

# BETWEEN GOOD INTENTIONS AND DARK CORNERS: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL CITIZENSHIP AND UNETHICAL PRO-ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

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**Abstract.** *Employees who are keen to uphold their organizational competitiveness by practicing organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) may, at some point within practical workplace settings, based on their social exchange perceptions (SEP), cross the ethical and moral boundary conditions to benefit the organization and engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). Drawing on social exchange theory (SET), and social cognitive theory (SCT), a mediated-moderation model has been theorized to broaden our take on UPB as one of the possible downstream effects of OCB, mediated by SEP and moderated by moral attentiveness (MA). As a novel study of its kind, it is likely to have a significant contribution to the body of knowledge regarding the paradoxical nature of UPB.*

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## 1. Introduction

Globalization has created a competitive environment where organizations strive for survival and growth (Shah et al., 2020). The key accomplishments from an organizational point of view include hiring, training, developing, and retaining a positive workforce that is willing to go above and beyond formal working boundaries (Tefera & Hunsaker, 2020). Employees adopt pro-social behaviors such as OCB which help them achieve their career goals through a tailored course of action (Ocampo et al., 2018). As OCB contributes to organizational efficacy, the factors contributing to such behaviors have been extensively researched, however consequences of such behaviors remain fragmented (Das & Mohanty, 2021; Rauf, 2016). Researchers have emphasized exploring the downstream consequences of OCB through an integrated conceptual framework (Bolino & Grant, 2016; Bolino et al., 2018; Edros et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2018; Mishra et al., 2022; Rauf, 2016; Wang, 2016; Zettler, 2022).

There has been an increased focus on unethical workplace behaviors in the recent past (Aqeel & Siddiqui, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Notably, high-profile scandals involving organizations like Barings Bank, Enron, Wells Fargo, and Volkswagen have shed light on the prevalence of immoral and unethical actions taken to further organizational goals (Kong, 2016; Li et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2022; Pierce & Aguinis, 2015; Umphress & Bingham, 2011; Zhang & Du, 2022). According to Mishra et al. (2022), unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) can benefit the organization, with the intent to serve organizational interests often overshadowing ethical considerations (Inam et al., 2021). Despite the growing interest in UPB, researchers are eager to explore the factors that contribute to the transition from being a good citizen to engaging in UPB, taking into account various ethical, moral, social, cognitive, and work-related constructs within the organizational context (Chen et al., 2022; Mishra et al., 2022; Mo et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a need for research to examine the antecedents of UPB, organizational-level motives that contribute to UPB, and the individual factors that may moderate such behaviors (Alniacik et al., 2021; Qureshi & Ahmed, 2021).

A significant contributing factor to employees' inclination towards engaging in UPB stems from a limited understanding of the underlying mechanisms guiding their decision-making processes (Ouyang et al., 2022). Although previous research has explored the link between a positive social exchange and UPB (Richards et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2021), there is a notable absence of a conceptual model that illustrates the relationship between OCB, social exchange perspective (SEP), and UPB. To gain insights into this shift in employee behavior, wherein individuals strive to be good citizens by engaging in OCB to enhance organizational success, it is crucial to undertake systematic investigations. Furthermore, research efforts need to be directed towards finding effective solutions for preventing UPB as employees unconsciously cross ethical boundaries (Mishra et al., 2022). In this regard, our review aims to bridge this gap through an integrated conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between OCB, and employees' willingness to perform UPB, mediated by SEP, and moderated by moral awareness (MA). The review represents the first endeavor of its kind in this area of study.

This review aims to address several key concerns. Firstly, it seeks to provide managers with practical strategies to effectively mitigate the increasingly prevalent issue of UPB within organizational contexts. Secondly, it aims to enhance our comprehension of OCB as a potential antecedent that can inadvertently lead to UPB. Thirdly, it aims to develop an understanding that UPB may stem from employees' pro-organizational motives, as well as their social exchange perspectives with the organization. Lastly, by discerning the factors that contribute to the negative outcomes of OCB, this review endeavors to cultivate a more comprehensive, stable, and nuanced understanding of the undesirable effects associated with OCB.

The remaining sections of this article will unfold in a systematic manner. A comprehensive overview of the theoretical foundations will be provided. Followed by a thorough examination of the existing literature, which will encompass various proposed propositions and conceptual frameworks. In the end, the article will highlight the significant contributions that the proposed conceptual framework brings to the advancement of the existing body of literature.

### **Theoretical Exposition**

The Social Exchange Theory (SET) is widely recognized as a prominent theoretical framework for comprehending the impact of OCB (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Tayal et al., 2022) and the conceptualization of UPB (Inam et al., 2021). SET is rooted in the concept of social conduct involving the intentional exchange of resources between individuals, driven by the anticipation of desired benefits (Blau, 1964). In essence, this theory posits that individuals engage in social exchanges to acquire valuable outcomes, and such exchanges are essential for achieving specific goals through connections with others (Redmond, 2015). To qualify as an exchange, an activity should be directed towards objectives that can only be accomplished through human interaction, aiming to modify means in order to advance these ends (Blau, 1986). The fundamental elements of SET encompass the initial interactions between the initiator (whether an employee or organization), the reciprocity exhibited by the target (which can be behavioral, attitudinal, or both), and the establishment of a relationship (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

Employees who rely on the "reinforcement principle" of SET tend to adopt a retrospective approach, focusing on the benefits already received from the organization as the initiator. Existing research predominantly examines the employee-organization social exchange from the organizational viewpoint, perceiving the organization as the investor or provider of rewards such as acknowledgment, cash, gifts, and gestures (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Conversely, the "utilitarian principle" of SET advocates a forward-looking perspective, where employees take on the role of initiators, anticipating behaviors and outcomes (Emerson, 2013). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the employee perspective is often overlooked and warrants further attention (Effelsberg et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2015; Jiang & Zhang, 2020; Wang et al., 2019; Xu & Lv, 2018; Zhang, 2020). Research indicates that in the employee-organization relationship, both parties can act as initiators and invest their resources to foster a mutually beneficial environment (Anand et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021). Reciprocation is also seen as essential in achieving anticipated rewards (Kong et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2018). Employees with a strong perception of social exchange are more confident in pursuing short-term gains aligned with organizational goals, viewing UPB as a justifiable and duty-bound action to fulfill their employment obligations (Dong et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

Researchers investigating the social cognitive perspective of ethico-moral cues within Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) have found that individuals exhibit varying responses to different ethical dilemmas (Khan et al., 2022). In instances of favorable socio-emotional exchange, organizational goals may take precedence over societal norms, leading to the perception of UPB as a reciprocal act to foster a positive working relationship with an employer. Such behavior is often associated with potential benefits for the organization, albeit at the cost of moral obligations to society (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Employees may employ cognitive minimizing techniques to rationalize unethical behavior, thereby avoiding self-contempt (Al Halbusi, 2022; Qureshi & Raza, 2022). Additionally, individuals with higher levels of ethical and moral boundary conditions are less likely to engage in unethical activities compared to those with lower levels (Newman et al., 2020).

## **Literature Review and Proffered Proposition**

### ***Relationship between OCB and UPB***

OCB and UPB represent two interconnected dimensions of prosocial workplace behaviors, existing on a continuum. These behaviors prioritize intention over the outcome (Cropanzano et al., 2017). OCB refers to “discretionary actions aimed at improving the social and psychological environment that supports task performance” (Organ, 1997, p. 91). Conversely, “UPB involves activities intended to enhance organizational effectiveness or benefit its members, such as leaders, but violates fundamental social values, mores, laws, or norms of proper behavior” (Umphress & Bingham, 2011, p. 622).

The inconsistency of OCB and UPB may cause them to cross over. These behaviors may not always be in opposition to one another in the workplace and may even be causally related (Mishra et al., 2022). There are two places where the OCB and UPB theories overlap. Firstly, none of these optional actions are called for by superiors and are neither listed in the job description nor formally rewarded (Liu et al., 2021; Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Second, while both may have the organization's best interests, there may also be a concurrent motive for self-interest (Takeuchi et al., 2015; Castille et al., 2018). The primary distinction between the two, however, is the violation of hyper-norms that is present in UPB but not in the case of OCB (Mishra et al., 2022).

The field of organizational behavior is centered around the conceptual paradigm of Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Cropanzano et al., 2017). However, existing research on the employee-organization social exchange relationship tends to prioritize the organizational viewpoint while overlooking the perspective of employees (Effelsberg et al., 2014; Jiang & Zhang, 2020; Wang et al., 2019; Xu & Lv, 2018; Zhang, 2020). It is important to recognize that in the employee-employer dynamic, both parties have the potential to act as initiators, contributing to the

development of a mutually beneficial environment characterized by factors such as dependence, gratitude, remuneration, and recognition (Anand et al., 2018).

The existing literature on OCB emphasizes the significance of reciprocity norms. These norms establish that reciprocity is essential to secure the expected support from both organizations and coworkers (Gervasi et al., 2021). Moreover, UPB can be analyzed through the lens of Social Exchange Theory (SET), as it allows employees to perceive UPB as a strategic means to maximize benefits and future returns in exchange for organizational support (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). The works of Babaloo et al. (2020), Wang et al. (2021), and Zhang (2020) have provided empirical evidence supporting the notion that UPB is seen as a duty-bound action, serving to enhance and reciprocate beneficial relationships within the organization.

While OCB and UPB differ theoretically, their practical distinction can be blurred due to employees' forward-thinking attitudes and their customized plans to maximize benefits (Emerson, 2013). This potential crossover between the two behaviors arises because the constructions of both OCB and UPB are complex and not easily discernible. As a result, UPB may be perceived as a variant of OCB (Mishra et al., 2022). The emergence of UPB as a relatively recent phenomenon has generated increasing interest in exploring its theoretical foundations, including the examination of reciprocity norms as antecedents (Wang et al., 2019).

Expanding upon previous investigations, we proffer that positive social exchange relationships can contribute to employees crossing ethical lines, potentially fostering conditions conducive to UPB. In this context, employees may perceive UPB as a reciprocal action aimed at maintaining a long-term relationship with the organization or their leader, leading them to disregard ethical and moral boundaries (Chen et al., 2022; Mo et al., 2022). Furthermore, Organizational Citizenship Behavior-Interpersonal (OCB-I) describes behaviors that benefit coworkers, while Organizational Citizenship Behavior-Organizational (OCB-O) refers to behaviors that benefit the organization (Ma et al., 2022). By considering these distinctions, we can better understand the varied ways in which employees engage in behaviors that contribute to the overall functioning of the workplace. Nexus to the above, we propose the following:

**Proposition 1a:** Norms of reciprocity increase the possibility for the employees demonstrating OCB-I to engage in UPB.

**Proposition 1b:** Norms of reciprocity increase the possibility for the employees demonstrating OCB-O to engage in UPB.

### ***Mediating Role of Social Exchange Perceptions between OCB and UPB***

A strong social exchange perception (SEP) within an organization can have a positive influence on various employee activities, such as enhanced work performance and additional role behaviors, which contribute to the overall competitiveness of the organization (Cropanzano et al., 2017). However, existing research indicates that when organizations prioritize extra-role behavior, employees may inadvertently cross ethical boundaries by engaging in UPB, as they prioritize organizational efficiency over moral and ethical considerations (Liu et al., 2019). It is important to further explore this phenomenon to gain a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between SEP, extra-role behavior, and the ethical implications involved (Mishra et al., 2022).

Researchers have recognized the significance of a positive social exchange perception (SEP) in fostering citizenship behavior among employees. This extra-role behavior can be directed either towards coworkers (OCB-I) or the organization (OCB-O) (Ma et al., 2022; Ocampo et al., 2018; Tourigny et al., 2019). Extensive research has demonstrated that engaging in OCB not only has a positive impact on organizational outcomes but also enhances an employee's reputation, leading to rewards, career advancement, and opportunities for engaging work assignments, along with encouragement from employers. These findings highlight the importance of fostering a supportive work environment where employees are motivated to exhibit citizenship behavior for mutual benefit (Bolino et al., 2013; Tayal et al., 2022).

Positive social exchange perception (SEP) can have unintended negative consequences, as indicated by research findings (Jachimowicz et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017). While SEP can foster a sense of reciprocity and the pursuit of organizational goals, it may also lead individuals to prioritize organizational interests over social norms and disregard moral obligations to society, giving rise to unethical behaviors such as unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Furthermore, studies have shown that engaging in organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) can sometimes result in organizational deviance, prosocial rule-breaking, and counterproductive activity (Bolino et al., 2018; Bolino & Klotz, 2015; Koopman et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019; Nguyen C. M., 2021; Qian et al., 2022; Yam et al., 2017). Positive SEP has been found to contribute to a willingness to engage in UPB. These findings underscore the need for organizations to carefully consider the potential risks associated with SEP and actively promote ethical behavior and responsible organizational practices (Umphress et al., 2010; Umphress & Bingham, 2011; Zhong et al., 2018).

Social Exchange Theory (SET) suggests that when employees align their behaviors with the utilitarian principle, focusing on anticipated rewards, they become initiators and direct their efforts and attitudes toward other members or the organization itself to enhance future returns (Wang et al., 2019). Similarly, when

organizations support their employees, demonstrate genuine concern for their well-being, and recognize their achievements, they establish a strong foundation for furthering the employee-organization relationship and fostering higher performance (Wang et al., 2021). This reciprocal dynamic between employees and organizations reinforces the importance of considering both perspectives and cultivating mutually beneficial exchanges based on a forward-looking approach (Emerson, 2013).

Reciprocation plays a crucial role in obtaining benefits, as highlighted by Kong et al. (2020). While reciprocity is not mandatory, neglecting to reciprocate can lead to mistrust, a damaged reputation, and the potential loss of future rewards. Conversely, individuals who actively engage in reciprocal exchanges gain confidence, earn favorable endorsements, and receive appreciation (Blau, 1964). People with a strong inclination towards positive reciprocity feel a greater sense of obligation to reciprocate favors to their exchange partners, which can manifest in various ways, such as assisting coworkers, adhering to organizational rules, and providing support to achieve organizational objectives (Castille et al., 2018; Eisenberger et al., 2004).

Organizations recognize and reward their employees for their valuable contributions. In response, employees demonstrate their appreciation by maintaining a positive attitude, exerting extra effort, and fostering positive relationships within the company to enhance anticipated benefits (Anand et al., 2018). We propose that positive SEP is closely associated with both individual-focused OCB (OCB-I) and organization-focused OCB (OCB-O). Simultaneously, a positive SEP can also create conditions conducive to engagement in UPB, as employees may perceive UPB as a reciprocal act to ensure long-term employment relationships, sometimes overlooking ethical obligations. Furthermore, by integrating the positive nexus between OCB and SEP, we propose that OCB may have a positive and indirect relationship with employee willingness to engage in UPB via SEP:

**Proposition 2a:** OCB-I leads to favorable conditions for building strong SEP which in turn encourages employees' willingness to engage in UPB.

**Proposition 2b:** OCB-O leads to favorable conditions for building strong SEP which in turn encourages employees' willingness to engage in UPB.

### ***Moderating Role of Moral Attentiveness between OCB, SEP, and UPB***

Moral attentiveness (MA) is an individual trait that shapes how individuals perceive and incorporate morality-related factors in their experiences (Zhu et al., 2016). MA refers to "an individual's chronic perception and consideration of

morality and moral elements in various situations” (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1029). This cognitive strategy enables individuals to interpret incoming information through a moral lens and make decisions in their daily lives (Reynolds, 2008). MA involves two dimensions: perceptual moral attentiveness (PMA), is typically automatic and focuses on recognizing and reporting moral issues, and reflective moral attentiveness (RMA), involves intentional and time-consuming moral considerations in daily decision-making (Al-Halbusi et al., 2021; Ouyang et al., 2022; Reynolds, 2008; Sturm, 2018). MA serves as a cognitive framework to differentiate between moral and immoral behavior as well as between normal and abnormal behavior (Mo et al., 2022).

Building upon Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), employees demonstrate diverse responses when faced with moral dilemmas, with their varying attention to moral aspects of incoming information (Khan et al., 2022). Individuals with heightened levels of MA possess the nuanced ability to effectively consider moral dimensions within received information. MA guides individuals in interpreting, organizing, and processing incoming information through a morality-focused lens (Ames et al., 2020). In situations where employees feel a strong connection to the organization, the pursuit of organizational goals may take precedence over adherence to social norms (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). To mitigate feelings of self-disgust, employees may engage in cognitive processes such as neutralization or cognitive minimizing to rationalize unethical actions after the act (Al Halbusi, 2022; Qureshi & Raza, 2022).

MA serves as a valuable tool for detecting and addressing unethical behavior in the workplace, providing a crucial signal in restoring moral balance (van-Gils et al., 2015). With a growing concern for unethical conduct in the marketplace, organizations are increasingly urged to foster MA, recognizing that organizational attention to moral concepts plays a vital role in this endeavor (Dawson, 2018; Khan et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2016). MA not only strengthens employees' personal judgment of their own behavior but also enables them to evaluate the behavior of others in light of held moral standards (Ouyang et al., 2022). Researchers have advocated for exploring individual-level moderators to better understand the influence of social cognitive processes on the transition from OCB to UPB. By refining our understanding of these factors, we can mitigate the conflicting impact of UPB and promote ethical workplace practices (Mishra et al., 2022).

Employees who exhibit higher levels of MA demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to moral and ethical issues in general (Jiang et al., 2022). These individuals actively seek out ethically stimulating situations and recognize the impact of morally motivating information (Culiberg & Mihelic, 2016). Employees with greater MA scores perceive unethical behavior as undesirable, understanding its numerous drawbacks, and are consequently less likely to engage in UPB. On the other hand, employees with lower levels of MA are less attuned to the moral dimensions of immoral actions and prioritize outcomes that benefit the



organization (Dawson, 2018). Current research consistently supports the idea that morally attentive individuals are less prone to engage in unethical activities (Miao et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2022; Ouyang et al., 2022; Reynolds, 2008; Van-Gils et al., 2015). By recognizing the importance of MA in shaping ethical behavior, organizations can foster a culture of heightened moral awareness and integrity, our propositions are as under:

**Proposition 4a:** The association between OCB-I and employees’ willingness to engage in UPB, will be weaker for the employees higher in MA and stronger for the employees lower in MA.

**Proposition 4b:** The association between OCB-O and employees’ willingness to engage in UPB, will be weaker for the employees higher in MA and stronger for the employees lower in MA.

**Proposition 4c:** The association between SEP and employees’ willingness to engage in UPB, will be weaker for the employees higher in MA and stronger for the employees lower in MA.

### Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model for the study.

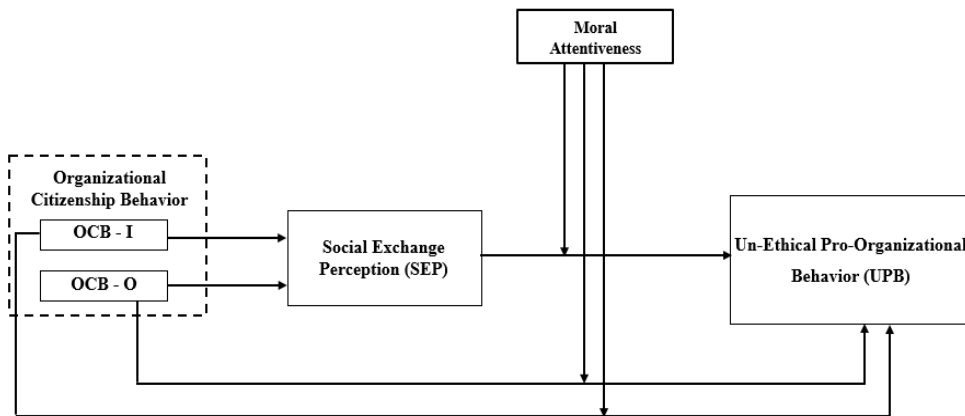


Figure 1 Conceptual Model of the Study

### Discussion

The increasing prevalence of unethical workplace behavior has become a significant concern for researchers, garnering considerable attention from scholars (Bryant, 2020; Bryant & Merritt, 2021; Graham et al., 2020; Inam et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2021). Within this context, UPB presents a paradoxical phenomenon, as employees engaging in such behaviors prioritize assisting the organization in gaining a competitive advantage without sufficient consideration of ethical

principles (Chen et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2020). Our review indicates a growing interest in understanding the empirical evidence surrounding the transition from good citizenship behavior to UPB. This entails examining various organizational, ethical, moral, social, cognitive, and work-related factors that may serve as bridges or catalysts for this behavioral shift. By delving into these complexities, researchers aim to shed light on the underlying dynamics of UPB and inform strategies for mitigating its occurrence in the workplace (Chen et al., 2022; Mishra et al., 2022; Mo et al., 2022).

The proposed conceptual framework makes significant contributions to the existing literature in several ways. Firstly, it enhances our understanding of employees who unintentionally engage in UPB while striving to be good citizens. Secondly, it addresses the fragmented nature of research on the outcomes of OCB by presenting a comprehensive mediated-moderation conceptual framework. Thirdly, it establishes an integrated conceptual and theoretical foundation that considers non-traditional outcomes resulting from OCB. Furthermore, the framework contributes to the existing literature by expanding our knowledge of the precursors and determinants of UPB. Additionally, it presents a motivational framework that explores the relationship between SE and UPB through reciprocity norms. Moreover, the framework emphasizes the importance of individual differences by considering moral attentiveness as an individual-level moderator and recognizes the synergistic effect of contextual and individual factors. Lastly, the framework addresses the need for a comparative analysis of multiple theoretical frameworks, specifically SET and SCT, in explaining the inclination towards engaging in UPB.

## **Conclusion**

The article presents a comprehensive conceptual framework the study explores the relationship between OCB and UPB and propose OCB as a potential precursor to unethical behavior within ethico-moral boundary conditions. Empirical analysis of the proffered propositions will have valuable implications for managers, academicians, and scholars. These insights can assist policy-makers in refining their strategies and expanding their knowledge base to effectively navigate diverse and demanding situations within organizational contexts.

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