Inhibiting pro-organizational behavior: harnessing the effects of responsible leadership and leader–member exchange

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Abstract

Purpose – Leadership styles appear to influence unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), but there has been little empirical research on employees' ethical behavior as an outcome of responsible leadership. This study examines the positive effect of responsible leadership on unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) via the mediator, leader–member exchange (LMX).

Design/methodology/approach – Responses from 200 full-time working employees in Pakistan were collected in two waves, and structural equation modeling was used to test the hypotheses.

Findings – The results indicated that LMX mediated the relationship between responsible leadership and UPB. Our research also yielded a negative relationship between responsible leadership and employees' willingness to engage in UPB and between LMX and UPB. In addition, the mediation and direct relationship results were stronger for employees who spent more than seven years in the organization as compared to those with less than seven years.

Research limitations/implications – The leader's responsible behavior trickles down to the subordinates and encourages their employees to behave responsibly too. We also showed that responsible leadership influenced employees' UPB engagement through LMX.

Practical implications – By adopting a responsible leadership style through training practices and appraisal tools, organizations may increase quality exchange relationship between leader and subordinates, which will reduce UPB.

Originality/value – This paper is one of the few empirical studies which have examined the relationship between responsible leadership, LMX and UPB. The results from our study help to enhance findings from earlier studies on the antecedents of UPB. Contrary to previous studies, our study also shows that LMX can lead to ethical behavior i.e. reduce UPB.

Keywords Responsible leadership, Leader-member exchange, Social learning theory, Social exchange theory, Unethical pro-organizational behavior

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The conception of unethical behavior and its conceivable destructive ability is apparently perceptible and widely recognized. Referring to such unethical behaviors, a newly emerged construct is unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), in which the intention to help the organization overshadows unethical actions (Umphress *et al.*, 2010). UPBs are employees' unethical acts committed that either benefits their leaders or organizations (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Sometimes, leaders have to engage in misrepresentation of truth for personal survival and to save the company from any potential losses (The Daily Orange, 2020). Such type of compromising or collaborative behaviors to facilitate unethical actions for temporary benefits questions the responsibility of a leader and raises concerns for tackling them. These transgressive behaviors are usually seen as productive and necessary behaviors since they benefit the organization. However, such acts can potentially harm stakeholders and damage organizations' reputations. For example, UPB has resulted in bankruptcies, corporate

downfalls and near collapses (e.g. Enron and Citibank), accounting frauds (e.g. Worldcom), product withdrawals (e.g. Toyota and Volkswagen) and lawsuits (e.g. Nutella).

Leadership has been found to influence the unethical pro-organizational behaviors of their subordinates (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). This is evident in the case of VoiceTel where the employees perceived their company's leaders as responsible for how they talked, walked and felt (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017). Prior research has found that leadership styles such as authoritative leadership (Kang-Hwa and Hung-Yi, 2018), transformational and transactional leadership (Graham *et al.*, 2013) elevate UPB. While it would be expected that authoritative and transactional leadership increase an employee's propensity to commit UPB (Graham *et al.*, 2013; Kang-Hwa and Hung-Yi, 2018), it is rather surprising to note that transformational leadership fosters employee actions by transcending immediate self-interest and seeks to achieve the bigger goal also correlates positively with UPB (Effelsberg *et al.*, 2014). Even charismatic leadership which is often considered positive to the organization has detrimental effects on employee workplace behaviors; charismatic leadership has been found to encourage UPB through psychological safety because such leaders often have high expectations of their followers and set them challenging goals (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, Miao *et al.* (2013) reported that employees relatively engaged more in UPB at a moderate level of ethical leadership rather than at a low level. Following calls of researchers to explore the antecedents of UPB particularly on different leadership styles (Gigol, 2020; Graham *et al.*, 2013), we aim to study the role of responsible leadership as a precursor to UPB and whether the liaison between a leader and its members, captured using the construct of leader–member exchange (LMX), creates the link between responsible leadership and UPB.

UPB is influenced by various influential factors such as external locus of control, leader–member exchange and performance pressure (Tang *et al.*, 2020). However, among other individual and organizational level mechanisms, responsible leadership has its profound significance in affecting individual and organizational mechanisms such as increasing the pride and satisfaction with the organization and decreasing turnover intention (Doh *et al.*, 2012). UPB may have a significant influence on UPB since subordinates consider their leader as a role model and try to imitate the responsible decisions and behaviors of their leaders (Cheng *et al.*, 2019; Voegtlin *et al.*, 2019).

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, although researchers have explored the possible factors that influence UPB such as manipulative personality (Naseer *et al.*, 2019) and organizational identification (Umphress *et al.*, 2010), the extant studies on UPB have suggested to investigate and provide greater insights on individual and situational factors which may better explain the ethically questionable events and behaviors at the workplace. Such investigations may assist in devising preventive policies to restrain the occurrence of such behaviors (Umphress *et al.*, 2010). Second, this study highlights the association between responsible leadership and UPB. Prior studies on responsible leadership examined the antecedents (Miska *et al.*, 2013; Stahl and Sully de Luque, 2014) and outcomes that are more prone toward organizational outcomes (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Székely and Knirsch, 2005). However, not enough work has been done on the outcomes that are particularly concerned with employees (Haque *et al.*, 2019). To the best of our knowledge, this would be one of the very few studies that link responsible leadership to a negative outcome. Third, this study expands preceding studies on leadership and UPB literature by proposing an integrated framework of employee behaviors in the work setting, as shown in Figure 1, to investigate LMX as an intervening construct between responsible leadership and UPB. From a practical perspective, UPB has important ethical relevance because such behaviors affect not only the organization and its internal stakeholders but also the organization's external stakeholders (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Therefore, the practical significance of this study is to provide some suggestions to organizations and administrators regarding how to avoid UPB by leadership, policy and training.

To establish these contributions, this study investigated the employees working in Pakistan and thereby respond to the call to examine unethical practices in other cultural settings (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). Parallel to other already investigated cultures like China (Cheng *et al.*, 2019), Pakistan is considered a collectivist culture where social relationships and loyalty are of paramount importance (Hofstede Insights, 2017). As a result, leadership and the quality of relationships with subordinates can act as an enabler for the well-being of the organization, and this may include engaging in UPB.

The foundation of our research model (Figure 1) is based on the social learning theory (SLT) where employees develop their behaviors based on what they observe in their leaders (Bandura, 1977). Similarly, in this way, the employees develop a good relationship with their leaders which is backed by ethical and relational values. In this process of learning and imitating ethical and relational values (Cheng *et al.*, 2019), the behavior of employees becomes ethical as well which in turn inhibits further UPBs. Therefore, consistent with the trickle-down effect (Cheng *et al.*, 2019) and SLT (Bandura, 1977), we suggest that the ethical and relational values in the leader will trickle down in their subordinates. These values will likely play a fundamental role in developing pro-social intentions and inhibiting any actions which demand unethical conduct.

The paper comprises five sections. The opening section deals with the introduction of the article. The second part describes the literature and hypothesis development. It will then go on to the methodology used in this study. The fourth and fifth sections present the data analysis, findings, theoretical and practical implications and finally the limitations and directions for future studies.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1 Responsible leadership

Maak and Pless (2006) defined responsible leadership as the art of developing and sustaining a good relationship with all the stakeholders. The role of a responsible leader is to build and achieve the organization's purpose by facilitating the relational process. Maak and Pless (2006) describe responsible leadership as a combination of both ethical and relational phenomenon that occurs in social interaction with those stakeholders who affect or are affected by the purpose and vision of the leadership. A responsible leader is one who embodies empathy, optimism and universal value orientation (Voegtlin *et al.*, 2019). It differs from other leadership styles such as servant leadership (Greenleaf 1979), ethical leadership (Brown *et al.*, 2005) and transformational leadership (Longshore and Bass, 2006) which are only values-centered. The key difference between responsible leadership and values-centered leadership styles is that the former focuses on positive social exchanges for sustainable value creation (Haque *et al.*, 2019; Maak and Pless, 2006), while value-centered leadership focuses on high profits and increasing shareholder's value. In contrast to other forms of leadership, responsible leadership has a wider scope in influencing both internal and external
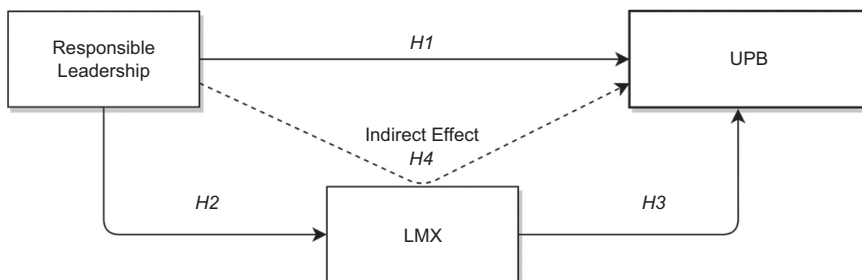

Figure 1.
The research model

stakeholders (Miska and Mendenhall, 2018). From the relational point of view, the responsible leader believes in co-creating the process to achieve ethically sound common objectives (Maak and Pless, 2006) which can be achieved when subordinates learn and imitate the responsible actions of their leaders (Bandura, 1977).

To date, a research synthesis by Stahl and Sully de Luque (2014) on responsible leader behavior shows that several studies have explored its individual, situational, organizational, institutional and supranational factors. Additionally, researchers have also examined factors such as intercultural competencies (Miska *et al.*, 2013) and motivational drivers (Pless, 2007) on responsible leadership. Several studies have also considered the outcomes of responsible leadership such as individual, team organizational and societal level outcomes through psychological (commitment, ownership, trust) and knowledge-based pathways (creativity, knowledge sharing, option) (Doh and Quigley, 2014). Responsible leadership also contributes to sustainable business performance by enhancing social capital (Maak and Pless, 2006; Székely and Knirsch, 2005).

2.2 Unethical pro-organizational behavior
Umphress *et al.* (2010, p. 622) defined UPB as "the actions thatInhibiting unethical pro-organizational behavior are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members and violate core societal values, mores, laws, or standards of proper conduct". Considering this definition, UPB comprises two vital mechanisms: (1) the pro-social nature of the actions i.e. the intentions to benefit the organization and (2) the unethicality in their actions which are potentially hazardous for the stakeholders and the organization's sustainability (Umphress *et al.*, 2010). Umphress and Bingham (2011) conceptualized UPB based on three boundary conditions to distinguish it from other similar constructs such as unethical behaviors and counter-productive work behavior. First, the employees commit these unethical acts without any intention to harm the organization but instead to benefit their organization. These actions include errors, mistakes and unconscious negligence. Second, employees must conduct these unethical behaviors with a conscious purpose. Finally, the concept of UPB applies only to actions in which the perpetrator's unethical actions are focused on benefiting the organization, not satisfying personal interests.

UPB has been conceptualized using a theoretical lens of social exchange theory (SET) and SLT. Positive social exchanges in the organization have been found to decrease employees' unethical actions (such as stealing) that may damage the organization (Greenberg, 2002). However, such exchange relationships may also have a dark side as it may embrace a sense of social comparison and desire for status which further lead toward UPB (Zhang *et al.*, 2017). Recently, UPB was found to be encouraged by the influence of authentic leadership (Gigol, 2020), charismatic leadership under high-performance pressure (Zhang *et al.*, 2020) and by the positive influence of external work locus of control through performance pressure under high LMX (Tang *et al.*, 2020).

2.3 Responsible leadership and unethical pro-organizational behavior
A leader's responsibility is not only to make ethical decisions but also to develop a constructive relationship with all the organization's stakeholders (Maak and Pless, 2006). Therefore, a responsible leadership style that focuses on both ethical and relational aspects is considered to inhibit UPB (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). This argument is based on the self-regulatory function of the SLT. According to the SLT, people learn to evaluate their conduct by seeing the reaction of others to their behaviors (Bandura, 1977). Similarly, SLT supports in explaining how responsible leadership affects subordinates' behaviors. The key idea behind SLT lies in the premise that subordinates observe and imitate the attitudes and behaviors of their leaders; followers emulate the behavior of the responsible leader and learn vicariously

what is responsible and irresponsible behavior (Bandura, 1977). These arguments provide the basis for hypothesizing the following:

H1. Responsible leadership is negatively related to UPB.

2.4 Responsible leadership and leader–member exchange

LMX is the reciprocal relationship between the leader and its subordinates which includes transactional exchanges on its lower extreme and mutual respect and fulfilling higher-order needs on the higher extreme (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995). The leadership role in maintaining the relationship with the members is crucial for sustainable performance (Székely and Knirsch, 2005). The responsibility of the leader is not only to maintain a good relationship with the employees but also to act responsibly in the best interest of the external stakeholders which is only possible if the leader behaves in an ethical and socially responsible manner (Maak and Pless, 2006). In a country like Pakistan, where its society follows a collectivistic culture (Hofstede Insights, 2017), people tend to focus on the collective interests of the organization and there is mutual respect in the communication between the members. Hence, in a collectivist culture, the role of a responsible leader is vital because of its prominent ethical and relational characteristics (Maak and Pless, 2006). Based on these characteristics, it is argued that the perception of responsible leadership lies to a considerable extent in the eyes of the beholder. Hence, the ethical attribute of a responsible leader will engender high-quality social bonds with the subordinates, given that the ethical orientation of such a leader drives them to treat their employees with care (Brown *et al.*, 2005). In return, the subordinates try to reciprocate in the form of actions that are preferred by their respective supervisors. For example, Tumasjan *et al.* (2011) reported that the quality of the relationship between the leader and the subordinates is dependent upon the followers' perception of their supervisor's ethical leadership. Mahsud *et al.* (2010) found that a leader's relationship-oriented behavior is triggered by the leader's empathy and ethical conduct which further increases the quality of the LMX relationship. Similarly, a responsible leader who has both ethical and relationship orientations likely assists in making quality exchange relationships. Therefore, the following hypothesis is devised:

H2. Responsible leadership is positively related to LMX.

2.5 Leader–member exchange and unethical pro-organizational behavior

There exist two ends of quality in the LMX relationship (Graham *et al.*, 2013): low- and high-quality relationships. The low-quality relationship emphasizes the quid-pro-quo exchange of monetary resources which does not include mutual trust but rather the fulfillment of rapid repayment and the assurances of return of resources (Lewicki *et al.*, 2006). In such relationships, the subordinates are expected to comply with the formal obligations, norms and standards as predetermined in the work contract (Brown and Mitchell, 2010). In low-quality relationships, the leader holds the subordinates accountable for any violation of this work contract which can result in feeling deprived relative to other group members, inculcating negative reciprocity motives and engaging in pro-self-unethical actions (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2004; Maslyn and Uhl-Bien, 2001). On the other hand, the primary focus of a high-quality relationship is on building mutual trust, warmth, support at work and the needs of another party (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). SET suggests that employees who receive high-quality LMX tend to be more effective (Emerson, 1976). This stems from the argument that during the higher-order exchange relationship, the employee receives care and support from the leader and the organization to such an extent that the employees try to reciprocate in the form of actions that meet the expectations of the leader and which ultimately benefit the organization (Emerson, 1976)

In a high-quality exchange relationship, the leader and subordinates exert efforts in their relationship and share a mutual perception to obtain collective work-related outcomes (Maslyn and Uhl-Bien, 2001). Most of the organizational experiences are tempered by immediate leaders who act as an instrument in the socialization process (Emerson, 1976). During the role-making process (i.e. leading toward high-LMX), the leader instills a feeling of responsibility in the employees toward the organization (Kinicki and Vecchio, 1994). Thus, employees who experience high LMX will likely reciprocate by doing actions that are beyond the in-role behaviors such as citizenship (i.e. discretionary) behaviors to benefit their leaders, group members and organization (Ilies *et al.*, 2007). According to Vriend *et al.* (2020), low LMX will likely engender subordinate's unethical pro-self-unethical behaviors, while high LMX will make the employee engage in pro-organizational behavior to please their leaders. Based on this notion, it is expected that a high-quality exchange relationship may instill expectations to perform UPB. Therefore, we posit that:

H3. LMX is positively related to UPB.

2.6 The mediating role of leader–member exchange

LMX is hypothesized to mediate the relationship between interpersonal justice and UPB because employees see the fair treatment by their leader as beneficial to them and may reciprocate this fairness in the form of UPB, which they see as acts that benefit the leader and the organization (Bryant and Merritt, 2019). This argument is based on SET where the leaders forms a reciprocal relationship with their subordinates (Graen and Scandura 1987), and based on the exchange notion, it is likely that the fair and ethical treatment by the responsible leader will also be considered as an exchange resource which the employee tries to reciprocate. Such reciprocity can include engaging in UPB which employees and leaders may perceive as positive behavior (Miao *et al.*, 2013). It is the leader's responsible roles i.e. relational and ethical which determine the quality of the LMX and employee's ethical or unethical pro-social behaviors. In addition, Cheng *et al.* (2019) reported that responsible leadership has a trickle-down effect on subordinates in reducing UPB because responsible leadership increases the leader–follower value congruence. Leader—follower value congruence happens when the follower's moral values become similar to those of the leader. In high levels of congruence, the subordinate rapidly understands and adapts to the leader's socially responsible behaviors (Ostroff *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, based on the SLT (Bandura, 1977) and leader–follower value congruence (Cheng *et al.*, 2019), we posit that:

H4. LMX mediates the relationship between responsible leadership and UPB.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and procedure

Marketing and sales department professionals who lived in Punjab, Pakistan were considered for this study. The rationale behind selecting the sample was that these respondents needed to be in contact with their clients and customers and their work may require them to engage in UPB. Self-reported data were collected from the managerial and functional level employees. To prevent respondent fatigue and common method variance, the data were collected in two waves. Anonymity was guaranteed, and participation was voluntary. Participants who agreed to be surveyed were provided with the questionnaire through email and data were collected from July to August 2019. At time 1, the employees gave responses on responsible leadership and LMX whereas, at time 2, the employees were contacted again to give responses on UPB and social desirability. Using this methodology,

a total of 230 survey questionnaires were disseminated to employees in 50 service sector companies including telecom, education, banking and insurance. In the first wave, 215 questionnaires were returned with a response rate of 93.5%. In the second wave, out of 215 responses, a total of 200 responses were returned, indicating a response rate of 93%. The final analysis was conducted based on 200 responses.

Of the 200 respondents, 75% were male, and the average age was around 34. In terms of education, 52% held a bachelor's degree and 44% had a postgraduate degree. About 46.5% of the respondents had organizational tenure of at least seven years, and 53.5% had a tenure of more than 7 years, suggesting that the target respondents have sufficient experience in their organization and spend considerable time with their leaders to comment upon constructs such as responsible leadership and LMX.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Responsible leadership. The scale proposed by Doh *et al.* (2012) was used for measuring responsible leadership. Employees responded to the items by using a 7-point Likert scale which ranged from 1 *(strongly disagree)* to 7 *(strongly agree)*. The items included "My immediate manager gives me the support I need to do my job well". The reliability score (Cronbach's alpha) of responsible leadership was 0.90.

3.2.2 LMX. LMX was evaluated with a seven-item scale developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). Respondents marked the questionnaires based on the quality of relationships with their respective subordinates using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 *(none)* to 5 *(very high)*. The items included, "How well does your leader/subordinates understand your job problems and needs?". This study reported a coefficient alpha of 0.85.

3.2.3 Unethical pro-organizational behavior. We examined UPB by adapting a six-item scale developed by Umphress *et al.* (2010). The scale ranged from 1 *(strongly disagree)* to 5 *(Strongly agree)*. The sample item included "To benefit my organization, I withhold negative information about my company or its products from customers and clients". The reliability coefficient was 0.88.

3.2.4 Control variables. The items of UPB are morally sensitive. To account for whether the participants responded in a socially desirable way, the 10-item social desirability scale developed by Strahan and Gerbasi (1972) was considered for this study. The sample items included "I'm always willing to admit it when I make a mistake" and this instrument was assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 *(strongly disagree)* to 5 *(strongly agree)*. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.86. We also controlled for employees' demographic variables of age and tenure.

4. Data analysis

The structural equation modeling (SEM) technique was adopted due to its feasibility to examine the multivariate association and theoretical model. This consisted of two steps. The first step included reliability, validity, item loadings and goodness of model fit. The second step included the overall model which outlined all the relationships in detail. Here, path modeling technique was adopted.

4.1 Measurement model

As demonstrated in Table 1, for the full sample ($N = 200$), the correlation between responsible leadership and LMX was 0.675 ($p \leq 0.001$), responsible leadership, and UPB was -0.654 ($p \leq 0.001$) and LMX and UPB was -0.292 ($p \leq 0.001$). In terms of social desirability bias, only the association between social desirability and UPB was significant indicating that this

relationship should be handled with care. The means and standard deviations of every construct were also assessed.

Cronbach's alpha values of responsible leadership ($\alpha = 0.899$), LMX ($\alpha = 0.853$), UPB ($\alpha = 0.879$), and social desirability bias ($\alpha = 0.858$) established internal consistency within the constructs (see Table 2). The results showed that discriminant validity statistics of responsible leadership (AVE = 0.50), LMX (AVE = 0.51), UPB (AVE = 0.54), and social desirability (AVE = 0.53) were greater than the threshold value of 0.50. Moreover, the square root of AVE was greater than the correlation between the constructs which meet the criteria for discriminant validity. The item loadings and the commutative percentage of explained variance for responsible leadership (69.57%), LMX (54.05%), UPB (62.7%) and social desirability (59.04%) were also examined (see Table 2).

4.2 Structural model

To obtain the fit indices for the four-factor model including social desirability bias, the confirmatory factor analysis was executed (see Figure 2). In the analysis, the model fit indices ($\chi^2 = 1268.701$, df = 570, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.07, RMSEA = 0.05, NFI = 0.74) illustrated that the four-factor model was in suitable threshold values.

Harman's single factor test was executed and the variance obtained was 28.4%, indicating that common method variance was not an issue. To test the direct effects of the hypothesized variables, a regression analysis was conducted (shown in Table 3). Hypothesis 1 predicted the positive relation between responsible leadership and UPB. The results obtained from the structural equation modeling showed that responsible leadership was negatively associated with UPB ($\beta = -0.365$, $p \leq 0.001$). For Hypothesis 2, the results indicate that responsible leadership is positively related to LMX ($\beta = 0.641$, $p \leq 0.001$). Regarding Hypothesis 3, the results did not support a positive relationship between LMX and UPB ($\beta = -0.331$, $p \leq 0.001$). Therefore, as illustrated in Table 3 and Figure 3, all the direct hypothesized relationships (i.e H1 and H2) except H3 were supported. The control variables were also included in the full model. Only social desirability was found to have a significant relationship with UPB ($\beta = 0.111$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that the respondents may have provided socially desirable responses for UPB.

Additional analysis was conducted between employees who had more than seven years of organizational tenure and those with less than or equal to 7 years. The relationships were stronger for employees who spent more than seven years in the organization. This could be due to the reason that as the employee spends more time in the organization, their identification with the team and organization increases (Barker and Tompkins, 1994). This high identification encourages moral decision-making when the organizational climate is perceived to be ethical (van Gils et al., 2017). Similarly, the ethical and relational influence of a responsible leader may positively influence the perception of employees having more tenure, and as a result, they are likely to commit less UPB.

For the mediation analysis, the bootstrapping procedure in AMOS was executed with 5000 resamples. A 95% confidence interval was used to determine the indirect effects.

Sr.	Study variables	Skewness	Kurtosis	M	SD	1	2	3
1	Responsible leadership	−0.73	−0.25	1.79	0.52			
2	LMX	−0.50	−0.74	2.66	0.89	0.675[a]		
3	UPB	0.83	0.15	1.81	0.68	−0.654[a]	−0.292[a]	
4	Social desirability	−0.45	−0.60	2.14	0.55	−0.102	−0.137	0.201[a]

Note(s): Means (M), Standard deviation (SD), LMX = leader–member exchange, UPB = Unethical pro-organizational behavior
$N = 200$ (two-tailed) whole sample. [a]$p < 0.001$

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics and two-tailed correlation results

Constructs	Items	λ	Cumulative % of variance explained	Chronbach's α	AVE	$\sqrt{AVE}$
Responsible	RL01	0.85	69.57	0.899	0.50	0.707
Leadership	RL02	0.82				
	RL03	0.56				
	RL04	0.74				
	RL05	0.86				
	RL06	0.55				
	RL07	0.59				
	RL08	0.63				
	RL09	0.74				
	RL10	0.75				
	RL12	0.68				
	RL13	0.67				
LMX	LMX01	0.73	54.05	0.853	0.51	0.714
	LMX02	0.65				
	LMX03	0.82				
	LMX04	0.66				
	LMX05	0.71				
	LMX06	0.80				
	LMX07	0.64				
UPB	UPB01	0.85	62.70	0.879	0.54	0.735
	UPB02	0.83				
	UPB03	0.64				
	UPB04	0.74				
	UPB05	0.85				
	UPB06	0.84				
Social desirability	SD01	0.87	59.04	0.858	0.53	0.728
	SD02	0.67				
	SD03	0.66				
	SD04	0.71				
	SD05	0.59				
	SD06	0.65				
	SD07	0.81				
	SD08	0.78				
	SD09	0.80				
	SD10	0.74				

Note(s): AVE = average variance extracted

Table 2.
Measurement
assessment results

As demonstrated in Table 4, the indirect effect for the whole sample was significant ($\beta = -0.244$; $p \leq 0.001$) which showed that LMX partially mediated the relationship between responsible leadership and UPB, providing support for Hypothesis H4.

Additional analysis on the two categories of sample i.e. tenure less than seven years, and tenure more than seven years shows that the indirect effect is slightly higher for those who have spent more than seven years in the organization ($\beta = -0.220$; $p \leq 0.001$) than the employees who have spent less than seven years ($\beta = -0.213$; $p \leq 0.001$). Table 5 summarizes the empirical results of the tested hypotheses.

5. Discussion
As predicted in Hypothesis 1, responsible leadership was negatively related to UPB. This is in line with the multilevel study by Cheng *et al.* (2019) on Chinese salespeople. The findings of our study demonstrate that the relational and ethical concerns of a responsible leader do
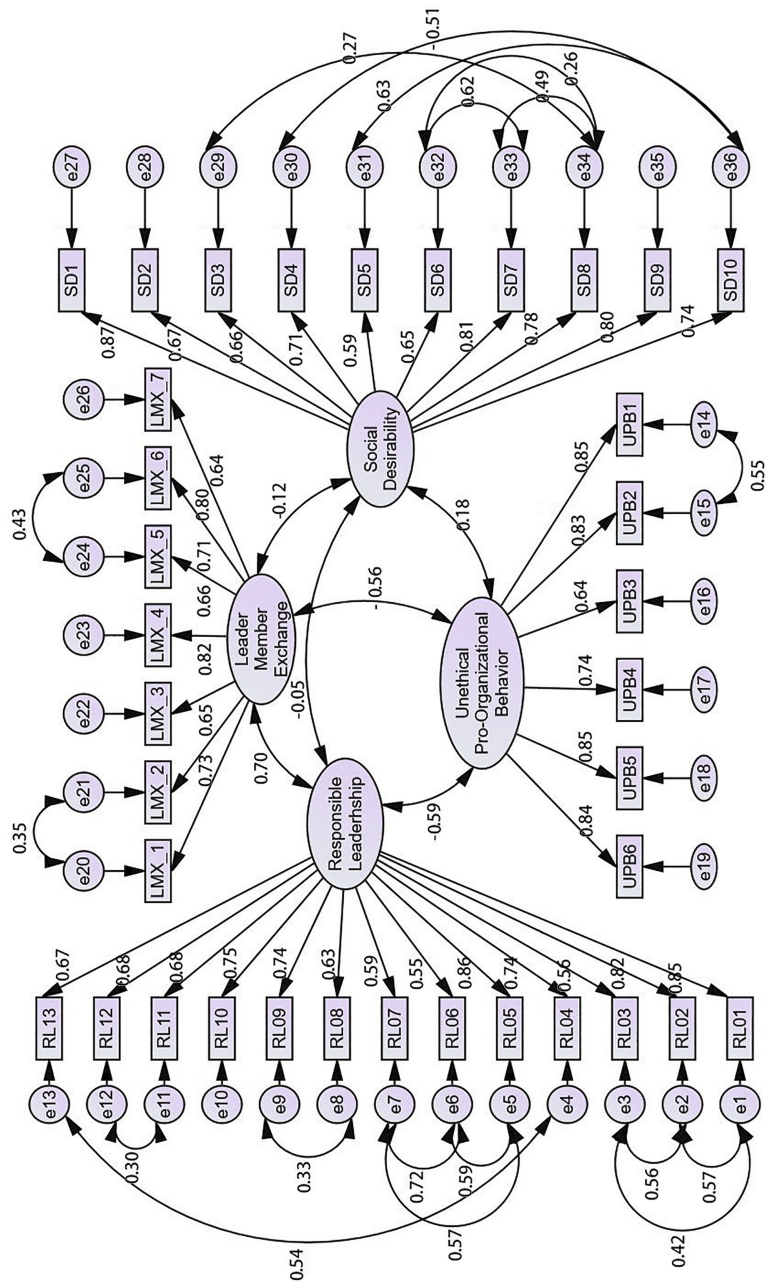
Figure 2.
Structural model

Paths	Whole sample (N = 200)				Tenure < 7 years (N = 93)				Tenure > 7 years (N = 107)			
	β	S.E.	C.R.	p	β	S.E.	C.R.	p	β	S.E.	C.R.	p
Direct paths												
RL → LMX	0.641	0.055	15.676	0.000**	0.637	0.076	10.477	0.000**	0.610	0.081	10.396	0.000**
RL → UPB	−0.365	0.069	−4.702	0.000**	−0.224	0.070	−2.413	0.003*	−0.432	0.090	−4.445	0.000**
LMX → UPB	−0.331	0.059	−4.259	0.000**	−0.290	0.095	−2.143	0.032*	−0.310	0.076	−3.189	0.001**
Control variables												
SD → LMX	−0.048	0.058	−1.017	0.309	−0.018	0.063	−0.254	0.799	−0.022	0.104	−0.322	0.748
SD → UPB	0.111	0.049	2.107	0.035*	0.025	0.057	0.272	0.786	0.142	0.081	2.060	0.039*
Age → LMX	−0.032	0.057	−0.684	0.494	0.019	0.094	0.262	0.793	−0.029	0.076	−0.417	0.676
Age → UPB	0.076	0.050	1.405	0.160	−0.012	0.085	−0.128	0.898	0.085	0.059	1.229	0.219
Tenure → UPB	0.047	0.029	0.845	0.398								

Note(s): β = Standardized estimates, S.E. = Standard Error, C.R = Critical Ratio, p = Significance Value
*p < 0.05, **p ≤ 0.001

Table 3.
Standardized
regression weights
estimation

Figure 3.
Direct effect results
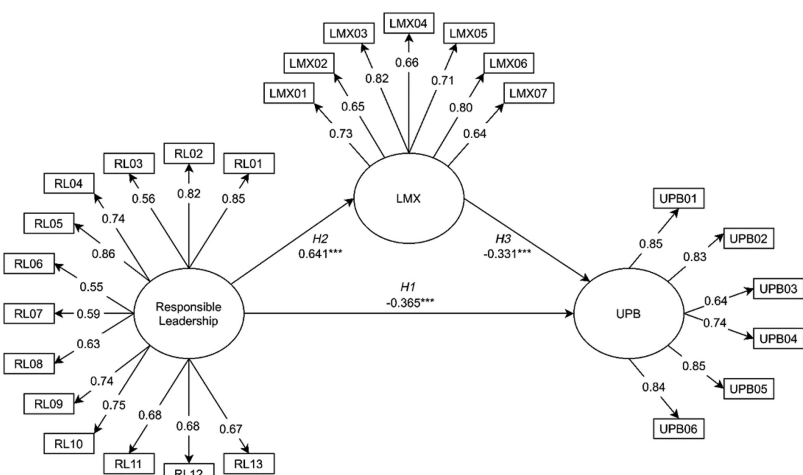
Path	Total effects (TE)	p-value of (TE)		Direct effects (DE)	p-value of (DE)		Indirect effects (IE)	p-value of (IE)	
Whole sample									
RL → LMX → UPB	−0.615	0.000***		−0.365	0.001***		−0.244	0.001***	
		LB	UB		LB	UB		LB	UB
		−0.72	−0.49		−0.55	−0.17		−0.38	−0.13
Tenure < 7 years									
RL → LMX → UPB	−0.44	0.004**		−0.224	0.003**		−0.213	0.010**	
		LB	UB		LB	UB		LB	UB
		−0.64	−0.18		−0.68	−0.13		−0.38	−0.05
Tenure > 7 Years									
RL → LMX → UPB	−0.653	0.000***		−0.432	0.001***		−0.220	0.002**	
		LB	UB		LB	UB		LB	UB
		−0.78	−0.49		−0.67	−0.20		−0.39	−0.07

Note(s): LB = lower bound, UB = upper bound
**P < 0.05, ***P ≤ 0.001

Table 4.
Mediation results

trickle down to their employees and this leads to less UPB. Based on the results of our study, ethical leadership does inhibit UPB.

The findings based on Hypothesis 2 reveal that there exists a positive significant relationship between RL and LMX. This is in line with the SET and SLT (Bandura, 1977; Emerson, 1976). The inherent ethical and relational nature of a responsible leader encourages employees to trust and value their relationship with their leader and by imitating the leader's responsiveness. Such feelings can result in higher levels of the LMX relationship. The results obtained after examining Hypothesis 3 reported that LMX is negatively related to UPB. This highlights the importance of increasing the quality of LMX which is based on the ethical values to inhibit UPB.

Finally, the testing of Hypothesis 4 reveals that LMX partially mediates the association between responsible leadership and UPB. This is congruent with the SLT (Bandura, 1977).

Hypotheses	Relationships	Beta value (β) with significance (p-value)	Results of analysis
H1	RL on UPB	*Whole Sample = ($\beta = -0.365$; $p \leq 0.001$) Tenure < seven years = ($\beta = -0.224$; $p < 0.01$) Tenure > seven years = ($\beta = -0.432$; $p \leq 0.001$)*	Accepted *(significant and negatively related)*
H2	RL on LMX	*Whole sample = ($\beta = 0.641$; $p \leq 0.001$) Tenure < seven years = ($\beta = 0.637$; $p \leq 0.001$) Tenure > 7 years = ($\beta = 0.610$; $p \leq 0.001$)*	Accepted *(significant and positively related)*
H3	LMX on UPB	Whole sample = ($\beta = -0.331$; $p \leq 0.001$) Tenure < seven years = ($\beta = -0.290$; $p < 0.05$) Tenure > seven years = ($\beta = -0.310$; $p \leq 0.001$)	Accepted *(significant and negatively related)*
H4	RL→LMX→UPB	*Whole sample* Indirect effect = ($\beta = -0.244$; $p \leq 0.001$) *Tenure ≤ seven years* Indirect effect = ($\beta = -0.213$; $p \leq 0.01$) *Tenure > seven years* Indirect effect = ($\beta = -0.220$; $p \leq 0.01$)	Accepted *(partial mediation)*

Note(s): RL = responsible leadership, LMX = leader–member exchange, UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior

One explanation of this result is that the relational values imparted by a responsible leader parallel to the ethical values motivate an ethically driven LMX relationship which restricts the employees in making future unethical decisions. In this way, the pro-organizational nature of UPB can be effectively utilized.

Our results also found that employees with longer tenure in the organization engaged in less UPB in the presence of quality exchange relationships which is induced by the responsible leader. These results may be explained by the fact that employees who have a short tenure may undertake deviant strategies to meet the performance as they could be over-eager to please their leaders. On the other hand, employees who have been longer in the organization may have more to lose if they were found to engage in UPB, even if it benefits the organization or the leader and hence were less likely to engage in UPB (Zhang, 2018). Another possible reason could also be that longer-tenured employees may realize that while UPB benefits the organization this benefit is only in the short term and is not in the organization's best interest in the long term. This makes it likely that shorter tenured employees (i.e. ≤ 7 years) are more prone to committing UPB to meet the performance targets as compared to employees who have spent more than seven years in the organization.

5.1 Theoretical implications
This study extends the knowledge about responsible leadership and unethical behaviors at the workplace and makes four decisive theoretical contributions. First, the foremost

contribution lies in associating theory on responsible leadership with the prevailing UPB literature. There is limited existing evidence on the role of leadership on UPB (Kang-Hwa and Hung-Yi, 2018; Miao *et al.*, 2013) because most researches on UPB have largely focused on an individual's cognitive factors (Naseer *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, only a few leadership styles have been reported to encourage UPB such as ethical leadership (Miao *et al.*, 2013) and transformational leadership (Effelsberg *et al.*, 2014). However, there exists a need to understand how leaders will influence the ethical behaviors of their followers (Cheng *et al.*, 2019; Effelsberg *et al.*, 2014; Graham *et al.*, 2013). The contribution of this study has been to confirm that responsible leadership acts as an inhibitor of UPB and extends upon the work by Umphress *et al.* (Umphress *et al.*, 2010; Umphress and Bingham, 2011) by looking at how responsible leadership plays an important role in regulating the conduct of UPB. This study also adds to the leadership literature by illustrating how a leadership style affects UPB. Specifically, the findings put forward the potential value for responsible leadership in organizations and its impact on the employees.

Second, the finding of this study that responsible leadership is positively related to LMX corroborates the social learning prospect of responsible leadership (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). This implies that while reciprocating the exchanges the employees learn and imitate appropriate ethical characteristics of a responsible leader and behave in a social context through observational learning. Thus, responsible leaders instill fairness and fulfill a higher-order exchange relationship which induces an obligation in subordinates to reciprocate by doing behaviors that meet the ethical expectations of the responsible leader. Moreover, through this process, employees portray the stakeholder-centric behaviors of their leaders, and as a result, the behaviors of employees reflect responsible behaviors. This study provides support to the literature by demonstrating that a positive supervisor–employee relationship does not always result in UPB. This outcome is contrary to that of Bryant and Merritt (2019) and Zhang *et al.* (2017) who reported a positive association between LMX and UPB. Our finding that higher LMX is linked with lower UPB, implies that higher LMX is not always a bad thing and it is desirable to curtail UPB acts in the organization.

Third, based on the SLT (Bandura, 1977), the result that responsible leadership indirectly relates to UPB through LMX contributes to a better understanding of the psychological phenomenon linking responsible leadership and the development of ethically driven exchange relationships. The findings corroborate both the relational and ethical elements of responsible leadership (Maak and Pless, 2006). Although Voegtlin *et al.* (2019) consider how employees engage with the organization and society, research has shown that responsible behavior trickles down to the subordinates (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the social learning approach helps us to comprehend why responsible leadership may help to make an ethically driven relationship and to prevent unethical behaviors while preserving pro-organizational intentions. Moreover, the findings emphasize the point that promoting and developing responsible leadership deserves excessive attention since it relates to the better interpersonal relationship between the leader and members and in turn prevents negative actions that may cause harm to the organization.

5.2 Managerial implications

Based on our findings, responsible leadership plays a vital role in preventing UPB as indicated by the significant negative relationship between UPB and responsible leadership. Responsible leadership has been found to encourage positive behavior such as encouraging employee engagement with the organization and society (Voegtlin *et al.*, 2019) and enhancing creativity and knowledge-sharing behaviors among employees (Doh and Quigley, 2014). Our study further strengthens this idea that responsible leadership does have a significant influence on employees' behaviors and that organizations should encourage responsible leadership either through selection, training or organizational practices.

This research provides three managerial implications for practitioners who seek to promote their working environment and reduce potential unethical behaviors. Considering the long-term devastating effects of UPB on the organization, keen attention is required to inhibit this phenomenon. First, the organization should focus on maintaining high-quality LMX relationships in the organization which is driven by the ethical and relational orientations of the leader. Therefore, an organization should encourage and elevate quality exchange relationships through managerial interventions and imparting ethical and relational skills to the leader. Doing so will not only reduce UPB but also promote citizenship behaviors in the organization (Ilies *et al.*, 2007). The organization should also popularize the effectiveness of responsible leaders internally because these principles may develop human resources in ethical and relational domains by practically leveraging on Bandura's SLT.

Second, the findings have implications for developing and conducting learning and competency-building programs such as trainings and workshops on the topics of morality, ethics and responsiveness for leaders who can, in turn, behave responsibly in front of their subordinates. The organizations can develop softskills and competencies-development programs for the responsible leaders in which various integrated learning programs can be executed such as team building, individualistic and team-level coaching, 360-degree feedback, reflective exercises and story-telling sessions (Pless *et al.*, 2011). These programs can be instilled through cognitive, affective and behavioral strategies and can result in developing an ethical mindset and responsible behaviors of the leaders which can reduce subordinates' UPB (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). More focus should be given to the leaders because the leaders' ethical and relational standards act as a driver to other employees, and when employees are given the role of leadership, they imitate such responsible behaviors. The effectiveness of these programs can further be examined by evaluating the learning outcomes by using a post-program survey questionnaire (Pless *et al.*, 2011).

Finally, organizations can employ leadership consultants who can implement and facilitate initiatives that can develop responsible leaders in organizations. In addition, management could also encourage employees' responsible actions by developing appraisal tools and empowering their managers to check on the extent to which these subordinates understand and imitate such values.

5.3 Limitations and opportunities for research
This study was limited in terms of the factors identified to influence UPB. A natural progression of this work is to analyze the influence of other organizational variables such as commitment, climate and justice on UPB. The results of this study did indicate that as the employee spent more time in their organization the strength of their exchange relationship decreases and their frequency of engaging in UPB increases. These results may be an avenue for future researchers to investigate that how spending more time in an organization will affect the hypothesized relationships. Whilst this study contributes to the findings of the negative relationship between LMX and UPB, future studies can clarify the nature of the relationship between these constructs by considering the moderating mechanism of responsible leadership because the relationship between LMX and UPB may depend on the ethicality of the leader. Additionally, it is certainly possible to have unethical/irresponsible leadership but with strong LMX. Future researchers can investigate cases where unethical leaders have been able to induce/coerce their employees into engaging in UPB.

This study could be repeated by examining the effect that UPB has on the well-being of employees since UPB can have emotional and cognitive outcomes such as guilt and shame and cognitive dissonance respectively (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Therefore, future researchers can investigate the emotional aftermath of UPB and how it affects the behavioral outcomes of an employee.

6. Conclusion

Using SLT and SET, this paper reports the association of responsible leadership on UPB through the LMX. Shedding vital insights on the understudied knowledge about inhibitors of UPB, this study found a positive significant association between responsible leadership and LMX relationship, a negative significant association between responsible leadership and UPB, and a negative significant association between LMX and UPB. Additionally, LMX partially mediated the association between RL and UPB. The direct and indirect effects of all the associations were relatively more for those employees who have spent more than seven years in their organization. In sum, this study upholds the importance of a responsible leader in maintaining a positive relationship between the leader and member and imparting ethical values in their members which afterward decreases UPB.

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