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When Employees Do Bad Things for Good Reasons: Examining Unethical Pro-Organizational Behaviors

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We propose that employees sometimes engage in unethical acts with the intent to benefit their organization, its members, or both—a construct we term *unethical pro-organizational behavior*. We suggest that positive social exchange relationships and organizational identification may lead to unethical pro-organizational behavior indirectly via neutralization, the process by which the moral content of unethical actions is overlooked. We incorporate situational and individual-level constructs as moderators of these relationships and consider managerial implications and future research.

Key words: unethical behavior; social exchange; organizational identification; ethics; moral disengagement; neutralization; guilt; shame; amoral culture; severity
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When...there's a slow-down...I may lie to protect the company image by telling the passengers that we're waiting on bags rather than that the mechanic is taking his own sweet time.

I would make excuses to protect the company, like if the cabin was filthy, I'd say, "I'm sorry it's dirty. We contracted out our services." I did that more times than I can remember, to protect the company's image.... (Scott 2003, p. 332, anonymous accounts from two flight attendants)

In a survey of more than 2,000 executive assistants and secretaries in Canada and the United States, researchers found that 10% destroyed or removed damaging information, 6.5% wrote documents with misleading or false information, and 5.1% falsified vouchers or expense accounts. All of this unethical activity was performed by employees to benefit their bosses, their organizations, or both (Kleiman 1996). A more recent study on organizational ethics found that more than one-third of U.S. adults surveyed had witnessed unethical activities at their workplace. Of those questioned, 19% observed lying to employees, customers, vendors, or the public (Gurchiek 2006).

Clearly, unethical activity is present within organizations. As illustrated by the opening examples of the flight attendants, employees may engage in unethical actions, such as lying, to benefit the organization. In this work, we consider the potential motivations for unethical behaviors conducted to benefit the organization or its agents, a construct we call "unethical pro-organizational

behavior." Existing research acknowledges that employees may conduct unethical behaviors on behalf of the organization (Ashforth and Anand 2003, Brief et al. 2001, Pinto et al. 2008), but a construct and theoretically grounded framework for understanding the underlying mechanisms of such behavior has not been thoroughly developed.

Our work contributes to the organizational literature in four ways. First, our work is unique in its focus on how positive social exchange and organizational identification can encourage unethical behavior intended to benefit the organization. Although generally thought to elicit favorable and ethical behavior for the organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989, Blau 1964, Gouldner 1960, Tajfel and Turner 1986), we suggest that *positive* social exchange relationships and higher levels of identification with the organization may also encourage unethical behaviors intended to benefit the organization. This contribution is particularly important because positive social exchange relationships and organizational identification motivate behaviors that are vital to organizational functioning, such as high levels of job performance and extra role behavior (Cropanzano et al. 2001; Mael and Ashforth 1995; Organ 1988, 1990). Yet we propose that individuals with strong attachments to and identification with their employer may also be the most likely to engage in unethical pro-organizational behaviors, suggesting that employees may do "bad things for good reasons." Thus we identify a potentially unintended *negative* consequence of *positive* social exchange and organizational identification.[1]

Second, our work provides the organizational literature with a detailed conceptualization of unethical acts that are conducted with the intent to benefit the organization. Previous work has theoretically and empirically examined how employees attempt to harm their organizations or help themselves (or both) by engaging in unethical behavior such as stealing (Greenberg 2002), sabotage (Robinson and Bennett 1995), counterproductive work behavior (Spector and Fox 2002), or defaming their organization (Bies and Tripp 1998). This extant work on unethical or deviant acts has contributed significantly to our understanding of unethical behavior. Yet the foundational motives for unethical behavior are likely "much more complex than generally conceived" (Greenberg 1997, p. 88), and we propose that some unethical behaviors may be carried out with pro-organizational intentions. In doing so, we add to the burgeoning literature that considers the potentially beneficial intentions underlying unethical, deviant, or counterproductive forms of behavior within organizations (Brief and Motowidlo 1986, Molinsky and Margolis 2005, Scott 2003, Vardi and Weitz 2004, Vardi and Wiener 1996, Warren 2003) and provide a potentially novel theoretical lens for understanding the phenomenon.

Third, we contribute to the organizational literature by considering how neutralization influences unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Neutralization, or the process by which the moral content of an unethical action is masked or overlooked (Bandura 1999, Sykes and Matza 1957), allows employees to engage in unethical acts without considering the ethical implications of their actions. We argue that employees with positive social exchange relationships and with high organizational identification may focus on the potential benefit associated with unethical pro-organizational behavior and ignore the ethicality associated with the act. Previous literature acknowledges that neutralization can enable employees to act unethically (Bandura 1999, Sykes and Matza 1957, Tenbrunsel and Messick 2004, Treviño et al. 2006), but this literature does not explicitly consider how social exchange relationships and organizational identification facilitate the neutralization process. Our theoretical model addresses this gap in the organizational literature.

Fourth, in our conceptual model we consider the connection between the potential severity of the unethical act and neutralization. Consistent with previous literature (Butterfield et al. 2000, Fritzsche and Becker 1983, Fritzsche 1988, Jones 1991, Morris and McDonald 1995, Weber 1990), we argue that in addition to considering the potential benefits to the organization, employees likely reflect on the potential severity of their actions. Potential severity involves the anticipated negative consequence(s) associated with the outcome of the unethical action for entities other than the organization, such as customers and clients. We suggest that employees are more likely to engage in neutralization when unethical pro-organizational acts have more severe consequences. This previously unexamined connection between potential severity and neutralization may enhance our understanding of why employees conduct unethical acts to benefit the organization with seemingly little regard for others.

The remainder of our work will unfold as follows. First, we define unethical pro-organizational behaviors; review related constructs; and describe how social exchange relationships, organizational identification, and neutralization influence unethical behavior within organizations. Consistent with other research attempting to understand forms of employee misconduct (e.g., Kidder 2005), we incorporate an interactionist perspective to morality (Bandura 1999, Treviño 1986), which implies that moral actions stem from the reciprocal interplay of personal and contextual influences. Integrating this view into our work, we describe how constructs at the organizational (amoral culture) and individual level (moral development) may promote unethical activity with helpful motives. Finally, we discuss the emotions and cognitions that may arise as a consequence of these unethical acts, as well as the practical and theoretical implications of our model for understanding and potentially inhibiting unethical pro-organizational behavior within organizations.

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

We define unethical pro-organizational behavior as actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members (e.g., leaders) and violate core societal values, mores, laws, or standards of proper conduct. At its heart, our definition incorporates two key components. First, unethical pro-organizational behavior is unethical, meaning that the behavior violates hypernorms, or globally held standards of ethical behavior judged in terms of justice, law, or widely held social norms (Donaldson and Dunfee 1994). Thus rather than merely violating a specific set of social benchmarks, such as organizational norms (Robinson and Bennett 1995), more absolute societal standards such as hypernorms (Donaldson and Dunfee 1994) govern whether a behavior is ethical or unethical. The second component of our definition incorporates the intent behind the unethical action. As stated earlier, we focus on behaviors intended to benefit the organizations, its members, or both. These behaviors may involve acts of commission (e.g., tampering with a manufacturer's expiration date to sell a perishable item) or omission (e.g., failing to fully inform customers about flaws in a product), and both types of unethical acts are included in our conceptualization of unethical pro-organizational behaviors.

We offer three boundary conditions to our conceptualization. First, we recognize the possibility that employees may engage in unethical behavior without specific

intentions to benefit or harm (e.g., an employee failing to report a serious product defect to customers when that employee has no knowledge of the flaw). We differentiate unethical pro-organizational behavior from work-related actions involving errors, mistakes, or unconscious negligence (e.g., Asare and Wright 1995). Because these acts are not conducted to intentionally benefit the organization, they would not constitute unethical pro-organizational behavior. Again, our focus here is on those behaviors that are purposely intended to benefit.

Second, although employees may aim to help, the end result of their actions may be inconsistent with their intentions. For instance, an employee may choose to destroy potentially incriminating documents to protect the organization; however, the destruction of these documents may not result in any form of organizational benefit. Indeed, the unethical act may cause the organization to look more suspicious to external auditors, harming the organization in the long run. The end result of unethical actions is important and is the focus of other empirical (e.g., Treviño and Ball 1992, Weaver et al. 1999), theoretical (Velasquez 1996), and practitioner-focused (Weaver 2004) work.

Third, we acknowledge that employees may conduct unethical actions with the intent to benefit *only* themselves. Previous empirical and theoretical work has focused on the role of self-interested motives (e.g., Grover and Hui 1994, Treviño and Youngblood 1990). Unethical behaviors conducted primarily with the intention of benefiting the self alone, and not the organization or its members, would not be considered unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Another aspect of our conceptualization is the potential severity associated with the unethical pro-organizational act. In our classification of unethical pro-organizational behaviors, we define potential severity as the anticipated negative consequence(s) associated with the outcome of the unethical action for entities other than the organization before the behavior is performed. As previously noted, unethical pro-organizational behaviors are intended to benefit the organization, in that the employee perceives a beneficial consequence for the organization. The anticipated consequence for other entities, however, may be harmful. Consider the example of an employee intending to protect his or her pharmaceutical company by failing to disclose a flaw in the company's product. The employee's view of the behavior might differ if the medical product defect had the capacity to cause death versus if the defect simply rendered the product ineffective after a period of time. Potential for death is clearly more severe than the possibility of spending money to buy a replacement product. Although one cannot be certain as to the eventual consequence caused by an unethical action before it is performed (Sonenshein 2007), it is possible to make inferences based on the possibility for harmful consequences

to entities other than the organization. Below, we further discuss potential severity after we consider the role of positive social exchange relationships and organizational identification in motivating unethical pro-organizational behaviors.

Differentiating Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior from Similar Concepts

Some organizational scholars acknowledge the possibility that individuals may commit unethical behaviors while intending to help the organization (Molinsky and Margolis 2005, Scott 2003, Vardi and Weitz 2004, Vardi and Wiener 1996, Warren 2003). Specifically, three categorizations of behavior coincide with and lend support for our conceptualization of unethical pro-organizational behavior. First, Molinsky and Margolis (2005) suggest that employees sometimes conduct behaviors to provide some benefit to an individual, an organization, or a society but harm the target of the behavior in the process. Molinsky and Margolis (2005, p. 247) refer to these actions as *necessary evils* and define them as "a work-related tasks in which an individual must, as a part of his or her job, perform an act that causes emotional or physical harm to another human being in the service of achieving some perceived greater good." Examples of necessary evils include managers giving bad news to their subordinates, health-care providers performing painful procedures, and teachers giving negative feedback to students (Molinsky and Margolis 2005, p. 245). Like unethical pro-organizational behavior, necessary evils can be performed to benefit the organization. But necessary evils also may be performed to benefit society, which would be considered outside the realm of unethical pro-organizational behavior. Further, necessary evils include *ethical* behaviors, whereas unethical pro-organizational behavior includes only unethical behaviors.

Second, Warren (2003) created a framework to conceptualize deviance through two dimensions: (1) whether the behavior conforms or deviates from hypernorms, or moral standards within society; and (2) whether the behavior conforms or deviates from workgroup norms within the organization. Warren (2003) broadens our view of deviance by suggesting that within some organizations, aberrant acts such as supporting workplace harassment can conform to workgroup norms and at the same time violate hypernorms. Our construct of unethical pro-organizational behavior complements Warren's view of deviant behavior, given that unethical pro-organizational behavior clearly deviates from hypernorms. Our construct can be distinguished from Warren's in that we focus solely on unethical behavior (rather than both ethical and unethical acts), and we consider the intention behind such actions.

Finally, Vardi and colleagues (Vardi and Weitz 2004, Vardi and Wiener 1996) developed a model of unethical behavior based on the intention of the deviant action,

a class of behaviors they term *organization misbehavior*. They identify three facets of organizational misbehavior: (1) acts intended to benefit the self, (2) acts intended to be destructive to others or the organization, and (3) acts intended to benefit the organization. Their third form of organizational misbehavior coincides with our conceptualization. However, our conceptualization and theoretical model of unethical pro-organizational behavior diverges from Vardi and colleagues' conceptualization in three important ways. First, the conceptual basis for our model is grounded in social exchange theory (Blau 1964, Emerson 1976), and our work is unique in its focus on how positive social exchange can encourage unethical behavior intended to benefit the organization. The work by Vardi and colleagues does not draw from social exchange as a theoretical framework. This distinction is important because previous literature suggests that positive social exchange relationships encourage behaviors that are ethical and positive for organizational functioning (Cropanzano et al. 2001; Mael and Ashforth 1995; Organ 1988, 1990), whereas our theoretical arguments suggest that positive social exchange relationships may also motivate unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Second, in contrast to Vardi and colleagues, we consider the potential severity of the unethical action for entities other than the organization. Employees likely view and make decisions about engaging in unethical pro-organizational behaviors differently depending on the potential severity of the act (Butterfield et al. 2000). Third, organizational misbehavior explicitly encompasses the violation of *either* societal *or* organizational norms. That is, organizational misbehavior includes actions that "may be consistent with organizational expectations but violate societal values... [and] behavior that is consistent with societal values but violates organizational expectations" (Vardi and Wiener 1996, p. 154). We only consider acts that are unethical—behaviors that violate societal values regardless of whether they are consistent with or defy organizational expectations.

Although one could discern other conceptual differences between unethical pro-organizational behavior and similar constructs, the conceptions reviewed above include both ethical *and* unethical behavior. A focus on ethical acts is clearly an important area of research, but the purpose of our work is to understand how social exchange relationships and organizational identification can lead employees to conduct unethical acts. Previous work has thoroughly investigated how positive social exchange relationships motivate ethical acts such as job performance and extra-role behavior (e.g., Cohen-Charash and Spector 2001). To our knowledge, however, there is no conceptual model presented in the organizational literature illustrating how social exchange relationships and organizational identification motivate unethical behaviors intended to benefit the organization

or its members. Below, we attempt to bridge this gap by suggesting how employees are motivated to enact unethical pro-organizational behaviors via social exchange relationships and organizational identification.

Theoretical Model

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory focuses on the relationship cultivated by the exchange of resources between two parties (Blau 1964, Emerson 1976). Accordingly, if one party provides a benefit, the other party is motivated to reciprocate by providing a benefit in return (e.g., Blau 1964, Emerson 1976, Gouldner 1960). Although reciprocating benefits is voluntary, those who fail to reciprocate may incur penalties such as distrust, decreased reputation, denial of future benefits, and other sanctions (Gouldner 1960). In contrast, those who reciprocate engage in a self-perpetuating exchange of benefits including mutual trust, approval, and respect (Blau 1964).

The logic of social exchange theory suggests that individuals comply with duties specified by their role (e.g., wife, father, or employee) because others have fulfilled similar duties toward them (Gouldner 1960). Extending this logic, employees perform organizational duties not only to fulfill employment obligations but also to reciprocate considerate treatment from their supervisors or organizations in general. This theme permeates a variety of exchange relationship phenomena within work contexts (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). For example, psychological contracts, or the perceived contractual obligations between employee and employer (e.g., Rousseau 1989, Van Dyne and Ang 1998), and perceived organizational support, or the employee's perception of support from the organization (e.g., Eisenberger et al. 2001, 1986; Wayne et al. 1997), are both founded on the norms of exchange and reciprocity (Coyle-Shapiro and Conway 2005). Leader–member exchange (e.g., Pillai et al. 1999, Wayne et al. 1997), or the interchange between subordinates and their leaders based on relational similarity, is also exchange-focused and has become a prominent area of social exchange research. Finally, organizational justice has theoretical roots in social exchange as a framework for explaining how fairness influences behavioral and attitudinal outcomes (e.g., Cropanzano et al. 2001).

Research on positive exchange relationships generally concludes that positive consequences result when constructive social exchange relationships exist (see Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005 for a review). Favorable perceptions of leader–member exchange, perceived organizational support, and fair treatment, for instance, create an open-ended and closer social exchange relationship between the employer and employee in which employees reciprocate favorable treatment by benefiting the organization or their manager (Cropanzano

et al. 2001). Thus social exchange researchers (e.g., Organ 1988, 1990) predict, for example, that employees respond to favorable treatment with organizational citizenship behaviors and increased performance (e.g., psychological contacts, Coyle-Shapiro 2002, Turnley et al. 2003; perceived organizational support, Eisenberger et al. 2001, Lynch et al. 1999, Moorman et al. 1998; leader–member exchange, Masterson et al. 2000, Settoon et al. 1996, Wayne et al. 1997; organizational justice, Cohen-Charash and Spector 2001, Kamdar et al. 2006, Tekleab et al. 2005, Tepper and Taylor 2003). Further, previous research suggests that employees with positive social exchange relationships are less likely to engage in unethical acts that may harm the organization, such as stealing (e.g., Greenberg 1993, Pearson 1998, Townsend et al. 2000). Hollinger (1986), for example, found that rule-breaking behavior directed toward production (e.g., substandard work, slowdowns, and insubordination) and property (e.g., theft, embezzlement, and vandalism) was less likely to occur under conditions of high personal attachment to the organization.

A particularly surprising implication of considering unethical behavior in the context of social exchange, as we do here, is that employees may reciprocate positive exchange relationships with their employers by engaging in unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Employees may view unethical pro-organizational behaviors, such as protecting the organization by lying to customers or clients, failing to issue refunds to customers and clients, or selling an unsafe product, as a way to reciprocate positive social exchange relationships with their employer.

The underlying motive for engaging in unethical pro-organizational behaviors, however, may not be limited to the norms of social exchange and reciprocity. The strength of one's psychological relationship with social groups also operates through identification (Ashforth and Mael 1989, Mael and Ashforth 1992, Tajfel and Turner 1986). Organizational identification reflects the extent to which the organization is incorporated into individuals' self-concept (Pratt 1998, van Knippenberg and Sleebos 2006) and represents another motive by which individuals may engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Organization Identification

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) posits that part of an individual's self-concept derives from membership with a social group (Tajfel 1981, p. 255). From this perspective, individuals develop highly salient social identities specific to the social domains they occupy (Tajfel 1982); a person has not one "personal self" but rather several selves that correspond to identification with membership in different groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Organizational identification, one salient form of social classification, is an employee's perception of belonging and membership to his or her employing organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989, Dutton et al. 1994).

Organizational identification enables individuals to both embody and support their organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989, Turner 1987). As organizational identification becomes stronger, organizational values and work-related practices become more salient to employees (Ashforth and Mael 1989, Riketta 2005). Employees who strongly identify with their organization internalize the organization's successes and failures as their own (Mael and Ashforth 1992) and behave in ways that are consistent with organizational expectations and ways to benefit the organization, such as through higher loyalty, increased extra-role behaviors and job performance, and decreased turnover intentions (Mael and Ashforth 1995, van Knippenberg et al. 2000, Wan-Huggins et al. 1998).

Organizational identification may also compel employees to disregard ethical standards (e.g., personal values, norms, and cognitive processes) and others outside the organization (e.g., customers, clients) in favor of behaviors that help the organization (Ashforth and Anand 2003). When one's social identity within the organization is increasingly important to the individual, employees may augment their own morality to coincide with the morality of their social in-group (Banfield 1958). Through a desire to protect the group's identity, individuals may place the interests of the group above the interests of those who could be harmed by the unethical act. Organizational identification could allow employees to perceive unethical pro-organizational behaviors as dutiful acts that serve their group or organization (Ashforth and Anand 2003). For instance, a highly identified employee may make false claims about the feature of a product to help make a sale.

Given this potential, we suggest that individuals who strongly identify with their organization may disregard their own moral standards in favor of unethical acts that protect or help the organization. Consistent with our arguments, Dukerich et al. (1998, p. 253) suggest that overidentification, when the needs of the actor become secondary to the needs of the organization, may influence unethical acts performed on behalf of the organization (see also Elsbach 1999). High levels of organizational identification may cause employees to conduct unethical acts such as lying to protect the organization or covering up evidence that could harm the organization (Dukerich et al. 1998). Similarly, employees who strongly identify with their employing organization will be more likely to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior.

We argue that individuals are motivated to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior because they reciprocate positive social exchange relationships or because they identify with the organization. One might inquire about how employees conduct unethical acts for their organization, possibly while preserving personal values that would otherwise prohibit such behavior. To overcome such discord, individuals may engage in cognitive rationalizations, known as neutralization (Sykes

and Matza 1957), which remove the ethicality associated with unethical actions. Neutralization sometimes precedes unethical behavior and explains "how people freely come to decide to adopt an unethical course of action... without experiencing significant amounts of dissonance, anxiety, and stress" (Bersoff 1999, p. 28). We highlight the role of neutralization as a way to understand the process by which employees define unethical actions as appropriate and choose to engage in unethical pro-organizational behaviors.

Neutralization

Neutralization is a process by which the moral or ethical imperatives associated with an act are masked, overlooked, or dismissed (see also Bandura 1999, Sykes and Matza 1957). Through neutralization, individuals justify their behavior and protect themselves from self-blame, thereby reducing dissonance and making immoral behavior seem less abhorrent. As Sykes and Matza (1957) note, neutralization eliminates social controls that inhibit unethical or deviant acts and frees an individual to perform unethical acts without harming his or her self-image. The implication of neutralization is that normal, everyday people may be perfectly willing to engage in unethical behavior. Individuals engaging in corrupt actions may not see themselves as corrupt and may continue to espouse a strong personal values system, even as they commit unscrupulous deeds (Ashforth and Anand 2003).

Neutralization processes allow employees on the one hand to pursue beneficial intentions to help the organization and its members and on the other to commit unethical acts that violate the moral standards of society (Sykes and Matza 1957). By removing or lessening the ethical implications of the actor's conduct, neutralization allows "individuals to behave incomprehensibly and, at the same time, not realize that they are doing so" (Tenbrunsel and Messick 2004, p. 224). Neutralization inhibits moral awareness, or the recognition of the existence of a moral issue (Rest 1986), and obscures ethical decision making (see also Treviño et al. 2006). As the ethical implications of decisions are removed, unethical acts become business decisions, not ethical dilemmas. In support of this reasoning, empirical work shows that unethical behavior increases once the ethical implications of the unethical act are masked via neutralization (Bersoff 1999). Because neutralization processes remove the ethical content from unethical behaviors, we propose that neutralization will be positively related to unethical pro-organizational behaviors (see Figure 1).

PROPOSITION 1. *Neutralization is an enabling condition for the expression of unethical pro-organizational behaviors.*
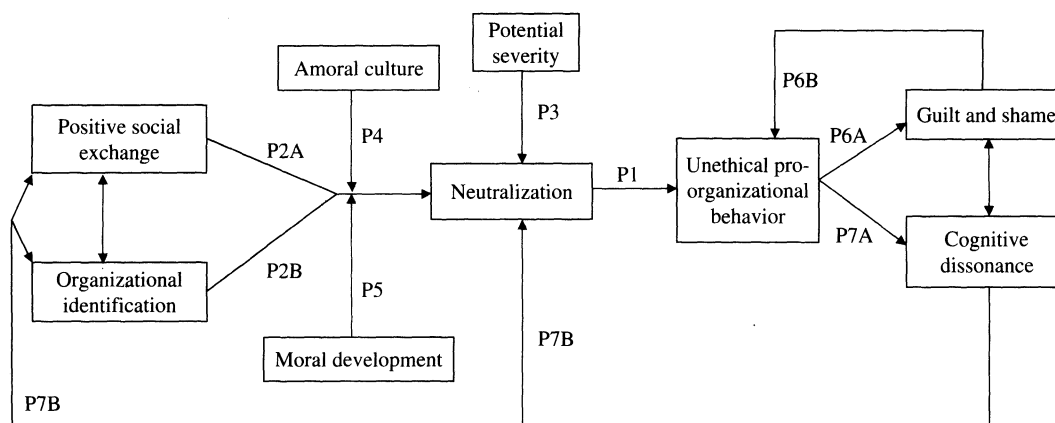
Social Exchange Theory and Neutralization

Positive social exchange relationships may facilitate neutralization, which in turn creates favorable conditions for unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Drawing from Sykes and Matza (1957), we argue that employees neutralize unethical acts stemming from social exchange by (1) focusing on the terms of the employee's specific role or situation and (2) creating a higher sense of loyalty and duty to reciprocate good treatment.

First, rather than focusing on the ethicality of the actual deed, employees with positive social exchange relationships may view the action as terms of the specific employment role or situation. In Sykes and Matza's (1957) view, individuals may reason that the unethical act is justified because of the power of the situation, not because they are unscrupulous: "I'm just doing my job," "My boss would want me to do this," or "The organization needs this" (Kelman and Hamilton 1989). Individuals with strong positive social exchange relationships, therefore, may focus on their duty to engage in the act and the possible beneficial consequences to the organization rather than on the moral implications associated with the unethical act. If employees look to situational factors such as role expectations to explain their unethical behavior, employees are able to accept less personal responsibility and distance themselves from the unethical act rather than internalize blame.

Second, positive social exchange relationships may create a higher sense of loyalty that may encourage neutralization. Employees with positive social exchange relationships might view their unethical behavior as being "good citizens" (Kelman and Hamilton 1989). For instance, highly committed employees exhibit stronger positive reciprocity norms (Eisenberger et al. 2001) and consequently are more likely to reciprocate through increased in job performance and extra-role behavior (Mael and Ashforth 1995, van Knippenberg et al. 2000, Wan-Huggins et al. 1998). Similarly, highly committed employees may also perform unethical pro-organizational behavior when seeking to reciprocate favorable treatment. Positive social exchange relationships, such as when employees are highly committed to their organization, may cause employees to lose sight of what they actually do at work (O'Reilly and Chatman 1996), and organizational goals can be placed above individual or societal standards for ethical behavior (Randall 1987). This may prompt employees to view unethical pro-organizational behaviors as a way of simply carrying out their duty for the organization because contributions to the goals of the organization trump one's moral obligations to society.

In sum, we propose that through neutralization, social exchange relationships can encourage unethical pro-organizational behaviors. By intending to benefit the organization, individuals may consciously or unconsciously rationalize behavior, allowing for otherwise

Figure 1   Theoretical Model of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behaviors

unethical acts to be defined as legitimate or appropriate. Employees who receive favorable treatment from their employer may view unethical behaviors that serve to help the organization or its members as permissible via neutralization.

PROPOSITION 2A. *Positive social exchange relationships lead to favorable conditions for neutralization, which encourages unethical pro-organizational behavior.*

Organizational Identification and Neutralization
We further argue that organizational identification can lead to amenable conditions for neutralization and unethical pro-organizational behavior. Following Sykes and Matza (1957), we suggest employees can neutralize unethical acts through organization identification by (1) ignoring the plight of the victims of unethical proorganizational behavior, (2) focusing on the wrongs committed by victims, and (3) maintaining a higher loyalty to the group than to the morals or norms within society.

First, employees who strongly identify with their organization may ignore the plight of their victims and focus on reaffirming or protecting the identity of the organization (Bandura 1999, Dukerich et al. 1998). Victims of unethical actions within corporate settings (e.g., whitecollar crime) can be difficult to visualize, remaining nameless and faceless to perpetrators. Employees may only read about their victims in the newspaper or hear anecdotal accounts of the harm caused by their unethical behavior. Distal relationships with the victims can make it appear as though no parties are negatively affected. If a highly identified employee lies for the organization to protect it from external auditors, it might be difficult to recognize any personal harm caused by the unethical act, especially when the benefits to the organization may seem overtly transparent.

Second, highly identified employees may also engage in neutralization by focusing on the wrongs committed by their victims (Sykes and Matza 1957). If employees perceive that the organization has been wronged, those

high in organizational identification are likely to feel especially affronted because group membership may be perceived to be threatened (Hogg and Terry 2001; Tajfel 1981, 1982). These individuals are then likely to justify their actions by relying on past unethical actions of their victims. In this way, employees who perpetrate unethical acts preserve the group's identity (Dutton et al. 1994) and are likely to view themselves as heroes or avengers by carrying out seemingly justifiable actions against disreputable victims. For example, an employee may decide to overcharge a client and justify the act by focusing on the client reneging on a past order. In the mind of the employee, two wrongs make a right because a wrong committed by a client makes a wrong committed by an employee the "right" thing to do.

Finally, neutralization is enabled when individuals feel a higher loyalty to their group than to the morals within society (Sykes and Matza 1957). Employees who identify strongly with the organization may focus on the needs of the in-group and ignore the broader moral implications of the act. An individual's tendency to fail to recognize ethical conflicts of interest is more likely when the unethical actions favor the individual's in-group (Chugh et al. 2005). Because one's social identity influences how individuals construct an issue (Sonenshein 2007), ethical compromise is likely to occur if the goals of the social in-group (i.e., the organization) are seen as more relevant, important, or vital to one's self-interest than society's moral values or the potential negative outcomes resulting from the unethical acts. Thus "an otherwise ethically-minded individual may forsake universalistic or dominant norms about ethical behavior in favor of particularistic behaviors that favor his or her group at the expense of outsiders" (Ashforth and Anand 2003, p. 10).

In sum, we propose that individuals who strongly identify with their organization may neutralize unethical acts to advance their groups' interests. When employees identify strongly with their organization, global moral standards such as hypernorms may be disregarded in

favor of behaviors that benefit the group. Such norms may be seen as obstacles to fulfilling the organization's goals and objectives.

PROPOSITION 2B. *Organizational identification leads to favorable conditions for neutralization, which encourages unethical pro-organizational behavior.*

Above, we describe how neutralization is an enabling condition for unethical pro-organizational behavior and how positive social exchange relationships and strong organizational identification can encourage neutralization processes. Although neutralization is important for the enactment of some unethical pro-organizational behaviors, neutralization may not be necessary for individuals to engage in other unethical pro-organizational behaviors. We consider this possibility based on the potential severity of the unethical act.

Potential Severity and Neutralization

We noted earlier that our conceptualization of unethical pro-organizational behavior considers the potential severity or the anticipated negative consequence(s) associated with the outcome of the unethical action for entities other than the organization. Our consideration of the potential severity of the unethical pro-organizational action is consistent with previous theoretical (Jones 1991) and empirical (Butterfield et al. 2000, Fritzsche and Becker 1983, Fritzsche 1988, Morris and McDonald 1995, Weber 1990) literature. Research suggests that individuals tend to view an unethical act differently based on its potential severity. For instance, Butterfield et al. (2000) conducted an experiment in which the researchers varied the potential severity of harm associated with hiring a job candidate who was willing to share insider information about a previous employer, an organization that was a competitor of the current company. In the high potential severity condition, participants were told that the insider information could put the competing company out of business. In the low potential severity condition, participants were told that the insider information could put a dent in the competitor's market share. Participants in the high potential severity condition were more likely to identify hiring the employee as an ethical decision than were those in the low potential severity condition. Similarly, we suggest that as the potential severity associated with the unethical act increases, people are more likely to view the decision to engage in unethical behavior as an ethical decision (Butterfield et al. 2000, Fritzsche and Becker 1983, Fritzsche 1988, Jones 1991, Morris and McDonald 1995, Weber 1990).

Potential severity may influence whether neutralization precedes unethical pro-organizational behavior. Individuals are likely to perceive that they are making an ethical decision when deciding to engage in unethical pro-organizational behaviors that have potentially severe consequences (e.g., failing to report an error during a surgical procedure). When the decision is defined as an ethical decision, neutralization becomes a more necessary antecedent to performing unethical acts. Failing to neutralize and subsequently engaging in the unethical act could threaten the employee's self-image of being a good, moral person. Because neutralization allows individuals to remove or mask the ethicality associated with the act (Sykes and Matza 1957), employees are more likely to focus on the potential benefit of the unethical pro-organizational behavior for the organization after neutralization occurs and to ignore any potential harm created for others. For these reasons, neutralization processes are likely to occur before engaging in unethical pro-organizational behaviors that are high in potential severity.

Unethical pro-organizational behaviors that are relatively low in potential severity (e.g., failing to disclose the hidden fees of a credit card enrollment procedure) may not require neutralization processes. If the potential harm caused by the unethical act is difficult to recognize a priori, individuals are likely to engage in the action without considering the costs to others. In essence, the consequence might already be masked or muted, making neutralization processes avoidable when engaging in behaviors with low potential severity. For less severe unethical pro-organizational behaviors, the potential benefits of the action likely far outweigh any potential negative consequences for others in the mind of the employee conducting the act. Therefore, we propose that as the potential severity of the unethical pro-organizational behavior decreases, employees are less likely to engage in neutralization before performing the unethical act.

PROPOSITION 3. *Potential severity increases the possibility that individuals will engage in neutralization prior to performing unethical pro-organizational behaviors.*

Intervening Influences

In our propositions, we highlight a potential negative consequence of positive social exchange and organizational identification. However, we recognize that other factors likely influence whether such relationships lead employees to engage in neutralization and unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Neutralization, as a generalized learned response pattern (Sykes and Matza 1957), is vulnerable to the influence of both individual and situational factors (Bersoff 1999). Thus, consistent with other research on ethical and unethical behavior (e.g., Kidder 2005, Ryan et al. 1997), we draw from Treviño's (1986) consideration of a person–situation (i.e., employee–organization) model of decision making. In doing so, we consider the influence of a situational factor (amoral culture) and an individual difference variable (moral development) in the commission of unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Amoral Culture

Cultures play a significant role in determining ethical behavior (Treviño 1986). Culture influences organizational members' "focus of attention, interpretations of events, and attitudes and behaviors" (O'Reilly and Chatman 1996, p. 157). Culture provides collective norms about ethical conduct and the foundation for employees' determinations about what is and what is not appropriate behavior within the organization. Corrupt behavior is fostered when an organization's culture strongly favors highly ambiguous ethical norms and instills notions of amorality (McKenna 1996).

Amoral cultures are environments in which organizational norms fail to encourage ethical behavior. Although explicit orders to carry out specific unethical practices may not occur, unethical behavior may nonetheless be implicitly accepted, if not expected, within amoral cultures. Consistent with the sociological work on crimes of obedience (Hamilton and Sanders 1999, Kelman and Hamilton 1989), if the organizational context is one in which directives, suggestions, or implications from above are ethically ambiguous, then unethical actions are likely to be implicitly condoned by the organization or its members. We propose that within amoral cultures, employees with positive social exchange relationships or with high organizational identification are especially likely to neutralize the ethicality associated with their own actions when those actions have the potential to benefit the organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Employees within amoral cultures also are likely to engage in higher levels of unethical pro-organizational behavior than are those within more ethical organizational cultures. Below, we describe the influence of amoral culture by examining its primary characteristics.

Amoral cultures are created within organizations with amoral leadership and performance goals and within amoral institutional and national environments. First, organizational goals may influence unethical activity within amoral cultures. Rather than coercing members into advancing organizational goals through unethical means, amoral organizations indirectly encourage unethical practices (Needleman and Needleman 1979). Goals are frequently tied to financial success and resource procurement, which facilitates immoral pursuits in the interest of meeting organizational objectives (Ashforth and Anand 2003). Individuals with high positive social exchange relationships or those who highly identify with the organization become internally committed to espousing and advancing organizational objectives (O'Reilly and Chatman 1986). When the emphasis on ends downplays and obfuscates a focus on the means, the value of and the desire to advance the organization's goals trumps ethical thinking (Yeager 1986). Habitual, routinized, or taken-for-granted pursuit of organizational goals could motivate employees with strong attachments to their organization to act unethically on behalf of their organization (Brief et al. 2001).

Amorality in organizations may be fostered by leaders who implicitly "authorize" unethical behavior even if they do not engage in unethical behaviors themselves. Organizational leaders possess a key source of ethical guidance for employees by focusing followers' attention on specific standards, including the necessity to act prosocially toward the organization (Brown et al. 2005, Wiener 1988). Leaders model and specify acceptable organizational conduct to members (Ashforth and Anand 2003, p. 6). Even unintentionally, leaders may propagate a culture void of ethical standards by supporting amoral initiatives, such as rewarding questionable practices, holding employees accountable for performance goals but not for the manner in which those goals were achieved, or implicitly condoning corrupt practices (Baucus 1994, Brief et al. 2001). Within amoral cultures organizational leaders emphasize less-than-ethical means to do business, and those with positive social exchange relationships or high in organizational identification are likely to internalize and behave consistently with this message. For instance, a charismatic leader may instill a certain level of trust and identification among his or her subordinates (Conger and Kanungo 1998), making employees less likely to question methods for carrying out work. In this way, a subordinate with positive social exchange or high identification with the organization may rationalize what appear to be seemingly authorized unethical acts as "business as usual," and such justifications may trump personal ethical values (Ashforth and Anand 2003, p. 7).

Finally, the amorality of an organizational culture is also likely to be affected by larger institutional and national environments. From an institutional level, major differences exist among industries in regulation, monitoring, and legal stipulations (Pfarrer et al. 2008). Leniency or low levels of formal sanctioning by professional associations may make amoral business decisions more economically viable and feasible (Braithwaite 1989). Leniency becomes particularly pervasive in mature industries, where time and stability facilitate dissemination of amoral practices and where industry governing bodies may themselves become part of an institutionalized system of amorality (Baucus 1994). At the national level, governmental leniency toward certain unethical practices may also foster unethical practices (Park 2003, Rodriguez et al. 2005, Uhlenbruck et al. 2006). For instance, organizations entering new markets may find themselves operating in foreign ethical domains potentially void of clear ethical standards. The lack of ethical standards may incite organizations to adopt local views toward organizational practices, which allows unethical behavior to become normative and institutionalized. In such environments, ethical concerns can be reframed as legal,

economic, or public relations issues, leaving employees who perceive strong connections to their organization via positive social exchange or organizational identification free to engage in amoral reasoning (Ashforth and Anand 2003, p. 6).

Employees with positive social exchange relationships and high organizational identification may be willing to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior within organizations with amoral cultures. For example, employees who possess positive social relationships with the organization function more openly with their employers and thus may be more likely to commit unethical acts intended to benefit their organizations or employers when cultural norms seem ambiguous. Similarly, employees who strongly identify with the organization may simply choose to conduct unethical pro-organizational behaviors given that such behavior would fit within a culture dominated by amoral norms and practices. For these reasons, we assert that amoral organizational cultures foster an environment wherein social exchange relationships and identification can facilitate unethical pro-organizational behavior through neutralization processes.

PROPOSITION 4. *Employees within amoral cultures will be more likely to engage in neutralization in response to positive social exchange relationships and organizational identification than those within ethical cultures.*

Moral Development

Kohlberg (1969) proposed that individuals vary in their moral development, the progressive cognitive development used to resolve ethical dilemmas. Kohlberg defines six stages of moral development that are embedded within the three broad hierarchical levels: preconventional level, conventional level, and principled or postconventional level. As individuals progress to higher stages over time, they are less influenced by situational factors in their ethical decision making than they are at lower stages. In addition, their cognitions regarding right and wrong go beyond a self-centered approach as they internalize broader rules of their social groups and society.

At the first level of moral development, the preconventional level, people view right and wrong as commensurate with the rewards and punishments for their behavior (stage 1) or view right and wrong as that which satisfies immediate self-interests (stage 2). At the conventional level, notions of right and wrong are based on conforming to others' expectations (stage 3) or internalizing rules from social groups (stage 4). Few reach the final stage, the principled level (Rest et al. 1999, Treviño 1986). Nonetheless, those who reach this level base thoughts of right and wrong on higher principles such as justice or virtue, while acknowledging that individuals may have different values and opinions (stage 5), or engage in abstract reasoning to decide what is right and wrong based on universal moral principles (stage 6). Research generally demonstrates that those in higher stages tend to behave more ethically than those in lower stages of moral development (e.g., Greenberg 2002, Treviño and Youngblood 1990).

For our model, we focus on whether individuals frame ethical issues by focusing on the self, social groups, or higher-order ethical principles when engaging in moral reasoning. Drawing on Kohlberg (1969), we propose that the influence of social exchange relationships and organizational identification on unethical pro-organizational behavior will be influenced by the different focus of moral reasoning for each of the three broad categories of moral development.

Individuals in the preconventional level of moral development are primarily self-interested and concentrate on acts that benefit themselves rather than those that may benefit their group or organization. Because they are self-interest driven, individuals at the preconventional stage are less likely to readily engage in neutralization processes in response to positive social exchange relationships or organizational identification. Thus, an employee in the preconventional stage may engage in self-interested unethical behaviors, such as stealing from the organization, but the motivation for these behaviors will be dominated by self-interest. These individuals are less likely to engage in unethical behaviors to benefit the organization; indeed, they may only do so when they perceive a probable benefit for themselves. Because the behavior is driven primarily by self-interest and not a motive to help the organization, preconventional individuals are unlikely to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior. Therefore, self-interest-focused unethical acts conducted by preconventional individuals are likely outside of our conceptualization of unethical pro-organizational behavior.

At the next level of moral development, the conventional level, notions of right and wrong are based on the norms or expectations of social groups. Because of the concentration on social relationships with others, individuals at the conventional level may be influenced by situational factors, such as their relationship with their organization or leader, when considering the ethicality of behavior. Those at the conventional level have greater potential than those at preconventional levels to attempt to mask the morality associated with acts intended to benefit the organization. By focusing on one's social group, those at the conventional level may view unethical acts that benefit the organization as justified and proper. Hence, individuals at the conventional stage are more likely to engage in neutralization processes in response to positive social exchange relationships and organizational identification and are thus more likely to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Finally, those at the highest level of moral development, the principled level, may engage in neutralization processes and unethical pro-organizational behavior in response to social exchange and organizational identification, similar to those at the lowest (preconventional) level of moral development. The logic differs, however, for why principled individuals fail to engage in neutralization and unethical pro-organizational behavior. Instead of a self-interested focus, those who reach the postconventional level incorporate notions of right and wrong based on justice and virtue. Individuals at this level are less likely to engage in neutralization in response to positive exchange and organizational identification because they are less likely to mask the ethicality associated with any unethical act, including acts intended to benefit the organization or its leaders. Thus those at the principled stage are less likely to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior. The above arguments suggest the following proposition.

PROPOSITION 5. *Employees in preconventional and principled levels of moral development will be less likely to engage in neutralization in response to social exchange relationships and organizational identification than are those in conventional levels of moral development.*

Emotions and Cognitive Dissonance as Potential Consequences

Employees who choose to engage in unethical pro-organizational behaviors are likely to experience different consequences after engaging in unethical acts. With the primary focus of our model on the individual, we elaborate on individual-level emotional and cognitive consequences that could result from unethical pro-organizational behaviors. We do not intend for our discussion of consequences to be exhaustive. Instead, we focus on factors that we perceive will act as consequences of unethical pro-organizational behavior and will further influence previous stages of our model. Specifically, we propose guilt and shame as possible emotional consequences and cognitive dissonance as a possible cognitive consequence of unethical pro-organizational behavior.

We rely on both emotional and cognitive consequences for our model because research suggests that both processes play a role in ethical judgment and behavior (Greene et al. 2001, 2008; Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe 2008). First, emotional consequences are important to acknowledge because of their role in highlighting morality within situations (Jones 1991). In referring to Damasio's (1994) discussion of the role of emotion in ethical behavior, Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe (2008, p. 575) note that "without emotion we would not be able to distinguish the abhorrent from the mundane; we would be operating outside of the grip of conscience." In fact,

moral dilemmas have been shown to heighten activity in regions of the brain associated with emotion (Greene et al. 2004, 2008). Second, cognitive dissonance is important to consider as a consequence because of its potential role in attitude change subsequent to performing unethical behavior (Kelman and Baron 1974, Holland et al. 2002, Tsang 2002). Kelman and Baron (1974) discuss the idea of moral dissonance, or the experience of arousal after conducting unethical activity, and propose that it is more threatening to one's sense of self than arousal created from activities without moral content. Finally, we perceive that emotion and cognitive dissonance are intriguing consequences because they are conceptually related (Wenzlaff and LePage 2000) in that cognitive dissonance is a state of psychological arousal and emotions are one indicator of arousal (Elliot and Devine 1994, Harmon-Jones 2001). Below, we elaborate on our discussion of how emotions and cognitive dissonance are possible consequences of unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Emotions

Although many different emotions have been discussed in the organizational literature, guilt and shame are the two emotions most closely linked to ethical and unethical behavior (Treviño et al. 2006). Guilt is defined as emotion-based regret arising from an individual anticipating causing, actually instigating, or being associated with a negative event (Eisenberg 2000, Ferguson and Stegge 1998). Guilt prompts individuals to internalize responsibility for behavior that violates personal standards of conduct (Eisenberg 2000, Tangney 1991). Shame involves a devaluation of the entire self, causing an individual to fear scorn and hide from others' potential condemnation (Eisenberg 2000, Tangney 1991). Although guilt and shame are similar, they are different in the focus of the emotion. Guilt is a negative reaction to a particular behavior, whereas shame is a negative reaction to the entire self and, therefore, is likely more devastating and painful than is guilt (Eisenberg 2000, Tangney 1998).

Guilt is more likely to prompt behavior change because of its focus on a particular activity or deed, whereas shame is assumed to prompt changes in self-image because it stems from a discrepancy between beliefs and idealized notions about the self (Eisenberg 2000, Tangney 1991). Evidence corroborates this notion in that guilt leads to ethical or moral behavior (Eisenberg 1986; Tangney 1991, 1995, 2002), whereas shame does not demonstrate such positive effects. The effect of guilt on behavior could be due to the association with an empathetic response toward others (Tangney 1991, 1995, 2002). Because guilt prompts positive behavioral change, it represents "the moral emotion of choice" (Tangney 2002, p. 98).

With regard to our model, we propose that guilt and shame are probable consequences of unethical pro-organizational behavior. If individuals reflect on unethical pro-organizational behavior as a violation of their personal ethical standards, they will likely experience guilt. Experiencing guilt may lead to attempts to provide restitution to potential victims of the unethical act, or at least the individual will not perform the unethical act again. However, if individuals internalize the unethical act as a departure from an idealized self, they will likely experience shame. The experience of shame will be less likely to result in behavioral change, but we nonetheless argue that shame is likely to influence individual-level reconciliatory actions, particularly when compared to situations in which unethical pro-organizational behavior yields no shame or guilt. In summary, we suggest that experiencing guilt and shame will influence behavioral change and decrease the likelihood of employees conducting future acts of unethical pro-organizational behavior.

PROPOSITION 6A. *Guilt and shame are probable consequences that result from unethical pro-organizational behavior.*

PROPOSITION 6B. *When experienced, guilt and shame serve to inhibit subsequent unethical pro-organizational behavior.*

Cognitive Dissonance

Another possible consequence of unethical pro-organizational behavior is cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory posits that people experience a state of arousal when their behavior is inconsistent with their attitudes (Festinger and Carlsmith 1957, Brehm and Cohen 1962). To reduce this state of arousal or dissonance, individuals are motivated to engage in attitude change. Previous research indicates that after behaving in a counterattitudinal manner, such as expressing a view or perception not initially endorsed, individuals will shift their perceptions to align with their behavior (Croyle and Cooper 1983, Elkin and Leippe 1986, Elliot and Devine 1994, Festinger and Carlsmith 1957, Gerard 1967, Pallak and Pittman 1972; for a review, see Cooper and Fazio 1984). In a landmark study illustrating the theory, Festinger and Carlsmith (1957) demonstrated that individuals who participated in a boring and dull experimental task reported more positive evaluations of the task after lying to an unsuspecting future participant by telling him that the experimental task was exciting and interesting. Further, the researchers found that participants who were paid $1 for lying reported higher levels of attitude change than those paid $20 for lying. Festinger and Carlsmith explained that being paid $20 provided more justification for lying to the future participant, and therefore less dissonance was experienced than when participants received only $1 for lying. These findings suggest

that higher levels of dissonance create enhanced attitude change. Similarly, research on cognitive dissonance indicates that attitude change is especially likely when individuals are able to choose to engage in behaviors, versus situations in which individuals are provided with fewer behavioral alternatives (e.g., Bem and McConnell 1970, Elkin and Leippe 1986, Pallak and Pittman 1972). That is, when individuals freely choose to engage in counterintuitive behavior, they will experience more dissonance and higher levels of attitude change than those who have less of a choice.

By definition, unethical pro-organizational behavior is neither ordered by supervisors nor included in job descriptions, which suggests that employees choose to engage in the unethical act. Having the opportunity to choose suggests that cognitive dissonance might play an important role as a consequence of unethical pro-organizational behavior. After behaving unethically, employees may feel dissonance if they perceive that they have conducted an unethical act. That is, awareness of committing an unethical act could create arousal or dissonance, and employees will likely attempt to resolve this unpleasant state of arousal.

We propose that employees may reduce arousal from cognitive dissonance in two different ways. First, employees could change their perception of the unethical pro-organizational behavior to make the behavior seem less immoral. As discussed previously, this could occur through neutralization processes in which the ethicality associated with the unethical act is removed or ignored. Once the ethicality of the unethical act is removed, arousal or dissonance will be reduced. Second, employees could change their evaluation of the organization by enhancing organizational identification or positive social exchange relationships. If employees recognize that they have behaved unethically after engaging in unethical pro-organizational behavior, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that these employees will look for a rational explanation for their behavior. When attempting to explain their behavior, employees may perceive that they behaved unethically because they strongly identify or have a strong positive social exchange relationship with the organization. Thus cognitive dissonance is a possible consequence of unethical pro-organizational behavior and could enhance positive social exchange relationships, organizational identification, or neutralization.

PROPOSITION 7A. *Cognitive dissonance is a probable consequence that may result from unethical pro-organizational behavior.*

PROPOSITION 7B. *When experienced, cognitive dissonance may serve to enhance positive social exchange relationships, organizational identification, or neutralization.*

Discussion

Daily headlines in the business and popular press attest to the overwhelming impact unethical behavior has on the business landscape. Unethical behavior erodes public trust and is costly to organizational reputations and society in general (Bullard and Resnik 193, Flandez 2008). Given the prevalence of unethical behavior within organizations, organizational scholars interested in ethics have sought to better understand the motivation for unethical actions (Finney and Lesieur 1982, Pinto et al. 2008). The theoretical model we have presented here has the potential to contribute additional insight about unethical behavior within organizations.

In an attempt to better understand how unethical behavior occurs within organizations, we moved beyond the assumption that unethical behavior is conducted exclusively with the intent to harm organizations (see also Molinsky and Margolis 2005, Scott 2003, Vardi and Weitz 2004, Vardi and Wiener 1996, Warren 2003). We also questioned the rarely challenged underlying assumption in the organizational literature that positive exchange relationships and organizational identification are related to constructive, ethical outcomes. Research examining employee–organization and employee–supervisor relationships provides ample evidence that positive social exchange and high organizational identification generally leads to beneficial outcomes (see Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Although our propositions require empirical testing to provide corroborating evidence, our theoretical rationale suggests that employees may commit unethical pro-organizational behavior under conditions most would consider ideal. Our propositions suggest that along with the myriad of positive, ethical consequences identified in previous research, positive social exchange and organizational identification could motivate employees to conduct unethical acts to benefit their organization. We further identified when these unethical acts may be likely to occur within organizations, thus enhancing our understanding of social exchange relationships, employee reciprocity, organizational identification, and neutralization processes that allow for the justification of unethical pro-organizational behaviors. We also provided logic for the emotional and cognitive consequences that employees may experience after engaging in unethical pro-organizational behavior and how such emotions and cognitions influence future perceptions and behavior toward the organization.

We argued that employees engage in neutralization processes prior to engaging in unethical pro-organizational behavior. Our logic is consistent with previous conceptualizations of neutralization and moral disengagement (Bandura 1999, Sykes and Matza 1957) that suggest that removing the ethicality associated with the unethical act fosters a greater likelihood that it will be perpetrated (Detert et al. 2008). Once the ethical implications associated with an act are lost, employees are free to engage in the unethical action without regard for the potential consequences to others.

We have argued that strong organizational identification influences employees to internalize their organization's successes and failures as their own. As such, employees may engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior to further the organization's goals—which facilitates their own goals. Further, individuals with high organizational identification may also fail to consider the ethicality of actions of organizational leaders and continue to maintain loyalty (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Future research should examine the possibility that those high in organizational identification view unethical pro-organizational behavior as actions that help themselves or their leaders as well as their organizations. Further, the primary focus of our model is on the individual employee rather than on the organization, which is why we explore the emotional (i.e., guilt and shame) and cognitive (i.e., cognitive dissonance) consequences for employees. However, unethical pro-organizational behavior may also yield important consequences for the organization, and we encourage future work to explore this possibility.

Managerial Implications

We have highlighted a potential "dark side" to social exchange and organizational identification—constructs largely considered to be beneficial to organizational functioning. To thwart unethical pro-organizational behaviors, we are not suggesting that managers and organizations should attempt to foster or maintain dysfunctional relationships with their employees. The benefits of positive social exchange relationships, in terms of increased job performance and ethical citizenship behaviors, will likely far outweigh any potentially negative consequence of unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Further, we do not believe that employers and managers should hesitate from encouraging and promoting strong organizational identification among their employees. Indeed, the majority of the literature on employee–organization attachment demonstrates the importance of organizational identification for both the organization and the employee (Ashforth and Mael 1989, Mael and Ashforth 1995, van Knippenberg et al. 2000, Wan-Huggins et al. 1998). Instead, we wish to prompt managers and organizational leaders to consider that employees who feel a strong attachment to their organization or its members might also conduct unethical behaviors to benefit them, particularly under certain conditions.

Although we did not focus explicitly on the societal effects or organizational outcomes of unethical pro-organizational behavior, managers should consider the possible consequences of such actions. Indeed, when employees conduct unethical acts to benefit their organizations, organizations likely experience the repercussions of such behaviors in the form of societal sanctions and other punitive measures (Weaver et al. 1999).

Also, managers should consider how to impose sanctions on employees who, in their attempt to be "good soldiers," cross the line to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior. Even when employees conduct unethical behavior for pro-organizational motives, managers should enforce hard-line disciplinary responses to unethical behavior infractions as a way to send powerful signals about normative expectations and to create clear ethical standards of performance. Without harsh disciplinary responses, employees' outcome expectancies for their own behavior, as well as their likelihood to alter future behavior, are likely to be relatively unaffected (Treviño and Ball 1992).

We propose that an amoral culture can be a breeding ground for unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Thus organizational leaders and managers can counteract and circumvent unethical behaviors by creating a culture in which unethical acts are not tolerated. We suggest that organizational leaders institute ethical cultures by emphasizing ethical behavior through formal systems (e.g., ethical training) and informal systems (e.g., ethical norms; Tenbrunsel et al. 2003). Thus organizations should be particularly cognizant of the rules, norms, and system structures that encourage ethical behavior. In particular, because subordinates look to their supervisor's actions when interpreting the importance of ethical behavior within organizations, managers, we believe, should be vigilant in ensuring that their own behavior meets high ethical standards (Treviño et al. 2000). Without an explicitly stated and carefully managed ethical culture, unethical behavior is more likely to occur.

Further, we suggest that managers provide clear standards for evaluating unethical behavior within organizations, such that neutralization processes are less likely to transpire in response to positive social exchange relationships and organizational identification. One way in which managers set standards for ethical behavior is through in-house ethics training forums. In such forums, ethically difficult cases are aired openly, alternatives are considered, and decisions are made around ethical standards imposed by organizational leaders. Such training programs educate employees about ethical conduct in their organization. For example, Motorola designs and delivers ethical case study training sessions to managers around the globe. Through myriad examples of both overtly unethical and ethically ambiguous behaviors, managers are taught to identify patterns of questionable behavior and mitigate unethical conduct through frequent audits (Morrison 2001). We suggest that these types of training programs decrease the possibility for the development of an amoral culture, which would reduce the expression of unethical pro-organizational behavior in response to positive social exchange relationships and organizational identification.

In sum, we encourage managers to set specific ethical performance goals along with financial performance goals and emulate the ethical performance required to reach those goals. Although these recommendations may appear applicable to many types of unethical behavior, setting specific ethical performance goals and emulating ethical performance are particularly important for mitigating unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Because employees with positive social exchange relationships or high organizational identification internalize their organization's performance goals, they are especially likely to look to their supervisors to learn ethical behavioral norms. When financial performance goals are set without clear ethical goals for performance, or supervisors emulate less-than-ethical performance, employees with positive social exchange relationships or with high organizational identification are likely to perform unethical pro-organizational behavior. Because highly attached employees are motivated to help the organization succeed, it is important for organizational leaders to behave ethically and include ethical performance as a measure of organizational success. These measures are likely to help inhibit unethical pro-organizational behaviors within organizations.

Methodological Considerations and Future Research
We encourage future empirical research to test our propositions. When measuring unethical pro-organizational behaviors, researchers will need to take a number of steps to ensure they are accurately assessing the construct of interest. It is unlikely that employees would report these unethical acts unless confidentiality or anonymity is ensured. Indeed, one of the challenges of examining unethical behaviors is the report of unethical acts because such admissions may be ill-advised from a legal perspective. Second, these are behaviors are unlikely to occur on a daily basis. As a result, the distribution of an unethical pro-organizational behavior measure would probably be skewed. As with other low base rate phenomena, researchers might attempt to normalize this distribution statistically.

Researchers could use a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques to determine the intent of the unethical behavior (i.e., to help or to harm the organization, its members, or both). As with any behavior, different individuals may engage in the same unethical act with different intentions. One employee may engage in the unethical act to help only himself or herself, whereas another employee might do so to help the organization (i.e., unethical pro-organizational behavior). Without measuring intentions, researchers cannot be sure whether an unethical action is unethical pro-organizational behavior or an unethical action performed to help himself or herself. To assess unethical pro-organizational behavior, one might ask a set of questions assessing a number of unethical acts that could potentially benefit the organization or its members, such as "I have concealed information from the public that could be damaging to my

organization." After these questions, researchers could ask open-ended questions to assess the intention of the employee, such as "Why did you engage in this behavior?" Answers to these open-ended questions could be content analyzed to determine the intent and target of the behavior. Preliminary experimental and survey research utilizing such methodology has yielded promising results (Crossley 2005).

Experience sampling methodology is another methodology that could prove useful in measuring unethical pro-organizational behavior (e.g., Hormuth 1986, Larson and Csikszentmihaly 1983). In this approach, participants are asked to carry an electronic instrument such as a pager that emits a signal at random periods during the day. When the participant hears the signal, they are asked to report their activities, thoughts, and inner states within a short questionnaire. This methodology has the potential to uncover intentions for behaviors because participants record their motivation for a particular act either before or while engaging in the action. This could allow researchers to ensure that unethical pro-organizational behaviors were conducted to benefit the organization, not the self. Additionally, we encourage future research to first conduct interviews with subject matter experts prior to gathering empirical data. Different types of unethical pro-organizational acts may be perpetuated within certain companies and industries, and subject matter experts could identify specific unethical pro-organizational behaviors performed within their organizations. This research strategy will allow researchers to focus on the unethical pro-organizational behaviors that are prevalent within specific types of organizations. Adopting this research approach may also increase the variance of an unethical pro-organizational behavior measure, allowing researchers to detect significant effects, if any are present. Finally, because of the sensitive nature of unethical pro-organizational behaviors, participants might wish to appear in a favorable light and be seen as socially desirable in their responses (Crowne and Marlow 1960). We suggest that researchers measure social desirability when collecting unethical pro-organizational behaviors in an attempt to control for these effects.

Our theoretical model has focused on predicting unethical behavior that benefits the organization, although it would be fruitful to measure unethical pro-organizational behavior along with other types of unethical acts such as those that are conducted to *harm* the organization or with solely self-interested intentions. Although we expect that unethical pro-organizational behavior is *positively* related to social exchange relationships and organizational identification, sabotage and stealing are expected to be *negatively* related to exchange relationships and organizational identification. Examining unethical pro-organizational behaviors with other types of unethical acts would demonstrate the uniqueness of the construct and allow organizational researchers and practitioners a better understanding of unethical behavior within organizations.

Finally, consistent with Treviño's (1986) interactionist model of ethical behavior, it is likely that unethical pro-organizational behavior has implications for unethical behavior beyond the individual level of analysis. Indeed, under the notion that individual characteristics and situational and social forces interact to shape decisions, future research on unethical pro-organizational behavior warrants consideration at the team, organizational, national, and even transnational levels (Aguilera et al. 2007). Extending past the cognitive and emotional reactions that are experienced by the actor engaged in unethical pro-organizational behavior activity, we highlight two broader outcomes that may prove potentially fruitful for future research on unethical pro-organizational behavior.

First, we derive the propositions in our model from the individual level of analysis, and because individuals are often nested within teams (i.e., departments, business units, formal teams; Klein et al. 1994, Kozlowski and Klein 2000), it seems logical to suggest that individual unethical pro-organizational behavior may affect team ethical behavior. As we suggested above, employees' decisions to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior are influenced by amoral cultures. Under this assumption, contagion effects are likely to emerge, and a team-level climate for unethical pro-organizational behavior may develop. This is consistent with the notion of groupthink (Janis 1972), in which cohesion within the group and the desire for unanimity places higher priority on decisions that lead to organizational benefits. Groupthink could encourage and support unethical pro-organizational behavior within teams (Sims 1992).

Second, individuals and teams are nested within organizations (Klein et al. 1994, Kozlowski and Klein 2000), suggesting that unethical pro-organizational behavior may induce organizational-level unethical activity. Just as some job perceptions create climates within a team or business unit (Liao and Rupp 2005), the implicit acceptance and enactment of unethical pro-organizational behavior at the individual level or team level may reasonably evolve into an organization-level climate for unethical pro-organizational behavior and the broader enactment of unethical behavior. A progression of unethical practices may be particularly pronounced where the emergence of grassroots-level processes (e.g., pervasive unethical pro-organizational behavior at the individual level) complements the organization's amoral culture (Kulik et al. 2008). In this case, the organization's unethical actions may then validate or normalize questionable behaviors throughout the organization such that organizational corruption becomes ubiquitous (Ashforth and Anand 2003).

Because the model of unethical pro-organizational behavior we have proposed in this paper is not meant to be exhaustive or inclusive of all levels within the organization, future research is likely to benefit by extrapolating our treatment of unethical pro-organizational behavior to broader levels of analysis, particularly at the team and organization levels. Such attempts to broaden the scope of unethical pro-organizational behavior are likely to be particularly fruitful given that models in which the influence of individual unethical behaviors becomes more organizationally widespread are less well developed or understood in extant business ethics research (see Kulik et al. 2008). Furthermore, elaborating the role of unethical pro-organizational behavior in a multilevel context is likely to address the Brass et al. (1998) call for a better understanding of the emergence of unethical behavior in organizationally embedded social networks.

Conclusion

We contribute to the organizational literature by presenting a construct, unethical pro-organizational behavior, which comprises unethical acts conducted with beneficial intentions for the organization, its members, or both. Our propositions acknowledge the possibility that the consequences of social exchange relationships and organizational identification on unethical behavior are potentially more complex than current literature suggests, and we recognize that there may be a potential dark side to positive social exchange relationships and high organizational identification. Our theoretical propositions may enable researchers to discover possible relationships among social exchange constructs, organizational identification, neutralization, and unethical pro-organizational behaviors.

Acknowledgments

Endnote

[1]We do not believe that employers should hesitate in forming positive social exchange relationships with or encouraging strong identification among their employees. Indeed, the majority of the literature on social exchange relationships demonstrates the importance of positive exchange relationships for both the organization and the employee. Rather, our intent is to acknowledge the possible negative consequences in terms of an increase in unethical pro-organizational behaviors that may stem from positive social exchange relationships.

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