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DOING WRONG FOR THE ORGANIZATION OR FOR THE SELF? BENEFICIARY ORIENTATION AND THE STRUCTURAL DIFFERENTIATION OF UNETHICAL WORKPLACE BEHAVIOR

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Abstract
Organizational misconduct has become a major concern in management and behavioral ethics research because it threatens organizational integrity, fairness, trust, and human dignity. Despite extensive scholarly attention, literature remains fragmented in distinguishing different forms of unethical workplace behavior. Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) and Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB) have developed as separate research streams, although both involve unethical actions in organizational settings. This study addresses this gap through a comparative bibliometric and thematic analysis of 264 UPB articles and 32 WCB articles indexed in Scopus. Using performance analysis, co-citation mapping, keyword co-occurrence analysis, and temporal overlay visualization, the study examines the intellectual structure, theoretical foundations, and thematic evolution of both domains. The findings reveal a clear asymmetry in research maturity. UPB literature is theoretically consolidated around moral disengagement, organizational identification, and leadership, whereas WCB research remains fragmented and primarily focused on dishonesty, self-regulation failure, performance pressure, and affective triggers. Based on these findings, this study proposes beneficiary orientation as a conceptual boundary distinguishing organization-serving from self-serving misconduct. The proposed framework advances a more coherent taxonomy of unethical workplace behavior and provides directions for future research in increasingly digitalized organizational environments.
Keywords*: Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior, Workplace Cheating Behavior, Beneficiary Orientation, Organizational Misconduct, Behavioral Ethics.*

1. Introduction

Organizational misconduct has long been a central concern in management and behavioral ethics research. A substantial body of scholarship has examined unethical behavior in organizations, ranging from studies of organizational deviance and counterproductive work behavior to broader investigations within behavioral ethics. Despite this extensive literature, the field remains conceptually fragmented. Different research streams frequently employ overlapping terminology and conceptual labels without clearly distinguishing the motivational foundations of unethical conduct (Götz et al., 2019; Hersel et al., 2019). As a result, theoretically distinct forms of misconduct are often aggregated under broad conceptual categories, limiting theoretical precision and obscuring meaningful differences in why individuals engage in unethical actions and who ultimately benefits from them.

Beyond its implications for organizational performance and governance, organizational misconduct represents a significant ethical challenge because it can undermine human dignity, fairness, and trust in the workplace. Unethical actions may harm employees, stakeholders, and organizational communities, regardless of whether they are committed for personal gain or in the perceived interest of the organization. Consequently, understanding the motivational foundations of unethical workplace behavior is not only a theoretical concern but also a practical necessity for fostering ethical, inclusive, and sustainable organizations. Clarifying who benefits from misconduct and how such actions are justified may therefore contribute to a deeper understanding of ethical decision-making in contemporary workplaces.

Within this fragmented landscape, two prominent yet unevenly developed domains have emerged: Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) and Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB). UPB refers to unethical actions intended to benefit the organization or its members

(Umphress et al., 2010). Over the past decade, research on UPB has demonstrated increasing theoretical consolidation, drawing heavily on moral disengagement theory, social identity processes, and leadership frameworks to explain why employees may rationalize unethical conduct in pursuit of collective goals. In contrast, workplace cheating behavior has evolved more diffusely from traditions of deviance, dishonesty, and unethical decision-making. It is commonly conceptualized as self-serving misconduct driven by performance pressure, emotional strain, opportunistic incentives, or failures of self-regulation (Mitchell et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2025). Although both domains examine unethical conduct within organizational settings, they differ fundamentally in their motivational orientation.

Although research on UPB and workplace cheating has expanded, the two domains have largely developed as separate research streams. Recent reviews and meta-analyses of UPB have concentrated on its antecedents, motivational mechanisms, leadership influences, organizational identification, and moral cognition (R. Ahmad et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2026; Liu et al., 2026). For example, recent meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that organizational identification and moral disengagement represent important explanatory mechanisms of UPB, while leadership research has developed a distinct body of evidence concerning how leaders shape organization-serving unethical conduct (R. Ahmad et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2026).

In contrast, workplace cheating research has developed primarily around performance pressure, self-protection, job insecurity, interpersonal conflict, and self-regulatory processes (Kamran et al., 2022; Men et al., 2022; Ye et al., 2025). Recent evidence continues to examine workplace cheating as a response to pressure and insecurity, rather than positioning it within a broader taxonomy of organizational misconduct (Ye et al., 2025).

These two streams therefore differ not only in the behaviors examined but also in their dominant theoretical perspectives, motivational framing, and contextual emphasis. However, existing reviews have predominantly synthesized each domain independently. The recent systematic review of leadership and UPB, for instance, provides an extensive synthesis of leadership-related UPB research but remains focused on the pro-organizational domain (R. Ahmad et al., 2024). Similarly, recent meta-analyses have advanced understanding of the antecedents and mechanisms of UPB without systematically comparing these mechanisms with those underlying workplace cheating (Hu et al., 2026; Liu et al., 2026).

Consequently, three related gaps remain. First, there is limited systematic evidence comparing the intellectual and thematic structures of UPB and workplace cheating. Second, it remains unclear how the theoretical perspectives and motivational mechanisms emphasized in these two streams converge or diverge. Third, existing organizational misconduct research has not sufficiently used the intended beneficiary of unethical conduct as a cross-domain organizing dimension. It remains unclear whether unethical conduct directed toward organizational interests and unethical conduct directed toward personal interests can be understood as differentiated manifestations of a broader organizational misconduct domain. Addressing these gaps is important because similar psychological mechanisms, such as moral disengagement, may be associated with different forms of unethical conduct depending on how the purpose and beneficiary of the behavior are framed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Organizational Misconduct and Conceptual Fragmentation

To situate Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) and Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB) within the broader unethical behavior domain, it is essential to review the traditions of organizational deviance, counterproductive work behavior (CWB), and behavioral ethics. These streams form the foundation of organizational misconduct research but remain conceptually fragmented and insufficiently integrated around a coherent taxonomy.

The organizational deviance and CWB literature conceptualize misconduct as discretionary behaviors that violate organizational norms and harm the organization or its

members (Fernández del Río et al., 2021; Kelloway et al., 2010). Research identifies job dissatisfaction, perceived injustice, and organizational politics as key predictors (Czarnota-Bojarska, 2015; Ogbozor et al., 2025; Piccoli, 2013). While this tradition provides strong measurement tools, it typically categorizes misconduct by target and harm rather than motivational intent.

In parallel, behavioral ethics adopts a descriptive approach to understanding how individuals justify unethical conduct despite valuing morality (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Gino, 2015). Studies highlight mechanisms such as moral licensing and impression management that enable rationalization (Bolino & Klotz, 2015; Bouzzine & Lueg, 2023; De Cremer & Moore, 2020). However, similar to the deviance tradition, this stream rarely differentiates misconduct based on who ultimately benefits from the act.

At the macro level, scholarship on organizational misconduct underscores definitional ambiguity and multilevel complexity (Greve et al., 2010; Hersel et al., 2019; Paruchuri et al., 2024). Although integrative efforts exist (Anand et al., 2026; Ashforth et al., 2008; Sonenshein & Decelles, 2017), the literature often uses deviance, dishonesty, and misconduct interchangeably (Götz et al., 2019). The absence of a unifying taxonomy distinguishing misconduct by beneficiary orientation limits theoretical precision and obscures meaningful differences between organizationally driven and self-serving unethical behavior.

Taken together, the broader organizational misconduct literature provides important foundations for understanding unethical workplace behavior, but existing perspectives primarily distinguish misconduct according to behavioral form, target, harm, or rule violation. They provide less insight into the motivational direction of misconduct, particularly whether the intended beneficiary is the organization or the individual. This limitation becomes particularly relevant when considering UPB and workplace cheating, which both represent unethical workplace conduct but differ in their underlying motivational orientation.

2.2 Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB): A Construct-Driven Domain

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) refers to actions that violate ethical standards or societal norms but are performed with the intention of benefiting the organization or its members (Grabowski et al., 2019; Mo et al., 2023; Umphress et al., 2010; Wolfgruber, 2024). Unlike other forms of misconduct that are primarily self-serving, UPB is characterized by its dual nature: unethical in execution yet pro-organizational in intent. This definitional clarity has enabled UPB to emerge as a distinct construct within organizational behavior, separating it from broader deviance or dishonesty categories.

Theoretically, UPB is strongly anchored in moral disengagement theory, which explains how individuals cognitively justify unethical actions while maintaining a positive moral self-image (Hsieh et al., 2020a; Zhang et al., 2023, 2023). Employees may neutralize guilt by framing misconduct as necessary for organizational success. At the same time, moral identity internalization has been shown to mitigate such rationalization processes, reducing the likelihood of UPB (Zhang et al., 2023). This cognitive mechanism provides a central explanatory foundation for the construct.

UPB is also deeply rooted in social identity theory. Strong organizational identification increases the tendency to prioritize collective goals over external ethical standards (Milesi, 2025; Qureshi & Ahmed, 2021; Umphress et al., 2010). Empirical research demonstrates that identification can mediate the relationship between leadership and UPB, suggesting that employees' perceived alignment with the organization shapes their moral decision-making (Kelebek & Alniacik, 2022). Thus, identity processes function as a motivational driver that distinguishes UPB from purely self-interested misconduct.

Leadership research further reinforces the construct's consolidation. Different leadership

styles—including ethical leadership, abusive supervision, and identity leadership—have been shown to influence UPB through mechanisms such as moral disengagement and status threat (R. Ahmad et al., 2024; Hsieh et al., 2020b; Xiong et al., 2021). The rapid integration of moral disengagement, social identity, and leadership frameworks illustrates the theoretical coherence of UPB. Collectively, this multi-theoretical anchoring has facilitated its rapid consolidation as a construct-driven and empirically robust research domain.

Collectively, the UPB literature demonstrates relatively strong theoretical integration around moral cognition, organizational identification, and leadership. These perspectives converge in explaining how employees may justify unethical actions when such actions are perceived to serve organizational interests. However, this strong organization-centered orientation has also resulted in UPB being predominantly examined as a distinct construct, with comparatively limited integration with other forms of workplace misconduct. In particular, the literature provides limited insight into whether mechanisms such as moral disengagement and performance pressure may also operate in misconduct directed toward individual interests.

2.3 Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB): A Diffusion-Driven Domain

Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB) originates from broader traditions of organizational deviance and dishonesty, rather than from a single foundational construct. It refers to self-serving misconduct intended to create unfair advantages for the individual, often at the expense of organizational integrity and fairness (Mitchell et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2025). Conceptually, WCB evolved from earlier frameworks addressing workplace deviance, fraud, and manipulation, which categorized unethical conduct primarily in terms of harm and rule violation rather than beneficiary intent (Khattab & Abdelaliem, 2024).

Unlike UPB, WCB is predominantly framed as self-interested misconduct driven by performance pressure, job insecurity, and self-protection motives (Kamran et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2018). Emotional states such as anger and frustration further intensify the likelihood of cheating, particularly under high performance demands or bottom-line mentality climates (Adeel et al., 2023; Kamran et al., 2022). These affective triggers position WCB within an honesty–dishonesty continuum, emphasizing individual moral failure and opportunistic decision-making rather than collective justification (Farasat et al., 2022; Yue et al., 2023).

The theoretical foundations of WCB are dispersed across multiple perspectives. Displaced aggression theory explains cheating as a reaction to performance pressure (Kamran et al., 2022), while conservation of resources theory links emotional exhaustion and resource depletion to misconduct (I. Ahmad et al., 2025; Men et al., 2022). Social learning theory highlights the influence of peer behavior and ethical leadership and impression management perspectives connect job insecurity to unethical self-protection strategies (Ye et al., 2025).

Despite this theoretical diversity, the WCB literature remains comparatively fragmented. Research is distributed across various antecedents and mediating mechanisms without a unified conceptual framework (Kamran et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2025). This diffusion-driven development contrasts with the construct-driven consolidation observed in UPB and limits theoretical integration within the WCB domain.

Overall, the workplace cheating literature is more theoretically dispersed than the UPB literature. Despite differences in theoretical perspectives, existing studies converge in emphasizing individual-level processes involving self-protection, performance pressure, job insecurity, emotional strain, and self-regulation. This individual-centered orientation distinguishes workplace cheating from the organization-serving orientation of UPB. However, the fragmented development of WCB research and its limited integration with broader organizational-level perspectives make it difficult to determine whether workplace cheating and UPB represent fundamentally different mechanisms or different motivational manifestations of unethical workplace behavior.

2.4 Beneficiary Orientation as a Theoretical Boundary

To address fragmentation within the organizational misconduct literature, beneficiary orientation can be conceptualized as a structural dimension differentiating forms of unethical behavior based on who ultimately benefits from the act. Existing research indicates that unethical behaviors vary not only in form but also in motivational direction. Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB), for instance, is driven by organizational identification, psychological entitlement, and manipulative tendencies, which can channel strong attachment to the organization into ethically questionable conduct (Naseer et al., 2020). Meta-analytic evidence further demonstrates that identity-based and cognitive mechanisms systematically predict UPB, reinforcing its organization-centered orientation (Liu et al., 2026). Performance goal orientation may intensify this tendency, as employees prioritize organizational success over ethical standards (Mo et al., 2023).

In contrast, self-interested unethical behavior is primarily guided by pro-self motives. Bottom-line mentality and goal-contingent rewards can narrow employees' focus to personal outcomes, increasing the likelihood of unethical acts that serve individual interests (Mawritz et al., 2024). Employees high in future orientation, however, are less prone to such behavior due to greater consideration of long-term consequences (Mawritz et al., 2024). These findings suggest that motivational direction—whether organization-focused or self-focused—constitutes a meaningful boundary condition separating misconduct forms.

Beneficiary orientation thus provides an integrative lens that clarifies the structural differences between organization-serving and self-serving unethical conduct. Psychological processes such as organizational identification and moral disengagement may mediate pro-organizational misconduct (Liu et al., 2026), whereas self-regulatory and reward-driven mechanisms more strongly explain pro-self unethical behavior (Mawritz et al., 2024). Moreover, decision-makers consider the perceived ethical preferences of beneficiaries when evaluating morally ambiguous actions, indicating that beneficiary perception shapes ethical judgment processes (Wiltermuth et al., 2013).

Positioning beneficiary orientation as a theoretical boundary offers a clearer taxonomy of workplace unethical behavior and directly addresses conceptual ambiguity within prior research. By distinguishing misconduct based on intended beneficiary rather than solely on behavioral form, this framework advances theoretical precision and provides a coherent structure for comparing UPB and WCB within a unified conceptual model.

The comparative literature reveals both convergence and divergence between UPB and workplace cheating. Both domains involve unethical conduct within organizational settings and share several psychological and contextual mechanisms, particularly moral disengagement and performance-related pressure. However, they differ substantially in motivational orientation, intended beneficiary, dominant theoretical perspectives, and contextual emphasis. UPB is predominantly oriented toward organizational or collective interests, whereas workplace cheating is primarily associated with individual advantage and self-protection.

This comparison also reveals an unresolved issue. Existing studies have provided substantial explanations for why employees engage in UPB or workplace cheating separately, but they provide limited insight into why similar psychological or contextual mechanisms may result in different forms of unethical conduct. It remains unclear whether the intended beneficiary of an unethical act can explain the distinction between organization-serving and self-serving misconduct.

This unresolved issue provides the basis for considering beneficiary orientation as a potential conceptual boundary within organizational misconduct. Rather than replacing established mechanisms such as moral disengagement, organizational identification, or self-regulation, beneficiary orientation provides an additional organizing dimension that

distinguishes misconduct according to the intended recipient of its benefits. This perspective enables UPB and workplace cheating to be examined within a common conceptual space while preserving their distinct motivational characteristics.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Data Source and Search Strategy

This study employed a comparative bibliometric approach to examine and compare the intellectual development of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) and Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB). To ensure analytical comparability, two independent datasets were constructed using parallel search procedures. The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database in March 2026. For the UPB domain, the search was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords using the following query: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("unethical pro-organizational behavior" OR "unethical proorganizational behavior" OR "unethical pro organizational behavior"). For the WCB domain, the following query was used: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("workplace cheating" OR "employee cheating" OR "workplace cheating behavior" OR "organizational cheating behavior" OR "employee dishonesty" OR "organizational dishonesty") AND NOT TITLE-ABS-KEY ("academic" OR "student" OR "exam" OR "tax" OR "consumer").

The exclusion terms were incorporated to minimize conceptual contamination from academic dishonesty, student and examination cheating, tax-related misconduct, and consumer-level misconduct, thereby maintaining the focus on unethical behaviors occurring within organizational contexts. The initial search yielded 306 documents for UPB and 59 documents for WCB. The retrieved records were subsequently screened based on document type, language, and subject-area relevance. Only English-language journal articles within the relevant subject areas were retained, resulting in a final dataset of 264 UPB articles and 32 WCB articles. The complete search and screening process is presented in Table 1.

This procedure ensured that both datasets were constructed using comparable search and screening criteria while maintaining the conceptual relevance of each research domain.

Table 1. Search Strategy and Screening Procedure

Criteria	Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB)	Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB)
Search Query	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("unethical pro-organizational behavior" OR "unethical proorganizational behavior" OR "unethical pro organizational behavior")	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("workplace cheating" OR "employee cheating" OR "workplace cheating behavior" OR "organizational cheating behavior" OR "employee dishonesty" OR "organizational dishonesty") AND NOT TITLE-ABS-KEY ("academic" OR "student" OR "exam" OR "tax" OR "consumer")
Initial Retrieval	306	59
Journal Articles	279	39
Final Journal Records	279	38
English Language	276	38
Subject Area Filter Applied	264	32
Final Dataset	**264**	**32**

3.2 Screening and Inclusion Procedure

Only English-language journal articles within Business, Management and Accounting, Social Sciences, Psychology, Economics, and Arts and Humanities were retained. After screening, the final dataset consisted of 264 UPB articles and 32 WCB articles.

3.3 Bibliometric Analysis Techniques

To systematically examine and compare the intellectual structures of the UPB and workplace cheating domains, this study employed a combination of performance analysis and science mapping techniques. Bibliometric methods enable researchers to quantitatively evaluate research productivity, structural relationships, and thematic evolution within a given field (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

3.4 Performance Analysis

Performance analysis was used to examine publication trends, citation impact, and influential contributors.

3.5 Science Mapping and Network Analysis

Science mapping techniques were employed to examine the intellectual structure and thematic development of both research domains. Co-citation analysis was used to identify foundational theoretical streams and intellectual relationships among influential publications, while keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted to map dominant themes, emerging topics, and conceptual linkages. These techniques enabled comparison of thematic concentration and research evolution across organizationally oriented misconduct (UPB) and self-serving unethical behavior (WCB). Bibliometric visualization and network mapping were performed using VOSviewer (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

3.6 Thematic Comparative Analysis

A thematic comparative analysis of abstracts and keywords was conducted to identify dominant theories, motivational orientations, and contextual factors across both domains. The findings were subsequently integrated with bibliometric results to clarify conceptual boundaries and research fragmentation.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive and Performance Analysis

Figure 1 presents the publication trends of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) and Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB) research from 2005 to 2026. The results reveal a significant asymmetry in domain development. Following its formal conceptualization in 2010, UPB research experienced steady growth and entered a rapid expansion phase after 2018, indicating increasing theoretical consolidation and scholarly attention. In contrast, WCB research demonstrates a comparatively limited and episodic growth pattern, with only a modest increase in publications in recent years.

Divergence cannot be explained solely by differences in temporal origin. Although workplace cheating draws from earlier dishonesty and workplace deviance traditions, it has not achieved the same level of theoretical integration and publication growth as UPB. Overall, the findings suggest that UPB has evolved into a more mature and consolidated research stream, whereas WCB remains comparatively fragmented. This asymmetry provides an initial indication of differences in intellectual maturity, which are further examined through co-citation and thematic analyses.

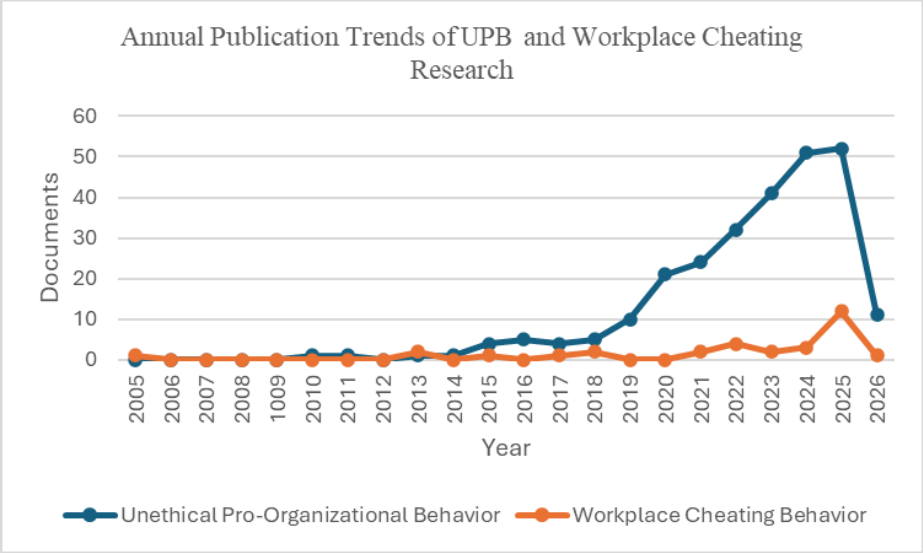


Figure 1. Annual Publication Trends in UPB and Workplace Cheating Research

4.2 Intellectual Structure: Co-Citation Analysis

The co-citation analysis of the UPB dataset (n = 264) generated a network of 31 cited references grouped into three major clusters, indicating a relatively mature and theoretically consolidated domain (Figure 2). The network reveals three dominant intellectual streams centered on moral disengagement, moral identity, and construct development. Together, these streams demonstrate that UPB research is firmly anchored in behavioral ethics, social identity, and organizational behavior perspectives. The strong interconnections among clusters suggest a coherent theoretical foundation integrating cognitive, identity-based, and contextual explanations of unethical behavior.

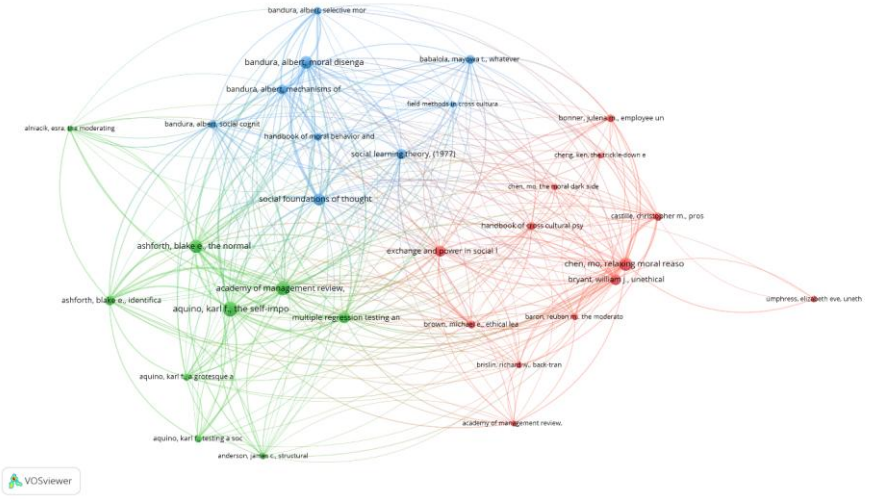


Figure 2. Intellectual Structure of the UPB Literature Based on Co-Citation Analysis

In contrast, the co-citation analysis of the WCB dataset (n = 32) did not produce a sufficiently dense network to form stable intellectual clusters. This finding suggests that the workplace cheating literature remains comparatively fragmented and lacks a dominant theoretical core. Rather than converging around a unified framework, WCB research draws from diverse perspectives related to workplace deviance, dishonesty, and ethical decision-making. The observed differences provide further evidence that UPB has achieved greater theoretical consolidation than WCB.

4.3 Thematic Structure: Keyword Co-Occurrence Analysis

The keyword co-occurrence analysis identified 27 interconnected keywords organized into five thematic clusters (Figure 3). The network reveals a conceptually coherent domain centered on three major themes: leadership and contextual antecedents, moral justification mechanisms, and organizational identification processes. Prominent topics include ethical leadership, moral disengagement, organizational identification, performance pressure, and social exchange relationships. Collectively, these themes indicate that UPB research integrates behavioral ethics, social identity, and leadership perspectives to explain organization-serving misconduct. The density and interconnectedness of the network further suggest a mature and theoretically consolidated research domain. Overall, the thematic configuration demonstrates a conceptually integrated domain that combines moral cognition, identity processes, and contextual leadership influences. The density and interconnectivity of these clusters further confirm the structural consolidation of UPB scholarship.

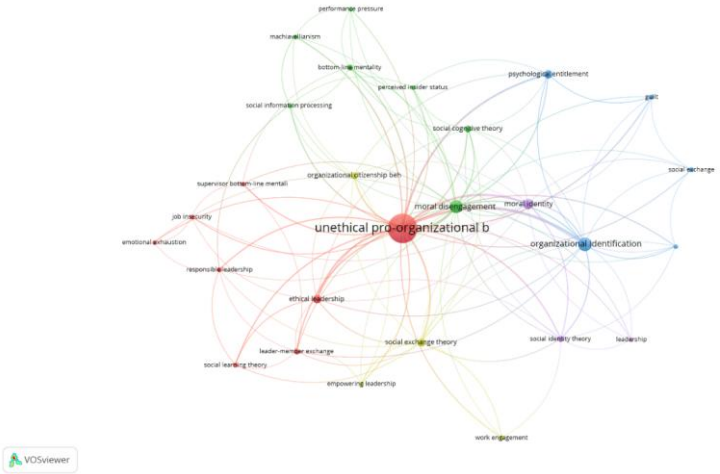


Figure 3. Thematic Structure of UPB Based on Keyword Co-Occurrence Analysis

The keyword co-occurrence analysis of the WCB dataset produced an 11-node network with a comparatively fragmented thematic structure (Figure 4). The literature is primarily centered on moral identity, moral disengagement, cheating behavior, and honesty–dishonesty constructs, reflecting an emphasis on individual morality and self-regulation. Additional themes include performance pressure and affective triggers such as anger, suggesting that workplace cheating is often examined as a response to personal strain and situational pressures. Overall, the findings indicate that WCB research remains predominantly individual-centered and lacks the broader organizational and leadership-oriented focus observed in the UPB literature.

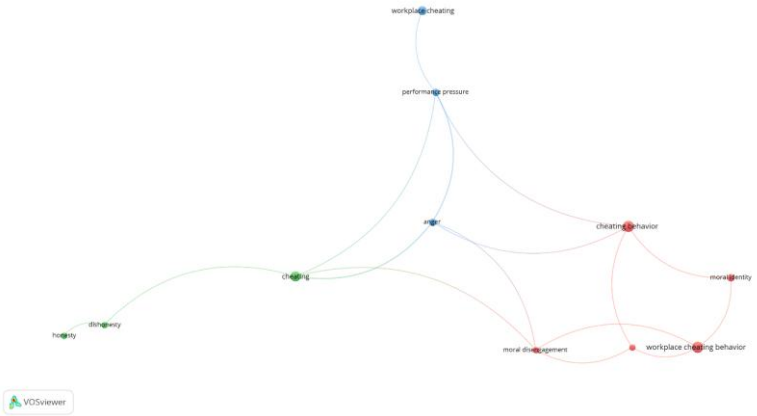


Figure 4. Thematic Configuration of Workplace Cheating Research

4.4 Temporal Evolution: Overlay Visualization

The overlay visualization reveals a clear shift in UPB research themes over time (Figure 5). Early studies primarily focused on organizational identification, social exchange, and social learning perspectives, emphasizing relational and identity-based explanations of misconduct. More recent research increasingly examines contextual factors such as performance pressure, bottom-line mentality, and psychological entitlement. Despite these shifts, moral disengagement remains a central theme throughout the literature, indicating its enduring role in explaining organization-serving unethical behavior. Overall, the findings suggest that UPB research has evolved from identity-based explanations toward more contextualized and pressure-driven models of misconduct.

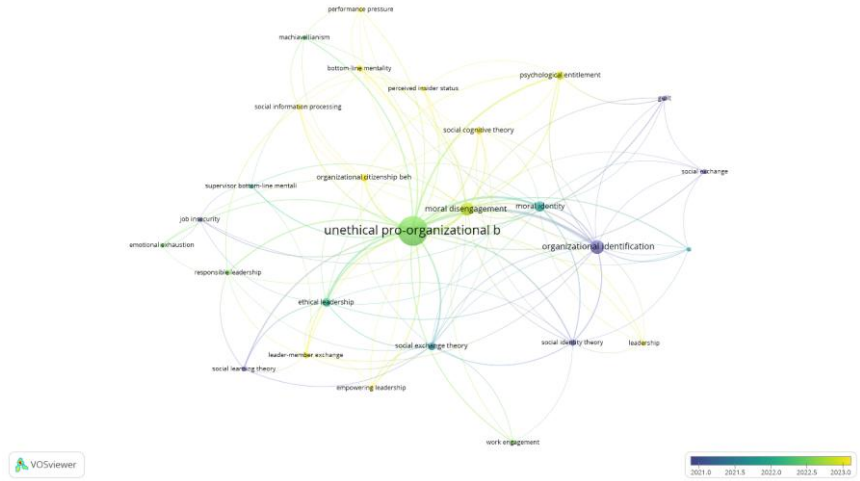


Figure 5. Temporal Evolution of UPB Research Themes (Overlay Visualization)

The overlay visualization indicates a gradual and comparatively limited evolution of workplace cheating research (Figure 6). Early studies primarily focused on honesty and dishonesty as individual moral traits, whereas more recent research has incorporated moral disengagement, moral identity, and workplace cheating behavior. Despite this development, the domain remains largely individual-centered and has not expanded into broader organizational themes such as leadership or organizational identification. Overall, the findings suggest that workplace cheating research continues to rely predominantly on individual-level explanations of unethical behavior.

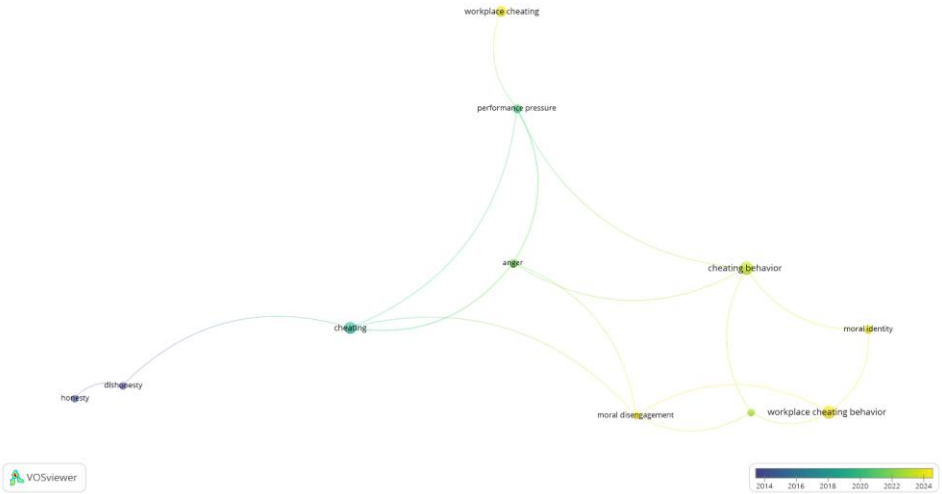


Figure 6. Temporal Evolution of Workplace Cheating Research Themes (Overlay Visualization)

4.5 Comparative Thematic Synthesis

Taken together, the bibliometric and thematic findings reveal a clear asymmetry between Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) and Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB). Although both research streams examine unethical conduct within organizational settings and share several psychological mechanisms, they differ in their intellectual maturity, dominant themes, motivational orientation, and contextual emphasis.

First, UPB represents a relatively consolidated research stream. Its co-citation and keyword networks are strongly centered on moral disengagement, organizational identification, leadership, and related organizational processes. The temporal analysis further indicates a shift from identity- and relationship-based explanations toward contextual factors such as performance pressure, bottom-line mentality, and psychological entitlement. These findings suggest that UPB research increasingly integrates individual psychological mechanisms with organizational and leadership contexts.

In contrast, WCB represents a comparatively fragmented and predominantly individual-centered research stream. Its thematic structure emphasizes cheating, honesty–dishonesty, moral identity, moral disengagement, performance pressure, and affective factors such as anger. The temporal evolution shows some expansion toward moral disengagement and moral identity, but limited integration with broader organizational constructs such as leadership and organizational identification. Thus, WCB research remains primarily focused on individual morality, self-regulation, and situational pressure.

Despite these differences, the two domains show an important area of convergence. Moral disengagement and performance-related pressure appear across both research streams, indicating that similar psychological or contextual mechanisms may be associated with unethical workplace behavior. However, their functions and motivational orientations differ. In UPB, unethical conduct is framed as serving organizational or collective interests, whereas WCB is primarily associated with personal advantage, self-protection, or individual outcomes. Therefore, the presence of a shared mechanism does not imply that the two behaviors are conceptually equivalent.

The comparison consequently identifies beneficiary orientation as an important cross-domain distinction. The critical question is not only why employees disengage morally or experience performance pressure, but also who is intended to benefit from the resulting unethical act. This distinction provides a basis for understanding UPB as organization-serving misconduct and WCB as predominantly self-serving misconduct. The comparative findings therefore support beneficiary orientation as a potential conceptual boundary for integrating these two previously separated research streams.

To structure the comparative thematic analysis, the findings were organized across five dimensions: theoretical perspectives, research contexts, methodological orientation, key variables or constructs, and major findings. These dimensions were derived from the recurring patterns identified through co-citation analysis, keyword co-occurrence analysis, temporal evolution, and examination of the abstracts and keywords of the selected publications. Table 2 summarizes the main similarities and differences identified across the two research streams.

Table 2. Systematic Thematic Comparison of UPB and Workplace Cheating Behavior

Comparison dimension	UPB	WCB
Theoretical perspectives	Moral disengagement, organizational identification, social identity, leadership	Self-regulation, dishonesty, self-protection, affective/strain perspectives

Comparison dimension	UPB	WCB
Research contexts	Organizational goals, leadership, organizational identification, collective interests	Performance pressure, job insecurity, interpersonal strain, personal gain
Methodological orientation	Individual, relational, and organizational/contextual perspectives	Predominantly individual-level and situational perspectives
Key constructs	Moral disengagement, organizational identification, leadership, bottom-line mentality	Cheating, honesty/dishonesty, self-regulation, moral identity, performance pressure
Motivational orientation	Organization-serving	Self-serving / self-protective
Shared mechanisms	Moral disengagement, performance-related pressure	Moral disengagement, performance-related pressure
Key findings	Unethical behavior may be justified as serving organizational/collective interests	Unethical behavior is primarily associated with personal advantage, self-protection, and pressure
Research development	Relatively consolidated	Comparatively fragmented

4.6 Conceptual Integration: Beneficiary Orientation Framework

Organizations face multiple forms of unethical conduct that are often treated as conceptually similar despite important motivational differences. Building on the comparative findings of this study, we propose beneficiary orientation as a structural dimension that differentiates organizational misconduct based on the primary beneficiary of the unethical act. Rather than treating unethical workplace behaviors as a homogeneous category, this perspective emphasizes that misconduct may emerge from fundamentally different motivational orientations depending on who ultimately benefits from the action.

Two distinct motivational pathways can therefore be identified.

1) Organization-serving misconduct refers to unethical actions rationalized as benefiting the organization. In this case, individuals engage in behavior that violates ethical standards but perceive the act as contributing to organizational success or protecting collective interests. This form of misconduct is typically conceptualized as Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB).
2) Self-serving misconduct refers to unethical actions primarily aimed at personal gain. In this pathway, individuals engage in dishonest or rule-violating behavior to obtain individual advantages such as financial rewards, performance outcomes, or career benefits. Such behavior is commonly represented in the literature as Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB).

Although these two forms of misconduct share similar psychological processes, their underlying motivations differ substantially. Moral disengagement functions as a central psychological mechanism enabling individuals to rationalize unethical behavior while maintaining a positive moral self-concept. However, the behavioral outcome of this mechanism depends on how individuals frame the beneficiary of the act.

Figure 7 presents the proposed Beneficiary Orientation Framework of Organizational Misconduct. The framework illustrates how moral disengagement operates as a psychological mechanism that shapes how employees interpret the beneficiary of their unethical actions. When individuals frame the beneficiary as the organization, unethical conduct may manifest as Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB). Conversely, when individuals frame the beneficiary as themselves, similar psychological processes may lead to Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB).

Importantly, this framework suggests that identical psychological mechanisms can produce different forms of unethical behavior depending on how individuals cognitively frame the intended beneficiary of the act. In other words, the distinction between organization-serving and self-serving misconduct does not necessarily arise from different psychological mechanisms, but rather from differences in motivational orientation and beneficiary framing.

By positioning beneficiary orientation as a structural boundary, this study contributes to the literature on organizational misconduct by proposing a clearer conceptual taxonomy of unethical workplace behavior. This perspective highlights that wrongdoing in organizations may emerge either from excessive loyalty to organizational goals or from self-interested opportunism. Recognizing this distinction provides a more precise theoretical foundation for understanding the diversity of unethical behaviors observed in organizational contexts.

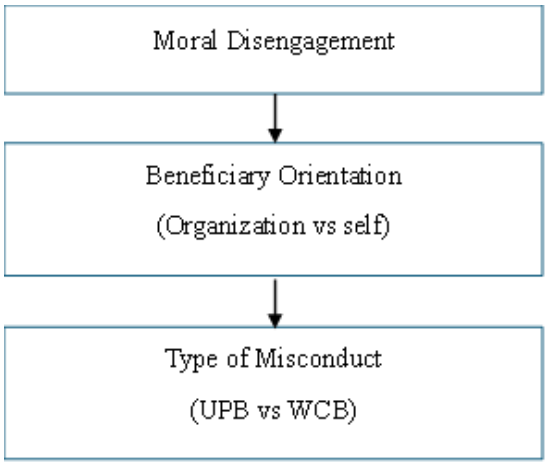


Figure 7. Beneficiary Orientation Framework of Organizational Misconduct

5. Research Agenda and Future Directions

The comparative findings identify several specific directions for future research. First, the stronger theoretical consolidation of UPB compared with the fragmented WCB literature suggests a need for integrative models that connect self-regulation, performance pressure, moral disengagement, and beneficiary orientation. Future studies could test whether these mechanisms operate differently depending on whether employees perceive the organization or themselves as the primary beneficiary of the unethical act.

Second, the presence of moral disengagement and performance-related pressure across both domains indicates the need to examine why similar mechanisms may lead to different forms of misconduct. Future research should empirically test beneficiary orientation as a potential moderator or boundary condition linking psychological and contextual antecedents to organization-serving versus self-serving misconduct.

Third, the contrasting emphasis on leadership and organizational identification in UPB and individual morality and performance pressure in WCB suggests an opportunity for multilevel research. Future studies could integrate organizational-level factors, such as leadership and organizational identification, with individual-level factors, such as self-regulation, moral identity, and performance pressure, to explain different forms of workplace misconduct.

Finally, the limited development of broader organizational themes in WCB and the increasing digitalization of work suggest a need to examine emerging technological contexts. Future research could investigate whether AI-driven performance monitoring, algorithmic management, and digital surveillance alter performance pressure, beneficiary orientation, and employees' propensity to engage in organization-serving or self-serving misconduct.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the intellectual structures of Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB) and Workplace Cheating Behavior (WCB) through comparative bibliometric and thematic analyses. The findings reveal that, although both domains share psychological mechanisms such as moral disengagement, they differ fundamentally in their motivational orientation. UPB is primarily associated with organizational identification, leadership influences, and collective-serving motives, whereas WCB is centered on self-interest, dishonesty, performance pressure, and self-regulatory failure.

Based on these findings, this study proposes beneficiary orientation as a conceptual boundary distinguishing organization-serving from self-serving misconduct. This perspective provides a more coherent taxonomy of unethical workplace behavior and highlights the importance of considering who benefits from unethical actions. By integrating previously fragmented research streams, the study contributes to behavioral ethics literature and offers a foundation for future research on organizational misconduct in increasingly digitalized workplaces.

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