

Public Organizations Management

Vol. 14(3), (Series 55): 113-136/ 2026

 <https://doi.org/10.30473/ipom.2026.78074.5348>

E-ISSN: 2538-600X

P-ISSN: 2322-522X

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Paradox of Corrupted Sacrifice: Unveiling the Hidden Structure and Conceptual Evolution of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

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Receive Date: 15/April/2026

Revise Date: 31/May/2026

Accept Date: 01/June/2026

How to cite

Mohajernia, M. R., Tabarsa, G. A., Akhavan Kharazian, M. (2026). The Paradox of Corrupted Sacrifice: Unveiling the Hidden Structure and Conceptual Evolution of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior. *Public Organizations Management*, 14(3), 113-136.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

In the contemporary competitive business landscape, organizational success is increasingly dependent on employee performance and ethical conduct. However, a paradoxical phenomenon known as "Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior" (UPB) has emerged as a critical area of concern in organizational behavior and business ethics literature. Defined as acts intended to benefit the organization or its members but which violate core societal values, laws, or ethical standards (Umphress et al, 2010), UPB presents a unique challenge. Unlike traditional deviant workplace behaviors aimed at harming the organization, UPB is driven by a motivation to help the organization, creating a cognitive dissonance between altruistic intent and unethical means. High-profile scandals, such as the Volkswagen emissions scandal and Toshiba's accounting fraud, illustrate how employees may engage in unethical acts under the belief that they are serving the organization's best interests. Despite its prevalence, UPB remains less studied compared to other organizational citizenship behaviors or counterproductive work behaviors. The dual nature of UPB—simultaneously supportive of organizational goals yet destructive to ethical norms—requires a comprehensive synthesis of existing research to understand its antecedents, mechanisms, and consequences. This study aims to provide a bibliometric analysis of the UPB domain, mapping its intellectual structure, identifying key influential scholars and journals, tracing thematic evolution, and examining the social structure of research collaboration. By doing so, it seeks to bridge the gap between fragmented studies and offer a holistic view of the field's development from its inception to 2026.

Methodology

This research employs a bibliometric approach, specifically utilizing the five-step method proposed by Zupic and Cater (2015), to systematically analyze the scientific literature on UPB. The study is descriptive-analytical in nature, aiming to quantify and visualize the structure and dynamics of the research field. Data were extracted from two major bibliographic databases: Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus. The search string included keywords related to "unethical pro-organizational behavior"

across titles, abstracts, and keywords to ensure comprehensive coverage. Initially, 244 articles were retrieved from WoS and 299 from Scopus. After applying inclusion criteria—restricting the document type to peer-reviewed journal articles and review papers, and limiting the language to English and Persian (with subsequent focus on English for global analysis)—a final dataset of 290 high-quality articles published between 2010 and 2026 was compiled. The analysis was conducted using R software (version 4.4.2) and specialized bibliometric tools. Several analytical techniques were employed to address the research questions: descriptive statistics were used to assess publication trends and growth rates; citation analysis identified the most influential journals, authors, and documents based on h-index, g-index, and m-index; bibliographic coupling and co-word analysis were used to map thematic trends and conceptual structures; and co-authorship network analysis explored the social structure of collaboration among countries and researchers. The co-word analysis allowed for the identification of conceptual clusters based on keyword co-occurrence, while bibliographic coupling helped trace the intellectual flow of the field. This multi-method approach ensures a robust and multidimensional understanding of the UPB research landscape.

Findings

The bibliometric analysis reveals significant growth and maturation in the field of UPB. The dataset of 290 articles shows an annual growth rate of 13%, indicating sustained and increasing academic interest. The average age of the articles is approximately 3.5 years, with an average citation count of 26 per article, suggesting high impact and relevance. The *Journal of Business Ethics* emerged as the most influential journal, followed by the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Organization Science*, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of the research, bridging ethics, psychology, and management. In terms of authorship, Elizabeth Eve Umphress, John B. Bingham, and Marie S. Mitchell are identified as foundational scholars, having established the theoretical frameworks in the early years. However, recent years have seen a surge in productivity from Chinese scholars, particularly Ying Zhang, Yu Wang, and Shuang Zhang, indicating a shift in the center of gravity towards Asian contexts. These scholars demonstrate high h-index and g-index values, reflecting both high productivity and consistent citation impact.

Thematic analysis through co-word clustering identified six major research streams. The dominant stream, characterized by high centrality and density, focuses on "Organizational Identity and Foundational Ethics," linking UPB to social identity theory and moral justification. Another significant stream explores "Moral Psychology, Leadership, and Social Exchange," emphasizing factors like psychological entitlement, leader-member exchange, and ethical leadership. A third cluster highlights "Cognitive Mechanisms and Ethical Leadership," focusing on moral disengagement and the dual role of leadership in either mitigating or exacerbating UPB. Other clusters address "Business Ethics and Job Satisfaction," "Negative Consequences and Complex Leadership Styles," and "Ethical Climate and Psychological Resources." Conceptual mapping further revealed three core structures: organizational drivers and leadership styles, psychological foundations and moral identity, and consequences and conceptual expansion (including unethical pro-family behavior). Social network analysis of authorship and country collaboration depicted a bipolar global structure dominated by the United States and China. The US acts as the theoretical hub and global connector, while China serves as a major production center and field laboratory, often testing US-derived theories in specific cultural contexts. Emerging collaborations with countries in Southeast Asia, India, and Korea suggest a democratization and localization of the field.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this bibliometric study highlight the complex and evolving nature of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) research. The field has progressed from early definitional debates toward more sophisticated investigations of psychological mechanisms and contextual factors. The prominence of Organizational Identity and Moral Disengagement underscores the central paradox of UPB: employees may rationalize unethical acts as necessary sacrifices for organizational benefit. This suggests that UPB is not simply a consequence of individual moral failure but may emerge from organizational pressures, leadership practices, and social exchange dynamics.

The growing contribution of Chinese scholars reflects the increasing relevance of UPB in collectivist and high-context cultural settings, where group loyalty and face-saving may encourage pro-organizational misconduct. This trend highlights the need for future research to incorporate cultural differences and move beyond predominantly Western theoretical perspectives. The prominence of Ethical Leadership and Bottom-line Mentality further emphasizes the role of management in shaping ethical climates. In particular, strong pressure for performance outcomes combined with inadequate ethical oversight may increase employees' tendency to justify unethical behavior in the organization's interest.

The emergence of Unethical Pro-Family Behavior also indicates an expansion of UPB research toward broader forms of in-group favoritism, suggesting that prioritizing group interests over universal ethical standards may extend beyond organizational contexts. Moreover, findings such as emotional exhaustion reveal that UPB can impose psychological costs on employees in addition to reputational and organizational consequences.

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the UPB research domain, identifying its major contributors, thematic evolution, and patterns of international collaboration. Overall, UPB appears to be a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by the interaction of individual psychology, organizational culture, and leadership. From a practical perspective, organizations should strengthen ethical climates, establish clear codes of conduct, and promote leadership approaches that prioritize integrity over short-term performance. Future research should address the limited evidence from longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, particularly in non-Western contexts, and examine the conditions and interventions that can reduce UPB while allowing organizations to benefit from employee commitment without compromising ethical standards.

KEYWORDS

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior; Bibliometric Analysis; Organizational Identity; Ethical Leadership; Moral Disengagement.

