

**Moral Foundations in Organisations: Exploring the Role of Moral Concerns and  
Organisational Identification on Unethical Pro-organisational Behaviours**

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## Moral Foundations in Organisations: Exploring the Role of Moral Concerns and Organisational Identification on Unethical Pro-organisational Behaviours

### ABSTRACT

*Behavioural ethics research has shown that various individual characteristics are associated with unethical decisions/behaviours. Extending this research, we argue that organisational members' willingness to engage in unethical behaviours that benefit their organisations is shaped by the way they conceptualise ethics and the extent to which they feel they belong to their organisations. Specifically, we hypothesise that organisational members who strongly endorse group-oriented ethical considerations (binding foundations) and endorse individual-oriented ethical considerations (individualising foundations) less strongly, and who strongly identify with their organisations, will be more willing to engage in unethical behaviours that benefit their organisations. The results of a field survey support our hypothesis. The implications for research and practice, as well as limitations and future research avenues are discussed.*

Keywords: moral foundations, organisational identification, unethical pro-organisational behaviours

The numerous ethical scandals transpired in the last decade have unfortunately tarnished the reputation of the business world as a whole. There has been a drastic decline in public trust worldwide in organisations. For instance, a 2006 survey conducted in Australia found that 60% of surveyed participants do not trust Australian corporations (Moriarty, 2006). With growing recognition that reputation is a source of competitive advantage, it is imperative that organisations maintain an upstanding ethical reputation. One means to do so is to deepen our understanding of how to identify when organisational members are willing to engage in unethical conduct and when they are not.

Enhancing this understanding, behavioural ethics researchers have examined the associations between various individual characteristics of organisational members and unethical choices (e.g., Machiavellianism; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Trevino, 2010). This paper contributes to this line of research by examining how individual differences in conceptualising ethics and the extent to which individuals identify with their organisations may be associated with unethical behaviours that benefit the organisation. Drawing on the moral foundations theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007) which asserts that individuals hold varied conceptualisations of what it means to be ethical, we argue that some organisational members view ethical conduct as protecting *individuals* (i.e., individualising foundations), while others consider it an ethical imperative to protect their own *group* (e.g., the

organisation; i.e., binding foundations). Some organisational members may also consider *both* moral concerns to be vital. We further argue that organisational members who strongly espouse the binding foundations and less so the individualising foundations, and who identify with their organisations, are more likely to engage in unethical behaviours to benefit their organisations.

This paper contributes to behavioural ethics research in three ways. First, it introduces the moral foundations theory to organisational research. Second, it extends existing research on moral foundations to consider an organisational outcome that may result from individuals supporting different patterns of moral foundations. Past research has mainly been descriptive, merely showing associations between moral foundations endorsement and various individual characteristics (e.g., political orientation; van Leeuwen & Park, 2009). Third, unlike “bad apples” research (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010), we propose that unethical organisational behaviours do not always result from “bad” individuals, rather they may stem from “good” individuals who engage in behaviours consistent with their moral concerns for protecting their group (i.e., individuals engage in unethical pro-organisational behaviours [UPB]).

The paper unfolds as follows. First, we present an overview of the moral foundations theory and the empirical evidence that supports it. Second, we argue that individuals who hold high binding foundations and low individualising foundations are more likely to engage in UPB. Third, we assert that high organisational identification is a requirement for the interactive relationship of binding and individualising foundations on UPB to occur. Next, we present the method and results of a survey that tested our hypotheses. Finally, we discuss implications of our findings.

### **Moral Foundations**

Ethical behaviours, especially those examined in the context of organisations, often are conceptualised as behaviours that show care and fairness towards others. The moral foundations theory, however, posits that this view of ethicality does not account for a full range of moral concerns held by individuals (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). According to Haidt and his colleagues (e.g., Haidt and Joseph, 2004), there are a total of five moral foundations. Consistent with how ethics has been conceived in past research, the first two are care and fairness, and are primarily concerned with

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safeguarding individuals from harm and injustice, respectively (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Collectively, they are referred to as *individualising foundations* and function to suppress selfishness in a society by protecting individuals (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Recently, Haidt and his colleagues (e.g., Haidt & Joseph, 2004) expanded the ethical domain to include three additional moral foundations; namely, in-group loyalty, deference to authority, and the preservation of in-group purity. These foundations are concerned with fulfilling group obligations, obeying hierarchy/tradition, and preventing physical/spiritual contagion from tainting the in-group, respectively (Graham et al., 2009). Taken together, they represent the *binding foundations*, as they focus on suppressing societal selfishness by uniting individuals via group roles (Graham et al., 2009). According to Haidt and his colleagues (e.g., Haidt and Joseph, 2004), these five foundations represent the blueprints inherent in all individuals; different cultures then build upon these foundations to create local systems of morality.

Empirical support for the theory that people hold different patterns of moral foundations has mainly come from research examining political ideological and socio-cultural differences in the endorsement of moral foundations. For instance, it has been shown that while both liberals and conservatives espouse individualising foundations, only the conservatives consider the binding foundations as equally relevant in terms of morality (e.g., van Leeuwen & Park, 2009). In the socio-cultural arena, Haidt, Koller, and Dias (2003) found that affluent westernised participants were less likely to perceive the violation of binding foundations as ethical failures, while participants of lower socioeconomic status (mainly from Brazil) saw similar breaches as morally reprehensible. We believe that individual differences in moral foundations endorsement should also be found for organisational members, with various organisation-related consequences (see Brief, 2012). Accordingly, beyond mere *description*, we examine how moral foundations are associated with particular organisational *outcomes*, that is, the willingness to engage in (un)ethical behaviours that benefit the organisation.

### **Moral Foundations and Unethical Pro-organisational Behaviour**

Moral foundations may play a role in unethical behaviours that benefit the organisation. Unethical pro-organisational behaviour (UPB) is a form of unethical behaviour engaged, not for personal gain, but to benefit the organisation or its members (e.g., Umphress & Bingham, 2011).

Given that binding foundations are associated with the concern that protecting/advancing the group is an ethical imperative, engaging in UPB may be considered a pro-social act, with the deviant aspect of the behaviour disregarded. This is consistent with the notion that individuals can *unwittingly* commit unethical acts in the name of one's group, organisation, or leader (cf. Milgram, 1963). Conversely, the individualising foundations are concerned with protecting individuals, such that endorsing these foundations allows one to recognise the unjust and harmful nature of UPB, which in turn lowers the likelihood that one will engage in such behaviour. Our arguments are supported by social psychological research. Leidner and Castano (2012), for instance, showed that in-group glorification, which enhanced the cognitive accessibility of loyalty and authority principles, was associated with the unconscious moralising of in-group violence against an out-group (e.g., prisoner abuse). Janoff-Bulman and Carnes (2013) similarly commented on the dark side of holding binding foundations, and argued that this moral motive may lead to immoral actions in the name of protecting one's in-group.

Furthermore, we argue that within the individual, the impact of the endorsement of one foundation on UPB depends on the level of endorsement of the other foundation. Specifically, the binding foundations will be most strongly associated with UPB when there are low levels of individualising foundations. In other words, when one's conceptualisation of ethics includes a strong drive towards protecting the organisation, and less of a drive towards avoiding violation of care and justice, an individual will be more likely to engage in unethical acts for the benefit of the organisation.

### **The Role of Organisational Identification**

An interactive effect was not hypothesised above as our arguments are incomplete if we do not consider the strength of an individual's sense of belongingness to the organisation. The notion that binding foundations are associated with *in-group* promoting behaviours informs us that the above interactive relationship on the engagement in UPB will only occur if the organisation is part of the individual's valued in-group. The organisation becomes an individual's valued in-group when the individual strongly identifies with the organisation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Organisational identification signifies the psychological bonds that organisational members have with their organisations (Edwards, 2005). It reflects an organisational member's sense of

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belongingness to the organisation, whereby the successes and failures of the organisation are incorporated into the organisational member's sense of self (i.e., self-concept; Mael & Ashforth, 1992).<sup>1</sup> It has been shown that organisational identification can have detrimental consequences (Dukerich, Kramer, & Parks, 1998). Dukerich and colleagues (1998) argued that over-identification with the organisation causes low differentiation between the individual's sense of self and the organisation. We assert that this may negatively affect one's ability to question suspicious organisational actions, which may result in one conforming to and engaging in wrongdoing in the name of the organisation. Vardi and Wiener (1996) further asserted that unethical behaviour carried out to benefit the organisation are often committed by organisational members who strongly identify with the organisation, its mission, and its leadership. Umphress and Bingham (2011) argued that UPB is associated with high levels of organisational identification. Such identification has been proposed to mask the ethical content in unethical acts and to focus one's attention to the need to benefit the organisation (Umphress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010).

The aforementioned arguments suggest that when organisational identification is high, the organisation represents a valued in-group, such that individuals with high binding and low individualising foundations will be more willing to engage in UPB. Taken together, we propose a three-way interaction between binding foundations, individualising foundations, and organisational identification on the willingness to engagement in UPB. Stated more formally, we hypothesise:

*The relationship between binding foundations and willingness to engage in UPB will be moderated by individualising foundations and organisational identity, such that the relationship will be strongest when the binding foundations are high, individualising foundations are low and organisational identity is high, and weakest when the binding foundations are low, individualising foundations are high and organisational identity is low.*

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<sup>1</sup> While organisational identification and organisational commitment share conceptual similarities, commitment is different in that it refers to an organisational member's dedication and responsibility to the organisation (Klein, Molloy, & Brinsfield, 2012). Commitment to the organisation may thus exist without the organisation forming a part of an individual's in-group. Theoretically, organisational commitment therefore is not suited for this study.

## METHOD

### Respondents

Five hundred and two employees (55% male) from the United States were recruited via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), to complete a web-based survey in exchange for US\$1. Respondents were predominantly White/Caucasian (81.7%), were on average 34.48 years old ( $SD = 10.26$ ), worked an average of 42.48 hours per week ( $SD = 7.74$ ), and had an average organisational tenure of approximately 5.32 years ( $SD = 4.66$ ). The most common industries in which respondents worked were professional, scientific, or technical services (12.2%) and educational services (10.6%). About 90 percent of the respondents were employed on a full time basis and around 38 percent of them hold a managerial/supervisory position. Previous studies conducted via MTurk have reported that data collection using this method attains high quality data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).

### Measures and Procedure

All respondents completed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2009) and, measures of organisational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and UPB (Umpfress et al., 2010). Six counterbalancing conditions were randomly assigned to reduce order effects and filler items were also included.

*Moral Foundations Questionnaire.* Moral foundations was measured using a 30-item questionnaire (Graham et al., 2009), composed of 15 items each assessing moral relevance and moral judgement. The moral relevance items required respondents to indicate the extent to which, on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all relevant) to 5 (extremely relevant), different considerations are relevant when deciding between right or wrong. A sample item includes "whether or not someone acted unfairly (fairness)". The moral judgement items required respondents to indicate the extent to which, on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), they agreed with various statements. A sample item includes "respect for authority is something all children need to learn (authority)". We averaged the scores on the care and fairness items, to attain a composite measure of the individualising foundations (Cronbach = .82) and in-group, authority, and purity items to attain the composite measure of the binding foundations (Cronbach = .90).

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*Organisational Identification.* Organisational identification was assessed with Mael and Ashforth's (1992) six-item measure rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item includes "my organisation's successes are my successes". The items were averaged to obtain an overall organisational identification score (Cronbach = .90).

*Unethical Pro-organisational Behaviour.* Unethical pro-organisational behaviour (UPB) was measured using a six-item measure developed by Umphress and colleagues (2010), which captured respondents' willingness to engage in unethical behaviours to benefit their organisations. The items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sample item includes "If it would help my organisation, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organisation look good". The items were averaged to obtain an overall UPB score (Cronbach = .89).

*Control variables.* We controlled for several variables that may be associated with the engagement of UPB and/or organisational identification; namely, age (in years), organisational tenure (in years), career self-interest (6 items rated on a 5-point scale; measures the extent that organisational members are willing to engage in self-interested behaviours to secure/advance their careers [Collins, 2006]), and job satisfaction (3 items rated on a 7-point scale; Edward and Rothbard, 1999).

### RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the variables of interest. Regression analysis was conducted to test the three-way interaction. As displayed in Table 2, the three-way interaction term for binding foundations, individualising foundations, and organisational identification was significant ( $\beta = -.18, p < .05$ ). Following Dawson and Richter's (2006) recommendation for comparing slopes across different groups, we plotted the three-way interaction effects (Figure 1). This supported the hypothesised three-way interaction, that is, the relationship between high binding foundations and UPB is strongest when individualising foundations are low and organisational identification is high. Additionally, when the binding foundations are low, the individualising foundations high, and organisational identification is low, engagement in UPB is the lowest. To further probe this 3-way interaction, slope analysis was conducted. The results indicate that the slope of the high binding foundations and high organisational identification line (see line 1, Figure 1) is significantly different



from lines 2 and 3 ( $p < .05$ ) and close to significantly different from line 4 ( $p = .053$ ; see Table 3).

Taken together, although the difference in the slopes of lines 1 and 4 was only close to significant, these findings nonetheless provide some initial support for our hypothesis.

### DISCUSSION

Behavioural ethics scholars have devoted considerable attention to understanding why some organisational members make ethical decisions, while others make unethical ones when faced with the same ethically-charged situation (e.g., Reynolds, 2006). In this paper, we demonstrate that it is not just deviant individuals who engage in unethical behaviours; rather, individuals who *seek to be ethical* and who *are ethical in their own eyes* by protecting the interests of their own organisations, may engage in unethical behaviours. Our study shows that organisational members who conceptualise ethics more in an in-group-protective manner (i.e., high binding foundations) and less in an individual rights manner (i.e., low individualising foundations) and who strongly identify with their organisations, are more willing to engage in unethical behaviours that benefit their organisations.

Our paper makes several contributions to advance research in behavioural ethics. First, this paper introduces moral foundation theory into organisational research by examining the role moral foundations play on unethical behaviours in organisations. It sheds light on the counterintuitive notion that unethical pro-organisational actions may in fact be engaged by organisational members who genuinely believe that such actions are not unethical. Second, this paper extends past research on moral foundations by going beyond mere description of the associations between moral foundations and individual characteristics (e.g., political orientation), to consider their associations with an *organisational outcome* (i.e., UPB). Third, our theorising is aligned with the school of thought that considers organisational wrongdoing a normal phenomenon (e.g., Palmer, 2012). Specifically, we view wrongdoers as potentially ordinary organisational members who are merely acting in a manner consistent with their moral concerns as opposed to organisational members who scheme and engage in self-interested unethical behaviours (e.g., Machiavellistic individuals; Tang, Chen, & Sutarso, 2008).

Practically, the expansion of the moral domain has implications for the treatment of ethics in the organisation. Indeed, knowing that (un)ethical behaviours may stem from different patterns of

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moral foundations held by organisational members, allows managers to better understand the motivations behind organisational member actions and to consequently derive appropriate methods to control the unethical behaviours from emerging. For instance, while extant research shows that unethical leadership is one determinant of unethical follower behaviours (Brown & Trevino, 2006), our finding suggests that unethical leadership may more negatively influence individuals who value binding foundations (i.e., group loyalty and deference to authority) more than those who value individualising foundations. This makes ethical leadership all the more vital in an organisation consisting of members who are high on binding foundations, low on individualising foundations, and who highly identify with the organisation.

The limitations present in this research should be noted. First, this study suffers from weaknesses inherent in cross-sectional self-report survey research, for instance socially desirable responding (Chan, 2008). However, as a first step to understand the role of moral foundations in organisations, the self-report survey design allowed us to gain insights into respondents' willingness to engage in UPB to benefit *their own* organisations, which boosted the ecological validity of this research. We propose that future researchers can gain more control by using an experimental design; for instance, by manipulating and inducing binding and individualising mindsets (see Napier and Luguri, 2013). Second, respondents completed the survey in one session, which makes it possible that the study results were influenced by common method bias, that is, the attained result was due to the measurement method rather than the constructs measured (e.g., context effects; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, as discussed earlier, to overcome this limitation, the measures of interest were counterbalanced and randomly presented to respondents and filler items were included. Future researchers should, however, consider implementing similar surveys in two sessions, with a time lag of several weeks in between each session.

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Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	34.48	10.26								
2. Organisational Tenure	5.32	4.66	.51**							
3. Career Self Interest	3.49	1.01	-.14**	.01	(.94)					
4. Job Satisfaction	5.03	1.55	.01	.08	.33**	(.96)				
5. Binding Foundations	2.63	.88	.13**	.21**	.22**	.30**	(.90)			
6. Individualising Foundations	3.57	.69	.11*	-.03	.03	.06	.14**	(.82)		
7. Organisational Identification	3.47	.93	.03	.13**	.34**	.56**	.33**	.15**	(.90)	
8. Unethical Pro- organisational Behaviour	2.66	1.29	-.21**	-.07	.23**	.05	.12**	-.19**	.12**	(.89)

*Note.*  $N = 502$ . Cronbach alphas are in parentheses on the diagonal. \*\* $p < .01$

**Table 2:***Regression results: Willingness to Engage in Unethical Pro-organisational Behaviour*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Control Variables</b>				
Age	-.03**	-.02**	-.02**	-.02**
Organisational Tenure	.01	-.01	-.00	-.00
Career Self Interest	.27**	.23**	.23**	.23**
Job Satisfaction	-.02	-.08	-.09*	-.10*
<b>Main Effects</b>				
Binding Foundations		.19**	.22**	.24**
Individualising Foundations		-.39**	-.39**	-.34**
Organisational Identification		.16*	.14	.17*
<b>2-way Interaction terms</b>				
Binding Foundations x Individualising Foundations			-.07	-.10
Binding Foundations x Organisational Identification			-.09	-.05
Individualising Foundations x Organisational Identification			-.06	-.12
<b>3-way Interaction term</b>				
Binding Foundations x Individualising Foundations x Organisational Identification				-.18*
$R^2$	.09	.15	.15	.16
$\Delta R^2$	.09	.06	.01	.01
$\Delta F$	11.87**	11.16**	1.45	4.44*

Note:  $N = 502$ . Unstandardised regression coefficients are shown. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . All variables are mean centred.

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Interactive Session**Table 3:***Slope Analysis for the 3-way Interaction*

Pair of Slopes	t-value	p-values
(1) and (2)	-2.01	.05
(1) and (3)	-2.03	.04
(1) and (4)	-1.94	.053
(2) and (3)	.15	.88
(2) and (4)	.63	.53
(3) and (4)	.46	.65

*Note.* The first column indicates which lines in Figure 1 are being compared; second and third columns indicate whether the slopes of the lines differ significantly.



**Figure 1:**

Regression slopes for the three-way interaction of binding foundations (Bind), individualising foundations (Ind), and organisational identification (OrgID).

