

Helping the organization but hurting yourself: How employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior predicts work-to-life conflict

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ABSTRACT

Integrating paradox theory with work-life boundary theory, we examine how employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) increases work-to-life conflict. Based on the morally paradoxical nature of UPB (unethical yet pro-organizational), we propose that UPB triggers emotional ambivalence by simultaneously inducing guilt (negative moral emotion) and pride (positive moral emotion). This emotional ambivalence produces a state of anxiety, which in turn increases employees' work-to-life conflict. Our theoretical perspective (UPB → emotional ambivalence [guilt & pride] → state anxiety → work-to-life conflict) was supported by an experience sampling study of hairstylists (Study 1), a vignette experiment of accountants (Study 2), and an experience sampling study of employee-partner pairs (Study 3). In sum, our research demonstrates that unethical behavior intended to benefit the organization may paradoxically hurt employees themselves.

“To protect our salon’s image, I sometimes lie to customers about our salon’s hair products being natural and harmless... even though I know they are artificial with parabens... I feel uneasy whether I did the right thing... and chew it over even while I’m watching TV with my family after work...”

An anonymous hairstylist

“[Because I sold] unneeded services, I had a severe panic attack. I went to the bathroom and took a drink of some hand sanitizer. This immediately reduced my anxiety... I am now having nightmares and flashbacks of that time period. It is horrible.”

Angie Payden, a former banker at Wells Fargo

In work and life, individuals are confronted with different demands and expectations of their various roles (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015; Kelly & Moen, 2020). For example, an accountant is expected to be not only a loyal employee of the company, a trusted service provider to clients, and a responsible member of the accounting profession, but also a caring family member, a supportive friend, and an ethical member of

society. These expectations in work and life are sometimes incompatible, such that an individual may fulfill the expectations of one role while violating the expectations of another (Hirsh & Kang, 2016). As illustrated by the opening quotes, when employees violate ethical norms to benefit their organizations, they may experience work-to-life conflict via anxiety spillover. The present research spotlights this phenomenon.

Unethical pro-organizational behaviors (UPB) are defined as “unethical behaviors conducted by employees to potentially benefit the organization” (Umphress et al., 2010, p. 769). Examples of UPB abound, including lying about company products to customers for the organization’s profits, falsifying financial reports to boost the organization’s stock value, and destroying incriminating documents to protect the organization (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Unlike unethical *pro-self* behavior, UPB is paradoxical because it is unethical yet pro-organizational. On the one hand, like unethical pro-self behavior, UPB is *unethical* because it violates widely-held ethical norms, principles, or laws (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994; Lu, Brockner, et al., 2017; Umphress & Bingham, 2011). On the other hand, UPB is *pro-organizational* because it is “neither specified in formal job descriptions nor ordered by superiors, yet is carried out to benefit or help the organization” (Umphress

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et al., 2010, p. 770).

We propose that this paradoxical nature of UPB can produce paradoxical outcomes for its actors: Although UPB is intended to benefit the organization, it may unintentionally harm employees themselves. Specifically, we theorize that the paradoxical nature of UPB triggers emotional ambivalence by simultaneously inducing guilt (negative moral emotion) and pride (positive moral emotion). This emotional ambivalence produces a state of anxiety, which can spill over to the life domain and increase employees' work-to-life conflict—"a form of interrole conflict where the role demands of one role (e.g., work) interferes with meeting the demands of another role (e.g., family)" (Butts et al., 2015, p. 769). Examining work-to-life conflict as an outcome of UPB is both theoretically and practically meaningful because it not only demonstrates the paradox around UPB, but also underscores the importance of curbing UPB. To test our conceptual model (UPB → emotional ambivalence [guilt & pride] → state anxiety → work-to-life conflict), we conducted three complementary studies using mixed methods (experience sampling survey and experiment) and multiple populations (hairstylists, accountants, and general employees).

The present research offers important theoretical contributions. To begin with, we contribute to the work-life conflict literature by identifying morally paradoxical behaviors as an antecedent of work-to-life conflict. Work-life boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000) suggests that work and life are two domains with different and often conflicting demands. While past research has documented how job characteristics like heavy workload and long hours engender work-to-life conflict (Michel et al., 2011), limited research has examined how *paradoxical behaviors* at work interfere with employees' life. Drawing on work-life boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000), we fill this theoretical gap by examining how UPB as a paradoxical behavior can interfere with employees' life domain via anxiety spillover. By revealing the link between UPB and work-to-life conflict, we underscore the importance of aligning pro-organizational goals with ethical norms, so as to reduce the emotional toll of morally paradoxical behaviors on employees (Hirsh et al., 2018).

Moreover, we contribute to paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) by bridging it with the literatures on emotions and behavioral ethics. Scholars suggest that studying emotional reactions can shed light on paradoxes and their consequences (Methot et al., 2017; Schad et al., 2016). For example, Schad and colleagues (2016) called for research to "explore in more detail how emotions surface paradoxes, and how they inform our responses" (p. 40). In response to this call, we examine how emotional ambivalence surfaces the paradoxical nature of UPB and triggers "anxiety and defense mechanisms" as responses (Schad et al., 2016, p. 39). By examining the concurrence of oppositely-valenced moral emotions (pride and guilt), we shed light on the emotional consequences of morally paradoxical behaviors.

Furthermore, we contribute to the emerging literature on UPB in three ways. First, we elucidate the conceptualization of UPB by differentiating it from unethical *pro-self* behavior. Instead of considering the unethical aspect and the pro-organizational aspect of UPB *separately*, we emphasize how these two aspects *combine* to render UPB a morally paradoxical behavior. By revealing the unique effect of UPB on emotional ambivalence, we theoretically and empirically distinguish UPB from unethical *pro-self* behavior. Second, whereas past studies on UPB have mostly focused on its antecedents (Mishra et al., 2021), less is known about the consequences of UPB, especially for actors themselves. Our studies are among the first to examine the consequences of UPB, thereby providing insights into how scholars should conceptualize UPB and how practitioners should regulate it. Third, whereas prior research has mostly examined UPB as a between-person phenomenon (e.g., Umphress et al., 2010), we demonstrate that UPB can also be understood as a within-person phenomenon that varies on a daily basis. Specifically, we apply a within-person lens to examine how daily fluctuations in UPB influence employees' daily emotions and work-to-life conflict. Accordingly, our Studies 1 and 3 are among the first to apply the experience

sampling methodology (ESM) to study daily UPB, thus illustrating its dynamic nature and intra-personal consequences.

1. Theory and hypotheses

Paradox theory is a meta-theory about the interplay of contradictory yet inter-related elements (Schad et al., 2016). According to paradox theory, individuals experience a paradox when facing elements that seem logical in isolation but paradoxical when occurring together (Smith & Lewis, 2011). By definition, UPB is a morally paradoxical behavior (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). As societal members, employees are expected to behave ethically (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994), yet as organizational members, employees are expected to benefit their organizations (Rousseau, 1989). For example, when an accountant falsifies financial reports to boost the company's stock value, although he fulfills the role of a loyal organizational member, he fails the role of an honest financial professional. These tensions in UPB highlight its paradoxical nature.²

Paradox theory suggests that paradoxical behaviors like UPB can induce emotional ambivalence, which can in turn produce a state of anxiety (Putnam et al., 2016; van Harreveld, Rutjens, et al., 2009). Such workplace anxiety can spill over to the life domain and increase work-to-life conflict, according to work-life boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000). Integrating paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) with work-life boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000), we propose that UPB conducted by employees to fulfill their organizational roles can produce anxiety that impedes their fulfillment of non-work roles. Specifically, we develop a conceptual model of how UPB produces work-to-life conflict via emotional ambivalence and then via state anxiety (Fig. 1).

1.1. How UPB produces state anxiety via emotional ambivalence

UPB → Emotional ambivalence. Emotional ambivalence refers to "the simultaneous existence of strong, polar opposite feelings...towards a given object, event, idea, or person" (Rothman et al., 2017, p. 35). It often occurs when individuals try to satisfy conflicting goals, expectations, roles, and constituencies (Methot et al., 2017; Rothman et al., 2017). According to Merton and Barber (1976, p. 6), "incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors" are the main sources of ambivalence (Ashforth et al., 2014). For example, women in high-status positions often experience emotional ambivalence, because they feel not only the positive affect associated with goal attainment but also the negative affect associated with pressures to act in a more gender-stereotypical way (Fong & Tiedens, 2002).

In a similar vein, we propose that UPB triggers emotional ambivalence due to its paradoxical nature. As a morally paradoxical behavior, UPB may simultaneously induce guilt and pride—two self-conscious moral emotions of opposite valence (Tangney et al., 2007). Guilt is a negative emotion associated with "having done wrong or failed in an obligation" (Oxford Dictionary). A wealth of research suggests that individuals feel guilty after behaving unethically because they are motivated to view themselves as moral beings (Kouchaki & Gino, 2016; Mazar et al., 2008). Individuals may feel guilty after engaging in UPB because it is an unethical behavior they are personally responsible for and could have avoided (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). For example, after lying about the salon's products to a customer for the salon's profit, a hairstylist may feel guilty about having failed to treat the customer with care and honesty. However, unlike unethical *pro-self* behavior, UPB can also induce pride because of its pro-organizational nature. Pride is a

² In the language of paradox theory, UPB can be viewed as a form of *belonging paradoxes* or *performing paradoxes*. Belonging paradoxes arise from the tension "between competing values, roles, and memberships" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 383), while performing paradoxes "stem from the plurality of stakeholders and result in competing strategies and goals" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 384).

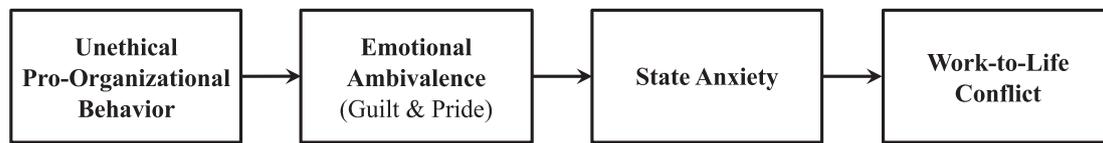


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

positive moral emotion associated with achievement (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Employees who engaged in UPB may feel proud because they acted to advance their organization's interests. In the aforementioned example, the hairstylist may *also* feel proud about having helped the salon to generate profit. Combining the above reasoning, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. UPB is positively related to emotional ambivalence.

Emotional ambivalence → State anxiety. As an aversive state, anxiety is defined as distress or physiological arousal in reaction to potential undesirable outcomes (Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Lu, Lee, et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2016). Anxiety encompasses stress, worry, apprehension, and nervousness (Akinola et al., 2019; Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011). Several theoretical perspectives have postulated that emotional ambivalence elicits a state of anxiety, as emotional ambivalence is “out of line with the typical desire for consistency and clear action tendencies” (Schmalz & Orth, 2012, p. 874). The Model of Ambivalence-Induced Discomfort (MAID) posits that emotional ambivalence “is accompanied by an unpleasant, aversive state of arousal” (van Harreveld, van der Pligt, et al., 2009, p. 45). Similarly, paradox theory argues that paradoxical experiences can trigger “stress, anxiety, [and] discomfort” (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 68). For example, Grzywacz and colleagues (2006) examined the ambivalence experienced by Mexican migrant workers who left home to provide economic security for their families yet paradoxically rendered their families vulnerable. These researchers found that such “ambivalence was associated with anxiety symptoms” among the migrant workers (Grzywacz et al., 2006, p. 85).

In a similar vein, we propose that the emotional ambivalence triggered by UPB can result in a state of anxiety. Morally paradoxical behaviors can heighten activity in the Behavioral Inhibition System, which has been identified as the neural substrate of anxiety, or “the seat of anxiety in the brain” (Hirsh & Kang, 2016, p. 228). Much research suggests that anxiety is closely related to ambiguity and uncertainty. For example, Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM) regards cognitive uncertainty as equivalent to affective anxiety (Gudykunst, 1993). As Kouchaki and Desai (2015) noted, “anxiety is generally experienced in response to situations in which a person is uncertain about an impending outcome of a personally relevant event” (p. 370). After engaging in UPB, individuals experience emotional ambivalence (i.e., guilt and pride), which can evoke a state of anxiety as individuals strive for certainty and consistency (Jones, 1973). For example, after lying to a customer about hair products for the salon's profit, the ensuing emotional ambivalence can make a hairstylist anxious and lead him/her to question whether this UPB was the right thing to do. Relatedly, employees may feel uncertain about the consequences of their UPB and worry about the anxiety-provoking counterfactuals (e.g., what if I had not lied to the customer about this product?). For these reasons, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2. UPB is positively related to state anxiety via emotional ambivalence.

1.2. How state anxiety induced by UPB increases employees' work-to-life conflict

Having theoretically linked UPB to state anxiety via emotional ambivalence, we next theorize how such anxiety induced by UPB increases employees' work-to-life conflict.

According to work-life boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000), work and life are two domains demarcated by boundaries that individuals cross on a daily basis. The two domains have different demands, such that individuals' fulfillment of work roles can conflict with their fulfillment of life roles (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Much research has identified “mood spillover as an important causal mechanism linking the work and family domains” (Ilies et al., 2007, pp. 1370–1371). In particular, the anxiety induced by workplace behaviors has been shown to impede employees' transition from work roles to life roles (Krannitz et al., 2015). According to a 2018 survey, 76% of American workers reported that anxiety from the workplace negatively impacted their personal relationships (The American Institute of Stress, 2019). For example, Krannitz and colleagues (2015) found that workplace surface acting produced state anxiety, which in turn predicted work-to-life conflict. In a similar vein, we propose that the state anxiety induced by UPB may spill over to the life domain to produce work-to-life conflict, for the following reasons.

First, the state anxiety induced by UPB makes it difficult for employees to *exit* work roles. Anxious employees tend to be preoccupied with their source of anxiety, which can prevent them from disengaging from the work domain (Raghunathan & Pham, 1999). For the hairstylist in the opening quote, he anxiously worried over his UPB even when watching TV with his family. Notably, anxiety is difficult to suppress, as self-regulatory attempts have been shown to backfire (Hofmann et al., 2009).

Second, the state anxiety induced by UPB also makes it difficult for employees to *enter* life roles. Unlike the work domain, the life domain expects individuals “to be warm, nurturant, emotional, and vulnerable” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 82). As an aversive state of unease, anxiety can provoke “flight or fight” responses (Krannitz et al., 2015). Consistent with this notion, paradox theory (Putnam et al., 2016) posits that anxiety can activate self-defense mechanisms, such as withdrawal (i.e., flight) and projecting negative emotions to others (i.e., fight). Individuals in a state of anxiety are more likely to withdraw from family and friends, and less likely to offer them help and support (Podsakoff et al., 2007; Story & Repetti, 2006). When anxious individuals do interact with their family and friends, they may behave more selfishly to psychologically protect themselves (Todd et al., 2015). As Kouchaki and Desai (2015) noted, “this self-protective mode causes people to focus narrowly on their own basic needs and self-interest” (p. 360). Relatedly, anxious employees may be more critical and aggressive towards their family and friends (Krannitz et al., 2015), jeopardizing the quality of their personal life.

For these reasons, we hypothesize that the state anxiety induced by employees' UPB can increase their work-to-life conflict.

Hypothesis 3. UPB is positively related to work-to-life conflict via state anxiety.

Combining the theoretical reasoning in the sections above, we propose that UPB can increase employees' work-to-life conflict via the following pathway: UPB → emotional ambivalence [guilt & pride] → state anxiety → work-to-life conflict. As a morally paradoxical behavior, UPB triggers emotional ambivalence by simultaneously inducing guilt (negative moral emotion) and pride (positive moral emotion). This emotional ambivalence produces a state of anxiety, which in turn increases employees' work-to-life conflict.

Hypothesis 4. UPB is positively related to work-to-life conflict via

emotional ambivalence and then state anxiety.

2. Overview of studies

To test our theoretical perspective, we conducted three complementary studies using multiple methods (experience sampling survey and experiment), multiple populations (hairstylists, accountants, and general employees), and multiple rating sources (self-ratings and partner-ratings). Study 1 consisted of a two-week ESM field study of hairstylists. We tested whether engaging in UPB positively predicted work-to-life conflict, and whether state anxiety mediated this relationship. Using a vignette experiment of professional accountants, Study 2 aimed to establish the causal link from UPB to state anxiety via emotional ambivalence. Specifically, we examined whether UPB triggered emotional ambivalence by simultaneously inducing guilt and pride, and whether emotional ambivalence in turn predicted state anxiety. Study 3 tested our full conceptual model (Fig. 1) in an employee-partner paired ESM field study.

Notably, Studies 1 and 3 both leveraged a multi-wave ESM design to examine UPB as a within-person construct. ESM refers to “a method of data collection in which participants respond to repeated assessments at moments over the course of time while functioning within their natural settings” (Scollon et al., 2003, p. 5). For our research, ESM has several methodological advantages over between-person designs. First, consistent with our within-person lens onto UPB, ESM enables us to examine how daily within-person changes in UPB relate to daily within-person changes in emotional ambivalence, state anxiety, and work-to-life conflict. Second, ESM can reveal patterns masked at between-person levels and mitigate concerns about between-person differences (e.g., in response styles and social desirability). Third, ESM is less vulnerable to retrospective recall biases and is suitable for assessing discrete emotions such as guilt and pride (Scollon et al., 2003).

3. Study 1. An experience sampling study of hairstylists

As the first test of our theoretical perspective, we conducted an ESM field study at a hair salon chain in southeastern China. Specifically, we tested whether hairstylists who engaged in more UPB on a given day subsequently experienced more work-to-life conflict, and whether state anxiety mediated this effect.

3.1. Study context

We chose this hair salon setting for several reasons. First, the wages of hairstylists in this salon chain were not commission-based, which minimized the possibility that their UPB was driven by self-interest. Second, hairstylists have opportunities to engage in UPB in their daily work. For example, our pilot interviews revealed that to help their salon earn more profits, hairstylists sometimes lie to customers about the salon’s products and services. Third and relatedly, because hairstylists interact with multiple customers on a daily basis, they are likely to have meaningful day-to-day *variances* in UPB and state anxiety, which is conducive to testing our hypotheses.

3.2. Participants

With the support of the hair salon chain’s CEO, we invited 90 hairstylists to participate in our study. 86 hairstylists consented to participate (34.9% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.67$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.88$). Their average tenure at the salon was 33.63 months. Their educational backgrounds were: 43.0% middle school or below, 40.7% high school, 15.1% technical/associate degree, and 1.2% college degree. Each participant was compensated with 50 RMB and a souvenir (a metal bookmark of a top Chinese university). To facilitate participation, we offered participants a bonus of 50 RMB if they completed all ESM surveys. To ensure data quality, we emphasized that all surveys were anonymous and only for

research purposes, so participants should answer questions as truthfully as they could.

3.3. Procedures

All surveys were in Chinese and followed the translation and back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). See Appendix A for all scales used in this study.

We built our ESM surveys on www.wjx.cn (also known as www.sojump.com), a reliable Chinese data collection platform similar to Qualtrics and widely used in past studies (Fehr et al., 2017; Lu, Liu, et al., 2020; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Surveys were sent to each participant’s mobile phone via www.wjx.cn. To facilitate participation, we created a WeChat group (similar to a WhatsApp chat group) that included all participating employees. For each survey, we sent group messages by using the “@all” function to remind participants.

We collected data in two phases over a period of three consecutive weeks. In Phase 1, participants completed a pre-survey in which they indicated their demographic information (age, gender, education, and tenure at salon). In Phase 2 (one week after the pre-survey), we sent ESM surveys to participants three times a day (10AM, 3PM, and 8PM) for two weeks. On average, the three ESM surveys were completed at 10:22AM, 3:32PM, and 8:23PM, respectively. The mean completion time for the three surveys was 3.2 min, 3.6 min, and 2.4 min, respectively. From the 86 hairstylists who participated in the study, we obtained 801 person-day observations.

All hairstylists had identical work hours, from 10AM to 9PM. At 10AM, participants reported their baseline anxiety. At 3PM, participants reported their UPB since arriving at work that day (i.e., they had already worked for five hours and had opportunities to engage in UPB). At 8PM, participants reported their current state anxiety and the number of customers served that day. At 10AM the next day, participants reported the level of work-to-life conflict they had experienced after yesterday’s work. These time lags in our research design both mitigated common source bias and strengthened causal precedence among our focal variables.

3.4. Daily measures

UPB (predictor). We adapted the six-item UPB scale from Umphress et al. (2010) to fit the hair salon setting. Sample items included: “Today, I recommended inappropriate products or services to customers for the profit of my salon”; “Today, I misrepresented the truth to make my salon look good” (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”; $\alpha = 0.96$).

State anxiety (mediator). To measure state anxiety, we used four items from Brooks and Schweitzer (2011). Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which they were anxious, apprehensive, worried, and nervous (1 = “not at all” to 7 = “extremely”; $\alpha = 0.97$).

Work-to-life conflict (outcome). To measure the work-to-life conflict that participants experienced after work, we adapted the four items used by Judge and colleagues (2006). Specifically, participants were asked: “Please recall your experience after work yesterday, and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.” Sample items included: “Work-related issues interfered with my non-work life” and “I was unable to focus on non-work issues because of work” (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”; $\alpha = 0.95$).

3.5. Control variables

At the within-person level, we controlled for the number of customers each hairstylist served on a given day because this variable could be a confound associated with both (a) opportunities to engage in UPB and (b) state anxiety. Following past ESM studies (Gabriel et al., 2011; Methot et al., 2020; Scott & Barnes, 2011), we also controlled for baseline anxiety at 10AM ($\alpha = 0.93$); this allowed us to ascertain the effect of UPB on anxiety at 8PM.

In line with the ESM literature (Gabriel et al., 2019; Methot et al., 2020), we did not control for between-person level variables such as age, gender, education, and tenure at salon because they were inherently controlled for in ESM multilevel models; results were robust when we did control for them.

3.6. Analytic strategy

Because our data had a nested structure (multiple days nested within hairstylists), we conducted multilevel analyses to account for potential statistical dependence. Following the ESM literature (Enders & Tofghi, 2007; Foulk et al., 2018; Klotz et al., 2018; Methot et al., 2020), we group-mean-centered the within-person variables (UPB, baseline anxiety at 10AM, and state anxiety at 8PM).

Before testing our hypotheses, we ran a series of null models to examine the within-person variance for each daily variable in our model. Following previous ESM studies (Gabriel et al., 2011; Methot et al., 2020; Scott & Barnes, 2011), Table 1 presents within- and between-person variance of the daily variables. These variance decomposition results indicate meaningful within-person variance in our data and corroborate the need for multilevel modeling (Scott & Barnes, 2011).

3.7. Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations of within-person variables are displayed in Table 2. Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to verify the distinctiveness of our three focal variables (UPB, state anxiety, work-to-life conflict). A three-factor CFA model not only fitted the data well ($\chi^2 = 978.21, p < .001$; comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.93, Tucker-Lewis Index [TLI] = 0.92, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.08, standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = 0.03), but also fitted the data significantly better than a CFA model in which state anxiety and work-to-life conflict represented the same latent construct ($\chi^2 = 3245.05, p < .001$, CFI = 0.76, TLI = 0.71, RMSEA = 0.15, SRMR = 0.13; $\Delta\chi^2 = 281.47, p < .001$).

We conducted multilevel path analysis using Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) to test whether UPB positively predicted work-to-life conflict via state anxiety (Table 3). As hypothesized, UPB was positively associated with state anxiety ($\gamma = 0.18, SE = 0.08, p = .018$), and state anxiety was positively associated with work-to-life conflict ($\gamma = 0.16, SE = 0.05, p = .003$). Moreover, multilevel mediation analysis (Preacher et al., 2010) revealed that state anxiety mediated the effect of UPB on work-to-life conflict (indirect effect = 0.03, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.05]).

Table 1

Study 1: Percentage of within-person and between-person variance in daily variables.

Variable	Within-person variance (e^2)	Between-person variance (r^2)	Percentage of within-person variance
Unethical pro-organizational behavior	0.31	1.02	23%
State anxiety (baseline control)	0.43	0.79	35%
State anxiety (mediator)	0.40	1.68	19%
Work-to-life conflict	0.53	1.59	25%

Note. $N = 801$ at the person-day level (Level 1), $N = 86$ at the person level (Level 2). e^2 is the within-person variance in a variable; and r^2 is the between-person variance in the variable. The percentage of within-person variance was computed as $e^2/(e^2 + r^2)$.

Table 2

Study 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations of within-person variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Unethical pro-organizational behavior	1.93	1.16				
2. State anxiety (baseline control)	1.84	1.11	0.03			
3. State anxiety (mediator)	2.06	1.43	0.21**	0.10**		
4. Work-to-life conflict	2.65	1.48	0.07 [†]	0.04	0.16**	
5. Number of customers	8.77	7.96	0.01	0.03	-0.03	0.01

Note. [†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Study 1: Multilevel path analysis results.

Within-person variables	State anxiety		Work-to-life conflict	
	γ	<i>SE</i>	γ	<i>SE</i>
Unethical pro-organizational behavior	0.18*	0.08	0.06	0.07
State anxiety (baseline control)	0.12*	0.05	0.06	0.07
State anxiety (mediator)			0.16**	0.05
Number of customers	-0.005	0.005	0.002	0.01
Residual variance	0.32***	0.05	0.52***	0.08

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. $N = 801$ at the person-day level (Level 1), $N = 86$ at the person level (Level 2).

3.8. Discussion

Through an ESM field study of hairstylists, Study 1 provided evidence that UPB positively predicted work-to-life conflict via state anxiety. Specifically, hairstylists who engaged in more UPB on a given day felt more anxious, and later experienced more work-to-life conflict.

Study 1 has several limitations. First, as the initial test of our theoretical perspective, Study 1 did not measure emotional ambivalence, which we went on to measure in Studies 2 and 3. Second, all variables in Study 1 were self-reported, raising concerns about common method bias. To address this limitation, we measured work-to-life conflict with cohabitation partner ratings in Study 3. Third, despite the time lags in research design, Study 1 was unable to establish causality from UPB to state anxiety. To strengthen causal inference, Study 2 used an experimental design.

4. Study 2. A vignette experiment of accountants

Study 2 extended Study 1 in three ways. First, to examine the causal link between UPB and anxiety, we designed a vignette experiment to manipulate UPB and subsequently assessed anxiety. Specifically, we randomly assigned participants to (1) UPB condition, (2) unethical pro-self behavior (USB) condition, or (3) control condition. This design also enabled us to distinguish UPB from USB. Second, Study 2 directly tested emotional ambivalence as a mediator linking UPB and state anxiety. Third, to examine the generalizability of our findings, we recruited participants from another occupation in which UPB is common: professional accounting. To ensure the ecological validity of our vignettes (Appendix B), we conducted informal interviews with (non-participant) accountants to learn about typical UPB situations in accounting.

The study was pre-registered at <https://aspredicted.org/dd3i4.pdf>. Data and R code are available on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/yf28q/>).

4.1. Participants

We used G*Power to determine the sample size for a small-sized effect: 252 participants were required for the study to be powered at 95%. To exceed this sample size, we recruited 300 professional accountants as participants from an online accountant network in China (58.9% female; $M_{age} = 34.13$ years, $SD_{age} = 9.83$). At the end of the

study, we probed what participants thought the study was about. Only one participant correctly guessed the true purpose of the study and was excluded from our analysis. On average, participants had 4.66 years of work experience in accounting ($SD = 5.71$). Their educational backgrounds were: 13.38% associate degree or below, 49.50% bachelor's degree, and 37.12% master's degree or above. Each participant was compensated with 4 RMB for this online study.

4.2. Experimental design

After consenting to the study, all participants read a vignette that asked them to imagine being an accountant at a branch of a conglomerate. Each year, the conglomerate headquarter set a profit goal for the branch, and the branch set a performance goal for the accountant. Importantly, these two goals were independent of each other. Depending on the experimental condition, the accountant was motivated to count a gray transaction that had not yet occurred (i.e., an unethical behavior) for different reasons—either for himself/herself or for the branch.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in a between-subjects design: UPB condition, unethical pro-self behavior (USB) condition, or control condition. See Appendix B for the three vignettes in Chinese and their English translations.

In the UPB condition, the accountant counted the gray transaction such that the branch's profit goal was met, but the accountant's personal performance goal was not met (thus no personal bonus). That is, this unethical behavior benefitted only the branch, not the accountant.

In the USB condition, the accountant counted the gray transaction such that the accountant's personal performance goal was met (thus receiving personal bonus), but the branch's profit goal was not met. That is, this unethical behavior benefitted only the accountant himself/herself but not the branch.

In the control condition, instead of counting the gray transaction, the accountant settled the account truthfully.

4.3. Measures

All measures were translated into Chinese following the translation and back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). The measures of guilt, pride, and state anxiety were counterbalanced across the participants and separated by filler items.

Guilt and pride. While imagining being the accountant in the vignette, participants completed measures of guilt and pride. Guilt was measured with four items from the PANAS-X scale (Watson & Clark, 1994): guilty, ashamed, blameworthy, angry at self (1 = "not at all" to 7 = "extremely"; $\alpha = 0.94$). Pride was measured with four items adapted from the PANAS-X scale (Watson & Clark, 1994): proud, self-assured, self-content, pleased with self (1 = "not at all" to 7 = "extremely"; $\alpha = 0.92$). The display order of these items was randomized.

Emotional ambivalence. According to the literature, emotional ambivalence can be calculated from scores of two oppositely-valenced emotions C and D using the Similarity-Intensity Model (Thompson et al., 1995): $(C + D)/2 - (D - C)$, where "C represents the lower score and D represents the higher score" (Fong & Tiedens, 2002, p. 112). A larger result indicates higher emotional ambivalence. In this study, emotional ambivalence was computed from guilt (negative emotion) and pride (positive emotion). Importantly, the formula considers both how intense the two emotions are (i.e., the " $(C + D)/2$ " component) and how similar the two emotions are (i.e., the " $-(D - C)$ " component). For example, if

both guilt and pride were 5, then emotional ambivalence would be $(5 + 5)/2 - (5 - 5) = 5$. By contrast, if guilt was 5 but pride was 7, then emotional ambivalence would actually be lower: $(5 + 7)/2 - (7 - 5) = 4$.³

State anxiety. We measured state anxiety with six commonly-used items from prior research (Akinola et al., 2016; Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Gong et al., 2020; Lu, Lee, et al., 2018). Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which they were anxious, apprehensive, worried, nervous, irritable, and distressed (1 = "not at all" to 7 = "extremely"; $\alpha = 0.92$). The display order of these items was randomized.

4.4. Manipulation check and confounding check

To confirm that our experimental manipulation of UPB (vs. USB vs. control) was successful, it is important to perform a manipulation check. In addition, to rule out performance pressure as a confounding factor (Mitchell et al., 2018), it is important to examine whether the three conditions differed in perceived performance pressure of the work environment. However, the addition of such measures could contaminate the experiment. Therefore, we conducted a separate pilot study for (a) manipulation check for UPB and (b) confounding check for performance pressure.

In the pilot study, we recruited 159 full-time general employees from www.wjx.cn (47.8% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 33.45$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 6.26$) to participate for a compensation of 4 RMB each. They were randomly assigned to read one of the three aforementioned vignettes. For the purpose of manipulation check, each participant rated (a) how unethical and (b) how pro-organizational the vignette behavior was (1 = "not at all", 7 = "very much"). For the purpose of confounding check, each participant rated the perceived performance pressure of the work environment described in the vignette (1 = "not at all", 7 = "extremely high"). The display order of these three questions was randomized.

Analyses confirmed that the UPB vignette ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.06$) was rated as significantly more pro-organizational than the USB vignette ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 1.06$; $t = 18.39$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [3.34, 4.15], $d = 3.52$) and the control vignette ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.39$; $t = 2.04$, $p = .04$, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.98], $d = 0.40$). Compared to the control vignette ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.25$), both the UPB vignette ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.43$; $t = 10.60$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [2.26, 3.30], $d = 2.07$) and the USB vignette ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.47$; $t = 11.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [2.47, 3.53], $d = 2.19$) were rated as significantly more unethical; the UPB vignette and the USB vignette did not significantly differ in perceived ethicality ($t = -0.79$, $p = .43$, 95% CI = [-0.77, 0.33]).

A one-way ANOVA confirmed that the three vignettes did not differ significantly in the perceived performance pressure of the work environment ($F[2, 156] = 1.37$, $p = .26$). Taken together, these pilot results suggest that our vignettes were able to successfully manipulate UPB (vs. USB vs. control) without introducing perceived performance pressure as a confounding factor.

4.5. Results of the main experiment

Guilt. The UPB condition ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.22$) and the USB condition ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.52$) did not significantly differ in guilt ($t = -1.77$, $p = .08$, 95% CI = [-0.74, 0.04]). As expected, guilt was significantly lower in the control condition ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.09$) than in the UPB condition ($t = -5.59$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [-1.24, -0.59], $d = -0.79$) and the USB condition ($t = -6.71$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [-1.64, -0.89], $d = -0.95$).

Pride. Pride was significantly higher in the UPB condition ($M = 3.21$,

³ A reviewer astutely pointed out that a limitation of this emotional ambivalence formula is that it treats the two emotions equally without considering their qualitative differences. In reality, it is possible that (a) guilt = 5 and pride = 7, (b) guilt = 7 and pride = 5 produce different levels of emotional ambivalence.

$SD = 1.18$) than in the USB condition ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.18$; $t = 3.23$, $p = .001$, 95% CI = [0.21, 0.88], $d = 0.46$) and the control condition ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.04$; $t = 2.30$, $p = .02$, 95% CI = [0.05, 0.67], $d = 0.32$). Moreover, there was no significant difference between the control condition and the USB condition ($t = 1.19$, $p = .23$, 95% CI = [-0.12, 0.50]).

Emotional ambivalence. As hypothesized, emotional ambivalence was significantly higher in the UPB condition ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.41$) than in the USB condition ($M = 1.40$, $SD = 1.55$; $t = 3.29$, $p = .001$, 95% CI = [0.28, 1.12], $d = 0.47$) and the control condition ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 1.19$; $t = 2.33$, $p = .02$, 95% CI = [0.07, 0.79], $d = 0.33$). There was no significant difference between the control condition and the USB condition ($t = 1.39$, $p = .17$, 95% CI = [-0.11, 0.66]).

State anxiety. As hypothesized, anxiety was significantly higher in the UPB condition ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.10$) than in the USB condition ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.17$; $t = 2.17$, $p = .03$, 95% CI = [0.03, 0.68], $d = 0.31$) and the control condition ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.10$; $t = 5.95$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.61, 1.22], $d = 0.84$). Moreover, anxiety was significantly higher in the USB condition than in the control condition ($t = 3.51$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.25, 0.88], $d = 0.50$).

Mediation by emotional ambivalence. We conducted mediation analyses with the R package “mediation” (Tingley et al., 2014). As hypothesized, emotional ambivalence significantly mediated the effect of the UPB condition (vs. USB condition) on anxiety (indirect effect = 0.10, $p = .02$, bootstrapped 95% CI = [0.02, 0.20]); emotional ambivalence also significantly mediated the effect of the UPB condition (vs. control condition) on anxiety (indirect effect = 0.13, $p = .04$, bootstrapped 95% CI = [0.01, 0.25]). When we collapsed the USB condition and the control condition into one condition (non-UPB condition), emotional ambivalence again significantly mediated the effect of the UPB condition (vs. non-UPB condition) on anxiety (indirect effect = 0.11, $p = .004$, bootstrapped 95% CI = [0.04, 0.19]).

4.6. Discussion

By manipulating UPB in a vignette experiment of professional accountants, Study 2 provided causal evidence for the link from UPB to state anxiety. Specifically, the UPB condition triggered significantly higher state anxiety than either the USB condition or the control condition. This effect was mediated by emotional ambivalence (due to the co-activation of guilt and pride). By demonstrating the differential effects of the UPB condition and the USB condition on pride, emotional ambivalence, and anxiety, Study 2 helped distinguish UPB from unethical pro-self behavior as a unique construct.

Notably, we replicated and extended Study 2's findings in another sample of professional accountants ($N = 301$). For details, see Study S2 in *Supplemental Materials*.

5. Study 3. An experience sampling study of employee-partner pairs

Study 3 extended the previous two studies in three ways. First, one limitation of Study 2 was that we did not measure work-to-life conflict (i.e., a downstream consequence of UPB) given the vignette experiment's constraints. To address this limitation, we conducted another ESM field study to test our full conceptual model (UPB → emotional ambivalence [guilt & pride] → state anxiety → work-to-life conflict). Second, whereas Study 1 asked employees to self-report their work-to-life conflict, Study 3 measured it with cohabiting partners' ratings, thus mitigating employees' potential self-report biases. Third, whereas Study 2 calculated emotional ambivalence based on Fong and Tiedens's (2002) formula, Study 3 assessed emotional ambivalence more directly (for a discussion about the validity of both measures, see Fong, 2006).

5.1. Study context

The ESM field study was conducted with white-collar employees at a real-estate conglomerate's branch office in eastern China. We chose this setting for two reasons. First, employee wages in this organization were not commission-based, minimizing the possibility that UPB was driven by self-interest. Second, whereas our previous two studies examined hairstylists (Study 1) and accountants (Study 2), Study 3 investigated the generalizability of our findings by recruiting a sample of general employees (for previous UPB studies that recruited general employees, see Castille et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2015; Kong, 2016; Thau et al., 2015; Umphress et al., 2010).

5.2. Participants

With the help of the branch office manager, we invited 134 employees who currently had a cohabiting partner to participate in our ESM study. To incentivize participation, we compensated the employee and his/her cohabiting partner 20 RMB when both completed the surveys that day. Thus, each employee-partner pair could receive a maximum of 100 RMB if they participated in all surveys. To ensure data quality, we emphasized that all surveys were anonymous and only for research purposes, so participants should answer questions as truthfully as they could. Moreover, we instructed participants not to discuss the survey with their colleagues or cohabiting partners until the study ended.

123 employee-partner pairs consented to participate (28.5% female employees; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.08$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 6.20$). On average, they had lived together for 9.75 years ($SD = 7.10$). The average tenure of the employees was 5.11 years ($SD = 4.01$). Their educational backgrounds were: 10.57% technical/associate degree, 76.42% college degree, and 13.01% master's degree or above.

5.3. Procedures

As in Study 1, ESM surveys were sent to each participant's mobile phone via www.wjx.cn. All measures were translated into Chinese following the translation and back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). See Appendix A for all scales used in this study.

We collected data in two phases over a period of two consecutive weeks. In Phase 1, 123 employees completed a pre-survey to report their personal information (age, gender, education, tenure), cohabitation duration with partner, and their phone number's last four digits. Cohabiting partners completed a separate pre-survey to report their personal information and phone number's last four digits. To ensure anonymity, we used the last four digits of phone numbers to match employee's and cohabiting partner's daily responses.

In Phase 2 (the week after the pre-survey), for every weekday (from Monday to Friday), we sent ESM surveys twice to employees (1PM and 3PM) and once to their cohabiting partners (at 8PM). On average, the three ESM surveys were completed at 1:21PM, 3:23PM, and 8:43PM, respectively. The mean completion time for the three surveys was 2.7 min, 3.9 min, and 2.6 min, respectively. 104 of the 123 employee-partner pairs actually completed the daily ESM surveys, and we obtained 423 person-day observations (response rate = 81.3%).

All employees had the same work hours, from 9AM to 5PM. At 1PM, employees reported their UPB since arriving at work that day (i.e., they had already worked for four hours and had opportunities to engage in UPB). At 3PM, employees indicated their emotional ambivalence and state anxiety (counterbalanced). At 8PM, employees' cohabiting partners rated the work-to-life conflict exhibited by employees since leaving work at 5PM. The dyadic nature and the time lags in our research design both mitigated common source bias and strengthened causal precedence among our focal variables.

Table 4
Study 3: Percentage of within-person and between-person variance in daily variables.

Variable	Within-person variance (e^2)	Between-person variance (r^2)	Percentage of within-person variance
Unethical pro-organizational behavior	0.15	0.85	15%
Emotional ambivalence	0.39	0.90	30%
State anxiety	0.48	1.00	32%
Work-to-life conflict	0.89	1.15	44%

Note. $N = 423$ at the person-day level (Level 1), $N = 104$ at the person level (Level 2). e^2 is the within-person variance in a variable; and r^2 is the between-person variance in the variable. The percentage of within-person variance was computed as $e^2/(e^2 + r^2)$.

5.4. Daily measures

UPB (predictor). We adapted the six-item UPB scale from Umphress et al. (2010). This scale is widely used to measure UPB in different work populations (e.g., Castille et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2016; Kong, 2016). Sample items included: “Today, I misrepresented the truth to make my organization look good”; “Today, I withheld negative information about my organization or its products from customers and clients to benefit my organization” (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”; $\alpha = 0.95$).

Emotional ambivalence (first serial mediator). To measure emotional ambivalence, we followed Fong (2006) and asked employees the extent to which they were feeling “a mix of pride and guilt” (1 = “not at all” to 7 = “extremely”).

State anxiety (second serial mediator). As in Study 1, we measured state anxiety with the four-item scale from Brooks and Schweitzer (2011). Specifically, employees indicated the extent to which they were anxious, apprehensive, worried, and nervous (1 = “not at all” to 7 = “extremely”; $\alpha = 0.96$).

Work-to-life conflict (outcome). Work-to-life conflict was measured by six items adapted from Judge and colleagues (2006). Specifically, cohabiting partners indicated the extent to which employees exhibited work-to-life conflict. Sample items included: “After work today, my partner’s work-related issues interfered with non-work life” and “After work today, my partner was unable to focus on non-work issues because of work” (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”; $\alpha = 0.94$).

5.5. Analytic strategy

Because our data had a nested structure (multiple days nested within employees), we conducted multilevel analyses. We group-mean-centered the within-person variables (UPB, emotional ambivalence, and state anxiety). Before testing our hypotheses, we ran a series of null models to examine within-person variance for each daily variable in our model. Table 4 presents within- and between-person variance of the daily variables. These variance decomposition results indicate that there was meaningful within-person variance in our data and corroborate the need for multilevel modeling (Scott & Barnes, 2011).

5.6. Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations of within-person variables are displayed in Table 5. Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted a CFA to verify the distinctiveness of our four focal variables (UPB, emotional ambivalence, state anxiety, work-to-life conflict). A four-factor CFA model not only fitted the data well ($\chi^2 = 320.62, p < .001; CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.03$), but also fitted the data

Table 5
Study 3: Descriptive statistics and correlations of within-person variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Unethical pro-organizational behavior	1.73	0.97			
2. Emotional ambivalence	2.48	1.12	0.20**		
3. State anxiety	2.80	1.18	0.20**	0.27**	
4. Work-to-life conflict	3.07	1.43	0.11*	0.01	0.19**

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 6
Study 3: Multilevel path analysis results.

Within-person variables	Serial mediators				Outcome variable	
	Emotional ambivalence		State anxiety		Work-to-life conflict	
	γ	<i>SE</i>	γ	<i>SE</i>	γ	<i>SE</i>
Unethical pro-organizational behavior	0.32***	0.07	0.28*	0.11	0.21	0.14
Emotional ambivalence			0.25***	0.06	-0.10	0.13
State anxiety					0.29**	0.10
Residual variance	0.28***	0.04	0.32***	0.05	0.86***	0.12

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. $N = 423$ at the person-day level (Level 1), $N = 104$ at the person level (Level 2).

significantly better than an alternative CFA model in which emotional ambivalence and state anxiety represented the same latent construct ($\Delta\chi^2 = 35.47, p < .001$).

To test our conceptual model (UPB → emotional ambivalence [guilt & pride] → state anxiety → work-to-life conflict), we conducted multilevel path analysis using Mplus 7 (Table 6). As hypothesized, UPB was positively associated with emotional ambivalence ($\gamma = 0.32, SE = 0.07, p < .001$), and emotional ambivalence was positively associated with state anxiety ($\gamma = 0.25, SE = 0.06, p < .001$). Moreover, state anxiety was positively associated with work-to-life conflict ($\gamma = 0.29, SE = 0.10, p = .004$). Multilevel mediation analysis (Preacher et al., 2010) revealed that emotional ambivalence and state anxiety serially mediated the effect of UPB on work-to-life conflict (indirect effect = 0.02, 95% CI = [0.004, 0.047]).

5.7. Discussion

Using an employee-partner paired ESM design, Study 3 provided evidence for our full conceptual model (UPB → emotional ambivalence [guilt & pride] → state anxiety → work-to-life conflict). Employees who engaged in more UPB at work experienced more work-to-life conflict, an effect that was serially mediated by emotional ambivalence and then state anxiety.

6. General discussion

Integrating paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) with work-life boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000), we developed a conceptual model of how UPB intended to benefit the organization can unintentionally harm employees themselves. Based on the morally paradoxical nature of UPB, we proposed that UPB triggers emotional ambivalence by simultaneously inducing guilt (negative moral emotion) and pride (positive moral emotion). This emotional ambivalence produces state anxiety, which in turn increases employees’ work-to-life conflict. To test our conceptual model, we conducted three complementary studies using multiple methods (ESM survey and experiment), multiple populations (hairstylists, accountants, and general employees), and multiple rating

sources (self-ratings and partner-ratings). Using a two-week ESM field study of hairstylists, Study 1 found that UPB was positively associated with work-to-life conflict via state anxiety. Using a vignette experiment of accountants, Study 2 established the causal link from UPB to state anxiety via emotional ambivalence. Study 3 supported our full conceptual model (UPB → emotional ambivalence [guilt & pride] → state anxiety → work-to-life conflict) in an employee-partner paired ESM field study.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

This research makes important theoretical contributions. To begin with, we extend the literature on UPB in three ways. First, we help establish UPB as a construct distinct from unethical pro-self behavior. As [Umphress and Bingham \(2011, p. 635\)](#) suggested, “examining unethical pro-organizational behaviors with other types of unethical acts would demonstrate the uniqueness of the construct [UPB] and allow organizational researchers and practitioners a better understanding of unethical behavior within organizations.” In response to this call, we theoretically and empirically distinguish UPB from unethical *pro-self* behavior ([Lu, Zhang, et al., 2018](#)). Theoretically, we highlight the morally paradoxical nature of UPB and its unique effect on emotional ambivalence: Unlike unethical pro-self behavior, UPB simultaneously induces guilt and pride. Empirically, our ESM studies selected field contexts where employee wages were not commission-based, which minimized the possibility that their UPB was purely driven by self-interest. In addition, our vignette experiments directly manipulated UPB vs. unethical pro-self behavior, and contrasted their emotional consequences.

Second, past studies have focused on the antecedents of UPB, including Machiavellianism ([Castille et al., 2018](#)), leadership styles ([Graham et al., 2015](#); [Liu et al., 2021](#); [Miao et al., 2013](#)), organizational identification ([Chen et al., 2016](#); [Kong, 2016](#); [Umphress et al., 2010](#)), organizational embeddedness ([Lee et al., 2020](#)), and risk of social exclusion ([Thau et al., 2015](#)). By contrast, the current research is among the first to examine UPB's consequences. Specifically, we revealed UPB's emotional consequences (guilt, pride, and emotional ambivalence) and downstream effects on employees' work-to-life conflict. In doing so, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of UPB as a theoretical construct.

Third, whereas prior research has mostly examined UPB as a between-person phenomenon, our studies suggest that it can also be understood as a within-person phenomenon. A within-person lens is constructive because it enables us to understand how daily fluctuations in UPB influence daily fluctuations in emotions. By examining how employees' UPB influenced their non-work life on a daily basis, we provide a more dynamic perspective on UPB. More broadly, we add to the burgeoning stream of research that applies a within-person lens to behavioral ethics ([Reynolds et al., 2014](#); [Rosen et al., 2016](#)).

Additionally, we contribute to paradox theory ([Smith & Lewis, 2011](#)) by integrating it with behavioral ethics. Although paradox theory has been applied to domains such as leadership ([Zhang et al., 2017](#)), limited research has connected it to the domain of behavioral ethics. In response to this gap in the literature, we applied the lens of paradox theory to understand moral issues and examined how ambivalent moral emotions (guilt and pride) surface the paradoxical nature of UPB. More broadly, our research suggests that emotional ambivalence may be an important consequence of morally paradoxical behaviors in general, such as pro-social lies ([Levine & Schweitzer, 2015](#)) and whistle-blowing ([Mayer et al., 2013](#); [Waytz et al., 2013](#)).

Finally, we contribute to the work-life conflict literature by extending its antecedents from a moral perspective. While past research has focused on certain job characteristics (e.g., heavy workload and long hours) as antecedents of work-to-life conflict ([Michel et al., 2011](#)), we reveal how *morally paradoxical behaviors* in the work domain can impair the life domain via emotional spillover ([Butts et al., 2015](#); [Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985](#)).

6.2. Practical implications

Besides theoretical contributions, the present research also offers meaningful practical implications. In the business world, some managers infer loyalty from and even take pride in employees' UPB. In our pilot interviews with hairstylists (Study 1), a salon manager boasted about how his hairstylists were skilled at cajoling customers into buying unnecessary hair products, which generated considerable profits for the salon. Intuitively, UPB harms external stakeholders such as customers, as illustrated by behaviors such as lying to customers about the company's products to help the company and withholding refunds from customers ([Umphress et al., 2010](#)). More counterintuitively, our research revealed that UPB may also harm the actors of UPB themselves. Thus, organizations should be aware of the paradoxical nature of UPB and its detrimental effects on employees' life.

To reduce UPB and its emotional toll on employees, organizations should avoid goals that pressure employees to sacrifice their moral values for the sake of the organization ([Pierce & Snyder, 2015](#)). Instead, organizations could clarify moral guidelines and implement an ethics-focused compensation system and accountability mechanisms ([Hirsh et al., 2018](#)). For example, organizations could incorporate moral standards directly into performance appraisal and explicitly reward ethical pro-organizational behavior (e.g., “the most ethical employee” award). In addition, organizations could cultivate moral insight, or “the discovery of solutions, other than selecting one of the competing moral imperatives over another, that honor both competing imperatives or resolve the tension among them” ([Zhang et al., 2018, p. 857](#)). Specifically, organizations could encourage employees to consider “What *could* I do?” instead of “What *should* I do?” when facing morally conflicting situations like UPB. Indeed, research suggests that compared to a “should” mindset, a “could” mindset can generate more moral insight by facilitating divergent thinking ([Zhang et al., 2018](#)).

Furthermore, our research highlights the importance of regulating the anxiety induced by workplace behaviors so as to mitigate its spillover effects on employees' non-work life. Organizations could help employees manage such anxiety through appropriate channels, such as meditation workshops ([Hafenbrack et al., 2014](#)) and affinity groups ([Judge et al., 2006](#)). When employees experience such anxiety, they could proactively create boundaries to segment their work and life ([Butts et al., 2015](#)).

6.3. Limitations and future directions

While the current research offers significant theoretical contributions and practical implications, it has limitations which provide opportunities for future research. Below we discuss (a) other potential outcomes of UPB, (b) potential moderators, and (c) generalizability.

Other outcomes of UPB. As one of the first investigations to examine the consequences of UPB, the current research has focused on a *negative, life-related* outcome (work-to-life conflict). Nevertheless, in light of its paradoxical nature, we posit that UPB may also have positive consequences. In *Supplemental Materials*, we consider a positive, work-related outcome of UPB: job involvement, which is defined as “the degree to which one is cognitively preoccupied with, engaged in, and concerned with one's present job” ([Paullay et al., 1994, p. 224](#)). After UPB, the experience of emotional ambivalence calls for individuals' attention and effort to make sense of such ambivalence, which may increase their job involvement ([Pratt & Doucet, 2012](#); [Pratt & Rosa, 2003](#)). In other words, the emotional ambivalence triggered by UPB not only produces anxiety that pushes employees away from their non-work life, but also pulls them into greater involvement with their work life. These findings highlight the paradoxical nature of UPB and further our understanding of its consequences. For detailed theorization and two complementary studies (Study S1: two-phase survey; Study S2: experiment), see *Supplemental Materials*.

In addition, paradox theory suggests that the paradoxical nature of

UPB may lead employees to “embrace contradictory spirals in ways that inspire learning, creativity, and discovery” (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 83). Individuals experiencing emotional ambivalence may be more creative because they have lower cognitive fixation (Lu, Akinola, et al., 2017) and can recognize “unusual relationships between concepts” (Fong, 2006, p. 1016). Similarly, Rees et al. (2013) found that emotional ambivalence enhanced judgment accuracy by increasing receptivity to alternative perspectives. Therefore, future research could also explore cognitive outcomes of UPB.

Furthermore, while our research focused on UPB’s consequences for the employees themselves, future research could examine the effects of UPB on organizational outcomes. Although organizations may profit from UPB in the short run, employees with worse work-to-life conflict may have a higher sickness-absence rate (Jansen et al., 2006) and turnover rate (Nohe & Sonntag, 2014), which can ultimately reduce the organization’s profitability (e.g., the Wells Fargo scandal). Thus, it is also worth investigating whether UPB intended to benefit the organization may hurt not only the employees themselves, but also the organization in the long run.

Potential moderators. While the current studies have focused on the mediating mechanisms for the consequences of UPB, future studies could explore potential moderators, such as moral attentiveness (Reynolds, 2008) and role segmentation preferences (Methot & LePine, 2016). Moral attentiveness, defined as “the extent to which an individual chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences” (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1027), could moderate the effect of UPB on emotional ambivalence: Employees higher in moral attentiveness may be especially likely to recognize and reflect on the morally paradoxical nature of UPB, such that they may feel especially ambivalent after committing UPB. In addition, role segmentation preferences could be another moderator, such that employees who prefer to segment their work and life may be less susceptible to the anxiety produced by UPB after they leave work (Butts et al., 2015; Methot & LePine, 2016). Such possibilities await future investigations.

Generalizability. Although our research demonstrated generalizability by examining employee samples from different industries (e.g.,

hairstylists, accountants), one limitation is that our studies were all conducted in China. This was a deliberate decision to avoid any abnormal effects due to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially because our studies involved state anxiety. When we conducted the studies, COVID-19 was raging in other parts of the world but had calmed down in China. When work life returns to normal in other parts of the world, it would be informative to replicate our studies in other countries.

7. Conclusion

Integrating paradox theory with work-life boundary theory, we developed and tested a conceptual model of how employees’ UPB at work unintendedly harms their personal life. In light of its morally paradoxical nature (unethical yet pro-organizational), we revealed that UPB triggers emotional ambivalence by simultaneously inducing guilt (negative moral emotion) and pride (positive moral emotion). This emotional ambivalence produces a state of anxiety, which in turn increases employees’ work-to-life conflict. Our conceptual model was supported by an ESM study of hairstylists, a vignette experiment of accountants, and an employee-partner paired ESM study of general employees. Overall, our paradox lens highlights the tensions surrounding UPB: organizational interests vs. ethical principles, pride vs. guilt, work vs. life, and benefiting the organization vs. hurting oneself.

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Appendix A

Table A1
Scales used in Study 1.

Variables	Instructions and items
UPB	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? 1. Today, I misrepresented the truth to make my salon look good. 2. Today, I exaggerated the truth about my salon’s products or services to customers to help my salon. 3. Today, I withheld negative information about my salon or its products from customers to benefit my salon. 4. Today, I concealed information from customers that could be damaging to my salon. 5. Today, I recommended inappropriate products or services to customers for the profit of my salon. 6. Today, I coaxed customers into unnecessary over-spending for the profit of my salon.
State anxiety	To what extent are you feeling the following? 1. Anxious 2. Apprehensive 3. Worried 4. Nervous
Work-to-life conflict	Please recall your experience after work yesterday, and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements. 1. Work-related issues interfered with my non-work life. 2. I was unable to focus on non-work issues because of work. 3. Stress at work made me irritable at home. 4. Because of work, I felt too tired to take care of things at home.

Table A2
Scales used in Study 3.

Variables	Instructions and items
UPB	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? 1. Today, I misrepresented the truth to make my organization look good. 2. Today, I exaggerated the truth about my organization's products or services to customers and clients to help my organization. 3. Today, I withheld negative information about my organization or its products from customers and clients to benefit my organization. 4. Today, I concealed information from the public that could be damaging to my organization. 5. Today, I engaged in some unethical behaviors to help my organization. 6. Today, I made up some data or facts for the profit of my organization.
Emotional ambivalence	To what extent are you feeling a mix of pride and guilt?
State anxiety	To what extent are you feeling the following? 1. Anxious 2. Apprehensive 3. Worried 4. Nervous
Work-to-life conflict (rated by cohabiting partner)	To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your cohabiting partner? 1. After work today, my partner's work-related issues interfered with non-work life. 2. After work today, my partner was unable to focus on non-work issues because of work. 3. Stress at work made my partner irritable at home today. 4. Because of work, my partner felt too tired to take care of things at home. 5. Because of work, my partner reduced the effort he/she could give to activities at home. 6. After work today, my partner was unable to relax at home because of work.

Appendix B. Vignettes used in Study 2

	Original vignettes in Chinese	English translations
General prompt	请想象你是下述情境的主人公,在财务决算时做了情境中描述的行为。请尽可能将自己代入情境。 你是某集团一分公司的会计,也是公司的核心员工。每年公司结算时,你都会格外关注两个不同指标的完成情况: (1) 公司利润是否达到集团给分公司制定的利润目标。集团会给达标的公司更多的战略支持和发展机会。 (2) 公司利润是否达到给核心员工发放年终奖的利润门槛。当公司利润达到这一门槛时,你作为核心员工可以领到年终奖。	Imagine that you are the accountant in the following vignette, in which you have settled the financial statement as described. Please try to put yourself in the shoes of this accountant. You are an accountant in one branch of a conglomerate and also a core employee of this branch. Every year when the branch settles its financial statement, you pay particular attention to whether the branch has met two profit goals: (1) Whether or not the branch has met the profit goal set by the conglomerate. If the branch meets this profit goal, it will receive more strategic support and developmental opportunities from the conglomerate. (2) Whether or not the branch has met the profit threshold such that its core employees can receive a year-end bonus. If the branch meets this profit threshold, you will be able to receive a personal year-end bonus as a core employee.
Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior Condition	快到年度结算的时间了,你发现虽然公司本年度的账面利润已经达到了你个人领年终奖的门槛,但距离集团为公司制定的利润目标还差3%。为了维护公司的利益,你决定提前计入一笔还未产生的收入,使得公司账面利润提升了3%。也就是说,你通过提前计入收入这种不正当行为,帮助公司达到了集团给公司制定的利润目标。 由于你是公司账务的直接负责人,公司其他人无法复查这笔提前计入的收入。	The time for settling the branch's accounts for this year is approaching. Although the branch's profit has met the threshold for you to receive your personal year-end bonus, it is still 3% short of the profit goal that the conglomerate set for the branch. In order to help your branch, you decided to count a transaction that has not yet been generated, thereby raising the branch's profit by 3% on paper. That is, by counting this unrealized transaction (an ethically dubious behavior), you helped the branch meet the profit goal set by the conglomerate. Since you are directly in charge of the branch's financial statement, nobody else will find out about this unrealized transaction.
Unethical Pro-Self Behavior Condition	快到年度结算的时间了,你发现虽然公司本年度的账面利润已经达到了集团给公司制定的目标,但距离你个人能领年终奖的利润门槛还差3%。为了领到你个人的年终奖,你决定提前计入一笔还未产生的收入,使得公司账面利润提升了3%。也就是说,你通过提前计入收入这种不正当行为,帮助你自己拿到了年终奖。 由于你是公司账务的直接负责人,公司其他人无法复查这笔提前计入的收入。	The time for settling the branch's accounts for this year is approaching. Although the branch's profit has met the goal set by the conglomerate, it is still 3% short of the threshold for you to receive your personal year-end bonus. In order to receive your personal year-end bonus, you decided to count a transaction that has not yet been generated, thereby raising the branch's profit by 3% on paper. That is, after counting this unrealized transaction (an ethically dubious behavior), your branch met the profit threshold for you to receive your personal year-end bonus. Since you are directly in charge of the branch's financial statement, nobody else will find out about this unrealized transaction.
Control Condition	快到年度结算的时间了,你发现虽然公司本年度的账面利润已经达到了你个人领年终奖的门槛,但距离集团为公司制定的利润目标还差3%。你决定如实结算本年度的财务,相应地,公司没有达到集团给公司制定的利润目标。	The time for settling the branch's accounts for this year is approaching. Although the branch's profit has met the threshold for you to receive your personal year-end bonus, it is still 3% short of the profit goal set by the conglomerate. You decided to settle the branch's annual accounts normally. As a result, the branch did not meet the profit goal set by the conglomerate.

Appendix C. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2021.05.002>.

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