

# Unethical Behavior in the Name of the Company: The Moderating Effect of Organizational Identification and Positive Reciprocity Beliefs on Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

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We examined the relationship between organizational identification and unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB)—unethical behaviors conducted by employees to potentially benefit the organization. We predicted that organizational identification would be positively related to UPB and that positive reciprocity beliefs would moderate and strengthen this relationship. The results from 2 field studies support the interaction effect and show that individuals who strongly identify with their organization are more likely to engage in UPB when they hold strong positive reciprocity beliefs. Given the nature of reciprocity, our findings may suggest that highly identified employees who hold strong reciprocity beliefs may conduct UPB with an anticipation of a future reward from their organization. Theoretical and managerial implications of our results for understanding unethical behaviors are discussed.

**Keywords:** organizational identification, reciprocity, unethical behavior, unethical pro-organizational behavior

Events leading to the accounting scandals and the collapse of billion-dollar companies at the beginning of the 21st century have forever changed the business landscape. These scandals confirm that unethical acts are being conducted and are sometimes flourishing within organizations (e.g., Frank et al., 2003). Research on unethical behavior in organizations has noted a number of reasons why employees might engage in unethical acts: to benefit themselves (e.g., Greenberg, 2002; Terpstra, Rozell, & Robinson, 1993), to retaliate against or harm the organization (e.g., Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), or to harm coworkers (e.g., Thau, Aquino, & Poortvliet, 2007).

We examine a separate form of unethical behavior: acts that seek to benefit the organization, called unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). This research contributes to the literature in two ways. First, we empirically examine a form of

unethical behavior that is often neglected in the literature. Theorists contend some unethical acts can be conducted for organizational benefit (Brief, Buttram, & Dukerich, 2001; Vardi & Weitz, 2005); yet, empirical evidence is scant. Indeed, research that has investigated beneficial unethical acts (e.g., Brief, Dukerich, & Doran, 1991) typically does not consider whether the acts were conducted to benefit the organization (cf. Froelich & Kottke, 1991). Our studies add to growing theoretical and empirical work by presenting an empirical examination of UPB. Also, by examining this type of unethical behavior and possible antecedents, our work provides insight into why employees may sometimes commit unethical behavior at work, which is of growing interest to both academics and practitioners. Thus, our work helps to narrow the science–practitioner gap (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008) within behavioral ethics.

Second, our research suggests that constructs generally thought to be productive may also encourage unethical behavior. Specifically, we examine the influence of organizational identification (an employee's sense of belonging and membership to his or her organization; Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and positive reciprocity beliefs (the degree to which individuals endorse reciprocity in exchange relationships; Eisenberger, Lynch, Aselage, & Rohdieck, 2004). Theorists acknowledge that organizational identification may promote unethical acts (Dukerich, Kramer, & Parks, 1998). Using logic from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), we argue that individuals may engage in UPB if they have strong organizational identification and positive reciprocity beliefs. We describe below the theoretical bases for our predictions and two field studies testing our predictions.

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## UPB

Following theoretical work in behavioral ethics (Brief et al., 2001; Vardi & Weitz, 2005), we argue that individuals may engage in UPB to help the organization in some way. UPB includes two main definitional components. First, UPB is *unethical behavior*, or acts that are “either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community” (Jones, 1991, p. 367). UPB includes acts of commission (e.g., “cooking” numbers to boost analyst projections and stock values) and omission (e.g., withholding information about the hazards of a pharmaceutical product) that are considered unethical by larger society. Second, UPB is *pro-organizational behavior* neither specified in formal job descriptions nor ordered by superiors, yet is carried out to benefit or help the organization (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986).

Consistent with theoretical work (Vardi & Weitz, 2005), our focus on unethical behavior intended to benefit the organization may extend beyond the hostile and self-focused views of unethical behavior. It is possible that individuals may perceive that benefiting the organization also benefits themselves. As such, our conception of UPB is not divorced from self-interested views of unethical behavior. UPB differs from work-related actions involving errors, mistakes, or unconscious negligence, as employees may engage in unethical behavior without a specific aim to benefit or harm. Only unethical acts that are conducted, in part, to benefit the organization would constitute UPB. Although employees may try to help organizations by engaging in UPB, the final result of their actions may deviate from their intentions and may ultimately cause harm (e.g., destroying incriminating documents to protect the organization may heighten external auditors' suspicions and prompt fines or more negative consequences). Thus, UPB may ultimately produce unbeneficial and even destructive outcomes. Outcomes of unethical actions are important and are explored in empirical (e.g., Weaver, Treviño, & Cochran, 1999), theoretical (e.g., Velasquez, 1996), and practitioner-focused (e.g., Weaver, 2004) research. In our conceptualization of UPB, we focus on the pro-organizational nature of the act, regardless of the ultimate consequences (Sackett, 2002).

## Theoretical Development

In the current study, we consider the effects of two potential motivators for UPB: organizational identification and positive reciprocity beliefs. Whereas research suggests these constructs produce beneficial outcomes, we suggest that they may also influence unethical behavior and, specifically, UPB. Drawing from their respective literatures, we elaborate on these assertions below.

### Organizational Identification and UPB

According to social identity theory, part of an individual's self-concept is derived from his or her membership within social groups, resulting in salient social identities (Tajfel, 1982). Organizational identification is one social classification; individuals who strongly identify with their organization internalize the organization's successes and failures as their own (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). As organizational identification strengthens, employees adhere to and behave in ways that are consistent with organizational norms and values (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Research suggests that

the strength of employees' organizational identification influences productive work behavior, such as increased extra-role behaviors and job performance and decreased turnover intentions (Mael & Ashforth, 1995; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2000; Wanhuggins, Riordan, & Griffeth, 1998).

Some theorists contend that individuals who strongly identify with their organization may choose to disregard personal moral standards and engage in acts that favor the organization, possibly even at the expense of those outside it (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Given this possibility, we propose that those who strongly identify with their organization may engage in UPB. In a sense, strong organizational identification may compel employees to disregard ethical standards (e.g., personal values, norms, and cognitive processes) in favor of behaviors that ostensibly aid the organization.

We draw from theoretical work on the dark side of organizational identification (Dukerich et al., 1998). Strong identification may influence “illegal or unethical acts that have been sanctioned by the organization both obliquely and intentionally” (Dukerich et al., 1998, p. 253) and may cause employees to “look away when faced with evidence of [illegal or unethical] activities and try to protect the organization, perhaps even covering up” such behaviors (Dukerich et al., 1998, p. 253). Similarly, we propose that employees who strongly identify with their organization will be more likely to report a willingness to engage in UPB.

*Hypothesis 1:* Organizational identification is positively related to UPB.

According to social identity theory, organizational identification provides the social context for how people behave (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Employees regulate their behavior to satisfy their positive association and membership with their organization (Hogg et al., 1995), and they behave in ways intended to maintain or enhance the positive self-image of being affiliated with their organization. A key to understanding employees' behavior, then, is identifying factors that may further influence self-regulatory abilities. We believe understanding the influence of positive reciprocity beliefs can shed light on why individuals may be more likely to engage in UPB when they hold a strong sense of organizational identification, and we elaborate on these thoughts below.

### The Moderating Effects of Positive Reciprocity Beliefs

Social exchange theory proposes that quality relationships develop through the exchange of resources between two parties (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). This principle is based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), which states that individuals generate obligations to return beneficial behavior to an organization with which they feel a strong membership (see Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, for a review). Reciprocity norms provide standards of behavior between employees and organizations; nevertheless, they do not in and of themselves determine that interactions will occur in a *quid pro quo* fashion.

Research suggests that individuals differ in the degree to which they endorse reciprocity in exchange relationships (cf. Clark & Mills, 1979), a term called positive reciprocity beliefs. Individuals who hold strong reciprocity beliefs consistently demonstrate reciprocal exchange behaviors. That is, individuals who hold strong positive reciprocity beliefs feel more obligated to reciprocate ben-

official behavior to other exchange partners—such as their employing organization (Eisenberger et al., 2004). Strong positive reciprocity beliefs prompt employees to act in ways intended to maximize long-term gains for the exchange partner (e.g., enhanced cooperative behavior: Perugini & Gallucci, 2001; Perugini, Gallucci, Presaghi, & Ercolani, 2003; emotional engagement: Eisenberger et al., 2004; felt obligation: Eisenberger et al., 2004; citizenship behavior: Witt, 1991; performance: Orpen, 1994). Those who do not strongly endorse positive reciprocity beliefs feel little, if any, obligation to reciprocate behavior, regardless of what they have received from their exchange partner. Thus, positive reciprocity beliefs strengthen the likelihood of behaviors that intend to benefit the organization, particularly when employees feel a strong membership to that organization.

We suggest strong positive reciprocity beliefs will influence individuals' willingness to conduct UPB when they strongly identify with their organization. Employees who strongly identify with their organization feel obligated to protect and maintain their membership in the organization (Hogg et al., 1995), and this effect will intensify if they hold strong positive reciprocity beliefs (Eisenberger et al., 2004).

*Hypothesis 2:* The positive relationship between organization identification and UPB is stronger when perceived reciprocity beliefs are high versus low.

We conducted two studies to test our predictions. Study 1 was conducted on a cross-sectional sample of working adults from multiple industries. In Study 2, we also assessed the predictions on a sample of working adults from multiple industries, but we did so at two points of time and with additional variables that controlled for potential alternative explanations of the findings.

## Study 1

### Method

**Sample and procedure.** Surveys were distributed to individuals randomly selected and called for jury duty by a southeastern U.S. county circuit court. At the beginning of the day before jurors were called to court, we explained the nature of our study. Interested participants picked up and returned completed surveys to us. Over the course of 4 weeks, 224 individuals (32.2%) participated. Participants' average age was 43.4 years ( $SD = 11.94$ ), the average company tenure was 8.51 years ( $SD = 8.33$ ), and the average tenure with the respondents' immediate supervisor was 4.35 years ( $SD = 4.62$ ). Approximately 68.6% were White, 17.7% were Black, and 8.8% were Hispanic; 55.9% were women; and 59.2% were in nonmanagement positions.

#### Measures.

**Dependent variable.** UPB was assessed with a six-item measure developed for this study. Items assessed respondents' agreement of their willingness to perform UPB on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). To construct the scale, we generated seven items on the basis of interviews with a sample of employed executive MBA students, who described everyday unethical actions benefiting the organization that either they performed or observed. Three additional samples provide evidence for the measure's validity. First, we used

responses from 516 undergraduate business students from a large U.S. southwest university (61% were employed; 87% had work experience, with an average of 1.51 years of experience; 56% were men; the average age was 22.3 years) to conduct a factor item analysis. The sample was restricted to 477 (92% response rate) individuals who provided complete data for our study's variables. An exploratory factor analysis revealed one unacceptably low loading ("I would do whatever it takes to help my organization"). This item added little incremental variance to the measure and was dropped. A composite measure of the remaining six items was formed. The six items in the exploratory factor analysis yielded one distinct factor ( $\lambda > 1.0$ ), accounting for 66.9% of the common variance; the six items' loadings exceeded .5 (see Table 1). The measure's reliability ( $\alpha = .89$ ) exceeded psychometric standards ( $\alpha > .70$ ).

Second, we examined the measure's discriminant validity on a sample of 352 senior-level undergraduate business students from a large U.S. western university (72% were employed; 87% had work experience, with an average of 1.5 years of experience; 79% were men; the average age was 23.4 years). The sample was restricted to the 277 (79% response rate) individuals who provided complete data for our study's variables. Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics and correlations. Using confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) with LISREL 8.80 maximum likelihood estimation (MLE; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996), we assessed the distinctiveness of the six-item UPB measure ( $\alpha = .90$ ) from three other measures of ethical and extra-role behaviors: (a) Lee and Allen's (2002) six-item in-role behavior measure ( $\alpha = .94$ ), (b) Williams and Anderson's (1991) individual organizational citizenship behavior (OCB-I) six-item measure ( $\alpha = .87$ ), and (c) Lee and Allen's (2002) six-item OCB-organization (OCB-O) measure ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Fit was assessed with the root-mean-square error of approximation

Table 1

*Preliminary Evidence Sample 1: Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior Items and Factor Loadings*

Item	Factor loading
If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good.	.88
If it would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company's products or services to customers and clients.	.87
If it would benefit my organization, I would withhold negative information about my company or its products from customers and clients.	.84
If my organization needed me to, I would give a good recommendation on the behalf of an incompetent employee in the hope that the person will become another organization's problem instead of my own.	.81
If my organization needed me to, I would withhold issuing a refund to a customer or client accidentally overcharged.	.78
If needed, I would conceal information from the public that could be damaging to my organization.	.66
I would do whatever it takes to help my organization. <sup>a</sup>	.31

Note.  $N = 477$ .

<sup>a</sup> Item dropped.

Table 2  
Preliminary Evidence Sample 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Unethical pro-organizational behavior	2.13	0.88	(.90)			
2. In-role behavior	6.48	0.49	-.12	(.94)		
3. OCB-I	5.80	0.78	-.04	.23	(.87)	
4. OCB-O	5.80	0.89	.06	.20	.40	(.91)

*Note.*  $N = 277$ . Cronbach alphas are in parentheses on the diagonal. Correlations greater than |.12| are significant at  $p < .05$ , and those greater than |.20| are significant at  $p < .01$ , two-tailed. For all items, respondents indicated their agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). OCB-I = individual organizational citizenship behavior; OCB-O = organization-focused citizenship behavior.

and the comparative fit index (Bentler & Bonnett, 1990). The results of comparative model tests indicate that the four-factor model containing in-role behavior, OCB-I, OCB-O, and UPB latent factors provided the best fit to the data (see Table 3).

Third, we further examined the distinctiveness of UPB relative to other forms of unethical behavior using a sample of 400 employed individuals (with an average age of 39.8 years; in their professions for an average of 10.3 years; an average organizational tenure of 9.6 years; 57.8% were men) who were recruited through StudyResponse.com—an online data collection service that allows researchers to advertise their studies to adult participants. The sample was restricted to 357 (89% response rate) individuals who provided complete data for our study's variables. Table 4 provides the descriptive statistics and correlations. CFA comparative model tests of our UPB measure with Bennett and Robinson's (2000) seven-item interpersonal deviance and 12-item organizational deviance measures indicated that the three-factor model containing UPB, interpersonal deviance, and organizational deviance latent factors provided the best fit to the data (see Table 5). Overall, the results of these studies help to provide preliminary evidence of construct validity for our UPB measure.

**Predictor variables.** *Organizational identification* was assessed with Mael and Ashforth's (1992) six-item measure (e.g., "My organization's successes are my successes"). *Positive reciprocity* was assessed with Eisenberger et al.'s (2004) 10-item measure (e.g., "When someone does something for me, I often find myself thinking about what I have done for them"). For both

predictor variables, respondents rated their agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

**Control variables.** We controlled for *social desirability* because research suggests impression management bias may occur when individuals answer sensitive questions (e.g., UPB). We used an 18-item short version of Paulhus's (1991) measure, using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Also, previous research has shown that demographic characteristics may influence unethical behaviors. As such, we controlled for *tenure with the supervisor* (in years), the average *time spent with the supervisor each day* (see Erdogan & Liden, 2002, for a review), *age* (in years; Kohlberg, 1981), and *job position* (0 = nonmanagement, 1 = management; Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001).

## Results

**Descriptive statistics and correlations.** Table 6 shows the variables' means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations. We note the mean for UPB was low ( $M = 1.34$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ), suggesting that UPB could be a low base rate behavior, similar to other measures of unethical behavior.

**Measurement model results.** We conducted a CFA using LISREL 8.80 MLE to evaluate the variables' distinctness. The measurement model consisted of items for three latent variables (organizational identification, positive reciprocity, and UPB), and the results show that the model provided a good fit to the data (see Table 7; Bollen, 1989). We compared and found the three-factor

Table 3  
Preliminary Evidence Sample 2: Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Measurement Models for Ethical Extra-Role Behaviors

Model	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	RMSEA	RMSEA confidence interval
One-factor (all items combined)	3,956.13	209	3,517.80 <sup>a</sup>	18.93	.28	.26	[.25, .26]
Two-factor (OCB-I, OCB-O, and UPB)	3,046.02	208	2,607.69 <sup>a</sup>	14.64	.45	.22	[.22, .23]
Three-factor (OCB-O and UPB)	2,013.20	206	1,574.87 <sup>a</sup>	9.77	.65	.18	[.17, .19]
Three-factor (OCB-I and UPB)	1,210.96	206	772.63 <sup>a</sup>	5.88	.81	.13	[.13, .14]
Four-factor	438.33	203		2.16	.96	.07	[.06, .07]

*Note.*  $N = 277$ . All chi-square values are significant at  $p < .05$ . The four-factor model is the hypothesized model of all latent variables (unethical pro-organizational behavior [UPB], individual organizational citizenship behavior [OCB-I], organization-focused citizenship behavior [OCB-O], and in-role behavior). The three-factor models constrain the two most highly correlated—and theoretically viable—latent variables (i.e., OCB-I and OCB-O) with UPB. The two-factor model constrains OCB-I, OCB-O, and UPB to a single variable. The one-factor model constrains OCB-I, OCB-O, in-role behavior, and UPB to a single latent variable. Thus, all alternative three-factor, two-factor, and one-factor models are subsets of (i.e., nested within) the four-factor target model. In all cases, the four-factor model produced a superior fit to the data than alternative models. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation.

<sup>a</sup> Chi-square change significant at  $p < .001$ .



Table 4  
*Preliminary Evidence Sample 3: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Unethical pro-organizational behavior	3.40	1.28	(.91)		
2. Organizational deviance	1.77	0.75	.41	(.95)	
3. Interpersonal deviance	1.74	0.82	.40	.84	(.93)

*Note.*  $N = 357$ . Cronbach alphas are in parentheses on the diagonal. Correlations greater than  $|\text{.40}|$  are significant at  $p < .01$ , two-tailed. For all items, respondents indicated their agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

model to be a better fit to the data than the alternative models (Schumacker & Lomax, 1996).

**Hypothesis testing.** We conducted moderated multiple regression analyses to assess the study's hypothesized relationships. To address the potential for multicollinearity, we mean-centered the predictor variables. The results in Table 8 do not provide support for Hypothesis 1, as organizational identification was not significantly related to UPB. The results provide support for Hypothesis 2, as the Organizational Identification  $\times$  Positive Reciprocity Beliefs interaction was significantly related to UPB. Figure 1 shows the organizational identification–UPB relationship for employees' positive reciprocity beliefs one standard deviation above the mean (i.e., strong positive reciprocity beliefs) and one standard deviation below the mean (i.e., weak positive reciprocity beliefs; J. Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). We further examined this effect with simple slope analyses (J. Cohen et al., 2003) and found that the organizational identification–UPB relationship was strengthened when positive reciprocity beliefs were high ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $t = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ) rather than low ( $\beta = -.06$ ,  $t = -0.60$ , *ns*).

## Discussion

Study 1 did not provide support for our prediction that organizational identification was positively related to UPB. Yet, we did find support for our interaction hypothesis: Organizational Identification  $\times$  Positive Reciprocity predicted UPB. The relationship between organizational identification and UPB was positive and significant when individuals held strong positive reciprocity beliefs; however, this effect was not significant for weak positive reciprocity beliefs. The results support our prediction that Strong

Organizational Identification  $\times$  Positive Reciprocity Beliefs increases UPB.

One tenet of the UPB construct is that this behavior is conducted to benefit the organization. It is possible that the Study 1 participants reported they would engage in UPB for self-interested reasons and not to benefit the organization, as we proposed. Further, we note two limitations with Study 1's design. First, the data were collected at one time from one source, which suggests the results may have been influenced by common method bias. Second, the UPB measure used in Study 1 assessed willingness to engage in UPB rather than reports of actual unethical behavior in which employees had engaged. Therefore, we conducted a second study to replicate the findings in Study 1 while controlling for measures of self-interest, using a measure of engaged UPB, and measuring the predictor variables and UPB at different points in time.

## Study 2

### Method

**Sample and procedure.** We recruited 400 employed individuals with the assistance of StudyResponse.com (an online data collection service that allows researchers to advertise their studies to adult participants) for a survey study at two points in time (4 weeks apart). We restricted our data sample to 148 individuals (37% response rate) who provided complete data for our variables of interest in this study at both survey time periods. On average, participants were 40.0 years of age, were in their professions approximately 8.8 years, and were employed in their

Table 5  
*Preliminary Evidence Sample 3: Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Measurement Models for Unethical Behaviors*

Model	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\chi^2/\text{df}$	CFI	RMSEA	RMSEA confidence interval
One-factor (all items combined)	3,303.32	275	2,045.97 <sup>a</sup>	12.01	.93	.18	[.17, .18]
Two-factor (UPB and interpersonal deviance)	3,050.81	274	1,793.46 <sup>a</sup>	11.13	.94	.17	[.16, .17]
Two-factor (UPB and organizational deviance)	3,003.38	274	1,746.03 <sup>a</sup>	10.96	.94	.17	[.16, .17]
Two-factor (interpersonal and organizational deviance)	1,592.17	274	334.82 <sup>a</sup>	5.81	.97	.12	[.11, .12]
Three-factor	1,257.35	272		4.62	.97	.10	[.09, .10]

*Note.*  $N = 357$ . All chi-square values are significant at  $p < .05$ . The three-factor model is the hypothesized model of all latent variables (unethical pro-organizational behavior [UPB], organizational deviance, and interpersonal deviance). One of the two-factor models constrains the remaining variables to the same latent variable (i.e., interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance combined). The other two-factor models separately constrain the two latent variables with UPB. The one-factor model constrains UPB, interpersonal, and organizational deviance to a single latent variable. All alternative two-factor and one-factor models are subsets of (i.e., nested within) the three-factor target model. In all cases, the three-factor model produced a superior fit to the data than alternative models. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation.

<sup>a</sup> Chi-square change significant at  $p < .001$ .

Table 6  
Study 1 Summary Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Organizational identification	4.69	1.68	(.92)							
2. Positive reciprocity	4.77	1.28	.15	(.88)						
3. Unethical pro-organizational behavior (willingness to engage)	1.34	1.57	.06	.01	(.88)					
4. Position (0 = nonmanagement)	0.32	0.47	.19	.02	-.04	—				
5. Tenure with supervisor	4.35	4.62	.12	.01	.05	.05	—			
6. Time spent with supervisor	3.37	6.06	.01	.05	-.07	-.02	.04	—		
7. Social desirability	2.58	0.58	-.20	.03	.19	-.05	-.09	-.03	(.77)	
8. Age (years)	43.40	11.94	.01	-.14	-.04	.00	.37	-.12	-.23	—

Note. *N* = 224. Cronbach alphas are in parentheses on the diagonal. Correlations greater than |.14| are significant at  $p < .05$ , and those greater than |.19| are significant at  $p < .01$ , two-tailed.

organizations approximately 7.1 years; 53.9% were men. Participants were from a variety of occupations (e.g., administrative support [ $n = 17$ ], accounting/financial [ $n = 13$ ], technology [e.g., web design,  $n = 10$ ], and health/safety [ $n = 14$ ]). The Time 1 survey included organizational identification, positive reciprocity beliefs, and some control variables. The Time 2 survey included UPB and other controls.

#### Measures.

**Dependent variable.** We adapted the UPB measure from Study 1, and we asked respondents to rate their agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) on engaged (vs. willingness to engage) UPB.

**Predictor variables.** Organizational identification and positive reciprocity were assessed with the same measures as in Study 1.

**Control variables.** We used the same controls as Study 1: social desirability, age (in years), tenure with the supervisor (in years), average time spent with the supervisor each day, and job position. As explained above, self-interest may pose a bias, and so we controlled for career self-interest via Collins's (2006) six-item measure using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Further, because employees might choose to engage in UPB because of their positive evaluation of their job rather than their identification with the organization, we controlled for job satisfaction via Edwards and Rothbard's (1999) three-item

measure using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

## Results

**Descriptive statistics and correlations.** Table 9 shows the variables' means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations. Similar to Study 1, the mean for UPB in Study 2 was low ( $M = 1.69$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ). Also, the reliability for social desirability was .64—below the .70 standard (Nunnally, 1978).

**Measurement model results.** We applied CFA using LISREL 8.80 MLE to evaluate the distinctness of the variables. As with Study 1, the three-factor measurement model provided a good fit to the data (see Table 10) (Bollen, 1989). We compared and found the three-factor model to be a better fit to the data than the alternative models (Schumacker & Lomax, 1996).

**Hypothesis testing.** Moderated multiple regression was used to test the hypotheses. As with Study 1, the predictors were mean-centered prior to creating the interaction term. Consistent with Study 1, the results in Table 11 do not provide support for Hypothesis 1, as organizational identification was not significantly related to UPB. The Organizational Identification  $\times$  Positive Reciprocity interaction was significant, supporting Hypothesis 2. Figure 2 shows the organizational identification–UPB relationship for

Table 7  
Study 1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Model	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	RMSEA	RMSEA confidence interval
One-factor (all items combined)	2,919.26	209	2,412.20 <sup>a</sup>	13.97	.59	.27	[.26, .27]
Two-factor (positive reciprocity and identification)	2,306.45	208	1,799.39 <sup>a</sup>	11.09	.73	.23	[.22, .24]
Two-factor (UPB and identification)	2,132.59	208	1,625.53 <sup>a</sup>	10.25	.73	.22	[.22, .23]
Two-factor (UPB and positive reciprocity)	1,347.23	208	840.17 <sup>a</sup>	6.48	.79	.17	[.16, .18]
Three-factor	507.06	206		2.46	.93	.08	[.07, .09]

Note. *N* = 224. All chi-square values are significant at  $p < .05$ . The three-factor model is the hypothesized model of all latent variables (unethical pro-organizational behavior [UPB], organizational identification, and positive reciprocity). One of the two-factor models constrains UPB and positive reciprocity, another two-factor model constrains UPB and identification, and the final two-factor model constrains positive reciprocity and identification to the same latent variable. The one-factor model constrains UPB, positive reciprocity, and organizational identification to a single latent variable. All alternative two-factor and one-factor models are subsets of (i.e., nested within) the three-factor target model. In all cases, the three-factor model produced a superior fit to the data than alternative models. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation.

<sup>a</sup> Chi-square change significant at  $p < .001$ .

Table 8  
Study 1 Multiple Regressions of Hypothesized Relationships

Variable	Willingness to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior								
	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
Control variables									
Position (0 = nonmanagement)	−0.05	0.12	−.03	−0.07	0.13	−.04	−0.07	0.12	−.04
Tenure with supervisor	0.02	0.01	.11	0.02	0.01	.10	0.02	0.01	.11
Time spent with supervisor	−0.01	0.01	−.08	−0.01	0.01	−.08	−0.01	0.01	−.07
Social desirability	0.28**	0.10	.21**	0.29**	0.11	.22**	0.31**	0.10	.23**
Age (years)	0.00	0.01	.03	0.00	0.01	.10	0.00	0.01	.04
Predictor variables									
Organizational identification				0.03	0.04	.05	0.03	0.04	.06
Positive reciprocity				0.03	0.05	.05	0.05	0.05	.08
Moderator variable									
Organizational Identification $\times$ Positive Reciprocity							0.05*	0.02	.17*
<i>F</i>	2.14			1.68			2.17*		
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.06			.06			.09		
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.03			.03			.05		
$\Delta R^2$				.01			.03*		

Note. Statistical significance is based on a two-tailed test. We tested and interpreted hypotheses using unstandardized regression coefficients.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

employees' positive reciprocity beliefs one standard deviation above the mean (i.e., strong positive reciprocity beliefs) and one standard deviation below the mean (i.e., weak positive reciprocity beliefs; J. Cohen et al., 2003). As with Study 1, simple slopes analyses show that the slope for strong positive reciprocity beliefs was significant ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $t = 2.33$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and the slope for weak positive reciprocity beliefs was not significant ( $\beta = -.01$ ,  $t = -0.09$ ,  $ns$ ).

## Discussion

Results from Study 2 are consistent with the findings from Study 1. Organizational identification was not significantly and directly related to UPB. This suggests that organizational identi-

fication alone does not provide enough impetus for UPB. However, we again found support for the Organizational Identification  $\times$  Positive Reciprocity Beliefs interaction. Individuals who hold a strong organizational identification and strong positive reciprocity beliefs were more likely to engage in UPB. It is important to note that the predictions in Study 2 were also tested using the willingness to engage in UPB measure (the measure used in Study 1), and the results did not differ from those presented in the Results section for Study 2 (results available upon request). We reported the results of engaged UPB to address the potential limitation that the measure used in Study 1 (willingness to engage in UPB) might have somehow explained the nonsignificant effects of organizational identification on UPB. The consistent effects of both measures of UPB (willingness to engage in and actual engaged UPB) in Study 2 and the results found in Study 1 help to provide further evidence of the robustness of the interaction effect of Organizational Identification  $\times$  Positive Reciprocity Beliefs.

## General Discussion

We examined an often-neglected form of unethical behavior within the organizational literature—unethical behavior intended to benefit the organization or its members, called UPB. Using a survey approach, we empirically explored whether employees' organizational identification was positively related to UPB and whether positive reciprocity beliefs moderated the relationship between organizational identification and UPB. Our two studies produced consistent findings.

In both of our studies, organizational identification was not significantly related to UPB. This finding was unexpected. Our studies suggest that strong organizational identification (or overidentification) alone may not drive employees to help the organization in unethical ways, as suggested by previous theorists (Dukerich et al., 1998). However, arguments made by Aguinis (2004)

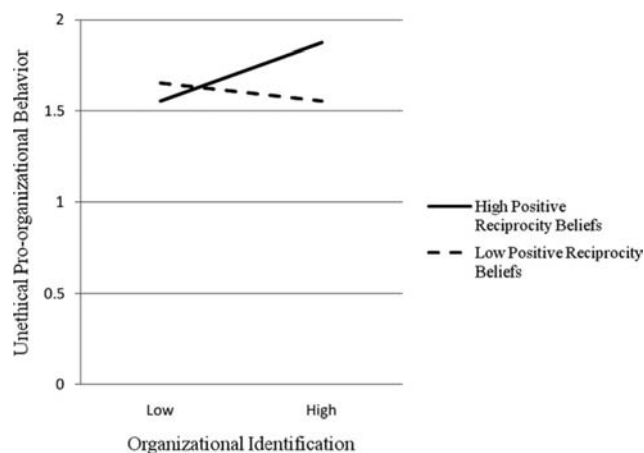


Figure 1. Study 1: Organizational Identification  $\times$  Positive Reciprocity interaction for unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Table 9  
Study 2 Summary Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Organizational identification	4.80	1.37	(.92)									
2. Positive reciprocity	5.17	0.96	.22	(.88)								
3. Unethical pro-organizational behavior	1.69	0.67	.31	.03	(.91)							
4. Position (0 = nonmanagement)	0.49	0.50	.42	-.02	.44	—						
5. Tenure with supervisor	3.81	4.18	.11	-.06	.03	.08	—					
6. Time spent with supervisor	3.08	3.55	.14	-.01	.17	.03	.27	—				
7. Career self-interest	3.24	0.87	.33	.14	.34	.13	-.04	.17	(.93)			
8. Job satisfaction	4.91	1.51	.60	.02	.17	.26	.04	.12	.29	(.95)		
9. Social desirability	4.00	0.42	.04	-.08	.38	.27	-.03	-.05	.12	.14	(.64)	
10. Age (years)	40.00	10.21	.02	-.15	-.17	.09	.26	-.09	-.22	.04	-.12	—

Note. *N* = 148. Cronbach alphas are in parentheses on the diagonal. Correlations greater than |.17| are significant at *p* < .05, and those greater than |.22| are significant at *p* < .01, two-tailed.

may help to explain and empirically account for the nonsignificant effect. Figures 1 and 2 show that the moderating effect is positive for high values of positive reciprocity beliefs and negative for low values of positive reciprocity beliefs. Aguinis noted that the first-order effect of a main effect relationship (organizational identification on UPB) “can be considered an average effect of this relationship” (pp. 35–36) across values of the moderator—positive reciprocity beliefs. The presence of the interaction implies that this average was computed using heterogeneous values (i.e., positive values for high reciprocity beliefs and negative values for low positive reciprocity beliefs). Thus, in computing the average, negative and positive values (i.e., first-order effect of organizational identification) lead to a value that is not statistically different from zero.

The Organizational Identification × Positive Reciprocity Beliefs interaction was significantly related to UPB in both of our studies. Researchers argue replicating interaction effects is not only a rarity but a difficult task (e.g., Aguinis, 2002; Aguinis, Beaty, Boik, & Pierce, 2005). The replication of the interaction over our two studies suggests that the interaction is robust. Participants reported higher levels of willingness to engage (Study 1) and having engaged (Study 2) in UPB when they held strong organizational identification and positive reciprocity beliefs. The results suggest organizational identification provides a strong so-

cial context in which individuals who endorse positive reciprocity principles feel motivated to help their organization through UPB.

### Implications

Our studies provide important implications for future research. First, extant work has done little to empirically examine UPB (cf. Froelich & Kottke, 1991). Some theoretical work (Brief et al., 2001; Vardi & Weitz, 2005) suggests that employees may engage in unethical acts to benefit their organizations. Our research extends this work and provides empirical evidence of UPB and its antecedents. Future research is needed to further understand the inherent complexities of UPB. Along these lines, we encourage researchers to pay careful attention to employees’ behavioral intentions (i.e., to harm, to help, and/or to solely self-benefit) and to explore other antecedents and potential consequences.

Second, our studies suggest that constructs often considered constructive (i.e., organizational identification and positive reciprocity beliefs) can influence unethical behavior. Research shows the beneficial effects of organizational identification; as employees reflect on their organizational membership, they may engage in positive (and ethical) behavior (Mael & Ashforth, 1995; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2000; Wanhuggins et al., 1998). Similarly, research suggests that positive reciprocity beliefs influ-

Table 10  
Study 2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Model	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	RMSEA	RMSEA confidence interval
One-factor (all items combined)	2,528.08	209	1,040.61 <sup>a</sup>	12.10	.36	.27	[.26, .28]
Two-factor (UPB and positive reciprocity)	1,487.47	208	433.06 <sup>a</sup>	7.15	.65	.20	[.19, .21]
Two-factor (positive reciprocity and identification)	1,197.44	208	859.74 <sup>a</sup>	5.76	.82	.18	[.17, .19]
Two-factor (UPB and identification)	1,054.41	208	716.71 <sup>a</sup>	5.07	.77	.16	[.15, .17]
Three-factor	337.70	206		1.64	.96	.06	[.05, .07]

Note. *N* = 148. All chi-square values are significant at *p* < .05. The three-factor model is the hypothesized model of all latent variables (unethical pro-organizational behavior [UPB], organizational identification, and positive reciprocity). One of the two-factor models constrains UPB and identification, another two-factor model constrains positive reciprocity and identification, and the final two-factor model constrains UPB and positive reciprocity to the same latent variable. The one-factor model constrains UPB, positive reciprocity, and organizational identification to a single latent variable. All alternative two-factor and one-factor models are subsets of (i.e., nested within) the three-factor target model. In all cases, the three-factor model produced a superior fit to the data than alternative models. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation.

<sup>a</sup> Chi-square change significant at *p* < .001.



Table 11  
Study 2 Multiple Regressions of Hypothesized Relationships

Variable	Unethical pro-organizational behavior								
	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
Control variables									
Position (0 = nonmanagement)	0.26**	0.07	.30**	0.21**	0.07	.25**	0.22**	0.07	.25**
Tenure with supervisor	−0.00	0.01	.00	0.00	0.01	−.01	0.00	0.01	−.01
Time spent with supervisor	0.01	0.00	.13	0.01	0.00	.12	0.01	0.00	.13
Social desirability	0.67**	0.16	.29**	0.70**	0.17	.31**	0.72**	0.16	.31**
Age (years)	−0.01	0.01	−.09	−0.01	0.01	−.08	−0.01	0.01	−.01
Career self-interest	0.25**	0.08	.23**	0.22**	0.08	.21**	0.24**	0.08	.22**
Job satisfaction	−0.01	0.05	−.01	−0.06	0.06	−.09	−0.08	0.06	−.13
Predictor variables									
Organizational identification				0.12	0.07	.17	0.10	0.07	.14
Positive reciprocity				−0.02	0.07	−.02	−0.02	0.07	−.02
Moderator variable									
Organizational Identification × Positive Reciprocity							0.10*	0.05	.15*
<i>F</i>	9.92**			8.11**			7.89**		
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.32			.34			.36		
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.29			.30			.31		
$\Delta R^2$				.01			.02*		

Note. Statistical significance is based on a two-tailed test. We tested and interpreted hypotheses using unstandardized regression coefficients.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

ence positive (and ethical) behavior (Perugini & Gallucci, 2001; Perugini et al., 2003) as individuals strive to maintain quality social exchange relations. Our results suggest that the combination of organizational identification and positive reciprocity beliefs influences unethical behavior. These results provide some support for prior theoretical work on the dark side of organizational identification (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Dukerich et al., 1998) but suggest that strong organizational identification alone does not predict unethical behavior. Employees engage in UPB in an attempt to protect or otherwise benefit their employer when employees feel strong organizational identification and strongly endorse positive reciprocity beliefs. Given the nature of reciprocity (i.e., quid pro quo propensities), our results imply that individuals high in organizational identification may believe the organization will

reciprocate with benefits in the future. Further research is needed to dissect the nature of reciprocity beliefs in terms of exchange relations and unethical behavior.

Concurrently, our results may reflect an overriding organizational culture that promotes unethical behavior. That is, if employees believe that they will be rewarded for engaging in unethical behavior, they will likely do so. These arguments are supported by social learning theory (Bandura, 1991)—people understand what is considered acceptable work behavior (even unethical behavior) by watching salient role models (i.e., supervisors, coworkers, peers) and through personal experience. Employees who see others being rewarded for unethical acts may see these behaviors as appropriate and engage in similar behaviors. Employees who were previously rewarded for unethical behavior will be more likely to do so again in the future. Combining this rewards-culture with employees with strong organizational identification and positive reciprocity beliefs may increase the likelihood of UPB and other forms of unethical behavior. Future research should examine this possibility.

We also note that the Organizational Identification × Positive Reciprocity Beliefs interaction has practical significance for both management and society (Aguinis et al., 2009). First, our study provides evidence of UPB. Generally, research and the popular press concentrate on more malevolent and malicious unethical acts, exemplified in high-profile corporate scandals. Less attention is given to unethical behaviors that are intended to help the organization (even if these behaviors may also help the actor). Consequently, it is possible that organizational decision makers give little attention to monitoring such acts or addressing them and their possibility in human resource development efforts (e.g., orientation, training, mentoring). Understanding that such behavior can exist in organizations is a necessary first step to heightening awareness of and diminishing them. Second, for practitioners,

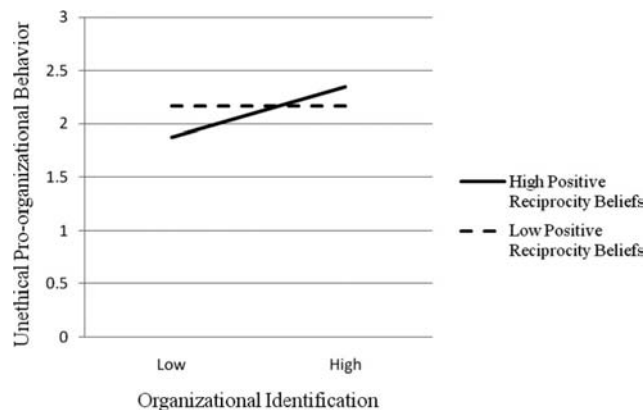


Figure 2. Study 2: Organizational Identification × Positive Reciprocity interaction for unethical pro-organizational behavior.

understanding what motivates employees to engage in unethical acts is important for reducing and eliminating them. Although our findings suggest that organizational identification may be an important precursor to UPB when positive reciprocity beliefs are high, we do not believe that employers should refrain from encouraging and promoting these beliefs among their employees. Indeed, the majority of the literature on employee–organization attachment demonstrates the importance of organizational identification and positive reciprocity beliefs for both the organization and employee (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Perugini & Gallucci, 2001; Perugini et al., 2003). Still, managers should be cautioned that strong organizational identification combined with strong positive reciprocity beliefs may promote UPB. This could lead to a problematic situation for managers because those employees who are likely to exhibit high performance in other arenas might also engage in UPB. As noted above, managers should be careful to form a culture that encourages ethical behavior by ensuring that their own behavior corresponds to ethical standards and reward only ethical behavior for their employees.

Because organizational identification and positive reciprocity may influence unethical behavior, managers also should be aware of the critical role of formal and informal systems in encouraging ethical behavior (such as leadership, policies, reward systems, norms, and language; Treviño, 1990). In particular, research suggests that employees look to supervisors when interpreting the importance of ethical behavior within organizations (D. V. Cohen, 1993; Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). Our results may be interpreted to suggest that some employees may be inclined to justify their unethical actions by appealing to the principle of higher loyalty—employees may believe they are just doing what the organization wants them to do (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Such appeals to higher loyalties may be even more likely if employees believe that their supervisors engage in similar unethical acts. Thus, it is possible for leaders who support and uphold ethical conduct to reduce the likelihood of UPB and other types of unethical behavior.

## Limitations

Our studies are not without limitations. For instance, in Study 1, we assessed employees' willingness to engage in UPB rather than actual reported UPB. However, in Study 2, we used a behavioral measure of UPB and found support for our interaction. Also, in both of our studies, we tested our predictions with employed individuals who worked in varying industries and jobs, suggesting that our findings are likely to generalize to different employment situations. Although the interaction effect was significant, the effect size associated with it was relatively modest in both studies. This suggests that other factors influence UPB, and we encourage future research to further investigate other potential motivators.

Further, it is possible that common method variance was a biasing problem in our studies because we used survey methodology to test our predictions. Study 2's design largely addresses this issue; the study's variables were assessed at two points in time, reducing the possibility of common method variance. Also, although some research suggests that common method variance does not pose a significant biasing problem (Spector, 1987), we followed protocol outlined in Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Pod-

sakoff's (2003) study and examined our studies' measurement models against a directly measured latent methods factor. The measurement model produced a significant improvement in fit to the latent method factor model, suggesting that common method variance did not substantially bias the effects. Further, Podsakoff et al. recommended integrating nonstatistical techniques for reducing the potential of common method variance. In both of our studies, we followed this advice and assured participants of confidentiality and told them that there were no right or wrong answers.

Another potential limitation of our studies is the use of self-report to assess UPB. We believe that self-reports were appropriate because supervisors or coworkers might not have had the insight necessary to assess the focal employee's intention for unethical behavior. Nevertheless, asking sensitive questions (like UPB) may enhance social desirability bias, particularly when employees believe that their employer may see their responses (Greenberg & Folger, 1988). Social desirability effects were likely reduced given our data collection venues (jury assembly and Internet-based response panel) and because there was no possibility of negative consequences from respondents' employers. Additionally, we addressed these biases methodologically by controlling for social desirability in our analyses.

Our measure of UPB includes both acts of omission (i.e., conceal information from the public that could be damaging to my organization) and commission (i.e., misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good). The consequences of both types of unethical actions have the potential to cause damage to organizational stakeholders and the larger society. However, unethical acts of commission are generally perceived as more heinous than acts of omission. Future research should examine whether our findings hold with both types of unethical acts.

Although our measures of UPB focused on acts intended to benefit the organization, it is possible that those individuals who have strong organizational identification and who are high in positive reciprocity see UPB as a tool for self-gain. Our predictions were supported while controlling for career self-interest in Study 2, but future research should examine whether organizational identification influences employees' interpretation of UPB. It may be that individuals with high organizational identification and positive reciprocity beliefs are less likely to consider the morality (i.e., moral awareness) of unethical actions that benefit their organization (Rest, 1986). If individuals fail to consider the ethical content of UPB, then moral reasoning is less likely to occur, and individuals may feel free to engage in these unethical acts.

## Conclusion

Our work provides an empirical investigation of unethical behavior intended to benefit the organization (UPB) and demonstrates the potentially destructive effects of combining strong organizational identification and positive reciprocity beliefs. Previous research suggests that these variables positively influence behaviors that are important and valuable for organizational functioning (Mael & Ashforth, 1995; Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2000; Wanhuggins et al., 1998). Substantiating the dark side of organizational identification (Dukerich et al., 1998), we found that organizational identification can encourage UPB when employees also hold strong positive reci-

procity beliefs. In so doing, we maintain that decision makers should be aware of the potential unethical consequences of these often constructive variables.

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