

# Impact of employee pro-organizational unethical behavior on performance evaluation rated by supervisor: a moderated mediation model of supervisor bottom-line mentality

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The topic of employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) has attracted more and more interest in both practice and academic fields. However, previous studies have mainly investigated the antecedents of UPB and little research has discussed the outcome variables. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effect mechanism of UPB on employee performance evaluation rated by a supervisor through a leader-member exchange (LMX) and the moderating role of supervisor bottom-line mentality (BLM).

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study used a sample consisting of 304 employees and 96 supervisors in several manufacturing firms in China. The authors used hierarchical linear modeling to test the hypotheses, as this was cross-level research. In addition, this paper also uses Mplus7.4 to test the moderating effects of supervisor BLM on the indirect effects between the UPB and performance evaluation by a moderated path analysis.

**Findings** – The results confirm that UPB is positively related to performance evaluation rated by supervisors. Additionally, the mediating effect of LMX in the relationship between UPB and performance evaluation is successfully demonstrated. Furthermore, supervisor BLM cross-levelly moderates the relationship between UPB and LMX, as well as moderates the mediation effect of LMX on the correlation between UPB and performance evaluation.

**Research limitations/implications** – The primary contribution of this research is building a cross-level model for the effect of UPB on followers' performance evaluation scored by the supervisor and thereby extending the nomological networks of both UPB and performance evaluation literature. Another contribution the study makes to the literature is that it provides a new perspective to understand how UPB relates to followers' performance evaluation.



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**Originality/value** – This is the first study about how and when UPB predicts followers' performance evaluation rated by the supervisor.

**Keywords** Performance evaluation, Leader-member exchange, Unethical pro-organizational behavior, Supervisor bottom-line mentality

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Business scandals and unethical behaviors in the workplace have been widely reported in recent decades. Scholars have conducted research focusing on workplace unethical behavior due to its universality and serious consequences for commercial society (Moore and Gino, 2015; Treviño *et al.*, 2014). Especially, an emerging stream of research has begun to systematically theorize and investigate unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). The term UPB refers to “actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization but violate ethical norms, values or standards of proper employee conduct” (Umphress and Bingham, 2011, p. 622). Examples of UPB involve lying to customers to sell a perishable product, bribing government officers and falsifying data in documents.

Literature review results have demonstrated that most studies on UPB focus on its antecedents (Chen *et al.*, 2016; Miao *et al.*, 2013; Umphress *et al.*, 2010). For example, a large number of empirical studies have shown that the individual traits (such as organizational identification, bottom-line mentality, job insecurity, job embeddedness, psychological entitlement and workplace spirituality), leadership (abusive supervision, relational leadership, responsible leadership and ethical leadership) and organizational situations (high-performance work systems and ethical climate) can trigger individual's UPB under certain conditions (Wang *et al.*, 2019; Ghosh, 2017; Kong, 2016; Cheng *et al.*, 2019; Dou *et al.*, 2019; Mesdaghinia *et al.*, 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2019; Kalshoven *et al.*, 2016; Matherne and Litchfield, 2012). However, in general, previous studies have primarily focused their attention on the antecedents of UPB and limited attention has been given to the consequences of UPB. Although some studies theoretically pointed out the negative effects of UPB such as harming the interests of the public and damaging the reputation of the organization (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Hosain, 2019), they have not sufficiently considered the potential positive impacts of UPB on employees who engage in them (Xia *et al.*, 2020). In terms of its “pro-organizational” nature, UPB can benefit the organization in the short term (Umphress *et al.*, 2010) such as avoiding the negative press. These short-term benefits might encourage the organization to reward or provide promotion opportunities for individuals who engage in UPB, which results in “giving a plum in return for a peach.” Therefore, investigating the positive consequences of UPB will help to explain why UPB is so prevalent among employees from another perspective and this is exactly what some scholars have been calling for (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Fehr *et al.*, 2019; Xia *et al.*, 2020).

In management practice, employee performance generally focuses on input or output criteria and is of great concern for both the individuals and organizations (Vilela *et al.*, 2008). For individuals, performance appraisal matters relating to performance evaluation results largely depend on its connections with tangible benefits such as pay, bonus, training opportunities, promotion, retention and status in the organization (Mehra *et al.*, 2001). For organizations, the long-term competitive advantage of the organization also depends on the continuous improvement of the performance of its members. Existing literature shows that both UPB and performance appraisal research implies the concept of “win-win” between organizations and employees and both have similarities in theoretical frameworks and

research perspectives. However, there is no research to explore the relationship between the two variables. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of UPB on employee performance evaluation. Besides that, the present study explores the influence mechanism of UPB on performance evaluation. As an unethical behavior, the existence of UPB does not conform to ethical standards, but why is it that the employees who engage in UPB under a normal operating organization system may obtain benefits? The “leader-member exchange” embedded in the theory of social exchange may provide an explanation (Emerson, 1976). The theory suggests that the social exchange between leaders and subordinates consists of bidirectional transactions in which supervisors provide exchange resources to employees (e.g. information, support, rewards), which are then reciprocated by the employees (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). UPB not only improves organizational short-term performance but also brings benefits to leaders (Umphress *et al.*, 2010; Mesdaghinia *et al.*, 2019). When the leaders in the organization perceive the goodwill of their subordinates, they will treat them as an “in-group” and establish a good relationship with them and then return employees who engage in UPB by providing better performance evaluation results. Furthermore, the present study also explores the moderating variables that affect the relationship between UPB and LMX. The reciprocal rules of social exchange theory suggest that individuals’ attitudes, personalities and preferences can have a bearing on their reciprocal decisions in social exchange relationships (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Accordingly, supervisors with different personal characteristics would treat the UPB of their subordinates differently. Bottom-line mentality (BLM) refers to one-dimensional thinking focus on any priority that is considered the most important at the expense of other priorities (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2012). Supervisors with high levels of BLM tends to bend the ethical norms or rules to do whatever is necessary to help achieve bottom-line results while ignoring the deleterious consequence such an unethical approach might have on individual and organizational outcomes, thereby strengthening the reciprocal impact of UPB on LMX and vice versa. Hence, we infer that the supervisor’s BLM could be the boundary conditions between UPB and LMX.

The present study makes three main contributions to the existing literature. First, the paper contributes to the existing literature by investigating the consequences of UPB. This is important because Chinese traditional culture and leadership make UPB very popular in organizations (Xue and Zan, 2012; Zhang, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is of great significance to conduct empirical research on UPB under the Chinese context. Second, this study advances the UPB literature by demonstrating whether and how UPB affects performance evaluation. In doing so, the present research enriches the nomological network of UPB by exploring its reciprocal effects on performance evaluation. Finally, this paper examines the moderating effect of contextual factors (i.e. supervisor bottom-line mentality), which helps to understand the conditions and processes that attenuate or strengthen the impact of UPB on performance evaluation.

## 2. Theoretical foundation and hypotheses

### 2.1 *Unethical pro-organizational behavior*

Umphress and Bingham (2011) define UPB as “actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members and violate core societal values, rules, laws or standards of proper conduct” (p. 622). This definition consists of two main components. First, UPB is unethical behavior that violates the widely held standards of ethical behavior measured by-laws, norms and values. The second component of this definition is associated with the intent behind the unethical behavior. UPB only focuses on unethical behavior with the intent of benefitting the organization, its members or both.

In their excellent work, [Umphress and Bingham \(2011\)](#) also identified three boundary conditions when certain actions cannot be considered as UPB. First, unethical behaviors that are conducted without specific intention to benefit or harm should not be regarded as UPB. Second, the authors recognized the situations where individuals conduct UPB with the intent of benefitting the organizations, but the result of such behavior may not result in any form of organizational benefit. In this case, unethical behaviors should not fall into the UPB category. Finally, unethical behaviors conducted with self-interested motives should not be seen as UPB.

## *2.2 The relationship between unethical pro-organizational behavior and performance evaluation*

Most empirical studies that focus on the consequence of UPB have indicated that UPB may cause unbeneficial and even destructive harm to organizations or members ([Umphress et al., 2010](#); [Umphress and Bingham, 2011](#)). At the individual level, UPB could induce employees to generate negative emotions such as guilt and shame ([Umphress and Bingham, 2011](#); [Tang et al., 2020](#)), which may further lead to employees' emotional exhaustion. For the organization, UPB could bring organizational short-term benefits, damage corporate reputations and lead to the breakdown of the relationship between organizations and stakeholders, resulting in a crisis of public confidence and an increase in enterprise costs ([Umphress et al., 2010](#); [Hosain, 2019](#)).

However, previous empirical research mainly investigated the consequences of UPB by focusing on its unethical component. Some scholars noted that UPB that could benefit the organizations originally should not be ignored and called researchers to explore the potential positive impact of UPB ([Tang et al., 2020](#); [Xia et al., 2020](#); [Fehr et al., 2019](#)). In terms of the pro-organizational aspect, UPB can be regarded as a supportive behavior directed at the leader, which contributes to the achievement of the personal success of the leader. In addition, given that it is conducted for the benefit of the organization, it is expected that leaders will be happy to perceive the loyalty and identification of their subordinates. Employees who demonstrate high levels of UPB will definitely benefit from the process of making leaders happy ([Miao et al., 2013](#)), which could be explained using social exchange theory.

According to social exchange theory, employees have interpersonal exchange with their supervisors that characterized by reciprocity ([Emerson, 1976](#)). The theory suggests that in interpersonal interactions between supervisors and employees, when one party provides the other with exchange resources for another party, the other party will follow reciprocity norms and return the favor in a certain way. In line with social exchange theory, once the pro-organizational motivation and intention behind UPB are recognized, the leader will perceive the loyalty and identification of the subordinates, thus giving them more resources or support. As a global judgment of what the employee brings to the work setting, general performance evaluations are well-defined, codified and routinized by supervisors in modern organizations ([Howell et al., 2015](#)). Besides, at the individual level, matters relating to performance evaluation results largely depend on its connections with tangible benefits; such as pay, bonus, training opportunities, promotion, retention and status in the organization ([Mehra et al., 2001](#)). Thus, a link between UPB and supervisor reciprocation through performance evaluations has been tentatively established. Based on the above analysis, this study predicts that supervisors will view their subordinate's UPB as a valuable exchange resource that will need to be reciprocated and proposes the following hypothesis:

H1. UPB is positively related to individual performance evaluation rated by the supervisor.

### *2.3 The mediation effect of leader-member exchange*

Under the influence of Confucian traditional culture, the relationship between supervisor and subordinate in the Chinese context is an important issue that has attracted the attention of organizational practitioners and scholars. Liden *et al.* (1997) proposed that the core premise of LMX is that different types of relationships develop between leaders and subordinates within workgroups. In their conception, low LMX relationships were defined as “those that are limited to the exchanges that take place according to the employment contract” (p. 48), which are labeled as out-group exchanges (Dansereau *et al.*, 1975). High LMX relationships are said to include “the exchange of material and non-material goods that extend beyond what is specified in formal job descriptions” (p. 48), which are regarded as in-group exchanges (Liden and Graen, 1980).

Social exchange theory theorists point out that in social interaction between leaders and subordinates, supervisors would develop high-quality relationships with employees who have done beneficial things for them according to reciprocal norms (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). As a kind of pro-organizational behavior, the pro-organizational nature of UPB helps individuals to establish high-quality exchange relationships with their leaders. More specifically, the reason why UPB is positively related to LMX developmental process can be explained from the following two aspects.

First, UPB serves the benefit of the organization, supervisors or both originally. Especially unethical pro-leader behavior (UPLB), as an extension of UPB, is an unethical action on behalf of the leader (Johnson and Umphress, 2019), which is helpful to achieve the personal success of the leader (Mesdaghinia *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, from the perspective of achieving the goal, UPB and UPLB could be perceived as supportive behaviors, which are then reciprocated by supervisors. Previous studies have shown that people would establish high-quality LMX relationships to meet certain needs (Liden *et al.*, 1997). The UPB made by employees can represent a good image to the leader and encourage the leader to develop high-quality LMX relationships with subordinates who engage in UPB to obtain continuous benefit exchange.

Second, UPB is unethical actions that make subordinates violate social values, ethics, standards and norms for the benefit of organizations or members. Then, unethical behaviors that break ethical norms are widely believed to bring a certain moral risk to subordinates, causing them to sacrifice their own moral image. It is expected that these actions of sacrificing personal interests or images for the benefit of organizations or leaders will convey a positive signal that subordinates who engaged in UPB are extremely loyal to their leaders. Once the signal is captured by leaders, they are more likely to develop high-quality LMX relationships with them (Liden and Graen, 1980). In light of the above discussion, it is assumed that subordinates exhibiting high levels of UPB are more likely to develop high-quality LMX relationships with their supervisors and the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. UPB is positively related to LMX.

Meanwhile, the impact of the relationship between leaders and subordinates on performance appraisals of employees has gradually attracted attention. Some empirical studies have proved that LMX was an important variable for predicting performance ratings of employees (Deluga and Perry, 1991; Tepper and Taylor, 2003; Kamdar *et al.*, 2006). In Chinese enterprises, especially under the influence of the organizational culture oriented by

humanism, the results of performance ratings of employees largely depend on their supervisors. Then, the relationship between employees and leaders often affects the management decisions made by leaders. Furthermore, according to leader-member exchange theory, within work units, leaders will treat subordinates in a differential way and label them “in-group” and “out-group” exchanges consciously and unconsciously. In the case of “in-group” exchanges, subordinates exhibiting high-quality LMX are more likely to be trusted and liked by their supervisors, thus receiving more emotional support and material resources from their leaders (Scandura and Graen, 1984). Therefore, employees who are labeled as “in-group” exchanges by their leaders can obtain more scarce resources in the work units such as better performance evaluation results scored by supervisors. In summary, this article proposes that the pro-organizational component of UPB makes it easier for employees who exhibit a high level of UPB to establish high-quality LMX relationships with leaders. To repay this reciprocal relationship, leaders would give them more resources and support in the workplace and of course, a better performance evaluation result is included. Therefore, this present study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H3.* LMX plays a mediating role in the relationship between UPB and performance evaluation.

#### *2.4 The moderating effect of supervisor bottom-line mentality*

In addition to providing support for the indirect effect of UPB on performance appraisals of employees via LMX, social exchange theory suggests that individual-difference characteristics may play a moderating role (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). The theory suggests that character and temperament, as well as situational contingencies, may influence an individuals’ attitude toward cooperation or noncooperative alternates (Wischniewski *et al.*, 2009). Accordingly, as a party in the social exchange relationship, supervisors’ own attitudes, personalities and preferences could influence his or her perception of employees’ actions and decisions for reciprocal behavior.

In considering how supervisors respond to the performance ratings of employees who engage in UPB, we focus on supervisors’ own self-reported bottom-line mentality (BLM), which refers to “one-dimensional thinking that resolves around securing bottom-line outcomes to the neglect of competing priorities” (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2012, p. 344). In today’s highly competitive business environment, leaders, particularly frontline supervisors, often take bottom-line goals as a way of motivating employees (Babalola *et al.*, 2020). For example, supervisors usually encourage employees to get high scores in customer satisfaction ratings, to produce a certain number of goods and to bill a certain number of hours because these performance metrics could help the organization to achieve financial success (Bonner *et al.*, 2017; Babalola *et al.*, 2020).

Supervisors’ BLM can be measured both from the employees’ perceptions of their supervisors’ BLM and supervisors’ self-ratings and these two phenomena are interrelated. However, we argue that supervisors’ behavior should be most impacted by their actual BLM (i.e. self-rated), whereas employees’ behavior should be most impacted by their perceptions of their supervisors’ BLM (Fehr *et al.*, 2019). When supervisors self-report high levels of BLM, they are indicating that bottom-line results are the only worthwhile goal, irrespective of whether the means and methods to achieve the goals may break the ethical norms or standards (Mesdaghinia *et al.*, 2019; Mawritz *et al.*, 2017; Bonner *et al.*, 2017). Due to the prioritization of bottom-line goals over ethical norms, high-BLM supervisors are likely to focus on the positive implications of UPB for the organization and, consequently, develop high-quality LMX relationships with employees who engage in UPB. For example, a



supervisor who sees an employee concealing product defects from customers to sell goods may focus primarily on the positive impacts of an employee's actions for the organization and not on the unethical nature of those actions. Conversely, supervisors who self-report low levels of BLM are indicating that they view employee morality and performance results equally. For these supervisors, outcomes related to bottom-line goals should be fully considered and the means through which outcomes are achieved should also be considered. Therefore, given that subordinate's UPB may cause great harm to the organization's reputation and legal standing in the long run (Miao *et al.*, 2013), supervisors with low BLM were more likely to criticize and even punish subordinates for their UPB rather than develop high-quality LMX with them. Based on the above analysis, this study predicts that the impact of UPB on LMX might vary with the level of supervisor BLM and proposes the following hypothesis:

- H4. Supervisor BLM plays a positive moderating role in the relationship between UPB and LMX. In the case of high-BLM supervisors, the relationship between UPB and LMX is stronger.

2.5 Moderated mediation effect

Combining H3 and H4, we further infer that the mediating effect of LMX may also be influenced by BLM. Specifically, when supervisors exhibit high levels of BLM, UPB can more promote LMX, which is easier to obtain better performance evaluation results. On the contrary, in the case of low-BLM supervisors, UPB has less impact on LMX, so the impact of UPB on performance evaluation is less transferred through LMX. Based on the above analysis, this study predicts that supervisor' BLM could moderate the mediation effect of LMX on the impact of UPB on employee performance evaluation rated by the supervisor and proposes the following hypothesis:

- H5. Supervisor BLM positively moderates the mediation effect of LMX on the relationship between UPB and employee performance evaluation. The higher the BLM of a supervisor is, the stronger the indirect effect of UPB on performance evaluation through LMX.

Therefore, the conceptual model in this study is shown in Figure 1.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and procedure

Participants in the present study were full-time employees working in five manufacturing enterprises located in Nanjing, Wuhan and Guangzhou in China. The research team first contacted the senior management or the head of the human resources department of the company in advance to inform the content, purpose and method of the present research in

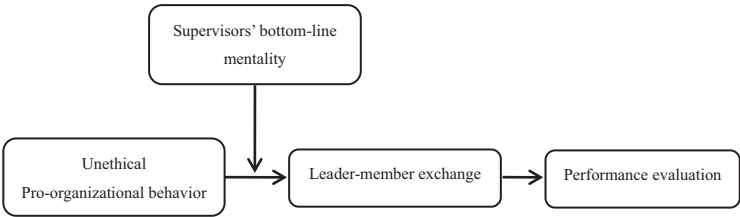


Figure 1.  
Conceptual model

detail. If the organization agreed to be surveyed, they were asked to provide a list of employees and their group leaders. This list, coding by researchers, provided conditions for collecting one-to-many matching data from leaders and subordinates. On the day of the formal investigation, HR managers informed the leaders and employees participating in the survey of the survey's purpose and invited them to complete the survey. More specifically, two variables (UPB and LMX) were based on a survey completed by the individuals according to their true feelings. In addition, supervisors were asked to rate every subordinate's performance and completed the questionnaire of BLM based on their own situation, which was intended to reduce the likelihood of common method variance.

After eliminating some invalid and unmatched questionnaires, a total of 308 employees supervised by 98 group leaders constituted the sample of this study. After deleting the group data with less than three subordinates, the final sample included 304 employees and their 96 group leaders. Of the 304 respondents, the proportion of women in our sample was 64.1%. About 55.6% of participants were between 21 and 30 years old. Only 20.4% of them had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. The average tenure was 4.56 years and the standard deviation was 3.767. Overall, the sample structure of the current study was reasonable.

### 3.2 Measures

**3.2.1 Independent variable: unethical pro-organizational behavior.** UPB was assessed using a six-item scale developed by [Umphress et al. \(2010\)](#). Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they engaged in UPB using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Typical items included "If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good" and "If it would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company's products or services to customers and clients." In this study, Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.807.

**3.2.2 Dependent variable: performance evaluation.** Performance evaluation was measured using a three-item scale developed by [Howell et al. \(2015\)](#). Supervisors were asked to rate the performance of their immediate subordinates using the seven-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). Sample items included "This employee is outstanding" and "This employee is one of the best members of my unit." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.903.

**3.2.3 Mediator variable: leader-member exchange.** LMX was measured using a seven-item scale adapted by [Scandura and Graen \(1984\)](#). Respondents were asked to rate the LMX between them and the direct supervisor using the seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Typical items included "I feel that my immediate supervisor understands my problems and needs" and "I feel that my immediate supervisor recognizes my potential." In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.913.

**3.2.4 Moderator variable: bottom-line mentality.** BLM was measured using a four-item scale developed by [Greenbaum et al. \(2012\)](#). Supervisors were asked to rate the extent of their BLM using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample items included "I only focus on bottom-line results" and "I treat the bottom line as more important than anything else." In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.804.

**3.2.5 Control variables.** According to previous research, individual demographic characteristics were shown to influence the results of performance evaluation rated by supervisors ([Howell et al., 2015](#)). So, in the current study, we controlled for the effects of demographic characteristics. Gender was controlled using a dummy variable (0 = female and 1 = male). Age and education levels were measured using dichotomous variables. The following categories were used to measure age: 1 = [16–20], 2 = [21–30], 3 = [31–40] and 4 =



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[41–50]. To measure education level, the following categories were used: 1 = “elementary school,” 2 = “junior high school,” 3 = “high school” and 4 = “college and above.” In addition, as the data collected from three different cities, two dummy variables (City1, City2) were used to control the effect of different cities on analysis results.

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3.3 Analysis techniques

The theoretical model in this study was a cross-level nested model. Therefore, HLM7.0 was used to test hypotheses by establishing several multi-level linear models. Before testing hypotheses, it was necessary to establish null models to explore whether the variances between groups were significant. The results of two null models with performance evaluation and LMX as dependent variables, respectively, showed that the ICC (1) of the two variables were 11.3% and 15.6%, respectively, suggesting that the variance between groups was significant, which was appropriate for hypothesis testing. According to the recommendation of Hofmann and Gavin (1998), we chose to scale the level-1 variables grand-mean-centered when testing the main effect and mediating effect and group-mean centered for testing cross-level moderating effect. To assess the moderated mediation, we followed Bauer et al.’s (2006) method.

4. Data analysis and results

4.1 Confirmatory factor analysis

Mplus 7.4 was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the discriminant validity of the three individual-level constructs used in this research. The results of CFA are presented in Table 1. According to Harman’s recommendations, by comparing the goodness-of-fit indices, the results showed that the one-factor model was significantly worse than the three-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 1,037.317, p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that the CMV existing in this research was not a threat to the findings of this study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Furthermore, a comparison of goodness-of-fit indices showed that a two-factor model in which scales measured LMX and performance evaluation were loaded onto a single factor was also significantly worse than a three-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 550.787, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that the three-factor model fitted the data best ( $RMSEA = 0.078; TLI = 0.937; CFI = 0.947; SRMR = 0.048$ ).

4.2 Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviation, reliabilities and inter-correlations among the study variables are shown in Table 2. As expected, UPB was positively related to LMX( $r = 0.221, p < 0.001$ ) and performance evaluation ( $r = 0.231, p < 0.001$ ). LMX was positively correlated with performance evaluation ( $r = 0.374, p < 0.001$ ).

Table 1.  
Results of  
confirmatory factor  
analysis

Models	$\chi^2$	df	SRMR	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Three-factor model: UPB, LMX, PE	239.528	101	0.048	0.937	0.947	0.078
Two-factor model: UPB, LMX+PE	790.315	103	0.101	0.694	0.737	0.158
One-factor model: UPB+LMX+PE	1276.845	104	0.156	0.482	0.551	0.202

Notes: Level-1,  $n = 304$ . UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior, LMX = leader-member exchange, PE = performance evaluation; “+” represents two factors that are loaded onto a single factor

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Model of supervisor bottom-line mentality
1.Gender	1									
2.Age	0.020	1								
3.Education	-0.149*	-0.065	1							
4.Tenure	-0.015	0.136*	0.087	1						
5.City 1	0.037	-0.074	0.062	0.007	1					
6.City 2	0.046	-0.031	0.024	-0.038	-0.028	1				
7.UPB	-0.028	-0.064	-0.072	-0.077	0.056	-0.127*	(0.807)			
8.LMX	-0.024	0.080	-0.114*	-0.091	-0.067	-0.076	0.221***	(0.913)		
9.PE	0.020	0.104	-0.007	0.003	0.071	-0.085	0.231***	0.374***	(0.903)	
Mean	0.64	2.45	2.32	4.56	0.184	0.324	2.877	3.667	3.766	
SD	0.480	0.720	1.114	3.767	0.388	0.468	0.708	1.263	1.530	

**Notes:** Level-1,  $n = 304$ . UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior, LMX = leader-member exchange, PE = performance evaluation. Reliabilities are mentioned in parentheses on the diagonal. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , two-tailed test

### 4.3 Test of hypotheses

**4.3.1 Main effect and mediating effect test.** We performed multi-level linear regression analysis in HLM7.0 by entering the control variables, the independent variable (UPB), mediator variable (LMX) and moderator variable (BLM) on separate steps to test the hypotheses. Table 3 showed the results of hierarchical regression analysis. *H1* proposed that UPB was positively related to performance evaluation. In model 2, the independent variable, UPB, was found to be significantly related to performance evaluation ( $\beta = 0.477$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), therefore, supporting *H1*. According to model 5, UPB was entered into the regression for LMX and it was found to be positively related to LMX ( $\beta = 0.382$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), so *H2* was supported. In model 3, the regression coefficient of UPB on performance

Variables	Performance evaluation (M1–M3)			M4(null)	LMX (M4–M7)		M7
	M1(null)	M2	M3		M5	M6	
Intercept( $\gamma_{00}$ )	3.760***	3.760***	3.758***	3.672***	3.672***	3.674***	3.681***
<i>Individual-level</i>							
Gender		0.053	0.090		-0.212	-0.212	-0.237
Age		0.286	0.201		0.152	0.152	0.144
Education		0.010	0.044		-0.074	-0.075	-0.108
Tenure		-0.014	-0.002		0.009	0.009	0.011
City 1		0.263	0.385		-0.128	-0.129	-0.124
City 2		-0.155	-0.060		-0.257	-0.257	-0.225
UPB		0.477***	0.321**		0.382**	0.385**	0.347**
LMX			0.426***				
<i>Team-level</i>							
BLM						0.064	0.069
UPB×BLM							0.203*
Pseudo $R^2$		0.074	0.125		0.159	0.160	0.152

**Table 3.** Hierarchical linear regression analysis results

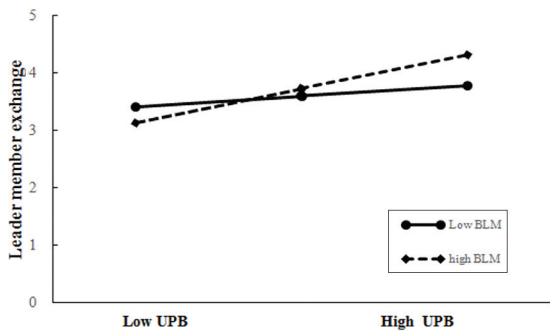
**Notes:** Level-1,  $n = 304$ ; Level-2,  $n = 96$ . UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior, LMX = leader member exchange, PE = performance evaluation, BLM = bottom-line mentality \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , two-tailed test

evaluation was still significant ( $\beta = 0.321, p < 0.01$ ) when controlling for LMX. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), LMX was found to partially mediate the influence of UPB on performance evaluation ( $\beta = 0.426, p < 0.001$ ). In addition, we also test the mediating role of LMX by using bootstrapping analysis and the results also showed that the indirect effect of UPB on performance evaluation (indirect effect= 0.162, 95% bias-corrected, CI [0.089, 0.253]) was significant. As a result, LMX partially mediated the relationship between UPB and performance evaluation, supporting *H3*.

*4.3.2 Cross-level moderating effect test.* *H4* proposed that supervisor bottom-line mentality (BLM) had a cross-level moderating effect on the relationship between UPB and LMX. The regression results for the moderating effect of BLM are presented in Table 3. As shown in model 7, supervisor BLM had a significant positive impact on the random slope of UPB and LMX ( $\beta = 0.203, p < 0.05$ ). To interpret the interaction effect, we conducted simple slope analysis according to Aiken and West's (1991) recommendation. We defined high and low BLM as one standard deviation above and below the mean. The plot was presented in Figure 2. Consistently, the relationship between UPB and LMX was stronger for supervisors with high BLM (simple slope = 0.670,  $p < 0.05$ ) than for those with low BLM (simple slope = 0.094, *n.s.*). Therefore, *H4* was supported.

*4.3.3 Moderated mediation effect test.* *H5* predicted that supervisor BLM would moderate the indirect effect of employee UPB on performance evaluation through LMX. To test this hypothesis, we examined the indirect relationship of UPB on performance evaluation through LMX at higher (+1 SD) and lower levels (−1 SD) of supervisor BLM using Bauer *et al.*'s (2006) method. As presented in Table 4, results indicated that the conditional indirect effect for UPB via LMX on performance evaluation was 0.407 ( $SE = 0.153$ , 95% CI [0.107, 0.708]) when supervisors BLM was high versus −0.100

**Figure 2.**  
The moderating  
effect of supervisor  
bottom-line mentality  
on the relationship  
between UPB and  
LMX



Moderator	Effect	SE	Boot LL CI	Boot UL CI
UPB → LMX → PE				
High BLM	0.407	0.153	0.107	0.708
Low BLM	−0.100	0.139	−0.374	0.173
Differences	0.508	0.243	0.031	0.985

**Table 4.**  
Results of moderated  
mediation model test

**Notes:** Level-1,  $n = 304$ ; Level-2,  $n = 96$ . UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior, LMX = leader member exchange, PE = performance evaluation, BLM = bottom-line mentality; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit

( $SE = 0.139$ , 95% CI  $[-0.374, 0.173]$ ) when it was low. The effect of the difference between the two conditions was 0.508 with a 95% CI of  $[0.031, 0.985]$ , which did not include 0. Thus,  $H5$  was supported, indicating that when supervisors exhibit high levels of BLM, subordinate UPB had a stronger relation to performance evaluation rated by the supervisor via LMX.

## 5. Discussion

Based on social exchange, the main purpose of this article was to gain a better understanding of the role played by the UPB of individuals in improving the performance evaluation rated by supervisors. Consistent with our research hypotheses, we found that there was a significantly positive relationship between UPB and performance evaluation and that relationship was mediated by LMX. In addition, supervisor BLM positively moderated the relationship between UPB and LMX. The higher a supervisor's BLM is, the stronger the influence of UPB on LMX is; that is, BLM moderated the mediation effect of LMX on the correlation between UPB and performance evaluation.

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

This study has several important theoretical implications. First, this paper contributes to UPB literature by expanding the nomological network of UPB (Mesdaghinia *et al.*, 2019; Umphress and Bingham, 2011). The existing research on UPB mainly focuses on the antecedents of UPB while paying less attention to its consequence (Chen *et al.*, 2016; Graham *et al.*, 2015). Although a few studies theoretically pointed out negative effects of UPB (Umphress *et al.*, 2010; Hosain, 2019) such as harming the interests of the public and stakeholders (Umphress and Bingham, 2011), they ignored potential positive effects of UPB. Based on the social exchange theory, our findings reveal that UPB is positively related to performance ratings of the employee, which answer calls to explore the beneficial effects for the employees who engage in them (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Fehr *et al.*, 2019; Xia *et al.*, 2020).

Second, this research concerns the explication of LMX as a key mechanism through which UPB influences the performance evaluation of employees rated by supervisors. It is important to explore the mediating mechanism as it helps to explain the paradoxical phenomenon of why unethical behavior leads to a positive impact. Several studies have applied social learning theory to understand the consequence of UPB (Fehr *et al.*, 2019; Mesdaghinia *et al.*, 2019), research on the mediating role of LMX is lacking. Grounded in social exchange theory, this research finds that LMX serves as a bridge linking UPB to performance evaluations of employees, thereby unpacking the "black box" of how UPB influences performance evaluation rated by supervisors.

Finally, this paper contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating the complex relationship between unethical behavior and performance evaluation. Previous studies have primarily indicated the negative relationship between unethical behavior and performance appraisals (Berry *et al.*, 2007; Sackett and Wanek, 1996). However, the relationship between unethical behavior and performance appraisal is not always so straightforward. In some cases, it requires the supervisors to manage the tension between what is good for the organization and what is ethical (Fehr *et al.*, 2019). The present study argued that supervisors' BLM played an important role in navigating the tension and demonstrated that supervisors would respond favorably to employees' UPB with higher performance evaluations when supervisors self-report that they value performance more than ethics (Babalola *et al.*, 2020). In addition, we also found that supervisor BLM moderated the mediation effect of LMX on the correlation between UPB and performance evaluation; that

is, the higher the BLM of a supervisor is, the stronger the positive effect of UPB through LMX on performance evaluation is. These findings act as a supplement and verify the traditional research.

### 5.2 Managerial implications

The findings of this study bear several important implications for management practices, which are mentioned below.

First, our results demonstrated that subordinates exhibiting high levels of UPB are likely to get a better performance evaluation rating by their supervisors than those engaged in low levels of UPB. Therefore, to reduce the expansion impact of UPB on performance evaluation, managers and organizations should be aware of the negative effect of UPB on organizations if the behavior involves lying to customers, bribing government workers and falsifying data in documents as such behavior is illegal (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Umphress *et al.*, 2010). In addition, organizations need to consider the ethical value of candidates when recruiting and avoid hiring immoral employees. Furthermore, organizations should facilitate the process for employees to report UPB they find and observe in the workplace and take effective actions to address the problems when the organizations receive such reports.

Second, our findings showed that UPB has a reciprocal effect on performance evaluation via LMX. Therefore, we recommend that companies and managers should be aware of the dark side of LMX and take effective measures to reduce this harmful impact. More specifically, managers should realize that leaders should treat every member equally and the differentiation of LMX might destroy the fairness of the organization. Furthermore, to inhibit the exaggeration effect of LMX on performance evaluation, organizations and managers should take measures to improve the fairness and objectivity of performance appraisals. For example, human resource management could introduce peer evaluation or external evaluation when rating the performance of employees.

Finally, the results revealed that supervisor BLM could moderate the relationship between UPB and LMX. Therefore, to reduce the harmful effects that UPB may bring, companies should be careful about leaders who exhibit high levels of BLM and seek to reduce BLM among leaders. More specifically, we suggest that companies and organizational leaders should emphasize that certain ethical bottom line values and moral principles should be followed when pursuing goals in selecting, hiring and promoting socializing. In addition, training courses that can reduce the BLM of supervisors should be designed and arranged. These training courses should be able to improve the morality of supervisors, encourage a high level of ethical leadership behavior and emphasize that ethical norms are not secondary to bottom-line results. In doing so, managers are encouraged to take ethics into consideration when interacting with employees and conducting their evaluations of employee performance.

### 5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

Like other studies, this study inevitably has some research limitations. First of all, the variables used in this research were all collected at the same time. Although the data was collected from multiple respondents and statistical techniques were used to check for common method bias, the possible impact of common method bias on research findings was not completely removed. Second, this study used a sample of employees from enterprises in China, which is a specific cultural context. Although the research findings may be repeated by using samples from different industrial and geographic contexts, the external validity of the findings outside this context is limited at present. Last but not least, considering the impact of pro-organizational behavior on performance evaluation (Hung *et al.*, 2012;

Vilela *et al.*, 2008), it was another limitation of the present study for investigating the impact of UPB on individual performance evaluation without controlling the impact of pro-organizational behavior.

In the future, a longitudinal design or experiment method may be used to enhance the persuasion of the causal relationship between variables. In addition, given that the survey scope of the current study is limited, more work needs to be done to ascertain the generalizability of our findings outside the specific context in which our study was addressed. Future research may also further explore the role played by other variables such as ethical leadership, supervisor's Machiavellianism and organizational ethical climate, in moderating the relationship between UPB and LMX. Finally, more work could be done to examine whether the impact of UPB on performance evaluation is still significant while controlling the impact of pro-organizational behavior.

## 6. Conclusion

Unlike previous studies that focus on the antecedents of UPB, the current study provides the first empirical examination of the impact of UPB on performance evaluation by using a sample drawn from several firms in China. The findings of this research showed a positive relationship between UPB and performance evaluation and that relationship was mediated by LMX. In addition, we found that the relationship between UPB and LMX was stronger when supervisors exercise high levels of BLM. These findings indicate that UPB may bring some short-term benefits to implementers under certain circumstances given its pro-organizational nature.

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