

THE COURAGE PARADOX: WHEN NOBLE ACTS FOSTER UNETHICAL PRO-ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

This study examines how organizational identification relates to unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) in public organizations and investigates the moderating role of courage. Courage is conceptualized in this study as a psychological disposition characterized by persistence in the face of fear, consistent with the operational definition, rather than as a moral virtue per se. Using survey data from 196 public employees in Türkiye, a context characterized by high collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, the hypotheses were tested through regression and moderation analysis. The results indicate that organizational identification is positively associated with UPB. Courage moderates this relationship such that individuals with higher courage are more likely to engage in UPB across all levels of identification. These findings extend social identity and trait activation theories by highlighting how a dispositional trait—courage as persistence despite fear—can amplify the propensity for UPB by reducing the inhibitory effect of perceived risk. The theoretical contributions and practical implications for organizational management are discussed.

Keywords: organizational identification; courage; unethical pro-organizational behavior; trait activation theory; moderating role

JEL Classification Codes: M14, D23, H83

1. Introduction

Public organizations play a multifaceted role in society, working to meet the diverse needs and interests of citizens, promote the common good, and maintain the stability and functioning of the nation (Frederickson and Hart 1985). Their roles and responsibilities can vary widely depending on their specific mandates and the societal context in which they operate. They often serve as regulatory bodies that establish and enforce rules and regulations to maintain order and protect the public interest. These organizations significantly determine citizens' protection, health, and safety (Hood 1991). However, the quality of service in public organizations depends on their employees. Pursuing a career in public service and excellence in this field are driven by the service ethic (Bailey 1964), which is characterized by a desire to serve the broader public (Bullock, Stritch, and Rainey 2015). The findings in the literature indicate that individuals driven by a sense of public service hold significant regard for tasks that contribute to the well-being of others and the betterment of society. Moreover, they prioritize work that entails personal sacrifices, instilling a sense of duty, and upholding the principles of honesty and moral uprightness.

Despite these ideals, strong organizational identification can produce a paradoxical outcome: it may lead employees to engage in behaviors that benefit their organization at the expense of broader ethical standards—a phenomenon known as unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) (Umphress and Bingham 2011). Critically, this phenomenon is not confined to any particular national or political context. In the private sector, organizational owners and leaders frequently cultivate strong organizational identification through culture and leadership to protect or grow their business interests, which can similarly result in ethically questionable employee behaviors (Effelsberg, Solga, and Gurt 2014). In public institutions, analogous dynamics emerge when employees prioritize the organization's image or interests over their obligation to citizens (Mishra, Ghosh, and Sharma 2022). Understanding this "dark side" of

organizational identification is therefore relevant across organizational types and national contexts.

It is not uncommon for employees to engage in behaviors that may initially seem beneficial to the organization but ultimately result in hidden costs for citizens and other external stakeholders. For example, employees may use their position to misrepresent information, falsify documents, manipulate records to achieve organizational goals, create a positive image, or protect the organization's reputation (Frederickson and Ghore 2015; Hood 2002). Scholars have introduced UPB to describe a distinct form of unethical conduct characterized by actions that aim to enhance the organization's or its members' efficiency while simultaneously contravening fundamental societal values, norms, laws, or ethical principles (Umphress and Bingham 2011). In recent years, there has been a significant increase in research activity in UPB owing to its widespread prevalence and serious consequences (Mishra, Ghosh, and Sharma 2022). Many studies have identified various motivators for UPB in the workplace, such as organizational identification, social exchange (Umphress, Bingham, and Mitchell 2010; Wang and Li 2019), leadership behaviors (Effelsberg and Solga 2015), social cognition (Chen, Chen, and Sheldon 2016), social learning (Fehr et al. 2019), and self-determination (Kong 2016).

Studies have shown that employee attachment to the organization, as measured by constructs such as organizational identification, is an essential factor among these predictors (Mishra, Ghosh, and Sharma 2022). According to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), organizational identification is a psychological state that leads to UPB in the workplace. Scholars suggest that individuals with a strong sense of organizational identification prioritize their organization's interests over the potential negative consequences of unethical actions (Umphress and Bingham 2011). Several studies have confirmed that organizational identification is a prominent factor driving UPB (Effelsberg, Solga, and Gurt 2014; Lee, Choi, and Kim 2018; Umphress, Bingham, and Mitchell 2010). However, the existing literature lacks a comprehensive investigation into the boundary conditions—specifically, the

individual dispositional traits—that may moderate the organizational identification–UPB relationship.

Among potentially relevant boundary conditions, courage warrants particular attention. Courage has been conceptualized as a psychological disposition involving persistence in the face of fear (Norton and Weiss 2009; Rachman 1984), enabling individuals to act on their intentions even when risks or threats are perceived. This dispositional quality is directly relevant to UPB, which often carries perceived personal risks (e.g., reputational damage, sanctions). Courageous individuals, by definition, are less deterred by such risks. Yet no published study has directly examined whether courage moderates the identification–UPB relationship. Building on trait activation theory (Tett and Guterman 2000), this study proposes that the perceived risks inherent in UPB serve as situational cues that activate the trait of courage, amplifying the identification–UPB link for dispositionally courageous employees.

Furthermore, culture shapes the context in which organizational identification and UPB unfold. Cultural dimensions such as collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance influence employees' ethical perceptions and pro-organizational tendencies (Hofstede 2001; Meyer 2014; Li 2023). This study draws on data from public employees in Türkiye—a context characterized by high collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance—to empirically examine these relationships. Nevertheless, the theoretical framework is broadly applicable across cultural contexts, as UPB and organizational identification were first identified in Western contexts and have been replicated globally.

Against this background, this study addresses two research questions: (1) Is organizational identification positively associated with UPB in a public-sector context? (2) Does courage, operationalized as persistence despite fear, moderate the organizational identification–UPB relationship? By addressing these questions, the study moves beyond attitudinal predictors of UPB to emphasize the role of dispositional factors (O'Boyle et al. 2012), extending the nomological network of UPB research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Organizational Identification and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

Social identity theory best explains the phenomenon of UPB in organizations (Tajfel and Turner 1979). This theory posits that individuals tend to define themselves based on their membership in various social categories. Organizational identification occurs when employees perceive a sense of oneness, belongingness, and membership with their employing organizations (Ashforth and Mael 1989). They also link their material and reputational status to the organization's development, perceiving organizational success as a personal achievement. This sense of identification with the organization leads to increased engagement in positive extra-role behaviors, such as organizational citizenship behavior, aimed at promoting the growth and progress of the organization (Castille, Buckner, and Thoroughgood 2018).

However, in their pursuit of maximizing organizational benefits, highly identified employees may disregard ethical principles and prioritize the organization's interests over those of external stakeholders. The quest to maximize organizational gains can result in unethical behaviors that ostensibly contribute to the organization's interests (Umphress and Bingham 2011). For instance, when the organization faces a threat such as a lawsuit, employees with a strong organizational identification may employ any necessary means to protect the interests and reputation of the organization—behaviors that may even involve concealing evidence of illegal or unethical conduct (Mishra, Ghosh, and Sharma 2022).

Unlike self-centered behaviors, UPB is driven by employees' strong identification with the organization. Highly identified employees perceive UPB as aligned with the organization's interests and consider compromising ethical principles necessary and justified in serving the organization (Chen, Chen, and Sheldon 2016). Furthermore, highly identified employees may diffuse accountability for their immoral behavior by attributing responsibility to the organization rather than themselves. Strong organizational identification may weaken

their moral and social obligation toward individuals outside the organization, foster hostility toward outgroup members, and justify UPB as an ingroup benefit. Several recent studies have confirmed that organizational identification is a prominent antecedent of UPB across diverse organizational contexts (Dadaboyev, Paek, and Choi 2023; Lee, Choi, and Kim 2018; Li 2023). Based on the above reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between organizational identification and UPB.

2.2. Courage: Conceptualization and Its Role as a Moderator

Courage is a multidimensional construct that has been approached from several theoretical perspectives in the literature. From a virtue-ethics standpoint, courage is treated as a moral virtue—a character strength that enables individuals to act in accordance with what is right in the face of adversity (Peterson and Seligman 2004; Pury and Lopez 2010). From a personality and clinical psychology standpoint, courage has been reconceptualized as a psychological disposition: specifically, the tendency to persist or persevere in the face of fear (Norton and Weiss 2009; Rachman 1984). These two perspectives—courage as moral virtue versus courage as psychological disposition—have generated some conceptual ambiguity in the organizational behavior literature.

The present study explicitly adopts the dispositional conceptualization of courage. Consistent with Norton and Weiss (2009), courage is defined here as the continued exertion of effort even in the presence of fear or perceived threat. This operationalization does not presuppose that the courageous act is morally virtuous; rather, it captures the psychological capacity to override fear-based inhibition and act on one's intentions regardless of perceived risk. This distinction is theoretically important because UPB inherently involves perceived personal risk (e.g., social sanctions, reputational harm, formal punishment), and it is precisely the dispositional capacity to act despite such fear—rather than a moral evaluation of the act—that is expected to amplify UPB.

This operationalization also differentiates courage from related constructs. First, courage differs from risk tolerance: whereas risk-tolerant individuals may not experience fear and simply perceive low risk, courageous individuals experience fear or apprehension yet persist nonetheless (Norton and Weiss 2009; Detert and Bruno 2017). The defining feature of courage is the co-occurrence of fear and action, not the absence of perceived risk. Second, courage differs from organizational loyalty: loyalty is an attitudinal construct directed specifically at the organization, whereas courage, as dispositional persistence, is a generalizable trait activated across situations involving perceived risk (Tett and Burnett 2003). Third, courage differs from moral disengagement: moral disengagement involves cognitive reframing of unethical acts to make them seem acceptable (Chen, Chen, and Sheldon 2016), whereas dispositional courage does not require such reframing—it enables action under conditions of fear without necessarily altering moral evaluation. These conceptual distinctions justify focusing specifically on courage as a moderator of the identification–UPB relationship.

Historically, courage has commonly been portrayed as a character strength or a consistent disposition (Peterson and Seligman 2004). Contemporary perspectives have redefined it as a form of action: Norton and Weiss (2009) outlined an operational definition as persisting in the face of fear. This definition aligns with Rachman (1984), who described the act of persisting in confronting a perilous circumstance despite experiencing subjective and physical indications of fear as the essence of courage. This conceptualization served as the foundation for developing the courage measure used in the current study.

Positive psychology views courage as a character strength, with multidimensional definitions encompassing voluntary action in dangerous circumstances to obtain or preserve perceived good (Peterson and Seligman 2004). Some scholars distinguish between general courage—applicable to any fear-evoking situation—and personal courage, which is more situationally specific (Pury and Kowalski 2007). The present study measures general courage (Norton and Weiss 2009), which

is theoretically more appropriate for predicting dispositional tendencies across organizational contexts.

It is important to acknowledge that courage, defined dispositionally, can have both positive and negative organizational consequences. On the positive side, courage is associated with whistleblowing, speaking out against wrongdoing, and innovation (Detert and Bruno 2017; Hannah, Sweeney, and Lester 2010). On the negative side—the “dark side” of courage—the same dispositional tendency to act despite fear can enable individuals to carry out risky unethical acts on behalf of their organization (Konstanczak 2004; Pury et al. 2015). The present study focuses on this dark-side manifestation.

Building on trait activation theory (Tett and Burnett 2003), the construct of social identity and courage are intricately linked. Identity plays a significant role in courage, particularly in the workplace. Acts of courage can be seen as identification experiences arising from contradictions between an individual’s self-identity and social identities (Ashforth and Mael 1989). The trait activation theory suggests that situational cues may activate specific traits, and courageous acts allow individuals to navigate conflicting alternatives, select the most relevant identity, and alleviate tension. These acts reveal central aspects of a person’s identity, leading to a sense of integrity, pride, and confidence (Koerner 2014). Conversely, acts that lack courage result in feelings of shame and regret. When employees with high organizational identification are confronted with opportunities to engage in UPB—acts that carry personal risk but serve the organization—the dispositional trait of courage may be activated, thereby increasing the likelihood that they act on their UPB intentions. Based on this reasoning, the following is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 2: Courage moderates the positive relationship between organizational identification and UPB, such that the relationship is stronger when courage is high.

2.3. Cultural Context and the Organizational Identification–UPB Relationship

Culture is pivotal in ethical decision-making as it directly influences individuals’ perceptions of ethical issues, available alternatives, and potential outcomes (Westerman et al. 2007). Organizational identification, courage, and UPB are intertwined with broader organizational culture. Some cultures that encourage and reward pro-organizational behaviors aligned with ethical principles tend to foster courageous actions, such as whistleblowing and speaking out against wrongdoing. Moral relativism (Harman 1975) suggests that moral judgments are subjective and vary across different cultures, societies, and individuals—what may be considered morally justified in one context may be considered unethical in another.

Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions framework has been extensively used to understand cross-national variation in organizational behavior. National contexts characterized by high collectivism, high power distance, and high uncertainty avoidance tend to reinforce organizational loyalty and in-group favoritism, creating conditions conducive to UPB (Li 2023). However, it is important to supplement Hofstede’s framework with more recent cultural frameworks. Meyer (2014), in her Culture Map, identifies additional dimensions that are especially relevant for organizational behavior, including communication style, hierarchical orientation, and attitudes toward disagreement. Türkiye, the national context of the present study, exhibits high-context communication, hierarchical orientation, and strong in-group loyalty according to Meyer’s (2014) framework, which complements Hofstede’s (2001) characterization of this context as high in collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance. Together, these cultural features suggest that the organizational identification–UPB link may be particularly pronounced in Turkish public organizations, though the underlying mechanisms are theoretically applicable beyond this specific context.

Li (2023) demonstrated that culture moderated the relationship between organizational identification and UPB, with low individualism and high power distance strengthening this relationship. Similarly, recent studies have found that amoral organizational cultures and weak ethical climates amplify the identification–UPB link (Mishra, Ghosh, and Sharma 2022), while ethical leadership and strong moral identity suppress it (Chen and Chen 2023; Zonghua et al. 2023). These findings collectively suggest that cultural and organizational contextual factors serve as important boundary conditions for the identification–UPB relationship, and that examining dispositional moderators such as courage within such contexts advances our theoretical understanding.

3. Methodology

The study aims to test the theoretical relations between the variables with empirical research. Thus, this study used an explanatory quantitative approach. In this cross-sectional study, employees from public organizations participated in identifying the connections between organizational identification, UPB, and courage.

3.1. Participants and Procedure

To control organizational culture's impact on employee attitudes and behaviors, participants were enrolled from three public organizations working under various ministries (transport and infrastructure, energy and natural resources, and labor and social security) and providing public services. The survey link was electronically shared with department managers/employees to distribute to other coworkers using their contacts. The three institutions have a total of 523 employees. The number of employees who agreed to participate and completed the questionnaire was 226. Thirty participants failed to complete attention checks and caused zero variance. After removing these answers, the remaining data comprised 196 participants. Assuming the survey link was sent to at least 80% of employees, the response rate was

approximately 47%. Among the 196 participants, 53.6% were male, 58.7% were married, 54.6% had bachelor's degrees, and the average age was 28.47 years ($SD = 8.16$).

It is acknowledged that this study relies on a cross-sectional, single-source self-report design. This approach may be particularly problematic in research dealing with unethical behavior due to the elevated likelihood of socially desirable responding. Although common method bias (CMB) checks were conducted (see Results section), this limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings. Future research employing multi-source or longitudinal designs is encouraged to address this constraint.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Organizational Identification

The present study employed Mael and Ashforth's (1992) six-item, five-point Likert scale to assess participants' level of organizational identification. A representative item was: "When an individual criticizes [my organization], it is perceived as a personal affront." The internal consistency reliability of the scale was 0.98 (Cronbach's alpha). Tak and Aydemir (2004) adapted the scale to Turkish (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88).

3.2.2. Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

The UPB scale developed by Umphress, Bingham, and Mitchell (2010) and adapted to Turkish by Aksoy Kürü (2022) was used. The scale has six items and one factor. Participants rated items on a five-point Likert scale. An example item is "If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good." The internal consistency reliability of the original and adapted scale was 0.90 (Cronbach's alpha).

3.2.3. Courage

The present study utilized the courage scale initially created by Norton and Weiss (2009) and

later reduced by Ginevra et al. (2020). Norton and Weiss (2009) developed a 12-item scale to assess self-perceived courageousness using an operational definition of “persistence or perseverance despite fear.” Ginevra et al. (2020) reduced the scale because negatively worded items disrupted the scale’s unidimensional factor structure. The reduced scale has sufficient validity and reliability. Scale items include: “I tend to face my fears”; “Even if I feel terrified, I will stay in the situation until I have done what I need to do”; “I will do things even though they seem to be dangerous”; “If I am worried or anxious about something, I will do or face it anyway”; “If there is an important reason to face something that scares me, I will face it”; and “Even if something scares me, I will not back down.” Mert and Köksal (2022) adapted the reduced scale to Turkish. It has six items and one factor. Participants rated items using a five-point Likert scale. The reduced and adapted scales have sufficient internal reliability (0.73 and 0.93, respectively).

3.2.4. Control Variables

The literature on business ethics indicates that various factors, including gender, age, level of education, and length of tenure, may affect ethical decision-making (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, and Treviño 2010). In a meta-analytic review, Dadaboyev, Paek, and Choi (2023) showed that gender significantly moderated the organizational identification–UPB relationship, whereas other demographic variables, such as age, tenure, and education, did not significantly affect this relationship. Therefore, the correlation of age, tenure, education, and gender with the study variables was checked, and demographic variables were not found to be related to the study variables. Accordingly, no demographic variables were included as control variables in the regression analysis.

3.3. Analytical Strategy

In this study, the constructs were considered at the individual level, and self-reported data were collected from participants. Regression and correlation analysis were used to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. The moderation model developed by Hayes (2013), known as PROCESS, was employed in SPSS. To address the multicollinearity problem, predictor variables were centered before creating interaction terms.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

Using self-reported scales may give rise to a potential issue known as common method bias (CMB). To address this concern, the common latent factor approach was applied to the baseline model (i.e., the three-factor model), and the chi-square values of the baseline and common latent factor models were compared. The results revealed that the chi-square difference between the models was not statistically significant, indicating that both models were invariant [$\Delta\chi^2(3) = 4.341, p > 0.05$], suggesting that CMB was not a severe problem for study results.

The adherence of the scale items to a normal distribution was assessed, determining that the skewness and kurtosis values fell within acceptable parameters (ranging from -1.07 to 1.80) as outlined by Sposito, Hand, and Skarpness (1983). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to evaluate the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model. CFA established that the factor loadings of all items were between 0.69 and 0.86 . (See Table 1)

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Construct Item	Factor Loading	p-value
Organizational Identity		
1. When someone criticizes (name of organization), it feels like a personal insult.	0.790	0.001
2. I am very interested in what others think about (name of organization).	0.830	0.001
3. When I talk about this organization, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they.'	0.858	0.001
4. This organization's successes are my successes.	0.696	0.001
5. When someone praises this organization, it feels like a personal compliment.	0.778	0.001
6. If a story in the media criticized the organization, I would feel embarrassed	0.690	0.001
Courage		
1. I tend to face my fears.	0.782	0.001
2. Even if I feel terrified, I will stay in the situation until I have done what I need to do.	0.786	0.001
3. I will do things even though they seem to be dangerous.	0.815	0.001
4. If I am worried or anxious about something, I will do or face it anyway.	0.850	0.001
5. If there is an important reason to face something that scares me, I will face it.	0.805	0.001
6. Even if something scares me, I will not back down.	0.729	0.001
Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior		
1. If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good.	0.808	0.001
2. If it would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company's products or services to customers and clients.	0.805	0.001
3. If it would benefit my organization, I would withhold negative information about my company or its products from customers and clients.	0.713	0.001
4. If my organization needed me to, I would give a good recommendation on behalf of an incompetent employee in the hope that the person will become another organization's problem instead of my own.	0.860	0.001
5. If my organization needed me to, I would withhold issuing a refund to a customer or client accidentally overcharged.	0.833	0.001
6. If needed, I would conceal information from the public that could be damaging to my organization.	0.847	0.001

Table 2 displays average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha, and maximum shared variance (MSV) values. Except for one item that approached the threshold at 0.69, all item factor loadings exceeded 0.70, and the AVE values surpassed 0.50, confirming convergent validity. Following the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker 1981), AVE values exceeded the maximum shared variance (MSV). The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) correlation ratios

(Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2015) ranged from 0.272 to 0.404, all below the threshold of 0.85, providing further evidence of discriminant validity. The composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha values, both exceeding 0.70, confirmed the reliability of the scales. CFA results revealed good model fit ($\chi^2 = 245.813$, $df = 132$, $\chi^2/df = 1.862$, CFI = 0.950, SRMR = 0.052, RMSEA = 0.066, PClose = 0.020; Hu and Bentler 1999).

Table 2. CR, AVE, MSV, and Cronbach's Alpha Values of Scales

	CR	AVE	MSV	Cronbach
Organizational Identity	0.900	0.603	0.157	0.898
Courage	0.912	0.633	0.091	0.911
Unethical pro-organizational behavior	0.921	0.660	0.157	0.919

Table 3 shows means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations. All intercorrelations between variables are significant and positive ($p < .01$). The means of courage and UPB were above the

midpoint, and the lowest average belonged to organizational identification. These positive correlations provided preliminary support for H1.

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Values

	Mean	SD	1	2
1-Organizational Identity	2.68	0.44	-	
2-Courage	3.07	0.94	0.34**	-
3-Unethical pro-organizational behavior	3.55	0.95	0.40**	0.38**

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

To test H2, a regression analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro in SPSS. Table 4 shows the results. Both organizational identification and courage significantly and positively predicted UPB.

Upon inclusion of the interaction variable, a statistically significant increase in the explained variance was observed ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01$, $p < 0.05$), indicating a moderating effect of courage.

Table 4. Results of Regression Analysis

Variables	β	SE	p	R ² / Δ R ²	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	3.58	0.06	0.00	0.24/0.01	3.46	3.71
Organizational Identity (OI)	0.59	0.14	0.00		0.31	0.88
Courage (C)	0.28	0.08	0.00		0.13	0.44
Interaction (OI x C)	-0.21	0.10	0.03		-0.40	-0.02

LLCI = lower limit confidence interval, ULCI = upper limit confidence interval

It is important to note that the increment in explained variance attributable to the interaction term is modest ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01$), suggesting that while the moderation effect is statistically significant, its practical magnitude is limited. This finding should be interpreted with appropriate caution, and the interaction effect should be considered in conjunction with the main effects of organizational identification and courage on UPB.

An interaction graph was constructed using conditioning values to understand the moderating effect better. Figure 1 provides an overview of how courage influenced the relationship between organizational identification and UPB. Consistent with H2, high courage strengthened the relationship between organizational identification and UPB.

Figure 1. Interaction Graph

5. Discussion

This study examined the boundary conditions of the relationship between organizational identification and UPB within a cross-sectional sample of public employees in Türkiye—a national context characterized by high collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 2001). The discussion is organized around three domains: theoretical implications, practical implications, limitations, and future research directions.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The results confirmed the positive and significant effect of organizational identification on UPB, replicating the established literature in this domain (Chen, Chen, and Sheldon 2016; Dadaboyev, Paek, and Choi 2023; Effelsberg and Solga 2015; Kong 2016; Li 2023; Umphress, Bingham, and Mitchell 2010). Consistent with social identity theory, highly identified employees are more likely to engage in UPB by prioritizing organizational interests over broader ethical principles.

The study's primary theoretical contribution lies in introducing courage—operationalized as a psychological disposition involving persistence despite fear—as a moderator of the organizational identification–UPB relationship. This extends trait activation theory (Tett and Burnett 2003) by

demonstrating that dispositional traits are activated by situational cues inherent in UPB contexts (i.e., perceived risk of engaging in unethical behavior). The moderation effect, while modest in magnitude ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01$), is theoretically meaningful: it demonstrates that individuals who share similar levels of organizational identification may differ in their likelihood of enacting UPB depending on their dispositional courage.

Specifically, the interaction pattern revealed that high courage strengthened the organizational identification–UPB relationship. For highly identified employees, courage may function as an enabling condition that allows them to overcome the fear of consequences associated with UPB, thereby translating strong organizational identification into actual unethical conduct. This finding adds nuance to the existing UPB literature by demonstrating that it is not identification alone, but the interplay between identification and dispositional courage, that predicts UPB. In contrast, employees with lower organizational identification—who are less motivated by organizational loyalty—may nonetheless engage in UPB when high in courage, as they are generally less inhibited by fear-based concerns.

It is also noteworthy that Wang and Li (2019) found moral courage to be negatively related to UPB, whereas low moral courage strengthened the identification–UPB relationship. The present study

found general courage (as persistence despite fear, not moral courage) to be positively associated with UPB. This apparent contradiction underscores the importance of conceptual clarity in courage research: moral courage and general dispositional courage are distinct constructs with divergent relationships to UPB. The present findings, drawing on moral relativism theory (Harman 1975), suggest that in collectivist, hierarchical cultures, the line between courageous pro-organizational action and unethical behavior may be perceived differently than in individualist, low-power-distance contexts.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings carry several specific implications for public sector management. First, managers in public organizations should be alert to the risk that strong organizational identification—typically associated with positive outcomes such as commitment and citizenship behavior—can, under certain conditions, motivate employees to engage in UPB. Training programs and codes of conduct should explicitly address this “dark side” of identification, helping employees to recognize and resist the rationalization of unethical behavior as serving organizational interests.

Second, given that courage amplifies the identification–UPB relationship, employee selection and performance evaluation processes should consider whether candidates who score high on measures of dispositional courage also demonstrate robust ethical judgment. Organizations should invest in ethics training that builds moral reasoning alongside dispositional traits, ensuring that courageous employees are guided by clear ethical frameworks.

Third, organizational leaders should actively cultivate ethical climates that redefine what constitutes praiseworthy courageous action. In particular, public institutions should institutionalize courage in the direction of ethical whistleblowing and speaking out against organizational wrongdoing, rather than allowing it to be channeled into protecting organizational image through deceptive means. Formal ethical reporting mechanisms, transparent accountability structures, and leadership modeling of ethical courage can help redirect dispositional courage toward positive

organizational outcomes.

Fourth, these findings call for the development of targeted interventions in public sector organizations aimed at decoupling organizational identification from UPB. Such interventions might include participative governance structures that strengthen employees’ sense of public service identity (rather than purely organizational identity), reducing the perceived tension between serving the organization and serving citizens. This reframing of identity can mitigate the conditions under which UPB becomes rationalized as a pro-organizational imperative.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Although CMB checks were conducted, the present study collected data from a single source using self-reported measures, which may have introduced single-source bias. This limitation is particularly consequential in research on unethical behavior, given the elevated likelihood of socially desirable responding. Future studies should employ multi-source data collection (e.g., peer-reported or supervisor-reported UPB), experimental designs, or behavioral measures to provide more robust evidence of the identified relationships.

The current study had sufficient statistical power to identify the effects of interest. However, the moderation effect was modest in magnitude ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01$), and future research should employ larger samples to detect minimal moderating effects with greater precision. Replication studies in other cultural and organizational contexts are needed to assess the generalizability of the findings.

Although participants were recruited from three public organizations to enhance generalizability and reduce organizational culture effects, this approach may have masked possible organizational-level differences in the examined relationships. Future research should explore whether the organizational identification–courage–UPB dynamic operates differently across specific types of public institutions, such as police forces, military organizations, or healthcare systems, which may invoke different types of courage (e.g., physical versus social courage).

Finally, this study relied on a correlational

cross-sectional design. Longitudinal designs, panel studies, or intensive experience-sampling methodologies would provide stronger evidence for causal direction and temporal dynamics in the identification–courage–UPB relationship.

6. Conclusion

This study drew on social identity theory and trait activation theory to examine how organizational identification affects UPB and how courage moderates this relationship. The results confirmed that organizational identification is a positive antecedent of UPB, replicating earlier findings in the literature. More importantly, courage—conceptualized as a psychological disposition involving persistence in the face of fear—was found to moderate the organizational identification–UPB relationship, such that highly courageous employees were more likely to engage in UPB across all levels of identification. These findings extend the nomological network of UPB research by introducing a dispositional moderator and contribute to trait activation theory by specifying perceived risk as a situational cue that activates the courage trait in UPB-relevant situations.

From a practical standpoint, the study underscores the need for public sector organizations to develop ethics training that addresses both the dark side of organizational identification and the role of dispositional traits in ethical decision-making. Cultivating a public service identity that complements organizational loyalty—without subsuming it—may help mitigate the conditions under which UPB becomes rationalized as a legitimate expression of organizational commitment.

Acknowledging that the perception of courage varies among individuals and communities is essential. What one person may perceive as courageous, another may view as reckless. Therefore, establishing a universal definition of courage applicable to all situations remains challenging. Evaluating whether activities with negative consequences can be courageous requires a nuanced understanding of individual motivations, cultural norms, and the complex interplay between morality and perception. While it may be tempting to categorize all actions with negative consequences

as lacking moral justification, the diverse perspectives and subjective nature of ethical judgments must be considered. In this sense, the current findings serve as a call for further dialogue between organizational behavior, ethics, and positive psychology scholars regarding the conditions under which courage constitutes a virtue versus a liability.

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The authors have no competing interests relevant to this article's content, and this study was not funded by any agencies.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethics restrictions but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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