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The Relationship Between Ethical Leadership and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior: Linear or Curvilinear Effects?

Q. Miao · A. Newman · J. Yu · L. Xu

Abstract In this study, we examine the nature of the relationship between ethical leadership and unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), defined as unethical behavior conducted by employees with the aim of benefiting their organization, and whether the strength of the relationship differs between subordinates experiencing high and low identification with supervisor. Based on three-wave survey data obtained from 239 public sector employees in China, we find that ethical leadership has an inverted u-shaped (curvilinear) relationship with UPB. As the level of ethical leadership increases from low to moderate, UPB increases; as the level of ethical leadership increases from moderate to high, UPB decreases. Further, we find that the strength of this inverted u-curve relationship differs between subordinates with high and low identification with supervisor. That is to say, the inverted u-shaped relationship between ethical leadership and UPB was stronger when subordinates experienced high levels of identification with supervisor. The theoretical and managerial implications of our findings for understanding how to manage UPB in an organizational context are discussed.

Keywords Curvilinear relationship · Ethical leadership · Identification with supervisor · Social exchange theory · Social learning theory · Unethical pro-organizational behavior

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Introduction

Over the course of the last decade, a growing body of research has focused on the role played by ethical leadership in regulating the ethical conduct of subordinates. Ethical leadership has been shown to be effective in reducing employee misconduct, deviant behaviors, and organizational bullying in the workplace (Mayer et al. 2009; Mayer et al. 2010; Stouten et al. 2010). However, previous studies investigating the influence of ethical leadership on unethical behavior have primarily focused their attention on behavior which goes against the interests of the organization (Peterson 2004; Ruiz-Palomino and Martinez-Cañas 2011). Limited attention has been placed on the role played by ethical leadership in regulating the unethical conduct of subordinates when it is conducted in favor of the organization. Such behavior, referred to in the literature as unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), has been defined as "actions that 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" (Umphress and Bingham 2011, p. 622).

This study builds upon recent empirical work (Umphress et al. 2010) by examining the nature of the relationship

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between ethical leadership and UPB, and whether the strength of the relationship differs according to the strength of a subordinate's identification with supervisor. In doing this, two main contributions are made to the existing literature. First, by drawing on contrasting perspectives from the social learning and social exchange theories we argue and test for an inverted u-shaped (curvilinear) relationship between ethical leadership and UPB, given the pro-organizational nature of UPB compared to other forms of unethical behavior in the workplace. More precisely, we expect that subordinates working under a moderate level of ethical leadership are more likely to engage in UPB than those working under low or high levels of ethical leadership, because the exhibition of moderate levels of ethical leadership sends a signal to subordinates that although their leader realizes the need to address ethical issues, the interest of the organization comes first. Such leaders typically engender a higher quality of social exchange relationship with their subordinates than those who exhibit low levels of ethical leadership, so will make subordinates feel more comfortable to engage in risky behaviors such as UPB (Tumasjan et al. 2011). In contrast, subordinates working under low levels of ethical leadership will be less willing to engage risky behaviors such as UPB, given the low quality of social exchange relationship with their supervisor, and those working under high levels of ethical leadership will be provided with a clearer message that unethical behavior, even when it is pro-organizational in nature like UPB, will not be accepted through social modeling by the leader. In other words, only at high levels of ethical leadership will the social learning effects of ethical leadership on subordinates outweigh the effects that high-quality social exchange relationships may have in engendering positive behavior towards the organization, when it is unethical in nature. In arguing for curvilinear effects, we refer to recent work which suggests that the impact of ethical leadership on subordinate outcomes might not always be linear in nature (Stouten et al. 2012).

The study also contributes to the literature by investigating whether the strength of the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB differs between subordinates with high and low levels of identification with supervisor. Specifically, drawing on the social identity theory (Kark et al. 2003), we propose that the inverted u-curve relationship between ethical leadership and UPB will be stronger when subordinates experience high levels of identification with supervisor. Based on the previous literature, we argue that subordinates experiencing high levels of identification with supervisor will be more likely to act in accordance with their supervisors values than those low in identification (van Knippenberg 2000; Aron 2003; van Knippenberg et al. 2004; Sluss and Ashforth 2007). This should lead them to exhibit higher levels of

UPB when they experience moderate levels of ethical leadership, as they are more likely to concur with their supervisor that acting in the interests of the organization is of greater importance than abiding by ethical standards.

The present study contributes to the existing literature by answering the call of researchers to explore the antecedents of UPB (Umphress et al. 2010). It is important to investigate the possible impact of ethical leadership on UPB given that although UPB may seem beneficial to the organization initially, it may also serve to harm the reputation and legal standing of the organization if the behavior involves bribery, falsifying documents, and lying to customers and investors, as such behavior is illegal in most countries. Over the course of recent years, governments have increasingly sought to prosecute companies whose employees engage in unethical behaviors both at home and abroad. For example, the US's Foreign Corrupt Practices Act makes it illegal for employees of US-based organizations to provide monetary rewards of gifts to facilitate business activities outside the US (Weismann 2009; Kaikati et al. 2000). As a result of these strict regulations, organizations are increasingly taking steps to identify and reduce unethical behavior conducted by employees, even that which may benefit the organization. By focusing on the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB, we are able to examine in greater detail the social antecedents of unethical behavior that is conducted with the aim of benefiting the organization. The findings of this research study should also enable us to inform organizations how best to train their managerial level employees to regulate the UPB of subordinates.

Literature Review

Ethical Leadership

Brown et al. (2005) define ethical leadership as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (p. 120). This definition highlights four elements of ethical leadership. First of all, ethical leaders conduct behaviors that are "normatively appropriate" in the eyes of followers, and thus build up credit as ethical role models. Second, ethical leaders make ethical messages explicit in the work place and encourage feedback from followers. Third, ethical leaders set clear ethical standards and regulate the ethical behavior of followers through reward and punishment. Finally, ethical leaders attend to ethical principles in the process by which they make decisions and make such a process observable to followers.

Brown et al.'s (2005) conceptualization of ethical leadership is based on two qualitative studies conducted by Treviño et al. (2000, 2003). Through semi-structured interviews, the researchers explored what ethical leaders are like in the eyes of their followers. The interview findings demonstrate that for leaders to be perceived as ethical, they must act as both a moral person and a moral manager. The moral person dimension involves the exhibition of certain traits such as honesty, integrity and trustworthiness, certain behaviors such as doing the right thing, being considerate and approachable to followers, and certain decision-making styles that reflect the leader's ethical principles. However, being perceived as a moral person is a necessary, but not sufficient step towards ethical leadership. Ethical leaders must also take up the moral manager role by engaging in ethical role modeling, developing a strong ethical message and communicating it effectively to followers, and thus leading followers towards good ethical conduct. Brown and Treviño (2006) argue that the moral manager dimension implies an important transactional aspect of ethical leadership: the use of a reward and discipline system to regulate ethical and unethical behaviors. However, this dimension is often overlooked in practice, resulting in most leaders being perceived as ethically neutral by employees (Treviño et al. 2000, 2003).

Social learning theory (Bandura 1977, 1986) provides a theoretical basis to explain how ethical leaders affect the behavior of followers. The major premise of social learning theory is that individuals can learn by observing and emulating others' attitudes and behaviors (Bandura 1977). Leaders are an important source of role modeling within the organizational context by virtue of their status and success in the organization (Bandura 1986). Through exercising rewards and punishments within an organizational hierarchy, employees can learn from them what kind of behavior is expected, rewarded, and punished. In addition, ethical leaders are also a salient source for observation and emulation because of their attractive personal traits such as honesty and trustworthiness, and the credibility of their ethical conduct (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009).

Brown et al.'s (2005) ethical leadership scale (ELS) has furthered the empirical investigation of ethical leadership over the course of the last decade. Initial evidence indicates that ethical leadership is a meaningful and reliable construct, and empirically distinguishable from similar concepts such as the idealized influence aspect of transformational leadership, leader–member exchange, honesty, and interactional justice (Brown et al. 2005; Toor and Ofori 2009; Kalshoven et al. 2011; Mayer et al. 2012). A growing number of empirical studies have investigated the antecedents and outcomes of ethical leadership. Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009) find a positive association between ethical leadership and personality traits such as agreeableness and

conscientiousness. Kalshoven et al. (2011) reveal a positive relationship between conscientiousness and emotional stability and ethical leadership, after controlling for the effects of leader–member exchange. With respect to the outcomes of ethical leadership, research has shown that ethical leadership enhances employee work attitudes such as job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment (Neubert et al. 2009; Ruiz et al. 2011), job performance (Piccolo et al. 2010; Walumbwa et al. 2011), voice behavior (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009), and organizational citizenship behavior (Piccolo et al. 2010; Avey et al. 2011; Kacmer et al. 2011; Ruiz-Palomino et al. 2011). In addition, scholars find that ethical leadership is effective in reducing subordinates' misconduct, deviant behaviors, and organizational bullying in the workplace (Mayer et al. 2009, 2010; Stouten et al. 2010; Avey et al. 2011).

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

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, mores, laws, or standards of proper conduct" (Umphress and Bingham 2011, p. 622). This definition incorporates two key components. First, UPB is unethical, i.e. it is behavior that violates widely held standards of ethical behavior as measured by values, laws or social norms, and not group or organizational norms. The second component of the definition relates to the intent behind the unethical action. UPB must be conducted with the intent of benefiting the organization, members of the organization, or both. This motivation differentiates it from other self-centered unethical behaviors, given they tend to be conducted with the aim of benefitting the perpetrator. Nevertheless, Umphress et al. (2010) argue that UPB cannot be completely separated from other self-centered unethical behaviors because behaviors benefiting the organization may also benefit the individual themselves. Examples of UPB include destroying documents that may cause harm to the organization, and lying or manipulating information to protect the organization's image.

Umphress and Bingham's (2011) conceptualization of UPB identifies three boundary situations when certain behaviors will not fall into the UPB category. First of all, if unethical behaviors are conducted without a conscious purpose, they should not be considered as UPB. Secondly, the authors acknowledge the case in which employees may undertake an action with the intent of benefiting the organization, but the result of such an action may work contrary to its original purpose. In this case the action will not be classified as UPB. Finally, unethical behaviors of only self-serving purposes are not classified as UPB.

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Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) and social exchange theory (Blau 1964) have been used to explain why individuals might engage in UPB. Umphress et al. (2010) argue that organizational identification and positive reciprocity beliefs might influence the propensity of an individual to conduct unethical behaviour in favour of the organization. According to social identity theory, an individual's self-concept is partly derived from their relationship with social groups, including their employing organization (Tajfel 1982). The extent to which organizational membership influences the self-concept of an individual has been conceptualized as organizational identification (Mael and Ashforth 1992). Although organizational identification has been shown to increase productive work behaviour, it has also been demonstrated to lead individuals to disregard their own ethical standards and engage in acts that favour the organization, even when those acts inflict harm on entities outside the organization (Dukerich et al. 1998; Umphress and Bingham 2011). However, this is only likely to be the case when individuals have positive beliefs that their organization will reciprocate through the provision of future rewards in return for their actions. Using data from two field studies, Umphress et al. (2010) find that an individual's organizational identification alone does not predict UPB. They find that organizational identification in combination with strong positive reciprocity beliefs work together to influence UPB.

The Relationship Between Ethical Leadership and UPB

The central tenet of ethical leadership theory posits that ethical leaders model ethical behaviors and regulate the ethical conduct of followers through the adoption of reward and discipline systems (Brown and Treviño 2006). Social learning theory further postulates that followers emulate the leader's ethical decision-making and vicariously learn about what are the right or wrong things to do (Brown et al. 2005). Therefore, it should follow that if employees perceive their supervisor to be of an ethical character, they will be less likely to engage in unethical behavior in the workplace. This proposition is confirmed by a number of empirical studies (Mayer et al. 2009; Mayer et al. 2010; Stouten et al. 2010). Mayer et al. (2009) find that the impact of ethical leadership from top management on group-level deviance behavior is mediated by the ethical leadership of the supervisor. Building upon this work, Mayer et al. (2010) reveal that the negative relationship between ethical leadership of the supervisor and subordinate misconduct is fully mediated by ethical climate, in other words ethical leaders reduce the likelihood that their subordinates will engage in unethical behavior by creating an ethical climate in which individuals are provided with a

cue as to which behaviors are unacceptable in their work environment. Similarly, Stouten et al. (2010) find that ethical leadership reduces bullying in the workplace through improving the design of the work environment. However, other studies find contradicting evidence on the impact of ethical leadership on the deviant behavior of subordinates (Dineen et al. 2006; Detert et al. 2007). For example, Dineen et al.'s (2006) study indicates that supervisory guidance does not influence the tendency for subordinates to engage in deviant behavior in the banking industry. Likewise, Detert et al. (2007) find no evidence of a significant relationship between ethical leadership and counterproductive behavior in the restaurant industry.

While unethical behaviors constitute one aspect of UPB, the pro-organizational nature of UPB implies that the relationship between ethical leadership and subordinate UPB might not be linear in nature. As highlighted previously, researchers have explored other influence mechanisms of ethical leadership beyond social learning theory, such as social exchange theory (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009; Walumbwa et al. 2011). Based on the tenets of social exchange theory (Blau 1964), we might expect ethical leadership to engender a high quality social relationship with the subordinate, given that ethical leaders typically treat their subordinates with fairness, trust and care (Brown et al. 2005; Brown and Mitchell Brown and Mitchell 2010). In return, this should lead the subordinate to reciprocate in the form of behaviors favored by their supervisor. For example, Tumasjan et al. (2011) find that follower's perception of his/her leader's ethical leadership is positively associated with his/her quality of relationship (LMX) with that leader. Likewise, Walumbwa et al. (2011) find that LMX partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance. In Brown and Mitchell's (2010) review of the ethical leadership literature, social exchange theory is also used to explain why followers with ethical leadership guidance engage in prosocial behaviors or refrain from deviant or unethical behaviors. However, they fail to acknowledge a potential negative outcome of positive social relationships- UPB. Umphress et al. (2010) propose and empirically confirm that the employee's positive reciprocity beliefs, combined with a strong sense of organizational identification, act together to influence the UPB of employees.

Given the findings of these studies, we propose an inverted u-shaped (curvilinear) relationship between the ethical leadership behavior of the supervisor and the tendency of subordinates to engage in UPB. More specifically, we argue that employees working under moderate levels of ethical leadership will be more likely to engage in UPB than those guided by low and high levels of ethical leadership for two main reasons. First, we argue that subordinates experiencing moderate levels of ethical leadership

will engage in greater UPB than those guided by low levels of ethical leadership because they typically have a higher quality of social exchange relationship with their supervisors, and stronger identification with the organization (Brown and Treviño 2006; Walumbwa et al. 2011). As a result they will feel that they are trusted and treated more fairly by their supervisor than subordinates who experience low levels of ethical leadership. This should make them feel more comfortable to reciprocate and engage in behavior they feel is required by their supervisor and the organization (Tumasjan et al. 2011), especially when it is of a risky nature such as UPB. Second, we argue that subordinates experiencing moderate levels of ethical leadership will engage in greater UPB than those guided by high levels of ethical leadership because only the exhibition of high levels of ethical leadership will provide subordinates with a consistent and clear message to abide by ethical standards and avoid engaging in unethical behavior, even when it is pro-organizational in nature (Kalshoven et al. 2011). The implementation of robust reward and discipline systems to reward ethical behavior by supervisors high in ethical leadership should also help to discourage unethical behaviors such as UPB through allowing their followers to vicariously learn what is appropriate behavior (Brown et al. 2005).

In contrast, a moderate level of ethical leadership may send subordinates the message that their leader realizes the need to address ethical issues, but that they have other more important concerns in mind such as the interests of the organization. This may cause a great degree of confusion to subordinates in situations in which ethical standards are in conflict with the organizational interest. The inadequate emphasis placed by the leader in guiding ethical behavior is likely to facilitate the process of neutralization whereby individuals justify their unethical behaviors with other righteous reasons, thus removing the unethical implication of such behaviors (Umphress and Bingham 2011). Supervisors who exhibit moderate levels of ethical leadership may also be perceived as being low on integrity given they send mixed messages to their subordinates as to what is appropriate behavior and come across as being inconsistent (Kalshoven et al. 2011). This may lead subordinates not to take their supervisor's messages seriously on the occasions where they stress it is important to act in an ethical manner. In other words, only at high levels of ethical leadership will the social learning effects of ethical leadership on subordinates' ethical conduct outweigh the effects that high quality social exchange relationships may have in engendering positive behavior towards the organization such as UPB.

Although there is a dearth of research examining the curvilinear effects of leadership on subordinate outcomes, in recent years scholars have begun to recognize that the impact of ethical leadership on subordinate behavior might not always be linear in nature. For example, recent work by Stouten et al. (2012) reveals a curvilinear relationship between ethical leadership and subordinate pro-social behavior. Based on this we develop the following hypothesis:

H1 There will be an inverted u-shaped (curvilinear) relationship between the ethical leadership behavior of the supervisor and subordinate UPB.

The Moderating Effects of Identification with Supervisor

Over the last decade research on identity and identification in the workplace has proliferated in the area of organizational behavior (Ashforth et al. 2008). Typically, researchers have focused on how an individual's identification with a group or organization they belong to influences their attitudes and behavior in the workplace (Van Knippenberg et al. 2004). However, recent studies have broadened the categorization to include their relational identity i.e. the personal relationships an individual has with other organizational members including their immediate supervisor (Kark et al. 2003; Sluss and Ashforth 2007; Wang and Rode 2010).

Several researchers have proposed that supervisors exert influence on their subordinates through influencing certain elements of their self-concept (Kark et al. 2003; van Knippenberg et al. 2004). Self-concept can be conceptualized as having three dimensions 1) the personal self, the extent to which an individual is defined by their unique personal characteristics; 2) the relational self, the extent to which the self is defined by relationships with other individuals; 3) and the collective self, the extent to which the self is defined by membership of social groups (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Lord et al. 1999). The extent to which a supervisor is included in the subordinate's relational self has been conceptualized as identification with supervisor (Kark et al. 2003; van Knippenberg et al. 2004).

Consistent with this definition, we examine whether the strength of the u-shaped (curvilinear) relationship between ethical leadership and UPB differs between subordinates with high and low levels of identification with supervisor. We argue that the proposed curvilinear relationship between ethical leadership and UPB will be stronger for subordinates with high levels of identification with supervisor than those with low levels, as identification with supervisor leads subordinates to exhibit greater sensitivity to the expectations of their supervisor, internalize the goals and values of the supervisor as their own, and work harder in the interests of their supervisor and the organization (van Knippenberg 2000; Aron 2003; van Knippenberg et al. 2004; Sluss and Ashforth 2007, 2008). For example, Sluss and Ashforth (2007) propose that when an individual identifies with

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another person in a work relationship, they will become susceptible to the social influence that results from this relationship. Thus it follows that the views of supervisors are more likely to influence and shape the views of their subordinates as to what is appropriate behavior when identification with supervisor is at a high level. As a result it might be expected that subordinates experiencing high levels of identification with their supervisor will be more likely to engage in UPB when they are guided by moderate levels of ethical leadership, given that in line with their supervisor's thinking, they will typically consider the interests of the organization to be more important than addressing ethical issues. In other words they will share a similar opinion as their supervisor vis-à-vis the relative importance of acting in the interests of the organization to abiding by ethical standards. Likewise when they experience high levels of ethical leadership, subordinates with high levels of identification with supervisor are less likely to engage in UPB. Recent work is supportive of such assertions. For example, Carmeli et al. (2011) demonstrate that identification with supervisor leads subordinates to exhibit greater levels of organizational identification and promotes their behavior in favor of the organization. They argue that this results from the fact that leaders play an important role in helping their subordinates integrate into the organization and are likely to portray the organization in a positive manner in doing so. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H2   The u-curve relationship between ethical leadership and UPB will be stronger for subordinates with high identification with supervisor than for those with low identification with supervisor.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

Participants in the research study were all full-time public-sector employees working in government departments in Zhejiang Province, China. They were recruited from an alumni database of former students who had completed a Master of Public Administration at the College of Public Administration, Zhejiang University. Survey invitations were distributed electronically to 1,000 alumni from the database by e-mail, with the assurance that their responses would be treated confidentially. The alumni contacted were chosen randomly from the database. If the individual agreed to be surveyed they were provided with links to three sets of online surveys in two week intervals during April to May 2011. The time lag between each wave of the survey was intended to reduce the likelihood of common method variance and mitigate respondent fatigue. Before

distribution of the survey instrument it was translated from English to Chinese and back-translated to check the accuracy of the translation. The back-translation corresponded well with the original version of the questionnaire.

At Time 1 participants were required to rate the ethical leadership of their immediate supervisor, the ethical environment in their organization and provide demographic information. Those who responded at Time 1 were asked at Time 2 to rate the extent to which they identified with their leader. Finally, at Time 3 participants who had responded at Time 2 assessed the extent to which they engaged in UPB. 362 participants completed the first wave of the survey, followed by 252 and 239 in the second and third waves respectively. This amounted to a final response rate of 24 percent. In order to account for non-response bias we compared the demographic characteristics of those who had responded fully, those who had responded partially and those who had not responded at all. We found no significant differences between each group of individuals. In addition, we compared the responses between partial respondents and full respondents to waves one and two of the survey. Again no major differences were found. These checks suggest the lack of non-response bias in our data. The proportion of female employees in our sample was 36.8 percent. Around 59 percent of participants were in managerial roles and over 93 percent of them were younger than 40. Only 4.2 percent of them had been with their present supervisor for more than 10 years.

Measures

Independent Variable: Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership was measured using the 10-item ELS scale developed by Brown et al. (2005). This scale has been shown to demonstrate good reliability in a large number of industrial and geographical contexts (Brown et al. 2005; Mayer et al. 2010; Walumbwa et al. 2011). Respondents were asked to rate the ethical leadership of their immediate supervisor using a five-point Likert scale (where $1 =$ strongly disagree and $5 =$ strongly agree). Sample items included 'My supervisor disciplines employees who violate ethical standards', and 'My supervisor sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics'. The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was .955.

Dependent Variable: UPB

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) was measured using a 6-item self-report scale adapted from Umphress et al. (2010). Respondents required to rate the extent to which they

engaged in UPB using a five-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Sample items included "If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good" and "If it would benefit my organization, I would withhold negative information about my organization." The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .791.

Categorical Variable: Identification with Supervisor

Identification with supervisor was assessed using a 7-item scale developed by Shamir et al. (1998). Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they identified with their immediate supervisor using a five-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Sample items included "My supervisor is a model for me to follow" and "my values are similar to my supervisor's values." The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .949.

Control Variables

As prior research has shown that demographic characteristics may influence the extent to which individuals engage in unethical behavior (Erdogan and Liden 2002), we controlled for the effects of demographic characteristics. Age and tenure with supervisor were measured as dichotomous variables. To measure age, the following categories were utilized: 1 = "26–30", 2 = "31–35", 3 = "36–40", 4 = "41–45", 5 = "46–50," and 6 = "51–55." To measure tenure with supervisor, the following categories were utilised: 1 = "less than 1 year", 2 = "2–5 years", 3 = "6–9 years", 4 = "10–13 years", 5 = "14–16 years," and 6 = "17–19 years." Gender was controlled for through the use of a dummy variable (0 = female, 1 = male). Position in organization was coded 1 through 4 based on the hierarchy of ranks in the Chinese civil sector (1 = non-managerial employees, 2 = section managers, 3 = department managers, and 4 = senior managers). The ethical environment of the organizational was also controlled for using a 14-item scale developed by Treviño et al. (1998) as it has been shown to influence the unethical behavior of employees. As with other scales, it was measured using a five-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Sample items included "Management in my organization disciplines unethical behavior when it occurs" and "Penalties for unethical behavior are strictly enforced in my organization." The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .962.

Analysis and Results

The data analysis was undertaken in two steps. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using

Table 1 Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Model	χ^2	df	IFI	CFI	RMSEA
Four-factor model	1151.44	623	.98	.98	.06
Three-factor model (ethical leadership and ethical environment combined)	3878.99	626	.90	.90	.15
One-factor model	5903.45	299	.83	.83	.19

IFI incremental fit index, *CFI* comparative fit index, *RMSEA* root-mean-square error of approximation

LISREL 8.8 to test the discriminant validity of the multiple-item measures used in the study. Second, hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the study hypotheses.

In Table 1, the results of CFA are presented. A test for common method variance was conducted using Harman's recommendations. A one-factor model was compared to that of the proposed four-factor model. Comparison of goodness-of-fit indices showed that the one-factor model was significantly worse than that of the four-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2(324) = 4752.01$, $p < .01$). These results suggest that CMV is not a serious threat to the findings of this study (Podsakoff et al. 2003). We also compared the goodness-of-fit indices of the four-factor model with that of a three-factor model in which items measuring ethical leadership and ethical environment were loaded onto a single factor. Again, the indices of the three-factor model were significantly worse ($\Delta\chi^2(3) = 2727.55$, $p < .01$), suggesting the four-factor model fitted the data best.

The means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability coefficients of study variables are presented in Table 2.

Hierarchical regression analysis was employed to test both hypotheses. Its findings are shown in Table 3.

In Model 1, the control variables were entered into the regression. Only managerial position was significantly

Table 2 Descriptive statistics, correlations and reliability coefficients of study variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Ethical environment	2.978	.844	(.962)			
2. Ethical leadership	3.235	.938	.632**	(.955)		
3. Unethical pro-organizational behavior	2.990	.698	.125	.090	(.791)	
4. Identification with leader	3.194	.930	.538**	.722**	.101	(.949)

Numbers in parentheses are the coefficient alphas

*, ** indicate significance at the 5 and 1 % levels, respectively

Table 3 Hierarchical regression analysis

Dependent variable	Unethical pro-organizational behavior				
	Model 1 Whole sample	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 High identification	Model 5 Low identification
Step 1: Control variables					
Managerial position	.201**	.201**	.195**	.133	.234**
Tenure	.012	.014	.005	−.030	.017
Gender	−.073	−.072	−.083	−.080	−.081
Age	−.049	−.047	−.044	−.167	.043
Ethical environment	.104	.094	.078	.056	.086
ΔR^2	.062*	.062*	.062*	.040*	.109*
Step 2: Independent and moderating variables					
Ethical leadership		.016	−.022	−.007	−.023
ΔR^2		.000	.000	.006	.003
Step 3: Interactive effects					
Ethical leadership × ethical leadership			−.135*	−.190*	−.122
ΔR^2			.016*	.029*	.004
Overall model					
R^2	.062	.062	.078	.075	.116
N	239	239	239	113	126

*, ** indicate significance at the 5 % and 1 % levels respectively

related to UPB, in other words managers at higher organizational levels were more likely to engage in unethical behavior that favors their employing organization. In Model 2, the independent variable, ethical leadership, was entered into the regression. It was found to be unrelated to UPB. In Model 3, the non-linear effects of ethical leadership on UPB were examined through entering a quadratic term (ethical leadership × ethical leadership) into the regression. The effects of the quadratic term is negative and significant ($\beta = -.135$, $p < .05$) and explained an additional 1.6 % in the variance. This supports Hypothesis 1, which predicted that ethical leadership would have an inverted u-shaped relationship with UPB. Although small in magnitude, the percentage of variance explained by the quadratic term are in line with organizational research studies investigating non-linear effects (Harris et al. 2005). Figure 1 graphically represents the inverted u-shaped relationship between ethical leadership and UPB. The figure was created using the regression coefficients and plotting the values for UPB at different levels of ethical leadership (Buchholtz and Ribbens 1994). As can be seen in the figure, as the level of ethical leadership increases from low to moderate, UPB increases and as the level of ethical leadership increases from moderate to high, UPB decreases.

In Models 4 and 5, in order to better understand the influence of identification with supervisor on the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB, the sample was split into two groups; individuals with low-to-moderate

Fig. 1 Relationship between ethical leadership and UPB

levels of identification with supervisor and those with moderate-to-high levels of identification with supervisor. In Model 4, we ran a similar regression to that in Model 3 but only include subordinates whose identification with supervisor was higher than the mean of the sample. In Model 5, we do the same, but for subordinates whose identification with supervisor was lower than the mean of the sample. In line with Hypothesis 2, we found that the inverted u-shaped relationship between ethical leadership and UPB was stronger for the group with high identification with supervisor. We plot the inverted u-shaped relationship between ethical leadership and UPB for both groups in Fig. 2. As can been seen in the figure, at low
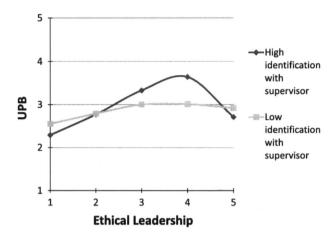
Fig. 2 Relationship between ethical leadership and UPB for individuals high and low in identification with supervisor

levels of ethical leadership the positive impact of ethical leadership on UPB is stronger for those with high identification with supervisor than those with low identification with supervisor. Similarly, at high levels of ethical leadership, the negative effect of ethical leadership on UPB is also stronger for those with high identification with supervisor.

Discussion

The major objective of this study was to gain a better understanding of the role played by the ethical leadership of supervisors in regulating the UPB of subordinates. Consistent with our hypotheses, we found an inverted u-shaped relationship between ethical leadership and UPB, and that the relationship was stronger for subordinates who experienced high levels of identification with supervisor.

This study has a number of theoretical implications. Although a great deal of research has investigated the relationship between ethical leadership and unethical behavior that goes against the interests of the organization (Mayer et al. 2009, 2010; Stouten et al. 2010), we have limited understanding of the social processes which may influence UPB in workplace settings. Our research builds upon recent work by Umphress and her associates (Umphress et al. 2010; Umphress and Bingham 2011), by looking at the role played by ethical leadership in regulating the conduct of UPB. Although previous studies have found that ethical leadership reduces the propensity of subordinates to engage in unethical behavior that goes against the interests of the organization (Mayer et al. 2009, 2010; Stouten et al. 2010), our study suggests that the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB is more complex, given the pro-organizational nature of UPB. First, we found that subordinates guided by moderate levels of

ethical leadership are more likely to engage in UPB than those guided by low levels of ethical leadership. Specifically, we found that when the level of supervisory ethical leadership rose from low to moderate, UPB increased. Our findings can be put down to the reciprocation effect of a positive social exchange relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate at moderate levels of ethical leadership. Subordinates led by moderate level of ethical leadership are more likely to develop positive social relationships with their supervisors than those operating under low levels of ethical leadership given that such leaders tend to be more considerate, open to opinions and compassionate (Walumbwa et al. 2011. For this reason, subordinates feel a greater willingness to reciprocate their supervisor's conduct with behavior that will benefit the organization, even if it is unethical in nature (Umphress and Bingham 2011). This is consistent with previous studies that find a positive relationship between subordinates' ratings of ethical leadership and their relationship with supervisors (Tumasjan et al. 2011; Walumbwa et al. 2011). In contrast, supervisors with lower levels of ethical leadership are typically ethically neutral, in other words they tend to be highly interested in financial performance, leaving limited room for ethics in the decision-making process. At worst, a supervisor who exhibits low levels of ethical leadership may be an unethical person who is dishonest, selfish, and uses underhand tactics to make subordinates work. Such supervisors are generally perceived to be self-centered, less concerned about others and insensitive to ethical issues (Treviño et al. 2000, 2003), and as a result do not lead subordinates to reciprocate in the form of desired behaviors.

Second, when ethical leadership rose from moderate to high UPB was found to decrease. We attribute this reduction of UPB to the supervisor's effective communication and reinforcement of ethical values with subordinates. That means supervisors who exercise high levels of ethical leadership are better at managing the ethical conduct of subordinates than those who exercise moderate levels of ethical leadership. Specifically, supervisors exhibiting moderate levels of ethical leadership will typically fail to prioritize addressing ethical values over the pursuit of other organizational interests, and thus deliver unclear and inconsistent messages to subordinates as to the importance of acting in an ethical manner. In other words, the display of moderate levels of ethical leadership may lead subordinates to think that ethical concerns are important but not the priority. Furthermore, if such supervisors stress the importance of abiding by ethical standards without taking substantial actions to reduce unethical behavior in their work group, the importance of messages regarding ethical conduct would soon be dismissed by subordinates (Treviño et al. 2000). In contrast, supervisors who exhibit high levels

of ethical leadership typically consider the ethical impact of every decision they make. Through their behavior, communication with subordinates and organizational policy design, they send their subordinates a clear and consistent message regarding the importance of ethical values to their organization. In addition, subordinates learn about appropriate behaviors through observing the willingness of their supervisor to punish unethical behavior such as UPB. In these ways, supervisors who exercise high levels of ethical leadership should therefore reduce UPB amongst their subordinates.

Our study also suggests that identification with supervisor influences the strength of the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB. This confirms the findings of previous studies which highlight the importance of identification with supervisor in strengthening the impact of leadership behavior on subordinate outcomes (Wang and Rode 2010). Specifically, we find that the curvilinear effect of supervisory ethical leadership on subordinate's UPB is stronger when that subordinate highly identifies with his or her supervisor. These differences are particularly evident at moderate levels of ethical leadership. Subordinate's high identification with the supervisor implies a convergence of values and interests between the supervisor and the subordinate (Wang and Rode 2010). Such identification amplifies the social exchange relationship between the supervisor and subordinate, making subordinates more responsive to their supervisor's expectations. Since supervisors with moderate levels of ethical leadership enjoy positive social relationships with subordinates and prioritize meeting organizational goals over addressing ethical issues, subordinates working under supervisors of this kind are most likely to conduct UPBs.

Managerial Implications

Unethical pro-organizational behaviours are unethical actions carried out under a "pro-organizational" facade. Such behaviours are dangerous because they may easily be overlooked by management and cause great harm to the organization's reputation and legal standing in the long-term, especially if they involve bribery, lying to customers, and falsifying documents, given the fact that governments are increasingly prosecuting such behavior. Our study acknowledges that ethical leadership may be utilized by organizations as a way of reducing their employees' UPB, and finds a curvilinear relationship between ethical leadership and UPB. These findings bear some practical implications for both the effective implementation of ethical leadership and the reduction of UPB within organizations.

First, given that our study revealed the existence of curvilinear effects of ethical leadership on UPB, managers are advised to use ethical leadership with caution. Although ethical leadership works to promote positive social relationships between the supervisor and subordinate, it may also lead to higher levels of UPB if not exercised in the right way. Only when implemented strictly and consistently is ethical leadership able to raise the ethical awareness of subordinates, regulate their unethical conduct, and reduce the likelihood of UPB. Our findings also suggest that the exercise of moderate levels of ethical leadership may be worse than not exercising ethical leadership at all in terms of eliciting UPB. Therefore, in order to reduce subordinate UPB, managers need to establish clear standards to evaluate and punish unethical behaviours, even when conducted in favour of the organization. Nevertheless, managers should also be aware of the potential challenges of deciding on the appropriate level of punishment, because harsh punishment of UPB may hurt the feelings of employees and discourage them from engaging in activities that may benefit the organization in the future.

Second, in order to reduce UPB in their organizations, top-level managers should refine their organizational values and integrate ethics into the core values of the organization. In other words, senior managers need to translate ethics into substantial corporate language so that ethical values are reflected in the organizational mission statement, culture, and even the employee's performance appraisal. If ethical values are in line with organizational interests, there will be little incentive for employees to conduct UPB.

Third, organizations should put more emphasis on training and developing the moral virtues of supervisors as well as employees to reduce UPB. Our finding that identification with supervisor impacts on the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB implies that the moral virtues of the supervisor play an important role in regulating subordinates unethical conduct. In order to reduce UPB, training courses should be designed to improve the moral sensitivity of ethically neutral leaders (Mele 2005, 2009). This training should involve teaching ethical knowledge, such as organizational ethical standards and values, and consider using a case study methodology to help participants gain practical knowledge of how to handle ethical issues in a particular context. In order to make supervisors truly virtuous, repeated practice of moral behaviors are necessary (Mele 2005). Employees should be trained in a similar way. Previous studies have suggested that employees who hold strong ethical beliefs are less likely to conduct unethical acts, irrespective of their leaders' ethical integrity (Peterson 2004).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Of course the findings from this study must be viewed in light of the study's limitations. First of all this study relied

on cross-sectional data from a single set of respondents. Although we collected data from the respondents in three waves and used statistical tools to check for common method bias, we cannot completely rule out the possibility of common method bias. However, we believe that self-reports were an appropriate tool for measuring UPB, given that supervisors might not be able to address their subordinates' intentions to conduct unethical behavior. Second, this research used a sample of employees from the public sector in a specific cultural context, China. Although it is very probable that our results may be repeated in other industrial and geographic contexts, the generalizability of our findings outside this specific context is limited at present. The fact that study participants were not randomly selected from their organizations but contacted through an alumni database also brings into question the extent to which their responses are representative of others in their organization. However, we believe that due to the sensitive nature of the questionnaire, contacting the participants directly rather than through their organization enabled us to reduce the potential for social desirability effects, given there was no possibility of negative consequences from respondents' employing organizations. Finally, we recognise that the response rate of study participants was relatively low. In order to deal with this we compared the demographic characteristics of respondents, partial respondents and non-respondents, and found no significant differences.

In future research, multiple respondents might be used to measure subordinates' UPB. In addition, more work needs to be done to ascertain the generalizability of our research findings outside the narrow context in which our study was conducted. Future research may also seek to ascertain the role played by co-workers in influencing the UPB of employees in the workplace. Recent empirical findings suggest that the ethical behaviour of peers might have a greater influence on the ethical behaviour of nurses than that of the supervisor alone (Deshpande and Joseph 2009). Finally, more work could be done to examine the extent to which training and developing the moral virtues of supervisors as well as employees as suggested by Mele (2005, 2009), has a positive impact in terms of reducing UPB.

Conclusion

This study provided the first empirical examination of the impact of ethical leadership on the UPB of subordinates using a sample drawn from the Chinese public sector. Unlike previous studies which found a linear relationship between ethical leadership and unethical behaviour, we identified an inverted u-shaped relationship between ethical

leadership and UPB. In addition, we found that this relationship was only significant when identification with supervisor was at a moderate-to-high level. These findings indicate the inherent difficulties faced by organizations in reducing UPB given its pro-organizational nature.

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