Why narcissistic individuals engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior. Testing a moderated mediation model

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the current research is to study the relationship between narcissism and unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), and also examine whether status striving mediates the relationship between narcissism and UPB among individuals with high organizational identification.

Design/methodology/approach – Data that was used to test the research model were collected from five companies in the trading sector in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The final sample included 200 responses, among all participants 29.5% were in a leadership position.

Findings – The current research found that narcissism leads individuals to exhibit a willingness to engage in UPB. Furthermore, status striving mediates the relationship between narcissism and UPB among individuals with high organizational identification.

Research limitations/implications – Research did not use actual reported UPB but measured employees' willingness to engage in UPB.

Practical implications – Organizations should develop special ethics guidance to change the employee's perceptions of UPB from the act of helping or protecting the organization to undesirable behavior in the organization. Moreover, the organization may develop an ethical counseling program, by which individuals may perceive that ethical behavior is valuable for the organization.

Originality/value – Current study examines the relationship between narcissism and UPB. Moreover, it provides empirical support for the notion that the relationship between narcissism and UPB is mediated by status striving among individuals with high organizational identification.

Keywords Narcissism, Unethical pro-organizational behavior, Status striving, Organizational identification

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The past few decades of research in the area of narcissism highlighted that these individuals may bring positive results in the organization such as high level of work engagement (Andreassen *et al.*, 2012), high organizational efficiency (Wales *et al.*, 2013), and at the same time may result in negative behavior in the organization such as counterproductive workplace behavior or incivility (Meier and Semmer, 2013; Grijalva and Newman, 2014), leader turnover (Resick *et al.*, 2009). These contradictory outcomes emphasize the need to improve a better understanding of the condition under which narcissism may engage in unethical behavior and whether these behaviors can bring some benefit to the organization.

Over decades, studies focused on unethical behavior, the intention of which was to benefit or protect the welfare of the organization (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Pierce and Aguinis, 2013). Unethical pro-organizational behavior consists of two fundamental parts. First, this behavior is unethical that neglects the generally accepted values of moral behavior. Second, unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) is a pro-organizational action, committed with the intention to protect or benefit the organization (Umphress and Bingham, 2011).

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

The benefit after engaging UPB might last for a short period, in the long-term perspective, UPB might cause serious damage to the reputation of the company (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Taking into consideration the negative outcomes of engaging in UPB scholars nowadays pay high attention to discover the antecedents of UPB (e.g. Wang *et al.*, 2019; Zhang, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2020). Research mainly focused on organizational antecedents such as leadership (e.g. Miao *et al.*, 2013; Guo *et al.*, 2020), organizational identification (e.g. Effelsberg *et al.*, 2014; Graham *et al.*, 2020); however, little attention is paid to the research of the role of personality in engaging UPB (Lee *et al.*, 2019), and addressing the gap present in the research explores the relationship between narcissism and UPB.

Research explores under what condition narcissism is positively related to UPB. Research conceptualized UPB as an altruistic behavior, intended to protect the welfare of the organization (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Previous research found that UPB is engaged by individuals to obtain status in the organization (Castille *et al.*, 2016; Lee *et al.*, 2019). Based on this argument, current research explores whether status striving mediates the relationship between narcissism and UPB.

Furthermore, to study the boundary circumstances of the relationship between narcissism and UPB via status striving, research tests the moderating effect of organizational identification on the relationship between status striving and UPB. We propose that status striving is the mechanism through which narcissistic individuals commit UPB among individuals with high organizational identification.

The current study contributes to the research of narcissism. Research in the area of narcissism presented contradictory outcomes concerning the behavior of narcissistic individuals, although various study proposed that narcissistic individuals displayed a high degree of enthusiasm and a high level of work engagement (Andreassen *et al.*, 2012), another research proposed that narcissism leads individuals to engage in unethical behavior (Grijalva and Newman, 2014). The current study provided empirical support for the notion that narcissistic individuals might exhibit UPB, which means that narcissistic individuals might engage in pro-organizational behavior even in an unethical way.

The research contributes to the literature of UPB by exploring the antecedents of UPB. The present research demonstrates that narcissism is positively related to UPB via status striving when organizational identification is high. The interaction of status striving and organizational identification may lead individuals to accomplish the needs of the organization, which align with the desires of individuals despite the cost of the action (Lee *et al.*, 2019).

The current paper consists of the following sections: the literature review and hypothesis development, the research method and results section, and finally the conclusion section, where information about implications and limitations of the study is presented.

Literature review and hypotheses
Narcissism
The term narcissism was first used in the research of Havelock Ellis (1898). The term was mentioned first in the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus, according to the myth, Narcissus was extremely egocentric that he fell desperately in love with his reflection in a pool. The Narcissistic approach that is widely spread nowadays is tightly linked to the approach that Narcissistic individuals cannot accept the case when their ego is under threat (Littleton, 2002; Evslin, 1975).

Identifying the term narcissism is a complex issue, and various researchers have offered a range of suggestions concerning its definitions. According to Baker (1979), narcissistic individuals hardly accept situations when their ego is under threat. For example, the situation when narcissist behavior was negatively rated (Baker, 1979). Individuals high in narcissism

may exhibit the scarcity of natural capability of patience for the long-term benefit as well as detrimentally influence on interactions with other individuals (Robins and Beer, 2001). Furthermore, individuals high in narcissism exhibit a significant level of arrogance (Brown *et al.*, 2009), have the disposition to pin the blame of failure on other individuals as well as significantly rely on the advantageous evaluation from other individuals (Rhodewalt and Morf, 1998). According to the American Psychiatric Association, narcissism is defined as a hyperbolic perception regarding one's self-importance, an irrational feeling of entitlement, desire for admiration, lack of concern about other individual feelings (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000).

Individuals high in narcissism have a tendency to act in various ways to fulfill a desire for recognition or admiration. In the social context, these individuals may apply self-enhancing strategies to achieve personal goals, even at the expense of other individuals (Morf *et al.*, 2011). Narcissism may apply various techniques, for example, nonadoptive attitude or social relationships (Lukowitsky and Pincus, 2013).

Penny and Spector (2002) in their research highlighted that individuals high in narcissism may apply different strategies compared to other individuals in response to the status threat (Penney and Spector, 2002). Research studying the narcissistic impact on the organizational climate suggests that individuals usually demonstrate a high level of enthusiasm and work engagement (Andreassen *et al.*, 2012). At the same time, another research provided that narcissistic individuals might also take part in ethically questionable behavior such as counterproductive work behavior (Grijalva and Newman, 2014). Those considerably inconsistent results highlight the importance of understanding circumstances under which narcissistic individuals take part morally unacceptable tendencies.

Unethical pro-organizational behavior
UPB refers to "actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members and violate core societal values, norms, laws, or standards of proper conduct" (Umphress and Bingham, 2011, p. 622). UPB is considered as an act, which is not accepted by society. For example, providing incorrect information about the quality of the product or hiding the information that might cause damage to the organization. Even though UPB is conducted with a selfless purpose, it is still considered morally challenging and highly risky to other stakeholders. Moreover, evidence suggests that the benefit of engaging in UPB may potentially be short-term, because, in the long run, this behavior might damage the reputation of the organization (Jenkins, 2002).

UPB conceptualization includes three boundary situations when particular acts cannot be classified as UPB. First, in the situation where the reason for committing unethical behavior is not recognizable, in this case, the action cannot fall into the UPB category. For example, due to the lack of knowledge, employees did not notify customers about the item's defect. Second, in the situation when employees intended to benefit or protect the welfare of the organization, but the outcome of the action brings damage to the organization. Finally, situations when unethical behavior may benefit only the actor of the action but cannot be recognized as UPB (Umphress and Bingham, 2011).

UPB is the paradoxical construct (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Up to date research in the area of UPB investigated the relationship between affective commitment and UPB, explaining that affective commitment drive individuals to engage in UPB (Matherne and Litchfield, 2012). Furthermore, the research found a positive relationship between job satisfaction and UPB, explaining that as a mechanism to repay the care of the organization about individuals who commit UPB (Zhang, 2020). In addition, Effelsberg *et al.* (2014) found that transformational leadership positively related to follower UPB. While the above-discussed variable such as affective commitment, job satisfaction and transformational leadership are associated with the high-level relationship in the workplace, other research studies highlighted that UPB can

be committed under a threat, for example, Ghosh (2017) found that job insecurity is positively related to UPB.

UPB is exhibited for various reasons. First, due to the social exchange theory, employees perform UPB as a social exchange tool which might be perceived as an opportunity to reciprocate the past beneficial attitude of the organization (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Umphress and Bingham in 2011 suggested that organizational identification may drive individuals toward UPB. Strong identification with the organization or the situation when employees perceive organizational success as their success may lead individuals to display a willingness to engage in UPB (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Second, UPB can be engaged as a response to the self-threat; in this situation, engaging in UPB might be the way to maintaining a positive self-image or obtain status in the organization (Lee et al., 2019). Lee et al. (2019) revealed that the willingness to gain status in the organization strive individuals to display UPB. The reason is that in organizations UPB is perceived as the action of sacrificing the moral principles of individuals with the intention to benefit or protect the organization. Therefore, individuals might use UPB as an ego defense mechanism (Brown and Starkey, 2000), as this behavior, in the short-term might benefit the organization (Lee et al., 2019). While, in the first case individual engaged in UPB with the greater intention to help the organization, in the second case, the situation is the opposite, since individuals use UPB as a mechanism to fulfill personal goals.

Narcissism and unethical pro-organizational behavior

Research highlights that individuals high in narcissism may apply different strategies compared to other individuals (Penney and Spector, 2002). These individuals show a lack of concern for others, narcissists are perceived in a positive way mostly in short-term interactions, conversely narcissistic attitude has a detrimental influence on a long-term relationship (Paulhus, 1998). Narcissism leads individuals to exhibit a high desire for recognition (Kernberg, 1975), self-importance (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissists demand special treatment and focus on receiving affirmation, and on the other hand neglect social norms (Duchon and Drake, 2009).

Narcissists implement a wide variety of strategies to protect an advantageous self-image (Wallace and Baumeister, 2002). Narcissists tend to engage in morally unacceptable behavior to reach the target (Rijsesbilt and Commandeur, 2013). In the situation when these individuals fail to obtain desirable target, narcissists often display a lack of concern and may act in an unethical way (Rosenthal and Pittinsky, 2006).

Prior research found empirical support for the argument that egoistic norms lead individuals to engage in UPB (Graham et al., 2020). Furthermore, egoistic norms lead an individual to engage in actions that can bring benefit to an individual and the limited number of stakeholders (Jones et al., 2007). Freud (1914) in his research associated Narcissism with egoism, in addition, Paulhus and John (1998) found that narcissism is linked to an egoistic bias that is a component of an agentic value strategy.

Moreover, ego involvement is the boundary condition for narcissists' performance motivation (Williams et al., 2010). Specifically, performance motivation for narcissistic individuals increases in situations that provide an opportunity for self-enhancement, such as success. Narcissists are well-informed that certain performance provides a more substantial opportunity for self-enhancement than others do (Wallace and Baumeister, 2002). UPB might simply be perceived as a high self-enhancement task by which an individual might gain status in the organization since this behavior is intended to protect or promote the welfare of the organization. Moreover, UPB is perceived as an act of sacrificing the ethical principles of the individual to benefit the organization (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). In this case, the current research proposes that individuals high in narcissism might engage in UPB as a shortcut possibility for gain status in an organization.

H1. Narcissism is positively related to UPB.

The mediating role of status striving
The desire to obtain status is the basic human drive that is recognizable in all individuals (Cheng *et al.*, 2010). Status striving represents an agentic motive that guides individuals to secure power and dominance inside of hierarchy (Hogan, 1996; Barrick *et al.*, 2002).

Narcissism is closely linked with the desire to obtain status (Zeigler-Hill and Hobbs, 2017). Narcissism leads individuals to become extremely vulnerable to events which at any level might be perceived as a threat to their status such as disadvantageous response (Baumeister *et al.*, 2000). Narcissistic individuals cannot accept the case when their ego is under threat (Evslin, 1975). Considering the statement above and that status is defined as an extrinsic motivation, leading by extrinsic elements, such as power (Deci and Ryan, 1985), the present research suggests that individuals high in narcissism might strive for status as a part of the ego defensive techniques.

Previous research in the area of UPB provided support for the link between the status and UPB (Castille *et al.*, 2018; Lee *et al.*, 2019). The relationship between these two variables is connected to the reality that individuals who strive for status focused on self-benefit at the cost of the organization (Dahling *et al.*, 2009).

That is why current research proposes that:

H2. Status striving will mediate the relationship between narcissism and UPB.

The moderating role of organizational identification
Organizational identification is characterized as "a perception of oneness of belongingness with the organization" (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Organizational identification leads employees to act according to organizational regulations and experience the organization's interest, success or failure as own interest, success and failure (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Strong organizational identification leads individuals to increase the desire to stay in the organization (Reade, 2001) and also to perform based on the organization's plans and goals (Dutton *et al.*, 1994)

The combination of status striving and organizational identification may lead to a scenario when an individual will try to fulfill the needs and desires of the company that are similar to their own needs and desires despite the cost of the behavior (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Adding the notion, that strong organizational identification may lead employees to neglect moral norms to protect the organization (Umphress and Bingham, 2011), the current study proposes that the relationship between the status striving and UPB will be moderated by organizational identification.

H3. Status striving has a stronger positive relationship with UPB under high organizational identification.

Research in the area of UPB highlighted the importance of exploring individual organizational identification to understand the motivation of engaging in UPB (Graham *et al.*, 2020). Taking into attention the view that individuals with strong organizational identification demonstrate a high desire to strengthen their positive social identity and may engage in ethically questionable action because they value the organization they work in (Sherman and Cohen, 2006). The potential outcome of strong organizational identification can be the falsification of information to protect the company (Burns and Kedia, 2006). The status demonstrates how individuals related to the social group and individual position inside of a social pyramid (Anderson *et al.*, 2015). Combining all arguments introduced previously, we propose that status striving is the mechanism through which narcissistic individuals engage in UPB among individuals with high organizational identification (Figure 1).

H4. Narcissism will be positively associated with UPB through status striving when organizational identification is high.

Research method

Sample and procedure

Uzbekistan is situated in Central Asia and has collectivist traditions (Ilkhamov, 2007). Given the notion that prior research emphasized the importance of collectivist culture in engaging UPB because employees perceive organizational goals more important than individual's beliefs (Zhang, 2020; Hsieh *et al.*, 2020), researchers decided to employ a survey in Uzbekistan.

We used a convenience sampling strategy in our survey. First, the authors contacted managers of the companies located in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and several of them agreed to cooperate with the authors, only in case we do not spread information about companies. Overall, we chose five trading companies from Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The reason is that employees from the companies have a chance to contact customers; this situation presents great chances to engage in UPB (Tang *et al.*, 2020). Second, researchers visited those companies and presented the purpose of the research, and provided the confidentiality of the participants. Byun *et al.* (2018) and Cheng *et al.* (2019) used similar methods for sample collection. Data were collected by paper survey. Responses collected from 213 participants of trading companies in Tashkent, Uzbekistan (response rate was 93%). The final sample comprised 200 participants, 58.5% were female and 29.5% were in a leadership position. Furthermore, 27% of participants were in the position of administrative staff, and 43.5% of participants were in the position of professional staff. Participants' mean age was 35.85 (SD = 8.9). The average organizational tenure of these individuals was 8.04 years (SD = 7.2). To eliminate the social response bias, participants were told that all the data collected only for academic purposes and we proved confidentiality of all the answers. The data are given in Table 2.
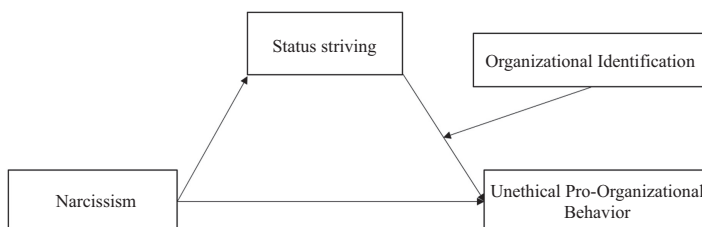
Measures

Narcissism

We adopted the NPI-16 measure to test narcissism (α = 0.93), (Ames *et al.*, 2006). Sample items are "I insist upon getting the respect that is due me," "I am apt to show off if I get the chance". The variable was measured by using a seven-point Likert scale: "from 1- strongly disagree to 7- strongly agree."

Unethical pro-organizational behavior

We measured UPB (α = 0.86) using a six-item self-report scale from Umphress *et al.* (2010). Sample items are "If it would benefit my organization, I would withhold negative information about my company or its products from customers and clients," "If my organization needed me to, I would give a good recommendation on the behalf of an incompetent employee in the hope that the person will become another organization's problem instead of my own."

Figure 1.
Theoretical model

Status striving
We adopted a measure developed by Barrick *et al.* (2002) to test status striving ($\alpha = 0.90$). Sample items are "I care a lot about being the best at my job," "I am challenged by a desire to perform my job better than my coworkers", "I often compare my work accomplishments against coworkers' accomplishments."

Organizational identification
We measured organizational identification using Mael and Ashforth's (1992) six-item scale ($\alpha = 0.81$). The sample item is "My organization's success is my success."

Control variable
Several control variables were included in current research: age, job tenure and social desirability. Since previous research found that psychological entitlement (Lee *et al.*, 2019) and Machiavellianism (Castille *et al.*, 2018) leads individuals to engage in UPB, we controlled these two dispositional variables in our research. Psychological entitlement was measured using Campbell *et al.*'s (2004) 12-item scale ($\alpha = 0.87$) Sample item is "I honestly feel I just deserve more than others." Machiavellianism was measured using Rauthmann's (2013) five-item scale ($\alpha = 0.78$). The sample item is "Anyone who completely trusts anyone else is asking for trouble."

Results
Measurement model testing
We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to confirm the uniqueness of measured constructs in Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) 23.0 in four scales: narcissism, status striving, organizational identification and UPB. According to the results, CMIN = 735.520, CMIN/DF = 1.43, IFI = 0.938, CFI = 0.937 and RMSEA was 0.047. In this case, the four-factor model, which included narcissism, status striving, organizational identification and UPB demonstrated a good fit. As we can see in Table 1, alternative models with a single factor, two factors and three factors exhibited a poorer fit than our theoretical model.

To check for common method bias Harman's single-factor approach was conducted (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Common method bias (CMB) is a problematic issue when one common element will account for all the variables (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The results of the single-factor test demonstrate that the one-factor model outcome was not acceptable and the results of statistical fit were poorer than the four-factor model reported above (Table 1). According to the results, CMB does not seriously affect the research.

Descriptive statistics
Results of mean, SD and correlations for our variables are provided in Table 2. According to the result, narcissism is positively correlated with UPB ($r = 0.539$, $p < 0.01$) and status striving ($r = 0.517$, $p < 0.01$). Status striving is positively correlated with UPB ($r = 0.461$, $p < 0.01$). Organizational identification is positively correlated with narcissism ($r = 0.140$, $p < 0.05$).

Hypothesis testing
To test the hypothesis, the current study used Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 22.0 (trial version). H1 predicted that Narcissism would be positively related to UPB.

Model	x^2	df	p-value	RMSEA	IFI	CFI
One-factor model	1,294,232	372	0.000	0.112	0.704	0.703
Two-factor model	451,422	167	0.000	0.090	0.856	0.855
Three-factor model	560,580	372	0.000	0.057	0.930	0.930
Four-factor model	735,520	512	0.000	0.047	0.938	0.937

Table 1.
Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	35.85	8.90	–									
2. Tenure in organization	8.04	7.27	0.73**	–								
3. Gender	1.59	0.49	–0.09	–0.09	–							
4. Job position	2.15	0.86	–0.13	–0.08	–0.05	–						
5. Narcissism	4.18	1.03	0.03	–0.02	0.06	0.06	–					
6. Status Striving	3.81	0.90	0.06	–0.06	–0.04	0.1	0.51**	–				
7. Organizational identification	5.09	1.01	–0.15*	–0.01	0.18**	–0.02	–0.01	–0.24**	–			
8. UPB	4.28	1.21	0.02	–0.01	–0.02	0.01	0.53**	0.46**	–0.28**	–		
9. Social desirability	1.35	0.17	0.10	0.11	–0.11	0.04	0.05	0.01	–0.19**	0.07	–	
10. Psychological entitlement	4.43	1.15	0.12	0.18**	0.02	–0.03	0.70**	0.40**	–0.04	0.43**	0.11	–
11. Machiavellianism	4.79	0.93	0.10	0.01	–0.11	0.06	0.23**	0.26**	–0.57**	0.34**	0.09	0.21**

Note(s): $N = 200$, **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics
and correlations

Regression analyses combined with the Process macro for SPSS developed by Hayes (2017) were conducted to test the relationship between narcissism and UPB. Results shown in Table 3 indicate that narcissism is positively related to UPB ($\beta = 0.37$, $t = 5.65$, SE $= 0.06$, $p < 0.001$, Model 2) supporting H1.

Preacher and Hayes' (2008) procedure was used to test for mediation relationship. H2 predicted that status striving would mediate the relationship between narcissism and UPB. As it is shown in Table 3, the relationship between narcissism and status striving is significant ($\beta = 0.51$, $t = 8.04$, SE $= 0.06$, $p < 0.001$). The same situation was in the relationship between status striving and UPB ($\beta = 0.26$, $t = 3.71$, SE $= 0.06$, $p < 0.001$, Model 3). Bootstrapping procedure (5,000 resamples) following Preacher and Hayes (2008) was performed to provide support for mediating effect. Results indicate that the indirect effect of narcissism on UPB through status striving was significant ($\beta = 0.13$, SE $= 0.03$, 95% bias-correlated CI [0.06, 0.21], excluding zero). The mediating effect of status striving is 0.13, supporting H2.

H3 predicts that organizational identification moderates the relationship between status striving and UPB. The results of regression analysis are provided in Table 3: the interaction between status striving and organizational identification was significantly related to UPB ($\beta = 0.29$, $t = 6.54$, SE $= 0.04$, $p < 0.001$). To better understand the nature of the interaction, we plotted the relationship between status striving and UPB at ± 1 SD of organizational identification (Figure 2). According to the results, status striving is positively significantly related to UPB for the employees with high organizational identification ($\beta = 0.64$, $t = 7.45$, SE $= 0.08$, $p < 0.001$); Conversely, the results show that the relationship between status striving and UPB was not significant for the individuals with low organizational identification ($\beta = 0.05$, $t = 0.81$, SE $= 0.06$ ns). H3 is supported.

To test for moderated mediation model theorized in H4, we calculated 95% bootstrap confidence interval based on 5,000 bootstrap samples using the PROCESS macro. According to the results, conditional indirect effect (narcissism → status striving → UPB) is significant, when followers have a high organizational identification ($\beta = 0.31$, Bootstrap SE $= 0.06$, 95% bias-correlated CI [0.20, 0.44], excluding zero). However, this is not the case when individuals have low organizational identification ($\beta = 0.02$, Bootstrap SE $= 0.04$, 95% bias-correlated CI [−0.07, 0.09]). H4 is supported.

| | Willingness to engage in unethical pro-group behaviour | | | | | | | |
| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | |
Variable	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Step 1. Control variables								
Age	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.08	−0.01	0.01	−0.003	0.01
Job tenure	−0.01	0.01	−0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Social desirability	0.04	0.03	0.20	0.28	0.02	0.03	0.05	0.03
Psychological entitlement	0.01*	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Machiavellianism	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Step 2. Predictor variables								
Narcissism			0.37***	0.06	0.51***	0.06	0.51***	0.06
Status striving					0.26***	0.06	0.36***	0.06
Step 3. Interaction Effects								
Status striving* Organizational identification							0.29***	0.04
R^2	0.04		0.35***		0.30***		0.46***	

Note(s): $N = 200$, ***$p < 0.001$; *$p < 0.05$

Table 3.
Results of regression analysis for UPB

Discussion

The current study addresses the recent calls in investigating the dispositional factors as an antecedent of UPB (e.g. Miao *et al.*, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2019), consisted with our statement we found that Narcissism leads individuals to engage in UPB. Moreover, we investigated the role of status striving in the relationship between narcissism and UPB. Furthermore, we tested the moderated mediation model of the antecedents of UPB and found that the relationship between status striving and UPB is moderated by organizational identification. Specifically, individuals with high organizational identification exhibit a greater willingness to engage in UPB. The explanation might be that interaction of status striving and organizational identification may drive individuals to fulfill the needs and desires of the company that are similar to their own needs and desires despite the cost (Lee *et al.*, 2019).

Theoretical contribution

The current study contributes to the literature of UPB. The previous study in the area of antecedents of UPB mainly focused on attitudinal and situational factors that lead to UPB (e.g. Effelsberg *et al.*, 2014; Chen *et al.*, 2016) and neglected the role of personality as an antecedent of UPB. Current research extended the literature of UPB by providing empirical evidence of dispositional variable, narcissism and its positive relationship with UPB. In the organization, UPB is perceived as a selfless act of sacrificing the ethical principles of an individual to benefit the organization (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). In the current research, we found support for the proposition that narcissistic individuals might engage in UPB as a shortcut opportunity for self-enhancement. Moreover, the relationship between narcissism and UPB is mediated by status striving. Considering the notion that UPB consisted of pro-organizational action such as protecting the welfare of the organization (Umphress and Bingham, 2011), individuals might engage in UPB to obtain status in the organization (Lee *et al.*, 2019).

The current research contributes to the literature on narcissism and its relationship with UPB. Studies in the area of narcissism provided inconsistent results regarding the outcome of narcissistic individuals, while some researchers suggest that narcissistic individuals demonstrate a high level of enthusiasm and greatly engaged in a job (Andreassen *et al.*, 2012), the other studies provide that narcissistic individuals take part in morally unacceptable behavior such as counterproductive work behaviors (Meier and Semmer, 2013; Grijalva and Newman, 2014). In our study, we found empirical support for the notion that narcissistic individuals might engage in behavior that might support or protect the organization, even in an unethical way. This finding sheds light on the outcomes of narcissism for the organization.

Practical implications

Considering that UPB might cause non-beneficial economic results on the companies in the long-term (Umphress and Bingham, 2011), organizations should develop special techniques
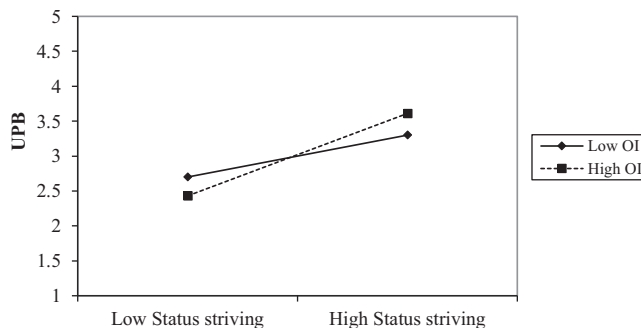
Figure 2.
Engaging in UPB as function of status striving with low and high organizational identification (OI) among narcissistic individuals

to prevent the cases of UPB. Current research found that narcissism leads individuals to engage in UPB to gain status in the organizations. In this case, research suggests to the organizations to develop special ethics guidance to change the employee's perceptions of UPB from the act of helping the organization to unacceptable organizational act.

Moreover, to prevent the situation of engaging in UPB by narcissistic individuals, the organization may establish an ethical counseling program, which can be perceived as a signal, that ethical decision is respectable for the company.

Furthermore, the research highlighted that a high level of organizational identification may also increase the chances to engage in UPB. For this, managers should increase the motivation of employees to conduct sociably acceptable behavior, by explaining the possible outcomes of strategies that help the internal and do not bring any damage to external stakeholders.

Limitations and suggestions for the future research

The current study has some limitations. First, all variables were measured by self-report, which might cause CMB. Several practices were applied to decrease the CMB. The research used social desirability as a control mechanism. Moreover, research followed recommendations by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) and employed Harman's single-factor approach. This approach is constructed on the statement that CMB is a problematic issue when one general factor will account for the majority of the common variables (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The results of the single-factor test demonstrate that no single factor accounted for all covariance and demonstrate that common method bias is not a severe problem in this study.

Second, the research did not use actual reported UPB but measured employees' willingness to engage in UPB. Although, the research provided that actual unethical actions came from the intention to engage in unethical behavior (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2010). Future research should focus on measuring actual UPB cases in the workplace.

The third limitation was the cross-sectional design of the research. Cross-sectional research can hardly present support for the alternative arguments to support the model. To eliminate alternative arguments in explaining the model, future research should mainly focus on experimental or longitudinal designs that might provide a better explanation of the research model.

While most studies focus on the antecedents of UPB, future research should focus on the potential outcomes of UPB over time. Employees, who engage in UPB, might not be aware of the potentially destructive impact of UPB on the organization that is why it is significant to research this question.

Fourth, the comparatively small effect size of current research. In most experienced sampling method studies the relatively small effect size is a common case (Koopman *et al.*, 2020). Previous researchers emphasized that small effect sizes may still provide an important contribution to the literature (Tang *et al.*, 2020). Future research should consider sample size to increase the validity of the research.

Next, current research mainly focused on the case when narcissistic individuals engage in UPB in short-term because considering the nature of narcissism, for which admiration is a very significant factor (Morf *et al.*, 2011) and also the notion that engaging in UPB may bring the favorable consequences in the short-term and damaging the reputation in the long-term (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Future research should analyze whether narcissistic individuals engage in UPB in long-term. The study claimed that for narcissistic individuals engaging in UPB in long-term might not bring admiration, which these individuals are looking for, since cases of committing UPB might simply become revealed to the society after some period and may result in serious reputation damage and financial losses (Jung and Sharon, 2019).

Furthermore, considering that previous research highlighted the notion that collectivist culture, which can be viewed in Asian region countries important phenomenon in engaging in UPB (Zhang, 2020; Hsieh *et al.*, 2020), research in this area is scant. Future studies should consider whether similar outcomes could be viewed in non-collectivistic culture countries of the Asian region.

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