THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT AND UNETHICAL PRO-ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR: THE ROLE OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - As one of the few studies on unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), this study hypothesizes that affective commitment predicts UPB through the mediation of moral disengagement. It was also proposed that ethical leadership affects the hypothesized relationship.
Methodology - 208 employees (98 males and 110 females) from different companies located in Istanbul, Turkey formed the sample of this study. A multidimensional questionnaire with seven-point interval scale was applied to measure all substantive variables used in this study.
Findings- The results of mediation analysis revealed that people with higher affective commitment engaged in more UPB, and that this effect was mediated by moral disengagement. In addition, the results of moderated mediation analysis showed that the mediation relationship was stronger when employees perceived a lower level of ethical leadership in the organization.
Conclusion- We found that affective commitment encourages UPB through the mechanism of moral disengagement. Besides, this effect is stronger when the ethical leadership is perceived to be low as opposed to being high. Our results extend knowledge of UPB by highlighting the importance of ethical leadership, and open up new avenues of research on the ethical challenges of prosocial motives, attitudes, and behaviors. Further theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: UPB, affective commitment, moral disengagement, ethical leadership.
JEL Codes: D22, D23, C00

1. INTRODUCTION

Unethical conduct in the workplace, which has been defined as behavior contrary to the accepted moral norms of society (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006), has received attention from scholars recently (Martin, Kish-Gephart, & Detert, 2014), especially the question of what leads to such behavior. In addressing this issue, previous studies have identified several individual, interpersonal, and organization level factors that help explain why employees behave unethically (Chen, Chen & Sheldon, 2016). Interestingly, however, most such research studies have focused on behaviors undertaken to benefit the self (e.g., Thau et al., 2015; Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014), implying that unethical behaviors are driven primarily by self-interest. At the same time, this line of research generally assumed that prosocial behaviors are ethical, driven by benevolent motives to help others. While these assumptions may be understandable, recent studies have begun to question them, showing that in fact, employees commonly engage in unethical behaviors to serve the interests of their organization, behaviors such destroying incriminating information to save one's organization's standing, giving false or exaggerated information to people, (Umphress & Bingham, 2011) or creating moral hazards not only for employers, but for society as a whole (Cialdini, Petrova, & Goldstein, 2004). Therefore, a growing number of organizational scholars have begun to systematically explore and theorize about the phenomenon of unethical pro-organizational behavior (e.g., Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2013; May, Chang, & Shao, 2015; Miao et al., 2013; Thau et al., 2015). Indeed, there is an emergent field of business ethics research that now focuses squarely on the moral challenges of positive constructs, including beliefs, values, and behaviors, traditionally regarded as purely prosocial and altruistic (e.g., Levine & Schweitzer, 2014). This emergent literature

greatly expands the extant business ethics research by not only enhancing our understanding of factors leading to unethical behavior, but also broadening our theoretical perspectives for understanding such behavior (Chen et al., 2016).

In an effort to contribute to this emergent field, we conducted a study in Turkey to further our understanding of factors that give rise to UPB in the workplace. In our first two hypotheses, we examined whether there exists a positive relationship between affective commitment and UPB, due in part to moral disengagement among people with higher affective commitment. We also examined the potential role of a key moderator: ethical leadership.

Our theoretical perspective and empirical findings make four contributions to the extant organizational literature. First, prior research has showcased the positive side of affective commitment (e.g., Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Wang et al., 2014), largely to the neglect of its dark side. Our research is among the first to generate evidence for the link between affective commitment and unethical behavior, drawing attention to the ethical challenges of employees with higher affective commitment in the workplace. Second, we contribute to the emergent research on UPB by shedding light on a key psychological mechanism, moral disengagement. While a similar mechanism (labeled moral neutralization) appeared in Umphress and Bingham's (2011) early theoretical model, subsequent empirical research has focused predominantly on distal antecedents, paying less attention to underlying psychological processes (May et al., 2015; Thau et al., 2015). Our research is among one of the first empirical evidence for Umphress and Bingham's (2011) contention that moral disengagement underpins not only proself but also UPB.

Third, this study contributes to the UPB literature investigating the role of ethical leadership on UPB. This contextual factor may help explain why affective commitment sometimes fails to predict UPB (Umphress, Bingham & Mitchell, 2010) and, more importantly, adds a key boundary condition to Umphress and Bingham's (2011) theoretical model. Taken together, exploring the effects of a key underlying mechanism as well as a key boundary condition of UPB broadens the scope of research on unethical behavior in the workplace and deepens our current understanding of why and how employees engage in UPB (Treviño et al., 2014). Last and most importantly, this study can both motivate and facilitate the growth of research on UPB in Turkey. By focusing on a sample from Turkey, this study will help to internationalization of research on UPB and a better picture of the attribute in different cultures. Furthermore, the Turkish versions of four related instruments are also examined, hence motivating further research on UPB in Turkey.

The paper is presented as follows. First, a brief review on affective commitment and unethical pro-organization behavior along with the effects of moral disengagement and ethical leadership is provided. The next part focuses on methodology. Results and discussions are presented in the following parts. Conclusions and implications of the study form the last part of the article.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Affective Commitment and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

Umphress and Bingham explained UPB 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" (2011, p. 622). For instance, employees sometimes exaggerate or fabricate the accomplishments of the company to boost its reputation or to maintain its competitive advantage over other companies (Cialdini et al., 2004). Essential to this definition are the dual qualifications that the act is performed with the intention to help the employing organization and yet is in violation of hyper moral standards of the society (Chen et al., 2016). For a pro-organizational act to be ethical, it must be in line with the ethical standards at the societal level, referred to as "hyper norms" (Warren, 2003). UPB therefore opens up existing business ethics research by directing our attention to ethical challenges posed by otherwise positive values, motives, and behaviors. In this article, we study affective commitment as an antecedent of UPB.

Organizational commitment is a psychological trait which deals with employees' relationship with their organization and it has to do with whether or not employees desire to stay in the organization (Matherne & Litchfield, 2012). Porter et al., (1974), defined organizational commitment as "the strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (p. 604). Three components of organizational commitment have been introduced: affective, continuance, and normative commitment (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). Affective commitment is related to an employees' emotional attachment to their organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990), continuance commitment has to do with the employees' perceptions of the costs associated with leaving the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990), and normative commitment deals with an employees' perception of their obligation to continue their work with the company (Allen & Meyer, 1990). The current study is concerned with the workers' activities that are unethical, but seen as beneficial, to the organization. Considering this, affective commitment is the most relevant dimension of organizational commitment in this study. Allen & Meyer has defined affective organizational commitment as "the employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in, the organization" (1990, p. 1). Previous research has focused mainly on commitment as an emotional, or

affective, bond to an organization "such that the strongly committed individual identifies with, is involved in, and enjoys membership in the organization" (Allen & Meyer, 1990, p. 2).

Employees having higher levels of organizational commitment have been reported to identify more strongly with the organizations and companies they work for (Cullinan et al., 2008). Consequently, these individuals try to maintain that strong identification and desire to avoid causing harm to their organizations and companies. Therefore, it seems credible that people having higher levels of organizational commitment are less likely to engage in behaviors that may have negative effects on their organization (Cullinan et al. 2008). But, more investigation is needed to understand whether or not employees having higher levels of organizational commitment are more, or less, likely to show behaviors that are ethically unacceptable, but are performed to benefit the organization (Cullinan et al., 2008). It can be said that individuals having higher levels of affective organizational commitment have different reactions to the situations in which the organization would benefit from unethical behaviors that are questionable.

It seems credible to state that people having higher organizational commitment are prone to misreport the information to make sure that their organizations reach their goals. In other words, since employees with higher levels of affective commitment have a stronger sense of identification with their organizations, they are more likely to behave unethically to benefit their organization. It is as a way for them to maintain their commitment to the objectives of their organization. Consequently, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: Affective commitment has positive effect on unethical pro-organizational behaviors.

2.2. Mediating Role of Moral Disengagement

According to social– cognitive theory, moral disengagement comprises a set of cognitive justification mechanisms that allow an individual to perform unethical acts while disengaging from the moral norms and self-sanctions that ordinarily inhibit such acts (Bandura et al., 1996; Detert, Treviño & Sweitzer, 2008). In particular, Bandura and colleagues (1996) mentioned three broad cognitive mechanisms through which moral disengagement occurs. The first is to reconstrue unethical acts so as to make them appear amoral, less immoral or even respectable. The second is to obscure or distort both responsibility for and the consequences of such conduct. And the third is to devalue the target of unethical acts. Because these different mechanisms all aim to justify morally suspect conducts, researchers have operationalized moral disengagement as a single overarching concept (Duffy et al., 2012). A few points are worth noting about the moral disengagement theory (Bandura et al., 1996) before applying it to the relationship between organizational identification and UPB. The theory is based on the idea that most moral transgressors are not inherently or globally immoral people. Rather, like all others, they hold self-regulatory standards that are largely consistent with societal norms. Unethical conduct occurs when self-regulatory moral standards get disengaged, that is, when transgressors find ways of justifying their unethical behaviors. Furthermore, moral disengagement is theorized as a pretransgression justification rather than posttransgression rationalization, even though the latter is also possible (Ribeaud & Eisner, 2010). This pretransgression conceptualization makes moral disengagement a potent mediator between more distant antecedents and unethical behavior. Consistent with the above two viewpoints, recent research shows that various situations (e.g., incentive systems) can activate moral disengagement in turn leading to immoral acts (Kish-Gephart et al., 2014), though prior work also reveals that there exists a general predisposition to morally disengage (Moore et al., 2012). Drawing upon moral disengagement theory, it can be stated that when employees face moral dilemmas in which the organization's interests are at stake, organizational identification can lead to UPB by activating moral disengagement, which in turn eliminates self-deterrents to harmful behavior and encourages self-approval of the unethical act (Brief, Buttram, & Dukerich, 2001). All three mechanisms of moral disengagement noted above help explain how moral disengagement more generally might mediate the effect of organizational identification on UPB. First, people with stronger affective commitment are more likely to reframe UPB as a necessary and even righteous conduct that serves the greater good of the organization (Umphress & Bingham, 2011), hence making it personally or socially acceptable (Bandura et al., 1996; Detert et al., 2008; Duffy et al., 2012). Second, organizational identification allows people to blur the accountability boundary of individual and organization and establishes the shield of anonymity for employees who violate moral principles in the name of the company (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Specifically, the stronger the affective commitment, due to greater oneness of the self and organization, the more diffuse the responsibility for the unethical acts (Wildschut, Insko, & Gaertner, 2002).

Taken together, the above observations thus lead us to predict that to protect organizational interests, people with stronger affective commitment are more likely to resort to moral disengagement for preact justification of UPB, due to the relative ease with which moral disengagement is activated. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Moral disengagement mediates the positive relationship between affective commitment and UPB.

2.3. Moderating Effect of Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership, with its emphasis on ethical component, is different from related forms of leadership (Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005). On one side, this kind of leadership includes attributes such as honesty, truthfulness, concern for others, fairness and behaving ethically (Treviño et al., 2003; Treviño & Brown, 2004). However, these attributes do not present the whole picture of ethical leadership. Another important part of ethical leadership, called as the moral manager by Treviño et al. (2003), deals with activities and behaviors to influence the ethical behavior of subordinates. In this way, ethical managers use punishments and rewards to promote desired behaviors, deliver the importance of ethics to their employees and play the role of ethical models (Matherne & Litchfield, 2012).

People learn by watching and then imitating the activities and behaviors of the individuals that are considered as reliable and credible (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Managers of an organization often serve as role models for their employees to judge which behaviors are appropriate and which not. Managers and leaders of organizations influence their employees to act ethically in two ways. First, since leaders are decision makers in the organization and due to their position, they are seen as legitimate models to be followed by employees. In other words, employees observe their leaders' behaviors and they use them as cues for ethical behavior. Second, the way managers and leaders reward appropriate behaviors and punish unethical ones influences the subordinates' engagement in ethical or unethical activities.

The effect of ethical leadership on subordinates can also be explained by social exchange processes (Blau, 1964). Social exchange is based on reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), stating that good behavior of one partner to the other one creates an obligation to reciprocate good behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Ethical leaders affect the behaviors of subordinates through socioemotional exchange because these leaders engender high levels of trust and encourage their employees to show ethical behaviors (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

In organizations where ethical leadership is perceived to be low, we propose that people with higher affective commitment will be more motivated to engage in UPB, making justifications for engaging in UPB even more compelling. On this basis, we thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Ethical leadership moderates indirect positive relationship between affective commitment and UPB through moral disengagement

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

208 employees (98 males and 110 females) from different companies located in Istanbul formed the sample of this study. Respondents participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Paper-based surveys in Turkish were used and total completion time for respondents ranged from approximately 13 to 35 minutes. Two hundred fifty copies of the surveys were distributed. Of these, 208 were completed, resulting in a response rate of 83%. Samples age ranged between 21 to 37 with mean 26.5 and standard deviation 3.94. Respondents were highly educated.

3.2. Measures

We used 7-point interval scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) for all substantive variables measured in this study. All materials were presented in Turkish, and were translated from their original English versions using translation and back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1986).

Affective Commitment was assessed using a six-item scale developed by Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993). Sample items are, "I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own," and "This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me."

Moral disengagement was assessed with the eight-item scale developed by Moore et al. (2012). Sample items are, "It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about" and "People shouldn't be held accountable for doing questionable things when they were just doing what an authority figure told them to do."

UPB was assessed using the six-item measure developed by Umphress et al. (2010). Sample items are, "If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good," and "If it would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company's products or services to customers and clients."

Finally, *ethical leadership* was assessed with the fifteen-item instrument developed by Yukl et al. (2013). Sample items are "My boss shows a strong concern for ethical and moral values," and "My boss communicates clear ethical standards for members."

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Exploratory Factor Analyses

Prior to hypotheses testing, a series of exploratory procedures were conducted to examine the factorial validity of the instruments. The KMO indices were higher than 0.6 and the results of the Bartlett's test of sphericity were significant (p<0.05). The results of the exploratory factor analyses were satisfactory for all the four instruments on their hypothesized scale. Internal consistency analyses (alpha reliability coefficient) were also performed on the instruments. The results suggested all scales were reliable (alpha coefficient > 0.75). The results of exploratory factor analyses have been presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of Exploratory Factor Analyses on the Four Scales Used in This Study

Scale	Item number	Explained variance %	Reliability	Mean	Standard deviation
Affective Commitment	6	60.01	0.76	3.84	0.76
Moral Disengagement	8	63.32	0.89	2.44	1.06
UPB	6	64.5	0.87	2.8	1.35
Ethical Leadership	15	70	0.96	4.77	1.39

4.2. Hypotheses Testing

As shown in Table 2, regression analyses revealed that affective commitment was positively related to both UPB (B = .22, SE = .12, p = .002, Step 1) and moral disengagement (B = .21, SE = .09, p = .003, Step 2). We also found that moral disengagement was positively related to UPB (B = .9, SE = .67, p = .00, Step 3), and that when both affective commitment and moral disengagement were included in the model (Step 4), the effect of moral disengagement remained significant (B = .89, SE = .06, p = .00) while that of affective commitment did not (B = .02, SE = .09, p > .05 and not significant). Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were thus supported.

Table 2: Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses with Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior and Moral Disengagement

Step 1:	B	SE	t	R^2	F
Affective commitment	.22[*]	.12	3.19	.05	10.23[*]
Dependent variable: Unethical pro-organizational behavior					
Step 2:	**B**	**SE**	**t**	**R^2**	**F**
Affective commitment	.21[*]	.09	2.99	.04	8.99[*]
Dependent variable: Moral disengagement					
Step 3:	**B**	**SE**	**t**	**R^2**	**F**
Moral disengagement	0.9[*]	0.67	13.69	0.49	187.61[*]
Dependent variable: Unethical pro-organizational behavior					
Step 4:	**B**	**SE**	**t**	**R^2**	**F**
Affective commitment	.02	.09	1.84	.52	107.92[*]
Moral disengagement	.89[*]	.06	13.48		
Dependent variable: Unethical pro-organizational behavior					

Note. N = 208, *p < .05.

Although the three-step procedure described above (proposed by Baron & Kenny, 1986) is one common method of assessing statistical mediation, indirect effects tests require the calculation of compound coefficients, which are not normally distributed (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). We also reexamined the predicted linkages (affective commitment, moral disengagement and UPB) using bootstrapping (Preacher and Hayes, 2004). Bootstrapping makes is possible to assign measures of accuracy (defined in terms of variance, bias, prediction error or confidence intervals) to sample estimates (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993). This technique uses random sampling methods and makes it possible to estimate the sampling distribution of almost any statistic (Varian, 2005). Generally, it falls in the broader class of resampling methods. Consistent with our first test, results of this follow-up test indicated that the indirect effect of affective commitment on UPB via moral disengagement was significant (B = 0.26, SE = 0.089, 95% bias corrected confidence interval [CI] [-.03, .55], suggesting that moral disengagement fully mediated the relationship between affective commitment and UPB.

Finally, we tested whether moral disengagement mediated the above moderating effect of ethical leadership by performing a moderated mediation analyses (Preacher et al., 2007). Figure 1 illustrates the model. As can be seen in Table 2, a subsequent bootstrapping analysis (5,000 random samples) (Preacher and Hayes, 2004) showed that the indirect effect of affective commitment on UPB via moral disengagement was stronger in the lower ethical leadership condition (B = .09, SE = .10, 95% bias-corrected CI [-.11, .32], excluding zero) than in the higher ethical leadership condition (B = .49, SE = .26, 95% bias-corrected CI [−.01, 1.01], including zero). The difference between the indirect relationships was significant (Bdiff = 1.07, SE = .39, 95% biascorrected CI [.38, 1.86]). Taken together, the above results thus provide support for our entire model.

Figure 1: The moderated mediation model
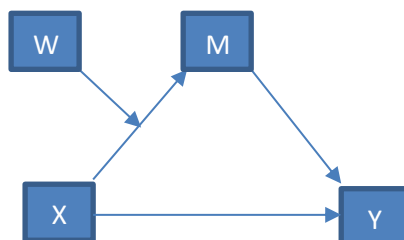
Note: X = Affective commitment, M = Moral disengagement, Y = UPB and W = Ethical leadership

Table 3: Results of Conditional Indirect Relationships

Relationships	B	SE	95% biascorrected CI
Conditional indirect relationships			
lower ethical leadership condition	.09	.10	[-.11, .32]
higher ethical leadership condition	.49	.26	[-.01, 1.01]
Difference	.40	.16	[.10, .69]

Note. N = 283. UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior; CI = confidence interval. The conditional indirect effect tests were based on 5,000 bootstrapping resamples.

5. CONCLUSION

We found that affective commitment encourages UPB through the mechanism of moral disengagement. We also found that this effect is stronger when the ethical leadership is perceived to be low as opposed to being high. Our results thus extend knowledge of UPB by highlighting the importance of ethical leadership, and open up new avenues of research on the ethical challenges of prosocial motives, attitudes, and behaviors.

This research makes several theoretical contributions. As noted at the outset, prior organizational research has focused overwhelmingly on unethical behaviors motivated by selfinterest (Greenberg, 2002; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Reynolds, 2006; Thau et al., 2015), implicitly assuming that selfish motives and behaviors are the major source of unethical conduct. However, as part of the emergent literature on ethical challenges of pro-organizational motives and behaviors (e.g., Thau et al., 2015; Umphress et al., 2010), the present work demonstrates that organizational identification can likewise be a powerful motivator of unethical behavior. It is not surprising that pro-organizational behaviors have a dark side and in fact social identity theory and research have long established the dark side of ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Nevertheless, in view of the growing influence of work organizations in people's lives and on their well-being, it is important to explore how social psychological identification with an organization can lead to negative consequences, including social and moral hazards. At the same time, our research also sheds light on the specific psychological mechanism through which organizational identification relates to UPB. Establishing the mediating mechanism is important, as it helps explain the paradoxical phenomenon of benign (moral) intentions leading to unethical conduct.

Unethical behaviors have been shown to be costly for organizations (Cialdini et al., 2004), especially when those behaviors are performed in the name of the organization and undermine stakeholders' trust or even cause the collapse of an organization. In other words, employees may engage in unethical conducts in order to protect their organizations. Behaviors such as hiding incriminating information to save an organization's face and giving false information to people, (Umphress & Bingham, 2011) harm not only the employers, but the society as well (Cialdini et al., 2004).

Considering this dark aspect of organizational identification, organizational leaders should be careful about blind allegiance and loyalty of their employees to the organization and always emphasize how social responsibility and caring for all stakeholders are important. The link between organizational identification and moral disengagement shown in this study suggests that loyal employees are under higher pressure to relax their moral reasoning, especially when ethical leadership is

perceived to be low in the organization. To decrease the tendency toward moral disengagement, organizations and managers need to emphasize how hyper ethical values in organizational policies are vital and apply these ethical standards in their decision-making. At the same time, social responsibility should be enhanced in organizations to reduce UPB (May et al., 2015) and promote ethical pro-organizational behavior.

Last but not least, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge a few limitations of the present work worth addressing in future research. First, the findings of the study are limited with the sample. The findings are not easily generalizable and should be tested further both in Turkey and in other cultures. Second, the findings may differ in different sectors. Further research in private or public sector or service industry and manufacturing can clarify this and provide a better picture of the mechanisms underlying UPB.

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