Past Research and Future Prospect of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behaviors

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Abstract

Unethical pro-organizational behavior is a breakthrough in the field of unethical behavior in recent years. On the basis of combing the previous literature, this paper summarizes the concept and measurement of unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Integrating relevant empirical studies, this paper analyzes the formation factors of unethical pro-organizational behaviors, and summarizes the feasible research directions in the future, so as to provide enlightenment for the follow-up research.

Keywords

Unethical pro-organizational behavior; unethical behavior; affective commitment.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the world economic development and business competition intensifies have led to the prevalence of the trend of pursuing economic interests but neglecting business ethics. Although the changeable environment is full of unprecedented opportunities for economic progress, with the prevalent corporate ethics scandals in recent years, the crisis of moral integrity has increasingly become the focus of society. The reason for the continuous business scandals lies in the prevalence of unethical behaviors within enterprises. A series of business ethics accidents occur frequently, which not only causes huge losses to enterprises and their stakeholders, but also has a significant negative impact on the orderly and healthy development of the market and economy. Therefore, more and more scholars began to explore the unethical behaviors within enterprises. It is widely accepted that unethical behavior is essentially employee's selfish behavior or revenge behavior(Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). However, recent studies have pointed out that the motivation of employees' unethical behavior may also include pro-organizational factors such as safeguarding organizational interests and leadership interests(Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Umphress et al. (2010) further studied this motivation and proposed the concept of unethical pro-organizational behaviors (UPB). Unethical pro-organizational behavior refers to the behavior that aims to promote the effectiveness of an organization or its members, but violates social norms, ethics, laws or appropriate standards. At present, scholars have analyzed the main causes of unethical pro-organizational behaviors from the aspects of individual, organization and leadership, and also confirmed the influence of positive factors such as organizational identity and positive reciprocal relationship on unethical pro-organizational behavior(Chen, Chen, & Sheldon, 2016; Umphress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010). However, managers do not pay much attention to unethical pro-organizational behaviors because of its pro-organizational nature. Neglecting or belittling unethical pro-organizational behavior is not conducive to the career development of leaders, and may even harm the long-term development of enterprises. Therefore, this paper sorts out the related research of unethical pro-organizational behavior, discusses its concept source and connotation, measurement methods and related empirical research, in order to provide enlightenment for the follow-up related research.

2. The Concept of Unethical Pro-organizational Behaviors

The concept of unethical pro-organizational behaviors comes from the extension of unethical behavior. Previous studies mostly believe that the purpose of employees' unethical behavior is to seek private interests or revenge colleagues. However, Umphress proposed that employees may also engage in unethical behaviors in order to protect the interests of the organization or group(Umphress et al., 2010), and defined these behaviors as unethical pro-organizational behaviors (UPB). UPB includes pro-organizational nature and unethical nature. The motivation is to maintain or increase the interests of the organization, but the behavior itself violates social norms, and the final result may not be conducive to the long-term development of the organization. In order to further distinguish unethical pro-organizational behaviors from other similar concepts, Umphress et al. (2011) proposed three boundaries of UPB: Firstly, unethical pro-organizational behaviors must be conscious, so it does not include work omissions and mistakes. Secondly, behavioral motivation must include pro-organizational elements. The immoral behavior just for personal benefit is not unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Thirdly, whether the actual results of behavior is conducive to the organization is not the standard to determine whether the behavior is UPB or not(Umphress & Bingham, 2011). It is worth noting that unethical pro-organizational behavior is different from other unethical behaviors driven by self-interest motivation. However, it is not entirely divorced from egoistic unethical behavior, and its motivation is often the combination of egoism and altruism(Cheng, Wei, & Lin, 2019). Employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviors can benefit the organization, but also consolidate their own interests and status to some extent.

3. Measurement of Unethical Pro-organizational Behaviors

In recent years, scholars have made some achievements in the conceptual structure and related scale development of unethical pro-organizational behaviors. The concept of unethical pro-organizational behaviors is clearer, and the measurement of construction is more operable. At present, the seven level Likert scale developed by Umphress is mainly used to measure unethical pro-organizational behaviors. There are six items in the scale, ranging from 1 to 7 indicating "totally disagree" to "totally agree". Specific items such as " if it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good". The data of unethical pro-organizational behaviors were obtained through employee self-evaluation. The scale has been used for many times by empirical research, and has high reliability. Therefore, it is widely used. In addition, from the perspective of affective commitment, Matherne explored the impact of affective commitment and moral identity on unethical pro-organizational behaviors(Matherne III & Litchfield, 2012), and developed a five-item scale. The scale also has good reliability, but it is rarely used at present.

4. Research on Unethical Pro-organizational Behaviors

At present, there are many researches on the antecedents of unethical pro-organizational behaviors, which are mainly from the perspectives of moral identity, leadership style and employee behavior. Some scholars have explored the relationship between organizational identity and unethical pro-organizational behaviors from the perspective of reciprocity. They believe that when employees hold strong reciprocal beliefs, organizational identification will positively affect unethical pro-organizational behaviors(Umphress et al., 2010). Some scholars have discussed the inverted U-shaped relationship between ethical leadership and unethical pro-organizational behaviors, which is more obvious when subordinates have high recognition of their leader(Miao, Newman, Yu, & Xu, 2013). Social exchange theory and social identity theory can well support these relationships. Social exchange theory(Gouldner, 1960) and social

identity theory(Wu, Liu, Kwan, & Lee, 2016) provide important theoretical support for these studies. From the perspective of performance pressure, some scholars have studied the mechanism of employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviors caused by high performance requirements(CHEN & LIANG, 2017). In the context of China, supervisor-subordinate guanxi (SSG, a local construction) refers to a "special connection" between subordinates and supervisors based on their identities, interests and emotions. It may also encourage employees to engage in unethical pro-organizational behaviors (Zhong, Wang, Luo, & Song, 2018). In addition, from the perspective of job security, some scholars have demonstrated that job insecurity and job embeddedness can positively affect unethical pro-organizational behaviors(Ghosh, 2017). In conclusion, scholars have conducted a profound discussion on the generation of unethical pro-organizational behaviors, including organization, leadership, individual, work environment and other aspects. At present, a relatively complete theoretical system has been formed. However, there are limited studies on the effects of unethical pro-organizational behaviors, and follow-up studies can pay greater attention to this aspect. At the same time, there are few studies on the mechanism of unethical pro-organizational behavior as a mediator variable. In terms of the number of papers, there is still a lack of research on the consequences and harm of unethical pro-organizational behavior. Therefore, future research should pay more attention to its consequences.

5. Future Research Prospects

Through the literature review of unethical pro-organizational behaviors, this paper finds that the current research in this field mainly focuses on the formation mechanism of unethical pro-organizational behaviors, mainly involving affective commitment, organizational identity, leadership style, organizational performance requirements and other factors, which are mainly single level factors. Future research can explore the formation mechanism of unethical pro-organizational behaviors from a multi-level comprehensive perspective. For example, researchers can examine the interaction of two different levels of factors on unethical pro-organizational behaviors. At the same time, previous studies have rarely discussed the consequences of unethical pro-organizational behaviors. Future research can focus on this aspect, in order to avoid unethical pro-organizational behaviors and reduce its adverse effects. Finally, the measurement of unethical pro-organizational behaviors mainly relies on the employee self-evaluation scale developed by Umpress. Future research can further improve the measurement of unethical pro-organizational behaviors, and develop a scale that adapts to local cultural background, in order to better measure unethical pro-organizational behaviors.

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