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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# From moral compromise to psychological depletion: How unethical pro-organizational behavior leads to role stress

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## ABSTRACT

In organizational practice, employees' voluntary engagement in unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) to promote organizational interests has become increasingly prevalent, drawing growing scholarly attention. While existing research has primarily focused on the antecedents and formation mechanisms of UPB, its potential consequences—Particularly its psychological impact on employees—Remain underexplored. Grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study develops and tests a theoretical model to examine how employees' proactive UPB influences their role stress via cognitive dissonance, and how organizational justice moderates these relationships. Using purposive sampling, data were collected from 548 valid responses from employees in Chinese enterprises. Empirical analyses were conducted through regression analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM). The results show that UPB significantly and positively predicts both cognitive dissonance ($\beta = 0.478$, $p < .001$) and role stress ($\beta = 0.527$, $p < .001$). Cognitive dissonance also exerts a significant positive effect on role stress ($\beta = 0.647$, $p < .001$), serving as a partial mediator between UPB and role stress. Furthermore, organizational justice negatively moderates the effects of UPB on both cognitive dissonance and role stress. When employees perceive higher levels of organizational justice, the psychological strain associated with UPB is significantly alleviated; conversely, lower levels of perceived justice amplify the adverse effects. This study not only extends the theoretical understanding of the consequences of UPB but also offers empirical support for building fair management systems to mitigate psychological stress and reduce behavioral risks in organizations.

***Keywords:*** unethical pro-organizational behavior; cognitive dissonance; role stress; organizational justice; conservation of resources theory

## 1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced and increasingly complex business environment, organizations face mounting competitive pressures and operational challenges. To enhance performance and maintain a competitive edge, many organizations place intense demands on their employees. These pressures may lead some individuals to adopt unconventional or ethically questionable methods in pursuit of organizational goals. Within this context, *Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior* (UPB)—actions that violate ethical norms but are intended to benefit the organization—has attracted growing attention from both scholars and practitioners[1–4].

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UPB is particularly noteworthy for its paradoxical nature: it combines prosocial intentions with unethical means. While such behavior aims to protect or promote organizational interests, it often contravenes legal regulations and social norms. This moral ambiguity not only jeopardizes organizational culture and public trust but may also impose significant psychological strain on the individuals who engage in it. Prior research has linked UPB to a variety of negative outcomes, such as reputational damage, value confusion among employees, and erosion of social fairness[5,6]. Understanding the mechanisms through which UPB affects individual and organizational functioning is therefore critical for strengthening ethical governance and safeguarding employee well-being.

One key psychological consequence of UPB is *cognitive dissonance*—a state of internal conflict arising when one's actions contradict personal moral standards. Employees who voluntarily engage in UPB must navigate the tension between achieving organizational goals and adhering to their ethical principles. When such actions violate internal moral codes, they can trigger feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety[1]. Although the theoretical link between UPB and cognitive dissonance is well established, empirical validation of this relationship remains limited[6].

At the same time, *role stress*—a common form of occupational stress—refers to the strain individuals experience when facing conflicting expectations, ambiguous responsibilities, or limited resources in their professional roles[7]. Employees often juggle demands from supervisors, colleagues, and customers, along with their personal career aspirations. Without sufficient support, this juggling act can lead to anxiety, helplessness, and burnout[8]. When unethical behavior becomes part of role performance, it may further intensify these psychological conflicts and aggravate role-related stress.

From a psychological resource perspective, the reason UPB may lead to role stress lies in the cognitive dissonance it evokes. Dissonance consumes mental and emotional resources, heightens individuals' sensitivity to threats, and weakens their capacity to cope effectively. This, in turn, contributes to cumulative stress and deeper role conflict [9]. However, whether UPB exerts its influence on role stress primarily through cognitive dissonance remains an open empirical question.

In this process, *organizational justice*—employees' perceptions of fairness in resource distribution, decision-making, and interpersonal treatment—may serve as a critical contextual buffer [10]. Prior research suggests that perceived justice enhances trust in the organization and mitigates stress. In fair environments, employees may justify UPB as aligned with organizational values, thereby reducing cognitive tension. Conversely, in unjust environments, employees may feel manipulated or exploited, exacerbating psychological distress and role stress[11].

Despite theoretical propositions linking UPB, cognitive dissonance, and role stress, empirical research exploring these mechanisms remains sparse[12]. This study seeks to address this gap by developing and testing a theoretical model grounded in *Conservation of Resources (COR) theory*. Specifically, we examine the mediating role of cognitive dissonance in the relationship between UPB and role stress, and the moderating role of organizational justice within this pathway. By investigating these dynamics, this study aims to clarify how UPB affects employee well-being and provide practical insights for building ethical, psychologically supportive, and fair organizational environments[13,14].

## 2. Literature review

The *Conservation of Resources* (COR) theory, developed by Hobfoll (1989), asserts that individuals are fundamentally driven to acquire, protect, and retain valued resources across both personal and professional domains [15]. Stress arises when these resources are threatened, lost, or insufficiently replenished, often

manifesting through emotional strain, cognitive overload, and behavioral disruption. These resources include not only material assets, but also intangible psychological elements such as time, energy, emotional stability, social support, and moral identity. Notably, COR theory emphasizes that resource loss has a greater psychological impact than resource gain, particularly when losses are severe, ongoing, or perceived as irreversible.

Within this theoretical framework, *Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior* (UPB) can be understood as a resource-depleting behavior. When employees engage in UPB, they often invest significant time, emotional effort, and mental energy while exposing themselves to reputational risks and threats to their moral self-concept. For example, in pursuit of organizational targets, employees may exaggerate product claims or withhold critical information—behaviors that not only consume emotional resources but also erode moral capital and damage trust-based relationships. Over time, these cumulative losses may result in fatigue, psychological strain, and ultimately, role stress [16,17].

Crucially, the resource costs of UPB are not limited to effort alone; they are intensified by the *moral conflict* such behavior entails. When employees violate their internal ethical standards, they are likely to experience *cognitive dissonance*—a state of psychological discomfort caused by inconsistency between actions and values[18]. In complex organizational settings where roles are multifaceted and responsibility is diffused, employees often face trade-offs between achieving goals and upholding ethics. Such moral ambiguity can heighten emotional distress, reduce coherence in self-identity[9], and increase moral uncertainty[19], all of which accelerate resource depletion and deepen dissonance[20].

COR theory also sheds light on how cognitive dissonance contributes to *role stress*. Dissonance is itself a psychological burden, requiring employees to expend further emotional and cognitive resources on self-justification or rationalization. These coping strategies, while aimed at reducing internal conflict, further deplete an individual's capacity to manage daily role demands. As this resource drain accumulates, employees may become increasingly overwhelmed by expectations and feel less capable of fulfilling their roles effectively—Potentially leading to burnout and performance decline[21].

That said, the psychological consequences of UPB are not uniformly negative. In certain organizational environments, employees may *reframe* their unethical behavior as acts of loyalty or responsibility. If such behavior is perceived as tacitly encouraged or institutionally accepted, it may help individuals maintain a coherent self-image and reduce internal conflict. In these cases, UPB can paradoxically function as a *compensatory mechanism* that temporarily protects role identity and psychological balance.

Whether UPB results in *resource loss or restoration* depends heavily on the broader organizational context—Particularly the level of perceived fairness and support. According to Festinger's (1963) cognitive dissonance theory, two main factors determine whether a behavior triggers dissonance: the extent to which it contradicts one's core beliefs, and the availability of external justification or rewards[22]. Strong moral convictions combined with weak justification increase the likelihood of dissonance. Conversely, when organizational incentives are high and moral norms are more flexible, dissonance may be suppressed.

*Organizational justice* plays a key moderating role in this process. Defined as employees' perceptions of fairness in procedures, resource distribution, and interpersonal interactions[23], justice is a crucial form of *social resource*. High levels of perceived justice enhance trust, support psychological safety, and promote a sense of belonging. In fair environments, employees are more likely to rationalize UPB as aligned with organizational values, thereby reducing internal conflict. Transparent communication, consistent decision-making, and respectful treatment further help individuals maintain cognitive coherence even when facing

ethical dilemmas. In contrast, perceived injustice can lead to feelings of exploitation or alienation, intensifying the psychological burden of UPB and exacerbating both dissonance and role stress.

In summary, UPB generates moral conflict that substantially increases the demand for psychological resources. In the absence of supportive structures or resource buffers, employees are more susceptible to cognitive strain and associated role stress. Guided by COR theory, this study aims to explore the interconnections among UPB, cognitive dissonance, organizational justice, and role stress. By clarifying these mechanisms, the study seeks to contribute both theoretical insight and empirical evidence to the discourse on ethical management and employee well-being, and to inform the development of effective support systems within organizations.

# 3. Research hypotheses

## 3.1. Unethical pro-organizational behavior and role stress

*Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior* (UPB) refers to employee actions that intentionally violate ethical standards or societal norms in order to serve organizational interests[1]. Although these actions may stem from prosocial motives, the means used often conflict with legal or moral expectations, creating internal moral conflict.

*Role stress* is the psychological strain individuals experience when fulfilling organizational roles, often resulting from role conflict, ambiguity, or overload [24]. Previous studies suggest that employees' ethical behavior shapes not only their value alignment and role identity but also their emotional experiences and psychological burden during role enactment[25].

UPB may lead to role stress in several ways. First, the inherent moral tension can trigger value conflicts between organizational goals and personal ethics. If unresolved, this conflict can undermine role clarity and create role conflict[1]. Second, UPB is typically accompanied by vague organizational feedback and ambiguous legitimacy, increasing uncertainty and role ambiguity[26]. Third, engaging in UPB may involve concealment, emotional suppression, or managing misleading information—activities that drain psychological resources and contribute to role overload[27,28].

Over time, UPB and role stress may form a reinforcing cycle. Employees might continue engaging in UPB to gain approval or relieve pressure, which only exacerbates their moral anxiety and psychological strain[29]. Such patterns may spread within teams, eroding ethical climate and amplifying collective role stress[30].

**H1**: Unethical pro-organizational behavior positively predicts role stress.

## 3.2. Unethical pro-organizational behavior and cognitive dissonance

*Cognitive dissonance*, introduced by Festinger (1957), refers to the psychological discomfort that arises from inconsistencies between one's values, attitudes, and behaviors[31]. In ethical contexts, this discomfort is heightened when individuals act in ways that contradict their moral standards or social expectations[32].

UPB, by nature, creates such contradictions. This is especially true when the behavior is self-initiated rather than externally mandated, leading individuals to assume greater responsibility for the unethical action. In these cases, common mechanisms such as "diffusion of responsibility" are less effective in reducing dissonance[33,34].

Moreover, the consequences of UPB shape the intensity of dissonance. Negative outcomes—Such as client loss or reputational damage—make the unethical nature of the action more salient, increasing self-

doubt and moral tension[35,36]. Additionally, employees engaging in UPB violate both personal values and the expectations tied to their professional roles, resulting in a "double violation" that intensifies dissonance[37,38].

**H2**: Unethical pro-organizational behavior positively predicts cognitive dissonance.

### 3.3. Cognitive dissonance and role stress

As a deeply internal psychological state, cognitive dissonance may act as a significant precursor to role stress[39]. It affects employees' emotional stability, self-evaluation, and their ability to function effectively within their roles.

First, dissonance creates a sustained state of internal conflict and cognitive strain, requiring continuous self-justification. This process consumes emotional and mental resources, increasing the likelihood of emotional fatigue and attention depletion[40,41].

Second, dissonance can undermine self-efficacy. When individuals doubt their moral integrity due to unethical behavior, they may also question their competence and professional worth—what some describe as "role competence anxiety"[42,43]. This is often compounded by negative emotions such as guilt, shame, or fear, which further reduce psychological resilience and amplify stress[44,45].

Finally, dissonance may lead to social withdrawal. Employees may avoid seeking support due to fears of moral judgment, thereby missing opportunities for emotional relief and resource restoration—creating what scholars term "socially isolated stressors"[46].

**H3**: Cognitive dissonance positively predicts role stress.

### 3.4. The mediating role of cognitive dissonance

From a resource-based psychological perspective, the relationship between UPB and role stress may be indirect. That is, UPB triggers cognitive dissonance, which then leads to increased role stress.

When employees experience a conflict between their actions and moral beliefs, dissonance activates emotional instability, self-doubt, and cognitive fatigue. These reactions impair their ability to manage role demands[1,47]. The severity of dissonance is influenced by perceived consequences, social judgment, and personal accountability. When employees anticipate reputational or ethical risks, the resulting tension may interfere with their role functioning[48,49].

Furthermore, individuals may adopt maladaptive coping strategies—such as denial, avoidance, or emotional suppression—that fail to alleviate stress and instead intensify psychological strain, increasing the risk of burnout[50,51].

**H4**: Cognitive dissonance mediates the relationship between unethical pro-organizational behavior and role stress.

### 3.5. The moderating role of organizational justice

*Organizational justice* refers to employees' perceptions of fairness in resource distribution, decision-making processes, and interpersonal treatment[52]. As a vital psychosocial resource, perceived justice enhances trust and belonging, and may buffer the negative effects of moral strain[11].

In high-justice environments, employees may interpret UPB as necessary and legitimate within the broader organizational context, thus reducing the intensity of dissonance through cognitive rationalization[53,54]. In contrast, in low-justice settings, the same behavior may be seen as exploitation, leading to stronger dissonance and emotional discomfort[55].

**H5**: Organizational justice negatively moderates the relationship between UPB and cognitive dissonance. Specifically, this positive relationship is weaker under high organizational justice and stronger under low organizational justice.

Similarly, perceived justice may moderate the effect of UPB on role stress. In fair organizations, employees may frame their actions as loyal or responsible, reducing the psychological burden. However, in unjust contexts, they are more likely to perceive their actions as coerced or manipulative, increasing emotional strain[56-58].

**H6**: Organizational justice negatively moderates the relationship between UPB and role stress. Specifically, this positive relationship is weaker under high organizational justice and stronger under low organizational justice.

Based on the above hypotheses, the conceptual model of this study is illustrated in **Figure 1**.

# 4. Research methods

## 4.1. Research participants and sampling procedure

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) is observed across many industries, but it is particularly prevalent in the service sector, where employee actions are directly visible to and experienced by customers. The real-time and interpersonal nature of service delivery makes unethical behavior in this context more immediate in impact and often more psychologically taxing for the employees involved[6,59].

According to Yan et al. (2023), frontline roles—such as those in sales, marketing, finance, and consultancy—are especially prone to ethically ambiguous practices when under pressure to meet performance targets or obtain incentives[60]. Gao et al. (2023) further confirmed through interviews that service employees operating in performance-driven environments often rationalize behaviors such as hiding product flaws, overstating service benefits, or misleading customers[61]. For example, staff in the training industry may use exaggerated claims to promote course offerings[62], while sales personnel may overpromise product features to meet sales quotas[63].

In light of this context, the present study employed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure theoretical relevance. Specifically, participants were drawn from customer-facing roles within the service industry—such as sales consultants, marketing specialists, advisors, product managers, cashiers, and frontline service staff. This targeted sampling enhances the validity and contextual applicability of the research findings by focusing on employees who are most likely to encounter the psychological consequences of UPB[64].

The survey was administered online via the Wenjuanxing platform between January and February 2025. Prior to participation, all respondents were clearly informed about the academic nature of the study and assured of complete anonymity and strict confidentiality. Consent was implied upon the voluntary submission of the completed questionnaire, in accordance with established ethical research standards.

A total of 756 responses were collected. After removing invalid, duplicate, or anomalously timed responses, 548 valid questionnaires were retained. The demographic characteristics of the final sample were as follows:

**Gender:** 329 males (60.04%), 219 females (39.96%)

**Age:** 18–25 years (n = 56, 10.22%), 26–35 years (n = 146, 26.64%), 36–45 years (n = 216, 39.42%), 46–55 years (n = 105, 19.16%), over 55 years (n = 25, 4.56%)

**Education level:** High school or below (n = 32, 5.84%), associate degree (n = 127, 23.18%), bachelor's degree (n = 313, 57.12%), master's degree or above (n = 76, 13.87%)

**Years of work experience:** less than 3 years (n = 23, 4.20%), 3–5 years (n = 140, 25.55%), 5–8 years (n = 264, 48.18%), more than 8 years (n = 121, 22.08%)

**Job type:** Sales/Marketing (n = 475, 86.68%), Banking/Finance/Insurance (n = 11, 2.01%), Management (n = 32, 5.84%), Public Relations/Planning (n = 6, 1.10%), Others (n = 24, 4.38%)

**Annual income:** under ¥50,000 (n = 80, 14.60%), ¥50,000–100,000 (n = 222, 40.51%), ¥100,000–150,000 (n = 142, 25.91%), over ¥150,000 (n = 104, 18.98%)

This sample structure exhibits typical characteristics of the service industry and provides a solid foundation for exploring the psychological mechanisms underlying UPB.

### 4.2. Measurement instruments and variable operationalization

All measurement instruments employed in this study were adapted from well-established international scales. To ensure cultural and conceptual equivalence, a rigorous *translation–back translation–expert review* procedure was followed. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) was measured using a 10-item scale developed by Wu et al. (2016), which assesses the extent to which employees engage in ethically questionable behavior for the benefit of the organization[65]. A sample item includes: *"If it helps the organization, I would distort the facts to protect the company's image."* The scale demonstrated high internal consistency in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.922$).

Role Stress was measured using a 13-item instrument developed by Li and Zhang (2009), encompassing three key dimensions: role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload [66]. A representative item is: *"I often face conflicting work demands."* The scale showed good internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.866$).

Cognitive Dissonance was assessed using a 9-item scale designed by Lii (2001), which captures the psychological discomfort resulting from inconsistencies between employees' ethical beliefs and their actual behavior[67]. A sample item reads: *"If I personally make a decision to engage in UPB, I can accept it."* The scale exhibited excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.918$).

Organizational Justice was measured using the 20-item scale developed by Colquitt (2001), which comprises four subdimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice, interpersonal justice, and informational justice[68]. Example items include: *"My pay accurately reflects the effort I put into my job,"* and *"My supervisor communicates relevant work information in a timely manner."* This scale demonstrated very high internal consistency in the present study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.943$).

All measurement tools employed in this research have been validated extensively in both domestic and international empirical studies. Their theoretical alignment with *Conservation of Resources Theory* and *Social Exchange Theory* ensures their suitability for exploring the psychological mechanisms underlying workplace behavior in organizational contexts.

## 5. Results

This section presents the results of statistical analyses conducted using **SPSS 27.0** and **AMOS 24.0** to evaluate the proposed hypotheses and validate the theoretical model. The main analytical steps included: (1) descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, (2) confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and (3) mediation

and moderation tests using Hayes' PROCESS macros (Models 4 and 5). Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was applied to generate 95% confidence intervals and assess the robustness of the effects observed[69,70].

## 5.1. Correlation analysis and validity testing

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients were first calculated. As shown in **Table 1**, none of the correlations between variables exceeded 0.70, indicating no serious multicollinearity concerns and supporting the validity of subsequent regression analyses.

To evaluate the measurement model, CFA was conducted in AMOS. All standardized factor loadings exceeded 0.50, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were above 0.50, and Composite Reliability (CR) scores were all greater than 0.80, indicating good convergent validity and internal consistency (see **Table 2**). Furthermore, the square roots of the AVEs were higher than the inter-construct correlations, supporting discriminant validity.

Model fit indices also indicated a good fit. As shown in **Table 3**, $\chi^2/df = 1.290$ (below the recommended threshold of 3), CFI = 0.977, TLI = 0.976 (both above 0.90), RMSEA = 0.023, and SRMR = 0.033 (both below the standard thresholds of 0.08 and 0.05, respectively). These results suggest that the measurement model fits the data well and is suitable for further structural analysis.

## 5.2. Hypothesis testing

### 5.2.1 Main effects

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to test hypotheses H1 through H3. As shown in **Table 4**, UPB had a significant positive effect on Role Stress (RS) ($\beta = 0.527$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. UPB also significantly predicted Cognitive Dissonance (CD) ($\beta = 0.478$, $p < .001$), confirming H2. Additionally, CD had a significant positive effect on RS ($\beta = 0.647$, $p < .001$), providing support for H3.

### 5.2.2. Mediation analysis

Hayes' (2015) PROCESS Model 4 and the bootstrapping method were used to test the mediation effect [70]. As presented in **Table 5**, the direct effect of UPB on RS was 0.367 ($p < .001$, 95% CI [0.267, 0.470]), and the indirect effect through CD was 0.349 ($p < .001$, 95% CI [0.287, 0.415]). Since both confidence intervals excluded zero, this indicates that CD partially mediates the relationship between UPB and RS. The indirect effect accounted for 48.7% of the total effect, providing robust support for H4.

### 5.2.3. Moderation analysis

To examine the moderating role of Organizational Justice (OJ) in the relationships between UPB and CD/RS, PROCESS Model 5 was used to test the interaction terms (UPB × OJ). As shown in **Table 6**, the interaction term had a significant negative effect on CD ($\beta = -0.277$, $p < .001$), supporting H5. It also significantly moderated the relationship between UPB and RS ($\beta = -0.204$, $p < .001$), supporting H6.

Further, to visualize the nature and strength of the moderation effects, simple slope analysis was conducted following Aiken and West's (1991) procedure[71]. As depicted in **Figure 2** and **Table 7**, under high levels of perceived organizational justice, the effect of UPB on CD was weaker ($\beta = 0.217$, $p < .001$), whereas under low justice conditions, the effect was significantly stronger ($\beta = 0.711$, $p < .001$).

Similarly, as shown in **Figure 3** and **Table 8**, organizational justice also negatively moderated the relationship between UPB and RS. Under high levels of organizational justice, the slope of this relationship was lower ($\beta = 0.243$, $p < .001$), while under low justice conditions, the slope increased ($\beta = 0.606$, $p < .001$). This suggests that high perceived justice effectively attenuates the role stress induced by UPB.

# 6. Discussion

This study empirically investigated the relationships among Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB), Cognitive Dissonance (CD), Role Stress (RS), and Organizational Justice (OJ), drawing upon the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and cognitive appraisal theory. All six hypotheses received empirical support. The following sections discuss the findings in detail.

## 6.1. The impact of UPB on role stress

The results support H1, indicating that UPB has a significant positive effect on role stress. As employees repeatedly engage in UPB, they experience escalating psychological and moral conflict, which may trigger a cycle of increasing internal strain. Prior research has shown that such behavior erodes moral self-concept, fuels emotional exhaustion, and exacerbates perceptions of role conflict, ambiguity, and overload[72].

From the COR perspective, engaging in UPB requires considerable psychological resources, including emotional regulation, self-justification, and impression management. It also poses risks to moral capital and interpersonal trust[73]. Over time, the cumulative depletion of these resources impairs employees' ability to manage role demands, potentially leading to burnout[74,75]. Moreover, the underlying moral tension reduces psychological safety and weakens organizational identification, further reinforcing long-term stress.

## 6.2. The impact of UPB on cognitive dissonance

Findings for H2 confirm that UPB significantly increases cognitive dissonance. Employees who knowingly violate their ethical standards—particularly when the behavior is self-initiated—tend to experience stronger internal conflict[76,77]. When UPB leads to tangible harm, such as customer dissatisfaction or reputational loss, the dissonance intensifies[78].

In addition, employees may reflect on their actions with guilt or shame, and worry about external judgment or disciplinary consequences. These psychological reactions deepen the dissonance and solidify the behavior's perceived moral incongruity [79]. Thus, UPB serves not only as an ethical breach but also as a trigger of sustained psychological discomfort.

## 6.3. The impact of cognitive dissonance on role stress

Hypothesis H3 is also supported: cognitive dissonance significantly contributes to role stress. As a form of internal psychological tension, dissonance consumes cognitive resources that would otherwise be used to manage professional demands [80]. The need to reconcile conflicting values and behaviors can lead to self-doubt, lower self-efficacy, and reduced emotional resilience.

Furthermore, employees may experience emotional exhaustion and avoid social interactions due to feelings of guilt or fear of judgment. This withdrawal limits access to emotional support and hinders the replenishment of psychological resources, thereby compounding stress[81]. Together, these mechanisms intensify the experience of role stress.

## 6.4. The Mediating role of cognitive dissonance

Results for H4 demonstrate that cognitive dissonance plays a partial mediating role between UPB and role stress. This means UPB indirectly increases role stress by first triggering internal value conflict. As COR theory posits, dissonance represents a threat to psychological resources and initiates compensatory processes—such as rationalization or emotional suppression—that further deplete those resources[82].

Cognitive appraisal theory also helps explain this mechanism: employees may interpret UPB as a moral threat during primary appraisal. If they assess their coping capacity as insufficient in the secondary appraisal,

the dissonance escalates into chronic psychological stress[83]. Thus, cognitive dissonance not only reflects the immediate emotional cost of UPB but also acts as a central mechanism linking unethical behavior to broader role strain.

### 6.5. The moderating role of organizational justice

Hypotheses H5 and H6 are both confirmed, showing that organizational justice buffers the negative psychological effects of UPB. In environments with high perceived fairness, employees are more likely to see the organization's goals and practices as legitimate. This facilitates the cognitive rationalization of UPB, making it easier to interpret such behavior as necessary or even loyal[84].

Fair treatment also reinforces psychological safety and strengthens the psychological contract between the employee and the organization, helping to offset feelings of conflict and pressure[85]. In contrast, low perceived justice heightens feelings of exploitation and mistrust, intensifying both cognitive dissonance and role stress.

These findings suggest that organizational justice functions as both a structural and psychological buffe**r**, offering cognitive clarity and emotional protection for employees navigating ethical gray zones[86]. As such, justice perceptions play a pivotal role in regulating the psychological costs of morally ambiguous behavior in the workplace.

## 7. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) significantly increases employees' Role Stress (RS). Although UPB may originate from seemingly positive intentions—Such as organizational loyalty or the pursuit of performance—It is characterized by ethical conflict, moral ambiguity, and behavioral complexity. These factors can impose substantial psychological burdens on employees and distort their understanding of professional roles.

The findings specifically show that employees who engage in UPB frequently experience Cognitive Dissonance (CD), arising from the mismatch between their actions and internal moral standards. Even when such behavior is carried out voluntarily or receives implicit approval from the organization, it can still generate intense inner conflict. The tension between achieving organizational goals and upholding personal ethical values results in psychological discomfort that cannot easily be resolved through external validation alone.

Importantly, cognitive dissonance is not merely a transient emotional reaction—It also represents a process of psychological resource depletion. In attempting to justify or rationalize their behavior, employees must invest considerable cognitive and emotional effort. This resource consumption undermines their capacity to manage work demands, exacerbates role ambiguity and conflict, and ultimately leads to heightened role stress. The study thus identifies cognitive dissonance as a key psychological mechanism linking UPB to negative employee outcomes.

In addition, the research highlights the moderating role of Organizational Justice (OJ) in this mechanism. Perceptions of fairness—whether in resource distribution, decision-making processes, or interpersonal treatment—can significantly buffer the negative psychological effects of UPB. A just organizational environment offers employees both emotional reassurance and cognitive support, thereby alleviating moral tension and mitigating the development of stress.

In sum, this study advances theoretical understanding of the psychological costs of UPB, especially through the lens of resource consumption and ethical conflict. It also offers practical insights for

organizations aiming to manage ethical risks: by fostering a fair and transparent work environment, organizations can reduce employees' psychological burden when facing moral dilemmas, and promote healthier, more sustainable employee functioning.

# 8. Theoretical contributions

This study offers several important contributions to the fields of organizational psychology, behavioral ethics, and employee well-being research:

First, it expands the theoretical understanding of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) by shifting the analytical focus from organizational outcomes to employee-level psychological consequences. While prior studies have primarily emphasized the external impacts of UPB—such as reputational damage, legal risk, or performance trade-offs—this research adopts an employee-centered perspective grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. It reveals that UPB, despite its prosocial intent, can deplete employees' psychological resources and intensify role stress, thereby exposing the self-harming nature of "altruistic unethical behavior." This insight enriches the growing discourse on the hidden costs of UPB.

Second, the study deepens empirical understanding of cognitive dissonance within organizational contexts. It provides clear evidence that cognitive dissonance serves as a psychological conduit through which UPB leads to role stress. By integrating COR theory with cognitive appraisal theory, the study offers a more nuanced account of how employees cognitively and emotionally respond to moral conflict. It demonstrates that internal value-behavior inconsistencies—Triggered by ethically ambiguous actions—function as chronic psychological stressors that drain personal coping resources and reduce workplace functioning.

Third, the study highlights the contextual buffering role of organizational justice. Results show that justice perceptions not only moderate the direct impact of UPB on role stress, but also mitigate the cognitive dissonance caused by UPB. This suggests that organizational justice operates as a dual-function psychological resource: it fosters fairness-based trust and reduces resistance to morally ambiguous behavior, while simultaneously offering institutional and interpersonal support that protects employees from excessive resource loss. This insight advances theoretical models of justice by positioning it as both a stressor shield and a coping enabler in ethically charged environments.

In summary, while UPB may superficially benefit organizational objectives, it imposes significant psychological costs on employees. The findings underscore the strategic importance of organizational justice as a protective mechanism for managing these unintended consequences. Fair compensation systems, transparent procedures, and respectful communication practices are not only ethical imperatives—They are also essential tools for minimizing employee dissonance, reducing role stress, and supporting sustainable workforce well-being.

# 9. Research limitations and future outlook

Despite the theoretical and empirical contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged, offering opportunities for future research:

First, the study relied exclusively on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias and retrospective inaccuracies. Participants may underreport engagement in UPB or misjudge their experiences of cognitive dissonance and stress due to self-censorship or biased memory recall. To enhance objectivity and external validity, future studies should consider multi-source data collection, incorporating assessments from supervisors, peers, or organizational records.

Second, the measurement of cognitive dissonance could be further refined. The current study used explicit self-report items, which may not fully capture the subtlety and complexity of the underlying psychological processes. Future research could incorporate implicit measures (e.g., response latency tasks) or psychophysiological indicators such as galvanic skin response, electroencephalogram (EEG), or facial electromyography to assess the activation, intensity, and duration of dissonance with greater precision.

Third, the scope of moderating variables examined in this study was limited to organizational justice. However, the psychological impact of UPB may also depend on a broader set of contextual and individual factors. Future research could explore moderators such as organizational culture, ethical climate, value congruence, or psychological capital, thereby constructing a more nuanced and integrative model of context–cognition–behavior dynamics.

Moreover, the cross-sectional design employed in this study limits causal inference and overlooks the temporal unfolding of psychological responses. Future studies could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to capture how cognitive and emotional reactions to UPB evolve over time—Before, during, and after the behavior occurs. Such designs would offer deeper insight into the dynamic mechanisms linking UPB to individual outcomes.

In sum, addressing these limitations in future work will help build a more comprehensive understanding of how UPB affects employees and how organizations can mitigate its psychological costs through contextual and structural interventions.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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# Figures and Tables

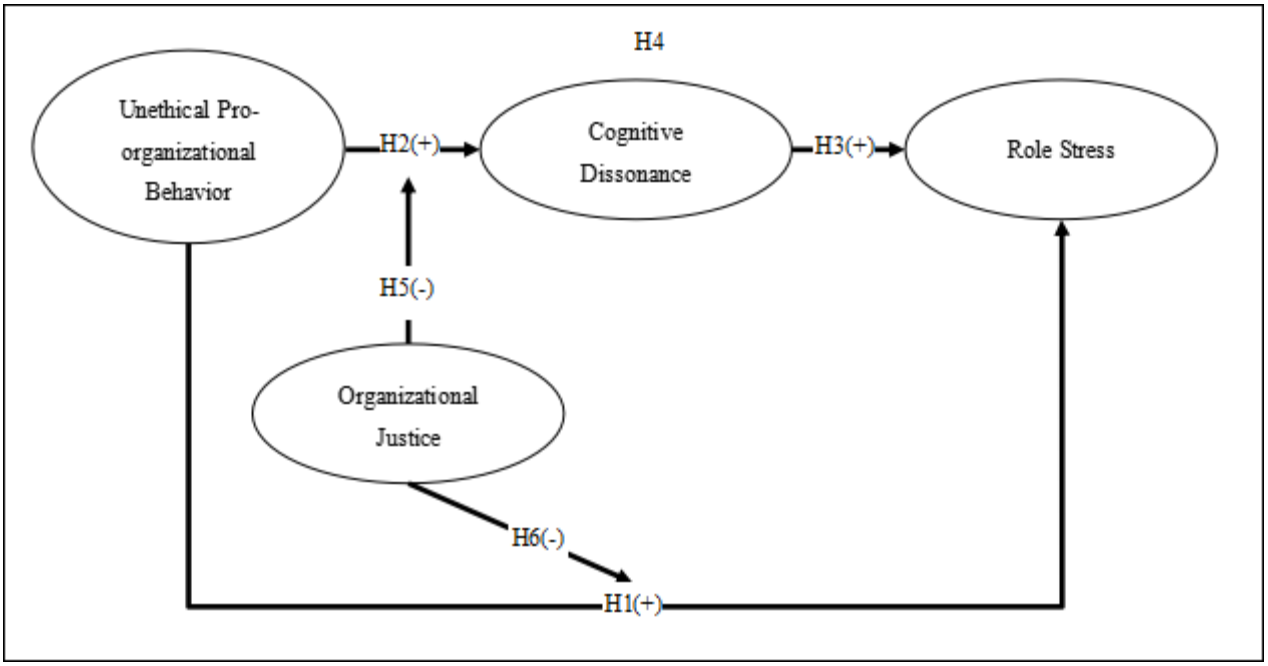


**Figure 1.** Research framework diagram.

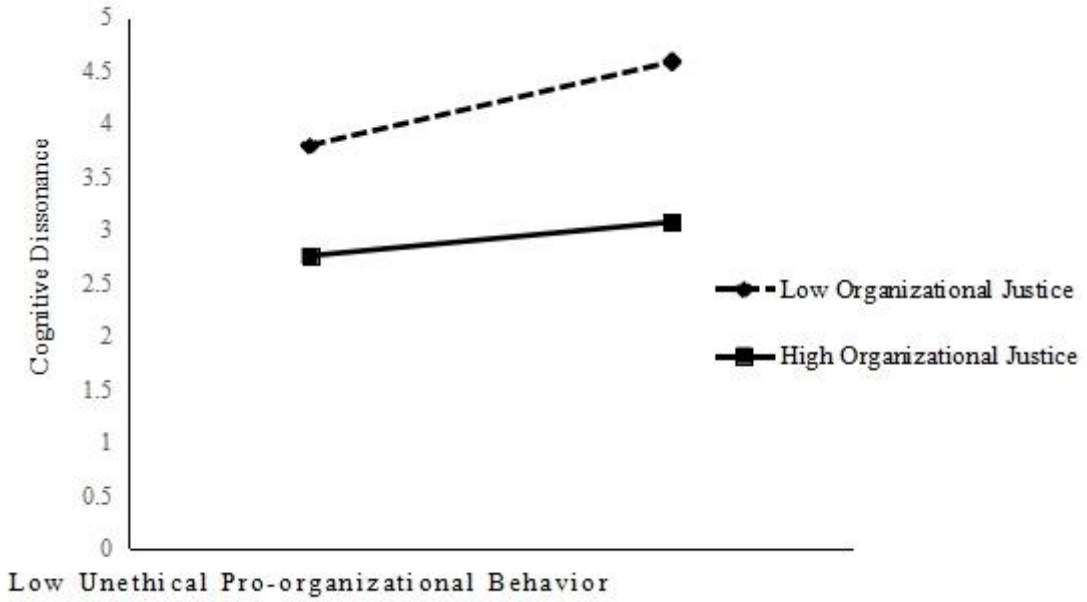


**Figure 2.** Simple slope plot of the moderating effect of organizational justice on the relationship between unethical pro-organizational behavior and cognitive dissonance.

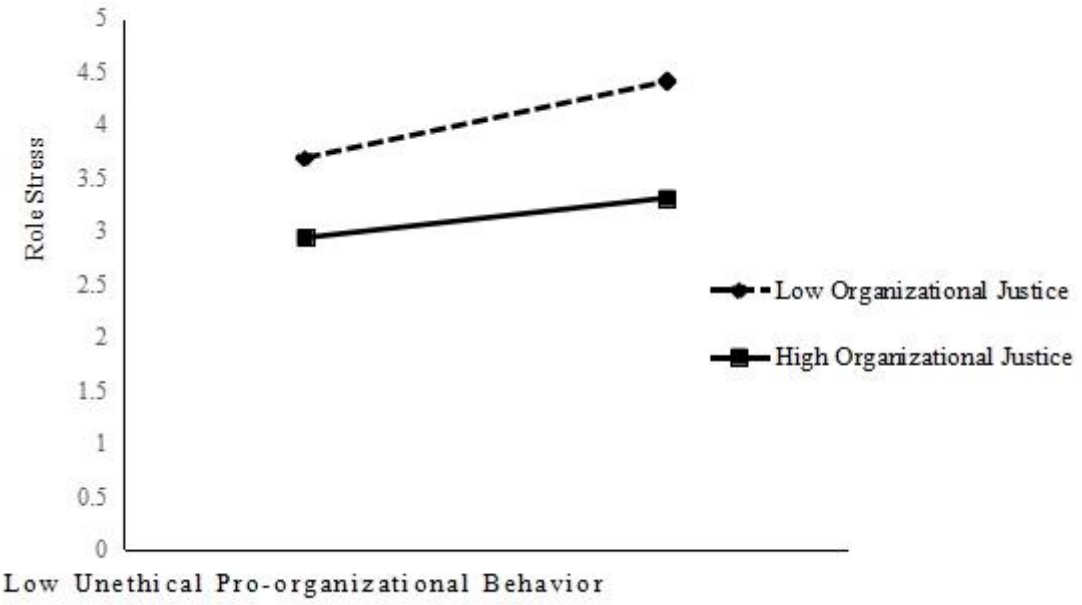


**Figure 3.** Simple slope plot of the moderating effect of organizational justice on the relationship between unethical pro-organizational behavior and role stress.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics, standard deviations, and correlation analysis results.

| | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior | 3.639 | 0.848 | 0.738 | | | |
| 2.Cognitive Dissonance | 3.555 | 0.911 | 0.484*** | 0.747 | | |
| 3.Role Stress | 3.633 | 0.738 | 0.540*** | 0.645*** | 0.776 | |
| 4.Organizational Justice | 3.147 | 0.892 | -0.231*** | -0.378*** | -0.381*** | 0.763 |

***Note:***

*1.N=548, *p <0.05, **p <0.01, ***p <0.001.*

*2.The diagonal represents the square root of the AVE for each variable.*

**Table 2.** Convergent validity analysis results.

| Variable | Factor Loading | AVE | CR |
|---|---|---|---|
| Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior | 0.719-0.768 | 0.544 | 0.923 |
| Cognitive Dissonance | 0.704-0.820 | 0.557 | 0.919 |
| Role Stress | 0.626-0.834 | 0.602 | 0.955 |
| Organizational Justice | 0.705-0.844 | 0.582 | 0.965 |

**Table 3.** Model fit analysis results.

| Fitting Index | Acceptable Range | Measured Value |
|---|---|---|
| $X^2$ | | 1620.519 |
| DF | | 1256 |
| $X^2$/DF | <3 | 1.290 |
| RMSEA | <0.08 | 0.023 |
| TLI | >0.9 | 0.976 |
| CFI | >0.9 | 0.977 |
| SRMR | <0.05 | 0.033 |

**Table 4.** Direct effect results analysis table for variables.

| Path | *B* | SE | *t* | *p* | *β* | VIF | $R^2$ | Adj-$R^2$ | *F-value* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UPB→RS | 0.458 | 0.030 | 15.271 | 0.000 | 0.527 | 1.006 | 0.363 | 0.353 | 38.386*** |
| UPB→CD | 0.513 | 0.040 | 12.832 | 0.000 | 0.478 | 1.006 | 0.256 | 0.245 | 23.238*** |
| CD→RS | 0.524 | 0.025 | 20.820 | 0.000 | 0.647 | 1.030 | 0.494 | 0.487 | 65.815*** |

***Note:***

*1.N=548, *p <0.05, **p <0.01, ***p <0.001.*

*2.UPB = Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior, RS = Role Stress, CD = Cognitive Dissonance.*

**Table 5.** Analysis of the mediating effect of cognitive dissonance on the relationship between unethical pro-organizational behavior and role stress.

| Path | Effect | SE | *t* | *p* | Bias Corrected (95%) | | Proportion(%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | LLCI | ULCI | |
| Total Effect | 0.715 | 0.040 | 18.084 | 0.000 | 0.636 | 0.790 | |
| Indirect Effect | 0.349 | 0.033 | 10.442 | 0.000 | 0.287 | 0.415 | 48.7% |
| Direct Effect | 0.367 | 0.051 | 7.211 | 0.000 | 0.267 | 0.470 | 51.3% |

**Table 6.** Analysis of the moderating effect of organizational justice.

| Path | *β* | *t* | $R^2$ | Adj-$R^2$ | *F* -value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UPB×OJ→CD | 0.277*** | 6.707 | 0.384 | 0.373 | 33.528*** |
| UPB×OJ→RS | 0.204*** | 6.512 | 0.461 | 0.451 | 45.928*** |

***Note:***

*1. N=548, *p <0.05, **p <0.01, ***p <0.001.*

*2. UPB = Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior, RS = Role Stress, CD = Cognitive Dissonance, OJ = Organizational Justice.*

**Table 7.** Simple slope analysis of the moderating effect of organizational justice on the relationship between unethical pro-organizational behavior and cognitive dissonance.

| **Moderating Variable Levels** | **Regression Coefficient** | **SE** | ***t*** | ***p*** | **95% CI** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mean | 0.464 | 0.038 | 12.357 | 0.000 | 0.390 | 0.538 |
| High Level (+1SD) | 0.217 | 0.050 | 4.306 | 0.000 | 0.118 | 0.316 |
| Low Level (-1SD) | 0.711 | 0.055 | 13.013 | 0.000 | 0.604 | 0.818 |

**Table 8.** Simple slope analysis of the moderating effect of organizational justice on the relationship between unethical pro-organizational behavior and role stress.

| **Moderating Variable Levels** | **Regression Coefficient** | **SE** | ***t*** | ***p*** | **95% CI** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mean | 0.425 | 0.028 | 14.927 | 0.000 | 0.369 | 0.481 |
| High Level (+1SD) | 0.243 | 0.038 | 6.362 | 0.000 | 0.168 | 0.318 |
| Low Level (-1SD) | 0.606 | 0.041 | 14.648 | 0.000 | 0.525 | 0.688 |