities can coexist without pressure) (Treadway et al., 2007; Woodside & Chebat, 2001). A balanced state with MD propensity occurs when a follower and leader hold similar values and propensities on ethical issues (i.e. leader–follower congruence in MD propensity). In such a balanced state, the follower feels relaxed when dealing with the leader because

both parties are not pressured to change (Wilson et al., 2018). Moreover, given that “we tend to like people who have the same beliefs and attitudes as we have” (Heider, 1958, p. 195), followers who exhibit MD propensity congruence with their leaders tend to perceive a harmonious interpersonal relationship with their leaders. This perception motivates followers to work for their leaders (Bryant & Merritt, 2019). Considering that leaders are often considered as the representative of an organization (Zhang et al., 2014), followers in the presence of leader–follower congruence in MD propensity are willing to serve their organization’s interests *via* all means available, including walking into moral gray areas and resorting to unethical acts that favor their organizations (i.e. UPBs) (Umphress & Bingham, 2011).

In the presence of leader–follower incongruence in MD propensity, the two entities may be inclined to disengage morally on ethical issues and follow various moral principles to different extents when making behavioral decisions (Moore et al., 2012). As a result of such inconsistency, interpersonal conflicts between followers and leaders, especially on unethical issues, are exacerbated (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012; Pircher Verdorfer & Peus, 2020; Thorne, 2010). The interpersonal incompatibility caused by MD propensity incongruence plays a powerful role in destroying the interactions between leaders and followers, which in turn creates an imbalance between the two parties. Based on balance theory, which states that negative psychological experiences (e.g. dissatisfaction, disturbance, and tension) are nourished in unbalanced states (Crano & Cooper, 1973; Woodside & Chebat, 2001), followers are likely to show anger, disgust, and dislike directed at leaders in the presence of MD propensity incongruence. These unfavorable feelings derived from interactions with leaders might also reflect their feelings toward the organization because leaders are representatives of organizations in the eyes of followers (Eisenberger et al., 2010; Loi et al., 2014). Consequently, a follower’s psychological attachment with the organization is weakened, and he/she is unlikely to feel obligated to abide with the rules of the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Therefore, followers tend to decrease their willingness to work for organizations by crossing moral boundaries (i.e. conducting UPB) when they exhibit incongruent MD propensity with their leaders. Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 1: There are more UPBs when a leader and a follower are congruent in MD propensity than when they are incongruent.

Distinguishing Two Scenarios of MD Propensity Congruence

Followers and leaders can exhibit congruence at either low or high levels of MD propensity. We contend that follower UPB may differ based on the two types of congruence. On the one hand, leader–follower congruence with high MD propensity promotes favorable mutual interactions between two parties, which is in line with the general logic of person–supervisor fit theory (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) and balance theory (Heider, 1958). As previously mentioned, positive interactions between followers and leaders provide a balanced and pleasant state for followers, which further strengthens the followers’ motivation to conduct pro-organizational behaviors. In addition to an enhanced pro-organizational motivation, the high MD propensity leads to additional unethical elements in a follower’s behavior because it protects the follower high in MD

propensity against self-sanctions and guilt when he/she is violating moral principles (Moore, 2008). Moreover, when both followers and leaders have a high MD propensity, the leaders are likely to be perceived as unethical behavioral models (Bonner et al., 2016). According to social cognitive theory, followers' behaviors are often influenced by external behavioral models (Bandura, 1973; Hannah et al., 2013), and followers supervised by leaders with high MD propensity are likely to behave with loose moral standards. Based on the above ideas, leader–follower congruence in high MD propensity not only motivates the follower to serve the organization's interests but also reduces the level of morality of their behaviors. Thus, we contend that a follower's willingness to conduct UPB is strengthened in the presence of leader–follower congruence with high MD propensity.

Similarly, a balanced state occurs when a follower and a leader exhibit congruence in the presence of low MD propensity, as they have consistent ethical expectations and thus experience few conflicts and contradictions when facing moral issues. Notably, however, individuals with low MD propensity are more likely to regulate themselves by following moral principles than those with high MD propensity (Fehr et al., 2020). Thus, low–low MD propensity interactions may reduce the level of immorality of followers' behaviors. Consequently, followers in the presence of congruence in low MD propensity prefer to pursue an ethical approach rather than an unethical approach to work for the interests of organizations, leading to a decrease in the likelihood of followers' engagement in UPBs. Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 2: UPBs are more likely to arise in the presence of high follower–high leader MD propensity than in the presence of low follower–low leader MD propensity.

Distinguishing Two Scenarios of MD Propensity Incongruence

We propose two possible permutations, namely, when a leader possesses a higher level of MD propensity than a follower and when a leader possesses a lower level of MD propensity than a follower. Although an unbalanced status can be caused by personal trait (i.e. MD propensity) misfit, we contend that the possibility of follower UPB is higher in the presence of low leader–high follower MD propensity than in the presence of high leader–low follower MD propensity.

Drawn from the theory of balance, a follower may be placed in a more unbalanced and stressful status when his/her level of MD propensity is low while his/her leader's level of MD propensity is high. Previous studies have shown that individuals with high MD propensity exhibit a greater possibility of using morally disengaged tactics (e.g. reconstructing unethical behaviors to reduce their immorality, distorting or obscuring the consequences of and responsibility for unethical conduct, and minimizing the harm caused by unethical behaviors to the victims) (Kacmar et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2016), which can free individuals from the accompanying self-sanctions and guilt of their unethical behavior (Knoll et al., 2016). Thus, leaders who hold high MD propensity tend to behave in accordance with loose moral norms. Morality is more important to followers with low MD propensity than those with high MD propensity, and accordingly, such people are more likely to behave morally and be attentive to ethical issues (Dang et al., 2017). Once they observe a leader's unethical actions, followers low in MD

propensity will have more negative psychological experiences (e.g. discomfort, dissonance, or guilt) (Bandura, 1999; Detert et al., 2008). Consequently, interpersonal conflicts between a leader and a follower are likely to become exacerbated. That is, low follower–high leader MD propensity is likely to cause the follower to be in a relatively unbalanced and unpleasant state, and in this case, followers may feel more disappointed toward their leaders with higher MD propensity than them. These negative feelings toward leaders will be transferred to the organization, as leaders are often regarded as representatives of organizations (Zhang et al., 2014). Finally, followers' willingness to be involved in ethical or unethical pro-organizational behaviors (i.e. UPBs) is weakened in the presence of low follower–high leader MD propensity.

In contrast, followers who hold high MD propensity are more likely to remove self-sanctions and the accompanying guilt when behaving in an unethical manner or observing others' (e.g. leaders') misconduct (Bandura, 1999; Detert et al., 2008). Thus, such followers are more likely to adopt an indifferent attitude toward leaders' behaviors and are less likely to care whether their leaders' behaviors are unethical. Consequently, followers with high MD propensity are unlikely to be influenced by the ethical message delivered by leaders with low MD propensity because MD propensity is a chronic trait (Dang et al., 2017). This kind of indifference can alleviate the intensity of interpersonal conflicts concerning ethical issues caused by MD propensity incongruence, thereby attenuating unbalanced experiences and the accompanying negative effect on followers' motivation to engage in UPBs. Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 3: UPBs are more in the case of high follower–low leader MD propensity than in the case of low follower–high leader MD propensity.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The data included in this research were collected from chief executive officers (CEOs) and three followers (the managers of the R&D department, the marketing department, and the human resources (HR) & administration department) in eastern China. Online questionnaires were sent out with the help of the local Commissions of Economy and Information Technology. The researchers guaranteed that the information provided by the participants would be anonymous and confidential and would be used for research only. To improve the response rate, the researchers reminded the participants to fill out the questionnaires *via* email or telephone. Of the total 767 firms invited to participate, 492 CEOs (64.15% of the total sample) completed the survey, with an above average response rate for executives in organizational survey research (37%, see meta-analysis by Anseel et al., 2010). Because only the CEOs with all three followers were included in our study, mismatching data from 307 firms were excluded. Our final sample consisted of 185 CEOs and 555 followers from 185 firms. Among the 185 CEOs, 96.2% were male, 27.6% were above the age of 40 years, and 30.8% held a bachelor's degree or above. Among the 555 followers, 86.5% were male, 54.8% were under the age of 40 years, and 36.9% held a bachelor's degree or above.

Measures

All measurements were originally constructed in an English version and were then translated to Chinese. Back translation procedures (Brislin, 1980) were conducted to ensure the equivalence of English-based measures and Chinese-based measures (Song et al., 2017). All the measures adopted in the current research were rated *via* a five-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

MD Propensity

Leaders' and followers' levels of MD propensity were rated by adopting the eight-item scale developed by Moore et al. (2012). The participants were asked to score items such as "It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about" and "Taking personal credit for ideas that were not yours is no big deal." The values of Cronbach's alpha (α) were .96 for the followers and .96 for the leaders.

Upb

The six-item scale from Umphress et al. (2010) work was adopted to evaluate each follower's UPB. The participants were asked to score items such as "If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good" and "If needed, I would conceal information from the public that would be damaging to my organization." The value of α was .97.

Control Variables

The dissimilarities between a leader and his or her followers regarding age, education, gender, and tenure influence the followers' attitudes, affects, and behaviors (Bauer & Green, 1996; Tsui & O'reilly, 1989). Tenure, age, education, and gender dissimilarity between leaders and followers were operated as controls in the current study.

Analytical Strategy

Polynomial regression procedures (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005) were adopted to test hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Response surface modeling (Edwards & Parry, 1993) was employed to accurately present and plot the results. To examine (in)congruence effects on the outcomes, polynomial regression procedures that can generate three-dimensional response surfaces have been suggested by Edwards and Van Harrison (1993) and Edwards and Parry (1993). This method has been applied by Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2005) to account for non-independence among followers who are supervised by the same leader. This method was employed in the present analysis owing to the nested nature of our data. In particular, we regressed the outcome variable (i.e. UPB) as a dependent variable on the controls, the centered follower MD propensity (F), the centered leader MD propensity (L), the follower MD propensity squared (F^2), the follower MD propensity times the leader MD propensity ($F \times L$), and the leader MD propensity squared (L^2). Consistent with previous work on polynomial regressions (e.g. Audenaert

et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2012), F and L were initially grand-mean centered. On this basis, we calculated the second-order terms (i.e. F^2 , $F \times L$, L^2) to improve the interpretability of the results and reduce the possibility of multicollinearity. The simplified regression equation adopted in this study, with the omission of all controls (i.e. age dissimilarity, education dissimilarity, and gender dissimilarity), is expressed as follows:

$$Z = b_0 + b_1F + b_2L + b_3F^2 + b_4F \times L + b_5L^2 + e,$$

where Z represents UPB, F represents the follower's MD propensity, and L represents the leader's MD propensity. The regression coefficients of F and L were used to plot the response surfaces with three dimensions.

After performing polynomial regressions, we conducted additional tests for slope and curvature examinations along the incongruence (i.e. $F = -L$) and congruence (i.e. $F = L$) lines. The shape of the surface along the $F = L$ line was obtained by plugging the formula of the congruence line into the equation of regression. Similarly, the shape of the surface along the $F = -L$ line was obtained by plugging the formula of the incongruence line into the equation of regression.

To test the first hypothesis, we initially assessed whether a significant joint effect exists among F^2 , $F \times L$, and L^2 . Subsequently, we tested whether a significantly negative curvature ($b_3 - b_4 + b_5$) exists along the $F = -L$ line. When these two conditions are satisfied, we can conclude that there is a significant congruence effect, thereby supporting hypothesis 1. We tested the second hypothesis by computing the slope along the $F = L$ line. When a significant and positive slope ($b_1 + b_2$) exists along this line, more UPBs arise when congruence exists in the presence of high MD propensity than in the presence of low MD propensity. To test the third hypothesis, we followed the approach of Edwards and Van Harrison (1993) for computing the lateral shift $((b_1 - b_2) / (2 \times (b_{11} - b_{12} + b_{22})))$ along the $F = -L$ line, representing this lateral shift's magnitude and direction. Atwater et al. (1998) suggested that a negative value in a concave surface implies sharper changes in the $F < L$ region of the surface than in the $F > L$ region.

Results

(1) Reliability analysis, (2) convergent validity analysis, and (3) discriminant validity analysis were conducted to examine the measurement model's reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha (α) was first adopted to evaluate the internal consistency of the research model, which can reflect the reliability of the measurement model. All α values in Table 1 exceed the threshold value .70, thereby indicating acceptable reliability for all constructs. Second, the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct and loadings of all items were computed to reflect the convergent validity of the measurement model. Table 3 shows the results. Each item's loading is greater than the .70 criterion, CR values for all constructs are above the .70 criterion, and the values of AVEs for all constructs are higher than the .50 criterion. Thus, the convergent validity is satisfactory. Third, we compared the square roots of the AVE values (\sqrt{AVE}) with the correlations among the constructs to evaluate the discriminant validity of the measurement model. The values of \sqrt{AVE} for all constructs in Table 2 are greater than the correlations among variables, indicating

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables of This Study^a.

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender dissimilarity	.17	.37							
2. Age dissimilarity	.63	.48	.07						
3. Education dissimilarity	.37	.48	.04	.19***					
4. Tenure dissimilarity	.54	.50	.03	.24***	.10*				
5. UPB	1.50	.92	-.05	-.06	.08	.09*	(.97)		
6. Follower MD propensity	1.51	.88	-.06	-.06	.11*	.13**	.82***	(.96)	
7. Leader MD propensity	1.65	1.01	.01	-.03	.08	.10*	.43***	.45***	(.96)

^aN_{Follower} = 555. Reliabilities (α) are presented along the diagonal in parentheses. When calculating the correlations, the value of the leader-level variable (i.e. leader MD propensity) was disaggregated to the follower level.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Loadings, Cronbach's Alpha (α), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

Variables	<i>N</i>	Loading	α	CR	AVE
UPB	6	.911–.952	.97	.98	.93
Follower MD propensity	8	.765–.946	.96	.97	.89
Leader MD propensity	8	.786–.943	.96	.97	.89

Table 3. Polynomial Regression Results: The Effects of the Congruence/Incongruence of MD Propensity on UPB^a.

Variable	UPB	
Constant	2.85*** (.06)	3.00*** (.07)
Gender Dissimilarity	.00 (.06)	-.00 (.06)
Age Dissimilarity	-.01 (.05)	-.02 (.05)
Education Dissimilarity	-.02 (.05)	-.01 (.05)
Tenure Dissimilarity	-.04 (.05)	-.04 (.05)
Follower MD propensity (FMDP)	.81*** (.03)	.85*** (.04)
Leader MD propensity (LMDP)	.08** (.03)	.19*** (.03)
FMDP ²		-.03 (.03)
FMDP * LMDP		.11*** (.02)
LMDP ²		-.05* (.02)
<i>Congruence</i>		
<i>(FMDP = LMDP) line</i>		
Slope		1.04***
Curvature		.04
<i>Incongruence</i>		
<i>(FMDP = -LMDP) line</i>		
Slope		.66***
Curvature		-.19***
F for the three quadratic terms		13.02***

Note. ^aN_{Follower} = 555, N_{Leader} = 185.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

good discriminant validity. Overall, these findings indicate acceptable reliability and validity.

Hypothesis 1 suggests a positive effect of MD propensity congruence between a leader and a follower on UPB. Table 3 shows the curvatures and slopes along (in)congruence lines, as well as the estimated coefficients for the polynomial regressions in predicting UPB. Figure 1 plots the response surface based on these coefficients. Table 3 reveals a significant joint effect among F^2 , $F \times L$, and L^2 (13.02, $p < .001$). Furthermore, a significantly negative curvature of the $F = -L$ line ($-.19$, $p < .001$) is shown, thereby indicating a curved downward response surface along the $F = -L$ line. Therefore, more UPBs arise

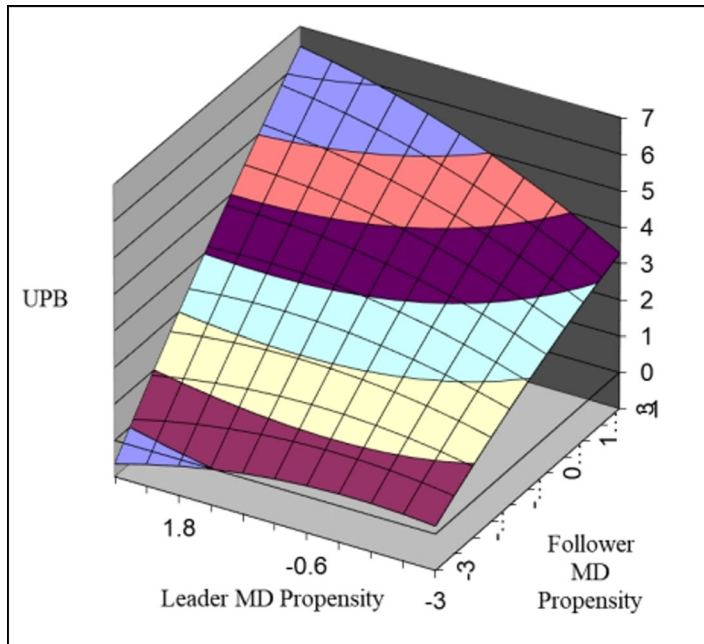


Figure 1. Response surface of the congruence of leader-follower MD propensity and its effect on UPB.

when the MD propensity held by a follower is aligned with that of his or her leader. In addition, any deviation from the $F=L$ line can induce a decrease in UPBs. Hence, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Hypothesis 2 suggests that more UPBs arise when a follower and his or her leader are aligned at high (vs. low) levels of MD propensity. Table 3 shows a significantly positive slope along the $F=L$ line (1.04, $p < .001$). Therefore, more UPBs exist in the condition of high follower-high leader congruence than in the condition of low follower-low leader congruence in MD propensity. Figure 1 illustrates that fewer UPBs occurs in the presence of low follower-low leader congruence than in the presence of high follower-high leader congruence in MD propensity. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

With regard to hypothesis 3, the lateral shift magnitude was significant and negative (-1.75 , 95% CI $[-11.41, -.51]$, excluding 0), supporting the asymmetrical assumption about the relationship between the incongruence in leader-follower MD propensity and followers' UPB. When the level of MD propensity held by a follower is lower than that of his or her leader, a sharper decrease is found than in the condition when MD propensity held by a follower is higher than his or her leader. Hence, hypothesis 3 was supported. Figure 1 provides additional support for hypothesis 3. Figure 1 illustrates that a higher UPB value can be found at the A point ($F=2$, $L=-2$) than at the B point ($F=-2$, $L=2$).

Discussion

A growing attention has been paid to the topic of UPB (e.g. Bryant & Merritt, 2019; Shaw et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020), but scholars have not yet uncovered the reasons for an

individual's engagement in UPB from the perspective of leader–follower congruence. In this study, we developed a dyadic model to test whether a combination effect of leader and follower MD propensity on follower UPB exists by integrating balance theory with the existing literature on moral disengagement. We found that leader–follower congruence in MD propensity increases the likelihood of follower UPB because MD propensity congruence contributes to a follower's pro-organizational motivation by inducing a balanced state between a leader and a follower. Moreover, this positive effect was stronger in the dyads of high follower–high leader MD propensity congruence than in the dyads of low follower–low leader MD propensity congruence, as high–high MD propensity congruence enhances a follower's pro-organizational motivation and adds additional unethical components into his/her behavior. Furthermore, although a follower's pro-organizational motivation is destroyed by leader–follower misfit, followers will demonstrate different levels of UPB in two scenarios of MD propensity incongruence (i.e. high leader–low follower and low leader–high follower) because high MD propensity makes followers ignore ethical messages from leaders with low MD propensity. Particularly, we demonstrated that more UPBs arise when a follower's MD propensity is higher than their leaders' than when followers' MD propensity is lower than their leaders', suggesting the importance of follower MD propensity in buffering the effect of MD propensity misfit on follower UPB. These findings offer several theoretical and practical implications along with future research directions.

Theoretical Implications

Our study contributes to the existing literature on behavioral ethics, moral disengagement, and congruence in three ways. First, by integrating leader–follower (in)congruence framework as well as moral disengagement literature into the research of UPB, our study extends the existing literature on the antecedents of follower UPB by revealing that leader–follower (in)congruence in MD propensity influences the likelihood for the follower's engagement in UPB. Previous empirical studies have identified leadership (e.g. Cheng et al., 2019; Effelsberg & Solga, 2015; Graham et al., 2015; Kalshoven et al., 2016; Miao et al., 2013) and employee characteristics (e.g. Castille et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2020; Kong, 2016) as predictors of employee UPB. These findings have revealed the influences of leaders and followers separately, but the studies have not investigated how leader and follower factors jointly (i.e. the leader–follower fit in personal characteristics) influence the occurrence of follower UPB, thereby preventing us from gaining a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances in which UPBs occur. The present study demonstrates that the answer to this question is far more complicated than previously thought by showing that follower UPB is related to congruence and incongruence between leaders and followers at different levels of MD propensity. Specifically, our findings indicate that depending on a leader's MD propensity level, a low level of follower MD propensity may not always decrease his/her willingness to conduct UPBs. There is an interesting but counterintuitive result that when both parties hold a low level of MD propensity, the follower may still be involved in UPB. Our findings prove that considering the joint effect of leader and follower characteristics needs to be considered to understand what triggers follower UPB. Moreover, our work extends beyond

previous studies, which mainly use social exchange theory (e.g. Umphress & Bingham, 2011), social identity theory (e.g. Kalshoven et al., 2016) and social cognitive theory (e.g. Chen et al., 2016) as the guiding theories for investigating the antecedents of UPB, and provides a new perspective for understanding the causes of UPB by applying person-supervisor fit theory and balance theory into the UPB domain.

Second, this study contributes to the existing literature on moral disengagement by revealing that the influence of followers' or leaders' MD propensity on follower's behavior partly depends on the level of MD propensity of the other party. Nearly all the previous studies on moral disengagement have exclusively focused on the role of MD propensity held by a follower in triggering his/her unethical behaviors (e.g. Fehr et al., 2020; Reynolds et al., 2014) while overlooked the simultaneous effect of leader and follower MD propensity. One exception is Bonner et al. (2016) research, which identified follower MD propensity as a moderator in the relationship between leader MD propensity and perceived ethical leadership. Our research moves beyond previous works on MD propensity by (a) assessing simple effects of leader-follower MD propensity congruence on follower UPB, (b) comparing two scenarios of MD propensity congruence (i.e. high-high MD propensity vs. low-low MD propensity), and (c) comparing two scenarios of MD propensity incongruence (i.e. high-low MD propensity vs. low-high MD propensity). Moreover, in contrast to previous studies that have highlighted the positive effect of MD propensity on individual unethical behavior (e.g. Moore, 2008; Samnani et al., 2014), our study demonstrates that followers with low MD propensity may also engage in a high level of UPB when their leaders hold low MD propensity. This finding implies that considering leader and follower MD propensity simultaneously is necessary for a nuanced understanding of the complicated behavioral consequences of MD propensity. By adopting a trait view and focusing on MD propensity, our study also provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex role played by moral disengagement. The existing empirical research has mainly identified moral disengagement as a cognitive state in which self-sanctions are removed when followers behave in an unethical manner (e.g. Duffy et al., 2012) while considerably disregarded the fact that moral disengagement is not only a state but also a personality trait. Moreover, by identifying UPB as the consequence of leader-follower MD propensity (in)congruence, our study also enriches the extant research on the outcomes of MD propensity, including counterproductive workplace behavior (Samnani et al., 2014), unethical behavior (Kouchaki & Smith, 2014), and organizational citizenship behavior (Shin et al., 2017).

Third, our findings provide evidence for the flip side of leader-follower congruence by showing a positive relationship between leader-follower congruence in MD propensity and follower UPB. Our study, therefore, advances the prior research that exclusively highlights the benefits of leader-follower congruence in stimulating superiority on one's work outcomes (e.g. Schaubroeck & Lam, 2002; Strauss et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2012) and reducing the occurrence of unethical behaviors (Qin et al., 2019). Moreover, the majority of past works on leader-follower congruence have concentrated on the effect of congruence on general outcomes, while only a few studies have explored congruence's effect on ethical or unethical behaviors by adopting the leader-follower congruence approach (e.g. Qin et al., 2018, 2019; Shin et al., 2017). The present study extends this line of research and deepens our understanding of the implications of leader-follower

congruence by identifying a specific type of unethical behavior (i.e. UPB) as the outcome of leader–follower congruence.

Managerial Implications

This study provides several implications for managerial practice. Unethical behaviors performed in the name of organizations (i.e. UPB) yield large losses to organizations because such misconduct undermines stakeholders' trust in organizations (Umphress et al., 2010). Consequently, such behaviors can potentially ruin organizations (Chen et al., 2016). Regarding the joint effect of leader and follower MD propensity on UPB, organizations should develop an accurate and comprehensive understanding of a leader's and a follower's tendency to disengage morally with each other.

Although MD propensity is believed to play a vital role in an individual's unethical behavioral decisions, our findings show that followers with low MD propensity may also engage in high levels of UPB when the leader also holds low MD propensity. To counterbalance this congruent effect, organizations should build an organizational culture that highlights social responsibility and ethics. This type of culture will reduce employees' willingness to conduct UPB (May et al., 2015) and reinforce moral consciousness.

Our findings show that a leader low in MD propensity cannot prevent the occurrence of UPBs conducted by a follower high in MD propensity, as MD propensity is a chronic trait and cannot be easily changed. This revelation indicates that the case of low leader–high follower MD propensity may be particularly problematic. Given the above situation, organizations could obtain first-hand information on each employee's MD propensity *via* surveys during the recruiting process, which can help organizations make the right decision. Moreover, organizations should develop ethical training programmes for their in-service staff members. By attending such training programmes, employees can effectively grasp the boundaries between morality and immorality and behave in an ethical manner in the future.

Limitations

Despite these theoretical and managerial implications, our study has certain limitations. First, we fail to conclude a causal relationship because our data were collected *via* a cross-sectional design. Therefore, future research should be conducted with an experimental or longitudinal research design to examine the causal relationship between MD propensity and UPB, thus extending the external validity of this study. Second, our research concentrates on the main effect of leader–follower (in)congruence in MD propensity on UPB but overlooks the underlying mechanisms. Balance theory suggests that leader–follower incongruence in individual characteristics can increase the occurrence of stressful experiences for both parties and thereby influence the follower's work or nonwork outcomes (Tse et al., 2013). Therefore, future research could explore the potential mediators from the perspective of stress. Third, our study assesses the focal employee's intention to conduct UPBs rather than the actual UPBs. Although unethical intentions have been widely adopted to substitute individuals' actual unethical behaviors (e.g. Castille et al., 2018; Effelsberg et al., 2014), measuring actual unethical behaviors is confirmed to reveal more valid conclusions and thus serves as a potential topic for

future research. Fourth, all the participants were from a society with a specific culture, China, which may limit the generalizability of our findings. Regarding this issue, a cross-cultural study should be conducted to confirm the generalizability of our findings. Fifth, this study focused on only personality (i.e. MD propensity) and did not address leadership, although leadership has been found to be a powerful driver of follower UPB (e.g. Cheng et al., 2019; Effelsberg & sSolga, 2015; Graham et al., 2015). Thus, examining whether congruence or incongruence between actual leadership exhibited by leaders and leadership perceived by followers has an effect on follower UPB should be addressed in future research.

Conclusion

UPB has gained an increasing amount of attention from scholars. The present study investigates the role of MD propensity in follower UPB by adopting the approach of leader–follower congruence. Our findings support the crucial role of the congruence of leader–follower MD propensity in predicting UPB. Future research can also benefit from considering the approach of leader–follower congruence in other individual differences when exploring the predictors of follower UPB.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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