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Examining Organizational and Interpersonal Determinants of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior in Hispanic-American Contexts

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Abstract

Most studies on unethical behavior emphasize actions motivated by personal gain, yet employees sometimes engage in rule-breaking or ethical violations with the intention of benefiting their organization—a behavior referred to as unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). This study focuses on Hispanic-American organizational settings, where socio-cultural and economic characteristics create unique contexts for such behaviors. It examines the influence of organizational, relational, and cognitive factors on the emergence of UPB, guided by social identity theory, social learning theory, social exchange theory, and social cognitive theory. Specifically, the research investigates how ethical culture, ethical leadership, leader-member exchange, organizational identification, moral disengagement, and ethical judgment shape employee conduct. Data were collected through an online survey of 652 employees across various industries in Ecuador and Venezuela. The results largely confirm the proposed hypotheses, offering a nuanced understanding of the drivers of UPB in Hispanic-American workplaces. The study provides both theoretical contributions and practical recommendations for managing and mitigating UPB in culturally similar organizational contexts.

Keywords: Ethical culture, Unethical pro-organizational behavior, Ethical leadership, Leader-member exchange, Moral disengagement, Organizational identification, Ethical judgment

Introduction

The Volkswagen Dieselgate scandal of 2015 exemplifies how organizationally motivated unethical actions can lead to far-reaching consequences. Employees intentionally manipulated emissions data to protect the company's market position and reputation, an act intended to benefit the organization but which ultimately caused severe financial, legal, and reputational harm [1]. This type of conduct illustrates the phenomenon of unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), defined as ethically questionable actions undertaken to advance organizational goals. Moore [2] characterizes such behaviors as a form of corruption: actions that prioritize organizational interests regardless of direct personal gain.

Traditionally, research on unethical conduct has emphasized self-serving motives, assuming that misconduct primarily benefits the individual at the expense of the organization or its stakeholders [3-5]. Conversely, behaviors intended to support others were generally considered morally acceptable [3, 6]. UPB challenges these assumptions by demonstrating that employees may engage in unethical acts not for personal advantage but to protect or promote the organization or its stakeholders [7-9].

While UPB may initially appear beneficial for organizational objectives, evidence shows it can undermine long-term performance, innovation, and sustainability, while also damaging broader industry practices [4, 10, 11]. As a result,

understanding the conditions and mechanisms that drive such behavior has become a growing area of research [3, 12, 13]. Despite increasing attention, theoretical models explaining why UPB occurs remain fragmented and debated, particularly outside of major research hubs such as China and the United States [14, 15]. Hispanic American contexts, in particular, remain underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by examining a comprehensive set of predictors spanning organizational, interpersonal, and individual domains. Specifically, it investigates the influence of ethical culture, ethical leadership, and leader-member exchange (interpersonal), alongside organizational identification, moral disengagement, and ethical evaluation (individual), on UPB. Additionally, the study considers the role of social desirability, a factor largely ignored in previous research. By testing these relationships in Ecuador and Venezuela, the study aims to provide insights into the drivers of UPB within Hispanic American workplaces and contribute to theory development in underrepresented socio-cultural contexts.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Defining unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB)

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) refers to actions undertaken to advance an organization's interests, its leadership, or colleagues, while violating societal norms, ethical standards, or legal regulations—typically without direct personal gain [9, 16, 17]. Recent evidence, however, suggests that personal motives may sometimes coexist with organizational goals in driving UPB [18]. Three characteristics define UPB:

1. **Normative or legal violation:** The behavior contravenes ethical or social standards and may negatively impact external stakeholders or society, regardless of organizational alignment [3, 13, 19, 20].

2. **Non-prescribed behavior:** UPB is not explicitly outlined in job descriptions nor formally requested by supervisors [7, 9].

Intentionality: These actions are deliberate, distinguishing them from errors or unintentional neglect, though they can emerge voluntarily, spontaneously, or under organizational pressures [17].

UPB embodies a paradox: while it may serve organizational objectives, it simultaneously challenges ethical norms [17, 20]. This tension is increasingly relevant in contemporary competitive environments, where the drive for organizational success can strain ethical boundaries [21, 22]. Employees engaging in UPB may experience mixed emotions—pride in benefiting the organization but guilt or moral discomfort due to ethical violations—consistent with cognitive dissonance theory [3, 23, 24]. Over time, the psychological costs of UPB can outweigh perceived benefits, potentially harming both individuals and organizations.

Predicting UPB

Explaining UPB requires integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, including social identity theory, social learning theory, social exchange theory, and social cognitive theory [8, 13, 14]. These frameworks collectively suggest that UPB arises from influences at three levels: organizational (e.g., ethical culture), interpersonal (e.g., ethical leadership and leader-member exchange), and individual (e.g., organizational identification, moral disengagement, and ethical evaluation) [13, 17].

Ethical culture

Organizations operate as social collectives, and social identity theory posits that individuals who strongly identify with their group adopt behaviors that align with group norms and interests, sometimes prioritizing these over societal or external considerations [25-27]. When unethical actions become normalized within a group, members may experience social support for such conduct [28].

Organizational culture shapes moral awareness, guiding perceptions of acceptable conduct [29, 30]. In cultures where unethical behavior is prevalent, employees are more likely to employ rationalization or neutralization mechanisms to justify their actions, thereby reducing moral conflict and mitigating feelings of guilt [25, 31, 32].

From the perspective of social cognitive theory, unethical organizational climates encourage moral disengagement, weakening self-regulation and facilitating behaviors that violate ethical standards without self-censure [33, 34]. Such environments also influence employees' perceptions of the ethicality of actions, increasing the likelihood of engaging in both specific unethical behaviors and broader misconduct deemed acceptable within the organization [29, 35]. Consequently, individuals often adopt behaviors consistent with organizational norms, even when these actions conflict with broader ethical principles.

Ethical culture (EC)

Ethical culture refers to the collective understanding within an organization of what behaviors are deemed acceptable or unacceptable [36]. It encompasses organizational norms, policies, and practices that guide employees toward integrity and discourage misconduct [37, 38]. Organizations with strong ethical frameworks actively promote ethical behavior and enforce consequences for unethical actions, while those with weak ethical cultures may unintentionally create an environment where misconduct flourishes [9, 25, 39]. Empirical studies suggest that environments lacking ethical rigor tend to experience higher

frequencies of unethical acts, including behaviors aimed at benefiting the organization but that contravene societal norms [4, 40, 41]. Research in the United States has shown that climates emphasizing self-interest and independence are linked with higher engagement in UPB, whereas climates governed by formal rules and legal standards correspond with lower levels of such behavior [29, 35].

Organizational identification (OI)

Organizational identification captures the degree to which employees feel a psychological connection to their organization and internalize its goals and values as part of their own identity [7, 42, 43]. Employees with strong identification derive self-esteem and pride from their membership and may perceive organizational outcomes as personally significant. While high OI often fosters positive engagement and loyalty, it can also motivate employees to engage in unethical actions intended to protect or advance the organization's interests, even at the expense of moral standards [16, 21]. For instance, employees may rationalize breaking ethical rules if it safeguards the organization's reputation or performance. Evidence suggests that the link between OI and UPB is contingent on contextual factors, including perceived obligations of reciprocity and the intensity of loyalty pressures [29, 43, 44].

Ethical leadership (EL)

Ethical leadership involves leaders demonstrating consistent integrity while promoting ethical conduct throughout the organization [45, 46]. Leaders influence employees not only by exemplifying moral behavior but also by clarifying expectations, providing feedback, and enforcing ethical norms [5]. Employees observe these behaviors and often model their actions accordingly. When leaders actively discourage unethical practices, UPB tends to decrease. Conversely, leaders who ignore or condone unethical actions can normalize such behaviors, leading employees to justify or overlook their own ethical lapses [47, 48]. The effect of ethical leadership on UPB is nuanced and shaped by situational factors, including the degree of autonomy employees have, their moral sensitivity, and the quality of their relationship with the leader [22, 49, 50].

Leader–Member Exchange Quality

Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory, rooted in social exchange principles, emphasizes that relationships between supervisors and subordinates are reciprocal and shaped by resource sharing and mutual obligations [51, 52]. Leaders often invest more attention, support, and opportunities in select employees, creating "high-quality" relationships that can motivate loyalty and discretionary effort [53, 54]. In these relationships, employees may feel compelled to repay their supervisors' trust by going beyond formal duties. In some cases, this repayment can manifest as actions that compromise ethical standards for the perceived benefit of the organization, such as engaging in UPB [9, 55]. High-quality exchanges can also strengthen employees' attachment to the organization, encouraging rationalizations that justify unethical behavior in service of organizational goals [13, 14]. Empirical studies indicate that employees in strong LMX relationships are more prone to participating in UPB [56, 57].

Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement (MD) is a cognitive process in which individuals detach from internal moral standards, permitting behavior they would normally consider wrong. Employees engaging in UPB often perceive their actions as serving the organization's interests, which enables them to rationalize transgressions, diffuse responsibility, or minimize perceived harm [8]. This cognitive distancing facilitates the enactment of UPB, as employees reconcile the ethical tension between their actions and their moral beliefs [6, 14]. Although the link between MD and UPB has been less explored, evidence from countries such as China, the U.S., Turkey, the UK, and Vietnam supports a positive association [3, 44, 47, 55]. By enabling individuals to view unethical acts as acceptable, MD directly influences ethical decision-making and increases the likelihood of UPB [58, 59].

Mediating Mechanisms

Multiple organizational, interpersonal, and individual factors interact to shape UPB, often through mediating processes. Ethical leadership, for instance, can transmit the organization's values to employees, shaping behavior in line with ethical standards [9, 37]. Employees observing ethical leaders are more likely to internalize organizational norms, which can reduce engagement in unethical acts. Similarly, ethical evaluation mediates the extent to which employees' perceptions of self-interest or egoistic norms within the organization translate into UPB [29].

Organizational identification (OI) mediates the influence of both ethical leadership and LMX quality. Ethical leaders enhance employees' sense of belonging and alignment with the organization, while high-quality leader exchanges reinforce

identification, which may unintentionally encourage employees to prioritize organizational loyalty over ethical considerations [49, 57]. LMX quality also mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and UPB, as employees in supportive relationships feel motivated to reciprocate through discretionary behaviors, which can include UPB [60, 61].

Moral disengagement further mediates these dynamics. Employees with strong organizational identification or high-quality LMX relationships may employ cognitive mechanisms that justify or rationalize unethical conduct, increasing the likelihood of UPB [3, 9]. Ethical leadership can also indirectly reduce UPB by discouraging moral disengagement and fostering moral self-regulation among subordinates [10, 50, 62].

Hypotheses Development

To understand the drivers of unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), it is crucial to consider the mediating roles of moral disengagement, leader-member exchange (LMX) quality, organizational identification, and ethical evaluation. Drawing on multiple theoretical frameworks—including social identity theory (SIT), social learning theory (SLT), social exchange theory (SET), leader-member exchange theory (LMXT), and social cognitive theory (SCT)—and supported by prior empirical research, we developed hypotheses linking key organizational, interpersonal, and individual factors to UPB.

Hypothesis 1: Employees' likelihood of engaging in UPB is expected to increase with higher moral disengagement, stronger leader-member exchange relationships, greater organizational identification, and more positive attitudes toward UPB, and to decrease when ethical leadership and organizational ethical culture are perceived as strong.

Hypothesis 2: Stronger perceptions of an organization's ethical culture are predicted to reduce both moral disengagement and favorable attitudes toward UPB.

Hypothesis 3: Ethical leadership is anticipated to strengthen organizational identification, reduce moral disengagement, lower supportive attitudes toward UPB, and enhance the quality of leader-member exchanges.

Hypothesis 4: Employees who perceive their organization as highly ethical are more likely to perceive their leaders as acting ethically.

Hypothesis 5: High-quality LMX relationships are expected to foster stronger organizational identification among employees.

Hypothesis 6: Stronger organizational identification may facilitate moral disengagement, enabling employees to rationalize ethically questionable actions.

Hypothesis 7: As moral disengagement rises, employees' attitudes toward engaging in UPB are likely to become more favorable.

Investigating UPB within Hispanic-American organizations is particularly meaningful because socio-cultural and economic factors shape employee behavior in unique ways. Hierarchical structures, collectivist norms, and close interpersonal networks influence how employees respond to authority, demonstrate loyalty, and navigate ethical dilemmas [9, 27]. Economic pressures in emerging economies, such as Ecuador and Venezuela, may further incentivize prioritizing organizational outcomes over ethical considerations [4, 57]. Understanding these cultural and economic influences is essential for designing targeted strategies to curb UPB and foster ethical practices. The proposed model integrates organizational, interpersonal, and individual factors to offer a comprehensive view of UPB dynamics in the Hispanic-American context.

Materials and Methods

Participants

The study sample included 652 working adults (60.6% female) from multiple organizational sectors and job roles, all aged 18 or older. Participants were primarily from Ecuador (53.4%) and Venezuela (44.0%). A summary of participants' demographic information is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

		Percentage
Educational level	Undergraduate degree	39.4
	Bachelor's or technician/technologist degree	30.4
	Graduate degree	29.6
	No studies	0.6
Type of organization	Private	59.2
	Non-profit	24.8
	Governmental	6.0
Industry	Service	58.6
	Commerce	21.0
	Manufacture	15.6
	Other	4.8
Occupational category	Administrative assistants/auxiliary or technical job	37.9

	Professional	27.5
	Area coordinator	20.9
	Director/manager	13.3
	Other	0.5
Working time	Full-time	74.7
	Part-time	25.3
Work modality	Face-to-face	77.3
	Hybrid	15.6
	Remote/virtual	7.1
Type of contract	Fixed-term and indefinite contract	70.7
	Temporary	13.8
	Free-lance	9.7
	Other	0.3
	No contract	5.5
Work experience	More than 10 years	38.8
	Between 1 and 5	31.7
	Between 5 and 10	19.8
	Less than 1 year	9.7
Time in the organization	Between 1 and 5	42.0
	More than 10 years	21.6
	Between 5 and 10	18.9
	Less than 1 year	17.5
Organizational area	Human resources	17.5
	Marketing/sales	15.2
	Administration	14.4
	Finance	13.2
	Production/operations/logistics/process	11.7
	Purchasing	6.9
	IT	4.8
	Other	16.4

Ethical Considerations

Approval for this study was granted by the Research Center at Espíritu Santo University in March 2023, ensuring adherence to internationally recognized research ethics. The study followed the ethical guidelines established in the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) and the American Psychological Association's code of conduct (2017). Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any point without consequences. Before beginning the survey, all participants received detailed information about the study's objectives, expected time commitment, the research team, and a contact for any questions. The study posed no risk of harm or discomfort, and all responses were anonymized and stored securely. As an incentive, three participants were selected via a raffle to receive $100 each. Data collection was conducted online between November 16, 2023, and June 28, 2024.

Study Participants

A total of 652 individuals took part in the study, with ages above 18 and a predominance of female respondents (60.6%). Participants represented a variety of industries, job roles, and organizational departments. The majority were from Ecuador (53.4%) and Venezuela (44.0%). Socio-demographic details of the participants are summarized in **Table 1**.

Measurement Instruments

All scales were translated into Spanish through a structured back-translation process to ensure conceptual equivalence. Initially, items were translated from English to Spanish by a bilingual expert, followed by a second independent translator who converted the items back into English. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved by the research team to maintain fidelity to the original constructs.

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB)
UPB was measured using a Spanish adaptation of the UPB Scale [16], which consists of six statements describing behaviors intended to benefit the organization despite being ethically questionable. Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale (1 =

strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Higher total scores indicate a greater inclination toward UPB. Factor analysis confirmed a single underlying factor, and internal consistency was α = .90.

Ethical culture (EC)

Ethical culture was assessed with a 13-item Spanish version of Treviño *et al.*'s [30] scale. Items evaluated organizational practices related to rewarding ethical behavior, punishing unethical conduct, and modeling ethical standards. Participants rated each item on a 5-point scale, with higher scores reflecting a stronger ethical culture. Factor analysis supported a unidimensional structure, and reliability was α = .95.

Ethical leadership (EL)

Perceptions of supervisors' ethical behavior were measured using a 10-item Spanish version of the Ethical Leadership Scale [45]. Items were rated on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating stronger ethical leadership. Factor analysis confirmed a single factor, with α = .95.

Organizational identification (OI)

Organizational identification was assessed via a Spanish adaptation of the six-item scale by Mael and Ashforth [63], capturing the extent to which participants felt connected to and proud of their organization. Responses were on a 5-point scale. Factor analysis supported unidimensionality, with α = .88.

Moral disengagement (MD)

MD was measured using a 24-item Spanish version of Moore *et al.*'s [64] scale, which assesses eight cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to bypass moral self-regulation. Items were rated on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater moral disengagement. Factor analysis supported a single-factor solution, with α = .97.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) Quality

LMX quality was measured with a 12-item Spanish adaptation of the LMX-Multidimensional Scale [65]. Items evaluated the quality of exchanges between employees and their supervisors, rated on a 5-point scale. Higher scores reflected better relationships. Factor analysis confirmed a dominant single factor, with α = .94.

Ethical Evaluation

Participants' ethical reasoning was assessed using the Spanish version of the Multidimensional Ethics Scale-15 (MES-15), adapted by Santalla-Banderali *et al.* [66] from Reidenbach and Robin's [67] original scale. This instrument evaluates moral judgments based on five ethical perspectives: deontology, justice, relativism, egoism, and utilitarianism. Three scenarios depicting potential UPB were presented, which had been pre-selected and validated by a panel of 15 experts. Respondents rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), with higher scores representing greater acceptance of ethically questionable behavior.

A factor analysis revealed that the MES-15 responses could be summarized under a single dimension for each scenario (first eigenvalues: 10.68, 11.13, 11.48), and internal consistency was excellent across the three scenarios (Cronbach's α ranging from .97 to .98). A bifactor model, including a general factor and scenario-specific factors, indicated that one overarching factor effectively captured participants' responses, with excellent fit indices (χ^2 = 2137.42, df = 900, χ^2/df = 2.38, CFI = .999, TLI = .999, RMSEA = .046, SRMR = .028).

Social Desirability

To control for tendencies to provide socially acceptable responses, the Spanish adaptation of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale–Form A [68] was administered. This 11-item measure evaluates participants' inclination to present themselves in a favorable light. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting stronger social desirability bias. Factor analysis supported a single-factor solution (first eigenvalue = 2.31), and the scale showed adequate internal reliability (α = .78).

Data Analysis

The proposed mediation model was tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation in the Lavaan package for R (version 4.1.0). Model adequacy was assessed with χ^2, χ^2/df, RMSEA, SRMR, CFI, and TLI,

with criteria for acceptable fit being RMSEA < .08, SRMR ≤ .08, CFI and TLI ≥ .95, and $\chi^2/df < 5$. Since the distribution of some variables deviated from normality, Spearman's Rho correlations were used to examine associations between constructs.

Descriptive Results

Descriptive statistics indicated that participants generally perceived their organizations as ethically strong, rated supervisors highly on ethical leadership, and reported substantial organizational identification. These distributions were skewed toward higher values with leptokurtic tendencies. Perceptions of leader-member exchange quality were also rated positively, though with a distribution closer to normal, suggesting moderate variability around the higher ratings.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis results.

	M	SD	Coefficient of variation	Skewness	Kurtosis
EC	43.87	7.19	16.39%	−0.686	1.430
EL	38.74	8.48	21.89%	−1.225	1.515
LMX	44.59	9.83	22.05%	−0.690	0.317
OI	22.10	4.90	22.17%	−0.819	0.898
MD	43.99	17.64	40.10%	1.637	3.200
EE Scenario 1	29.13	13.31	45.69%	1.152	0.968
EE Scenario 2	27.03	12.49	46.21%	1.404	2.098
EE Scenario 3	29.13	13.70	47.03%	1.027	0.529
UPB	11.46	5.32	46.42%	1.169	0.870

Note: UPB: Unethical pro-organizational behavior; EC: Ethical culture; LMX: Leader-member exchange quality; OI: Organizational identification; MD: Moral disengagement; EL: Ethical leadership; EE: Ethical evaluation.

Overall, participants showed relatively low tendencies toward moral disengagement and generally judged the UPB scenarios unfavorably, indicating limited agreement with the behaviors described. The distribution of responses for these variables was concentrated at the lower end, with positive skewness and leptokurtic patterns **(Table 2)**, highlighting that most respondents leaned toward rejecting UPB.

Correlation Analysis

Examining the interrelations among UPB and the various individual, organizational, and interpersonal factors revealed several notable patterns. Moral disengagement and ethical evaluation were both positively correlated with UPB, with moderate-to-strong effect sizes. In other words, employees who were more inclined to justify unethical actions or who assessed UPB more permissively were also more likely to report a willingness to engage in such behaviors **(Table 3)**. Additionally, moral disengagement showed a strong positive association with ethical evaluation, suggesting that rationalizing unethical acts was closely linked to perceiving these acts as acceptable.

Contrary to expectations, organizational identification displayed a weak negative correlation with UPB. Participants who reported stronger identification with their organization were slightly less likely to engage in UPB, opposing the hypothesized trend. Similarly, the relationship between organizational identification and moral disengagement was also weakly negative, indicating that higher organizational attachment was associated with a reduced tendency to morally disengage **(Table 3)**.

Table 3. Correlations matrix

	UPB	EE Scenario 1	EE Scenario 2	EE Scenario 3	MD	OI	LMX	EL
EE Scenario 1	.518***							
EE Scenario 2	.482***	.678***						
EE Scenario 3	.508***	.650***	.655***					
MD	.590***	.589***	.603***	.551***				
OI	−.222***	−.220***	−.183***	−.143***	−.167***			
LMX	−.188***	−.193***	−.104***	−.090*	−.126***	.498***		
EL	−.248***	−.173***	−.137***	−.150***	−.194***	.437***	.623***	
EC	−.241***	−.156***	−.178***	−.121**	−.156***	.325***	.406***	.488***

Note: UPB = Unethical pro-organizational behavior; EC = Ethical culture; LMX = Leader-member exchange quality; OI = Organizational identification; MD = Moral disengagement; EL = Ethical leadership; EE = Ethical evaluation. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Descriptive Observations

Overall, participants in the study tended to exhibit low moral disengagement and generally disapproved of engaging in unethical pro-organizational behaviors (UPB) across the three scenarios presented. Their responses suggested a cautious approach to UPB, with most ratings concentrated at the lower end of the scales.

Patterns of Associations

Analysis of the relationships between variables revealed that employees' moral disengagement and ethical evaluations were the strongest correlates of UPB. Individuals who demonstrated a higher tendency to rationalize unethical actions or justify them as acceptable for organizational benefit were more likely to perceive UPB positively and report higher engagement in such behaviors. Moral disengagement and favorable ethical evaluation were also closely linked, indicating a reinforcing effect: as employees justified their actions more, they also tended to rate UPB as ethically permissible.

Unexpectedly, organizational identification was negatively associated with UPB, albeit weakly, suggesting that stronger identification with the organization did not necessarily drive employees toward unethical acts in this sample. Similarly, organizational identification had a weak negative correlation with moral disengagement, counter to theoretical expectations. When examining organizational and interpersonal factors, the results indicated that lower perceived ethical culture, weaker ethical leadership, and lower-quality leader-member exchanges were associated with increased UPB, though the strength of these associations was modest. Ethical culture and leadership showed weak negative correlations with moral disengagement and positive ethical evaluations of UPB, while maintaining moderate positive correlations with organizational identification. This suggests that employees' sense of belonging and attachment aligns with perceptions of ethical practices and leadership integrity.

Interactions among organizational and interpersonal variables were consistent with theoretical expectations. Ethical culture was positively associated with both ethical leadership and LMX quality, and ethical leadership was further related to higher LMX quality. In turn, higher LMX quality correlated with stronger organizational identification, highlighting the interplay between leadership, relational quality, and employee attachment to the organization.

Structural Model Assessment

The initial structural model, without accounting for social desirability, showed poor fit indices. Incorporating a direct path from ethical culture to LMX significantly improved the model's alignment with the observed data.

Findings partially supported the first hypothesis: moral disengagement, ethical evaluation, and ethical culture emerged as significant predictors of UPB. Employees who were more prone to justify unethical behaviors and who evaluated UPB more favorably were substantially more likely to engage in these actions, particularly when perceiving the organizational culture as less ethical. Contrary to expectations, ethical leadership, LMX quality, and organizational identification did not demonstrate a direct influence on UPB in this sample.

Table 4. Values β obtained for each of the hypothesized relationships, with and without controlling social desirability.

	Without controlling social desirability		Controlling social desirability	
	β	*P*	β	*p*
EC → UPB	−.084	.047	−.081	.058
LMX → UPB	.011	.870	.002	.971
OI → UPB	−.047	.401	−.036	.511
MD → UPB	.421	<.001	.411	<.001
EL → UPB	−.064	.231	−.060	.261
EE → UPB	.315	<.001	.319	<.001
SD → UPB			−.076	.118
EC → EE	−.0161	.696	−.018	.673
EL → EE	.001	.982	−.000	.998
MD → EE	.621	<.001	.625	<.001
SD → EE			.037	.448
EC → MD	.019	.692	.024	.607
EL → MD	−.094	.071	.091	.076
OI → MD	−.060	.342	−.034	.592
SD → MD			−.226	<.001
LMX → OI	.248	<.001	.259	<.001
EL → OI	.206	<.001	.187	<.001
SD → OI			.177	<.001
EL → LMX	.495	<.001	.500	<.001

EC → LMX	.261	<.001	.265	<.001
SD → LMX			−.102	.026
EC → EL	.488	<.001	.484	<.001
SD → EL			.069	.138

Note: UPB = Unethical pro-organizational behavior; EC = Ethical culture; LMX = Leader-member exchange quality; OI = Organizational identification; MD = Moral disengagement; EL = Ethical leadership; EE = Ethical evaluation; SD = Social desirability.

As predicted in Hypothesis 7, moral disengagement showed a clear positive association with participants' attitudes toward UPB: individuals who exhibited higher levels of moral disengagement were more likely to hold favorable views of UPB **(Table 4)**. In contrast, ethical culture and ethical leadership did not emerge as significant predictors of ethical evaluation, contrary to the expectations outlined in Hypotheses 2 and 3 (R^2 = .378) **(Table 4)**. Likewise, the analyses did not support Hypotheses 2, 3, or 6, as ethical culture, ethical leadership, and organizational identification were not significantly linked to moral disengagement **(Table 4)**.

Regarding organizational identification, both leader-member exchange (LMX) and ethical leadership were significant predictors (R^2 = .238) **(Table 4)**, consistent with Hypotheses 3 and 5. This suggests that employees developed stronger identification with their organization when they perceived their leaders as ethical and experienced higher-quality exchanges with them. Additionally, ethical leadership positively predicted LMX quality, while ethical culture also showed a significant positive effect on LMX quality (R^2 = .469), indicating that participants who viewed their organization and leaders as ethical tended to report better-quality interactions with supervisors **(Table 4)**. Finally, ethical culture significantly predicted perceptions of ethical leadership (R^2 = .309), supporting Hypothesis 4: employees who considered their organization's culture to be more ethical were also more likely to view their leaders as ethical **(Table 4, Figure 1)**.
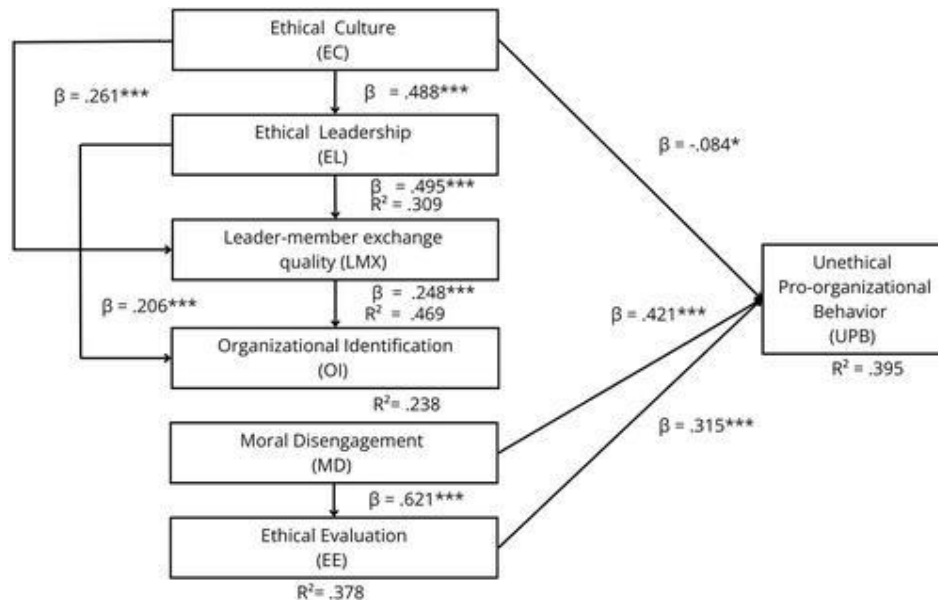

Figure 1. Resulting model without controlling for social desirability

Note: * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

Findings controlling for social desirability

When social desirability was incorporated as a predictor in the model, the fit indices indicated an acceptable representation of the data (χ^2 = 23.246, df = 4, $p < .001$; χ^2/df = 5.812; CFI = .987; TLI = .914; RMSEA = .086 [.054–.121]; SRMR = .023). In this analysis, ethical evaluation and moral disengagement remained strong positive predictors of UPB (R^2 = .398). In contrast, social desirability, organizational ethical culture, organizational identification, leader-member exchange, and ethical leadership did not exert a direct effect on UPB **(Table 4)**.

Consistent with the previous model, moral disengagement significantly predicted participants' ethical evaluations (R^2 = .378), while social desirability, ethical leadership, and ethical culture had no direct impact. Interestingly, social desirability emerged as a predictor of moral disengagement (R^2 = .037), indicating that individuals who were more inclined toward socially desirable responses were less likely to morally disengage. Neither organizational identification, ethical leadership, nor ethical culture significantly influenced moral disengagement **(Table 4)**.

Leader-member exchange and ethical leadership again demonstrated positive relationships with organizational identification (R^2 = .258), suggesting that stronger leader-subordinate interactions and perceptions of ethical leadership enhance employees' sense of belonging to the organization. Social desirability also influenced these relationships in opposing ways: higher socially desirable responding was linked to stronger organizational identification but lower perceived LMX quality **(Table 4)**.

Similar to the prior model, both ethical leadership and organizational ethical culture positively predicted LMX quality (R^2 = .469). Ethical culture also remained a significant predictor of ethical leadership (R^2 = .311), while social desirability did not affect this relationship. The final structural model, adjusted for social desirability, is illustrated in **Figure 2**.
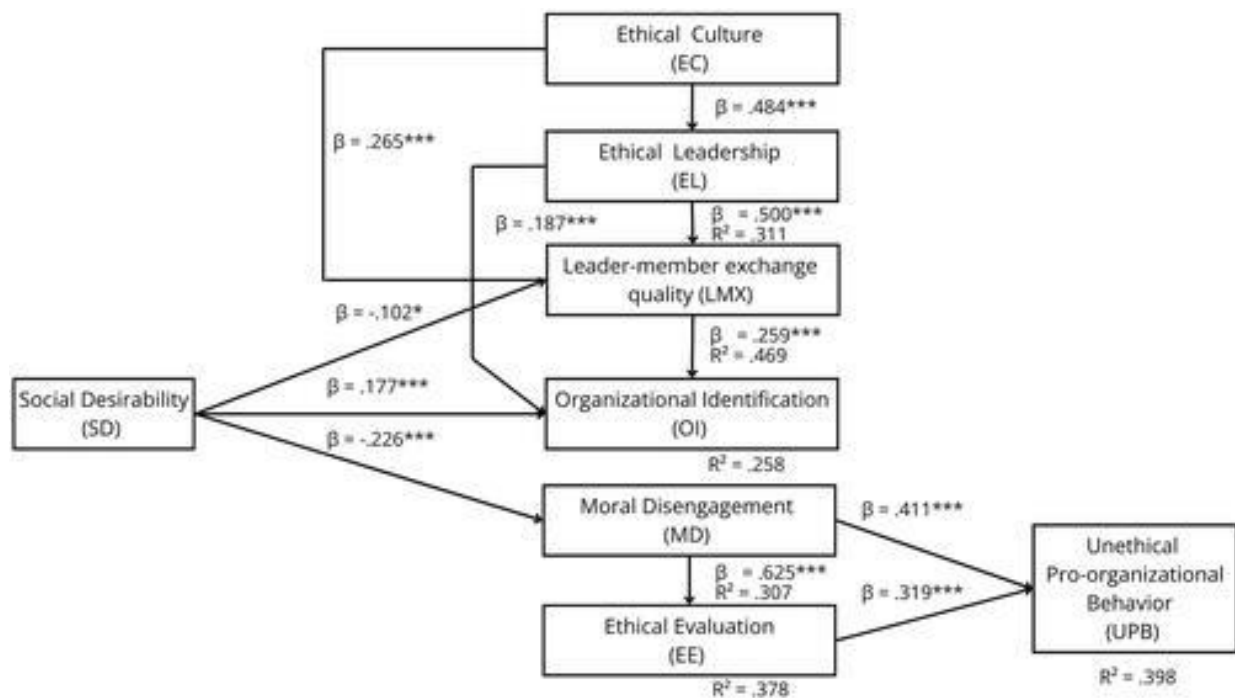

Figure 2. Resulting Model When Controlling for Social Desirability.

*Note: *p* < .05; *** *p* < .001.*

Discussion

This study examined factors influencing employees' engagement in unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) within the Hispanic-American context, integrating organizational, interpersonal, and individual variables under multiple theoretical lenses, including social identity theory (SIT), social learning theory (SLT), social exchange theory (SET), and social cognitive theory (SCT). The results highlight the predominant role of cognitive mechanisms, while revealing unexpected patterns concerning organizational culture and leadership influences.

Consistent with predictions, moral disengagement (MD) and ethical evaluation (EE) were the strongest direct predictors of UPB. Individuals with higher MD were more likely to justify actions that benefited the organization despite violating ethical standards. Similarly, employees who viewed UPB as ethically acceptable showed greater engagement in these behaviors. These findings underscore the significance of internal cognitive processes, suggesting that employees' ethical reasoning can override external cues when deciding to engage in UPB. This aligns with SCT perspectives and prior research emphasizing the centrality of moral disengagement in unethical behaviors [13, 14, 69].

Unexpectedly, perceptions of organizational ethical culture (EC) did not significantly affect UPB when controlling for social desirability, despite its established relevance in promoting ethical conduct [25, 36]. This indicates that while employees may recognize organizational norms, these norms alone may not deter unethical acts if cognitive mechanisms like MD and EE justify them. The findings suggest that individual-level reasoning can outweigh organizational-level influences in contexts where employees rationalize unethical actions for perceived organizational benefit.

In addition, neither organizational identification (OI) nor leader-member exchange (LMX) quality or ethical leadership (EL) directly influenced UPB. These results diverge from studies suggesting that higher identification or stronger leader relationships can increase UPB [3, 7, 43] but are in line with research showing non-significant effects of OI in certain contexts [29, 44]. Cultural factors, including collectivist values and the emphasis on interpersonal loyalty typical in Hispanic-American organizations, may modulate these relationships, making the influence of leadership and identification less direct.

Interestingly, EL did not predict UPB, suggesting that the impact of leadership may operate through indirect mechanisms, such as shaping employees' cognitive interpretations of ethical norms, rather than producing direct behavioral effects. MD and EE appeared to mediate the cognitive processing through which employees justify unethical actions, potentially neutralizing the direct influence of leaders. This indicates a more nuanced interplay between leadership and individual cognition than traditional SLT models might suggest.

Moreover, neither EC, EL, nor OI significantly predicted MD. Therefore, moral disengagement did not serve as a mediator linking these organizational and interpersonal variables to UPB. These findings emphasize that in this sample, individual

ethical reasoning is the primary determinant of UPB, highlighting the importance of addressing cognitive justifications rather than relying solely on organizational or leadership interventions.

In conclusion, this study underscores the central role of moral disengagement and ethical evaluation in understanding UPB. While organizational and leadership factors contribute to the ethical environment, employees' internal cognitive processes appear to play a more decisive role in whether they engage in unethical behaviors that benefit the organization. The Hispanic-American context, with its unique cultural and relational dynamics, may further modulate these relationships, suggesting that interventions to reduce UPB should prioritize cognitive and moral reasoning strategies alongside organizational policies.

Contrary to prior expectations, our findings do not support the mediating role of ethical evaluation (EE) in the relationship between organizational ethical culture (EC) and UPB, as suggested by Graham *et al.* [29]. Hypothesis 2, which proposed a significant influence of EC on EE, was not confirmed, and similarly, the association between ethical leadership (EL) and EE was non-significant, contradicting Hypothesis 3 and previous research [10, 17, 46, 47, 64, 70].

Our results indicate that individual-level factors, specifically moral disengagement (MD) and EE, were stronger predictors of UPB than organizational and interpersonal variables. These macro-level factors showed limited association with individual cognitive variables. In line with Hypothesis 7, higher levels of MD corresponded to more favorable ethical evaluations toward UPB, regardless of whether social desirability was statistically controlled. Notably, social desirability itself influenced MD: participants with a higher tendency to respond in socially desirable ways reported lower MD. The observed link between EE and UPB also suggests a mediating effect, where attitudes toward unethical behavior translate individual cognitive tendencies into actual engagement in UPB.

Regarding organizational-level variables, as hypothesized and consistent across social desirability conditions, organizational identification (OI) was positively associated with both LMX quality (supporting Hypothesis 5 and findings by Kelebek & Alniacik [57]; Koçak [71]) and EL (supporting Hypothesis 3 and Kalshoven *et al.* [49]; Walumbwa *et al.* [72]). EL also predicted LMX quality, confirming previous literature [5, 45, 60, 70]. which indicates that employees' perceptions of ethical leadership strengthen their perception of leader-subordinate relationships, which in turn enhance identification with the organization.

Additionally, EC was positively linked to LMX quality and EL (Hypothesis 4), both with and without controlling for social desirability. This supports a mediated pathway in which perceiving the organization as ethically sound enhances perceptions of leaders' ethical behavior, which then improves perceived leader-member exchange quality. Interestingly, social desirability also influenced LMX quality: individuals scoring higher on social desirability tended to report lower-quality interactions with supervisors.

Theoretical Implications

These findings underscore the dominant role of cognitive processes in predicting UPB. Moral disengagement and EE emerged as critical determinants, overshadowing the influence of organizational culture and leadership. This suggests that employees' internal moral reasoning can outweigh structural and relational factors in shaping unethical pro-organizational behavior.

Moreover, the results challenge some assumptions of social exchange theory and leader-member exchange theory, as LMX quality did not significantly influence UPB. While interpersonal relationships remain important for organizational functioning, they may not trigger unethical behaviors without alignment with individual cognitive mechanisms. This highlights the need to reconsider how relational dynamics interact with ethical decision-making, especially in culturally diverse contexts like Hispanic-American organizations and in modern work environments where individual cognitive orientations may dominate over social or organizational pressures.

Practical Implications

The study offers actionable recommendations to reduce UPB while fostering ethical organizational climates:

1. **Strengthen ethical culture and leadership practices.** Although EC and EL did not directly predict UPB, they provide the foundational environment for ethical conduct. Ethical leaders act as role models, promoting transparency and accountability, which indirectly discourages UPB. Organizations should invest in training programs emphasizing ethical decision-making, accountability, and behavioral modeling, along with implementing ethics audits, clear codes of conduct, and reporting mechanisms to reinforce ethical norms [5, 37, 38, 46].

2. **Deliver ethics-focused training programs.** Beyond theoretical instruction, employees and leaders should engage in practical exercises simulating ethical dilemmas. Scenarios can help participants recognize when organizational loyalty may conflict with ethical standards and understand how cognitive biases influence decision-making. Workshops, role-playing, and discussions encourage reflection and provide tools to counteract rationalizations for unethical actions [47, 73].

3. **Integrate ethical evaluation in recruitment and promotion.** Given the importance of individual-level factors, organizations should screen for moral reasoning and tendencies toward ethical disengagement during hiring and promotion.

Integrity assessments, structured interviews, and behavioral evaluations can help identify candidates more likely to rationalize unethical acts for organizational benefit. Reinforcing ethical behavior through performance evaluations, recognition systems, and leadership assessments ensures that ethical conduct is consistently rewarded and normalized [30, 54].

4. **Ethics-focused onboarding programs.** Introducing new employees to the organization's ethical principles during onboarding is crucial for shaping behavior from the start. Such programs should communicate the company's mission, operational procedures, and expected ethical conduct. Research shows that comprehensive induction programs enhance employees' understanding of their responsibilities, strengthen commitment to organizational values, and reduce unethical behavior [74]. Embedding ethics early helps integrate employees into the company's culture while setting clear expectations for professional conduct.

5. **Ethical incentive structures.** Compensation plans and reward systems should carefully balance performance outcomes with ethical conduct. Incentives focused solely on short-term profits, particularly commission-based pay, can inadvertently encourage employees to prioritize business goals over ethical standards [75, 76]. Organizations should instead incorporate broader performance criteria that value collaboration, long-term client relationships, and adherence to ethical norms alongside financial achievements.

6. **Fostering ethical dialogue and dissent.** Organizations benefit from environments that allow employees to voice concerns about potentially unethical policies or practices. Open communication channels, collective decision-making, and psychological safety mechanisms can help prevent unethical pro-organizational behaviors from becoming normalized [19, 20]. Managers should encourage debate, welcome diverse perspectives, and ensure that constructive dissent is supported [9].

7. **Whistleblower protection measures.** A robust whistleblower framework is essential to ensure employees can report unethical behavior without fear of retaliation. Protecting whistleblowers is a key part of comprehensive strategies to combat corruption and promote accountability, as emphasized by the ILO [77]. These protections enhance organizational oversight and help maintain a culture of ethical responsibility by discouraging tolerance for unethical practices.

8. **Integrating ethics into organizational strategy.** Organizations should embed ethical principles into strategic planning so employees do not perceive unethical actions as necessary for achieving objectives [2]. Initiatives such as corporate social responsibility, transparent decision-making, and ethical leadership modeling reinforce ethical norms at every level [55]. Training and development programs, including corporate universities, can further instill these principles in employees, embedding ethics into the organizational fabric.

Comprehensive ethical integration

Ethical considerations should permeate all stages of the employee lifecycle—from hiring and onboarding to daily work practices, performance evaluations, and offboarding. By making ethics an integral part of operations rather than a procedural formality, organizations can cultivate a culture where ethical behavior is natural and consistent. Aligning ethical standards across all touchpoints ensures employees internalize these principles in daily decision-making and long-term planning.

Limitations and future research directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the study sampled employees from Hispanic-American countries, it may not fully capture the region's cultural diversity. Cross-cultural studies are needed to examine how cultural nuances shape the relationships among moral disengagement, ethical evaluation, and UPB.

Second, reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, including social desirability. While this study controlled for such effects, future research could employ experimental designs, multi-source surveys, or observational methods to validate these results. Additionally, other individual and organizational factors, such as job autonomy, organizational power dynamics, or team norms, could be explored to understand their influence on UPB.

Third, participants' industry sectors were not controlled, although competitive pressures differ across industries and may affect engagement in UPB. Future studies should consider industry-specific moderators.

Fourth, the study did not account for employees' hierarchical roles. Managers and non-managers may experience different levels of pressure and exposure to ethical dilemmas, which could affect the likelihood of UPB. Future research should examine the impact of organizational position on ethical decision-making.

Finally, although ethical leadership, LMX quality, and organizational identification did not directly predict UPB, moderate correlations suggest these factors may still play a contextual role. Future studies could investigate additional variables, such as trust in leadership or ethical climate strength, to clarify the conditions under which these interpersonal and organizational factors influence UPB.

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