

Emotional Intelligence Versus Willingness to Engage in Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB).

A Brief Research Report

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Abstract

Aim: The purpose of this research was to determine the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) considered as a trait and willingness to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). This research was intended to fill the gap that exists in the field of research on the relationship between emotional intelligence and UPB.

Method: The study included 103 people working in companies across Poland. Emotional intelligence (EI) was examined using a questionnaire to diagnose the level of EI constructed by Borkowska and colleagues (2006). Readiness to undertake UPB was measured using the Polish version of the scale of unethical pro-organizational behavior (Grabowski et al., 2019).

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Results: The study showed that there is a negative relationship between EI and UPB. Mood regulation, emotion perception and empathy, as well as knowledge and emotional insight are negatively related to willingness to undertake UPB. Mood regulation and emotion perception and empathy further appear as downward predictors of readiness to undertake UPB, explaining about 20% of UPB' variance.

Conclusions: The study provided important insights into the relationship between EI and UPB in the group of Polish workers. It can be assumed that emotional intelligence (EI), especially mood regulation, and emotion perception and empathy are factors that reduce readiness to undertake UPB.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, emotional insight, mood regulation, unethical pro-organizational behavior

The concept of unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), by Umphress and colleagues (2010; Umphress & Bingham, 2011), refers to employees engaging in unethical behavior at work to benefit the organization in which they work and/or members of that organization. The concept refers to acts of behavior involving violations of the law, social norms or violations of generally accepted values (Umphress et al., 2010). Such behavior does not fall within the formal requirements of the job or the set of regulations that make up the employee's role, but is the result of the employee's intentions. When an employee engages in such behavior, he/she believes that by doing so he/she is helping his/her company. At the same time, he does so in order to indirectly strengthen his position in the organization or obtain other organizational rewards.

UPBs are intentional behaviors and are therefore "distinct from work-related activities involving errors, mistakes or unconscious negligence" (Umphress et al., 2010, p. 770). These behaviors are also distinct from the construct of counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) (e.g., sabotage, theft, aggression toward co-workers), which are intended to harm the organization or other members of the organization, while UPBs mean benefits to the organization at any given time (Grabowski et al., 2019). UPBs bear some similarity to organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), which are behaviors undertaken by and on the initiative of employees to support their company and/or co-workers (Grabowski et al., 2019). Both UPBs and OCBs stem from employees' intentions and benefit the company/co-workers. However, OCBs produce unequivocally positive organizational results, while UPBs can produce unfavorable and even destructive results, especially in the long term (Grabowski et al., 2019). For example, hiding the truth about an organization's products or services from customers can, in the long run, mean a reduction in prestige or even damage to a company's image.

One potential correlate and predictor of UPB is emotional intelligence (EI). Studies show a positive association of EI with Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) and a negative association with Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) (Bibi et al., 2013; Greenidge & Coyne, 2014). The variables conducive to engaging in CWB are personality traits that are components of the dark triad, namely narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Duradoni et al.,

2023). EI correlates negatively with Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Miao et al., 2019), while Machiavellianism and related narcissism correlate positively with UPB (Luan et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2020). There is no research on the relationship between EI and UPB. On the basis of the studies cited here (the relationship of EI with CWB, and the dark triad with CWB, narcissism and Machiavellianism with UPB), it can be assumed that the relationship of EI with UPB is negative.

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to recognize and understand the meaning of emotions and the relationship between different emotions, as well as to solve problems based on them. This intelligence is involved in the ability to perceive emotions, assimilate and integrate feelings associated with emotions, understand emotional information, and manage it (Strelau, 2020). In short, EI is “a set of abilities that determine the use of emotions in solving problems, especially in social situations” (Jaworowska & Matczak, 2008, pp. 6–7). Emotional intelligence (EI) also refers to a constellation of behavioral and self-perceptual dispositions regarding the ability to recognize, process and use emotional information. EI also encompasses “the ability to manage and regulate one’s own emotions; for example, it helps people stay calm, confident, and optimistic during situations that may provoke anger, fear, anxiety, and emotional hijacking in low EI people” (Miao et al., 2019, p. 189). Conceptualizations of EI tell us to treat this intelligence as a trait (trait EI) on the one hand, and as an ability (ability EI) on the other. Trait EI measurements are based on the assumption that EI has trait-like properties and, like other traits, can be measured using self-report techniques, such as questionnaires (Miao et al., 2019). Trait EI was defined as a constellation of self-perceptions and emotional dispositions assessed through self-report. In contrast, the ability EI model is based on the conceptualization that EI is a type of intelligence and, like academic intelligence, is measured by tests, i.e. sets of “objective” tasks and multiple-choice questions in which one answer is correct (Miao et al., 2019; Strelau, 2020).

In this article, EI refers to trait EI and an early, classic version of Salovey and Mayer’s EI model (Salovey et al., 1995), which became the basis for the development of the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS). Anna Borkowska and colleagues (2006) made a successful attempt to create a Polish equivalent of the TMMS (Gorostiaga et al., 2011; Salguero et al., 2010). The design of this questionnaire and research on its psychometric properties made it possible to obtain, through the use of factor analysis, the following three components of EI: mood regulation, emotion perception and empathy, as well as and emotional insight and knowledge.

Mood regulation encompasses skills concerning coping with negative emotional states, skills for mastering behavioral disruptions resulting from experiencing negative emotions, and using even intense emotions to achieve one’s goals. Thus, this regulation means the ability to maintain a good mood and self-control (Borkowska et al., 2006).

Emotion perception and empathy are the skills of recognizing and feeling the emotional states experienced and expressed by other people. This group

includes, first, noticing, tuning in to the other person, a habitual mechanism of primary empathy. Second, this group includes conscious observation of behavior, including the expressions of others, and inference, prediction, and understanding of behavior based on this observation, i.e. a higher level of empathy. This perception also includes the ability to perceive emotional signals expressed, even involuntarily by others (Borkowska et al., 2006).

Emotional knowledge and insight are placed within is the range of knowledge about emotions. This range includes, on the one hand, emotional self-reflection, sensitivity in reading, distinguishing, as well as the ability to name the emotional states experienced. On the other hand, this knowledge includes the ability to draw conclusions and make certain generalizations based on one's emotional experiences. This knowledge is most likely acquired in the course of one's own emotional experiences, and represents a set of certain rules governing emotions and the impact of those emotions on one's own person and the environment. A large amount of this knowledge provides good insight into one's own emotional states. This knowledge also consists of the ability to make very subtle distinctions within different emotional states (Borkowska et al., 2006).

Research Question

Recognizing the lack of global and Polish studies on the relationship between EI and UPB, the following research question was posed: Is there a relationship and if so what relationship (positive, negative) between EI, its components and UPB?

Method

Participants

In order to show the relationship between EI and UPB, 103 people working in organizations in various industries across the country were surveyed. The sample included 49 women (48%) and 54 men (52%). The average age of those surveyed was almost 39 years ($M = 38.88$, $SD = 11.35$), and the survey covered a group of people from 22 to 68 years old. The largest number of study subjects (47) had a university degree (45.7%). There were 13 people (12.6%) with a bachelor's degree, 30 people (29.1%) with secondary education, and 13 people (12.6%) with vocational education. A group of 41 people (40%) worked in medium-sized companies (employing 51 to 250 people), a group of 25 people (24%) worked in large companies (employing more than 250 people). A group of 29 people (28%) worked in micro companies (employing up to 9 people), while 8 people (8%) worked in small companies (employing up to 50 people). The average length of service of the respondents in their current company was more than 9 years ($M = 9.21$, $SD = 10.14$).

Research Tools

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) was measured with a scale to measure willingness to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB scale), developed by Umphress et al. (2010), in the Polish translation by Chudzicka-Czupała, Paruzel-Czachura and Grabowski (Grabowski et al., 2019). Respondents are asked to answer six items (e.g., “I would choose to diverge from the truth in order to improve my company’s image”) on a 7-point Likert-type response scale from 1 to 7 (where 1 – *I completely disagree* and 7 – *I completely agree*). Cronbach’s α coefficient, a measure of reliability, was $\alpha = .87$ for this scale in this research, indicating a high reliability value. McDonald’s ω coefficient took a similar value ($\omega = .87$).

Emotional intelligence was measured using the Questionnaire for the Diagnosis of the Level of Emotional Intelligence constructed by Borkowska and colleagues (2006). This questionnaire consists of the following three scales corresponding to the components of EI described above: mood regulation, emotion perception and empathy, and emotional knowledge and insight. The mood regulation scale includes statements such as “I try to find something positive, optimistic even in unpleasant situations and experiences,” and obtained the following value for the Cronbach’s α reliability measure: $\alpha = .70$, which means a satisfactory reliability value. McDonald’s ω coefficient ($\omega = .70$) took a similar value. The emotion perception and empathy scale includes statements such as: “I like to observe other people and predict their behavior” and obtained reliability measure values indicating high reliability ($\alpha = .78$, $\omega = .79$). The knowledge and emotional insight scale, on the other hand, includes statements such as: “I generally know well what mood I am in at the moment” and obtained reliability measure values indicating sufficient reliability ($\alpha = .65$, $\omega = .64$). The values of Cronbach’s α measure are comparable to those obtained in the study by Borkowska and colleagues (2006). The sum of the aforementioned scales represents the overall score ($\alpha = .78$, $\omega = .79$).

Method of Conducting the Study

The survey was conducted in 2023, and participation in the research was voluntary and anonymous. Questionnaire methods were used, which took the form of an online survey, the link to which was distributed via email. Each respondent agreed to participate and could withdraw from the survey at any time. The sampling was non-probabilistic, purposive, and people working in different industries were surveyed. It also sought to apply the principles of quota selection (VandenBos, 2007), i.e., to obtain a sample resembling the Polish working population (in terms of age and gender) according to CSO data (2023).

Data Analysis Methods

Statistical analyses were carried out using the SPSS version 29 statistical package and JASP 0.18.3. Within this software, measures of statistical description, correlations and linear regression analysis were calculated.

Results

To test the relationship between EI and UPB, we calculated the correlation coefficients summarized in Table 1 and conducted a multiple regression analysis, the results of which are shown in Table 2.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Correlations and Intercorrelations Between EI and Its Components and Willingness to Engage in Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior (UPB)

Variables	1. MR	2. EPE	3. KEI	4. EI	5. UPB
<i>M</i>	37.79	46.43	48.11	132.32	16.10
<i>SD</i>	5.78	8.07	6.01	16.79	8.32
1. Mood regulation (MR)	—				
2. Emotion perception and empathy (EPE)	.52***	—			
3. Knowledge and emotional insight (KEI)	.58***	.60***	—		
4. Emotional intelligence (EI)	.80***	.88***	.85***	—	
5. Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB)	-.41***	-.42***	-.33***	-.46***	—

Note. $n = 103$.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

As shown in Table 1, emotional intelligence (EI) correlates negatively and on average with UPB. More specifically, mood regulation and emotion perception and empathy correlate negatively and moderately with UPB readiness, while knowledge and emotional insight correlate negatively and somewhat less, or moderately.

Table 2

Multiple Regression on the Association of Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior (UPB) (Explained Variable) With Dimensions of Emotional Intelligence (Explanatory Variables)

Independent (explanatory) variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	95% CI lower	95% CI upper	VIF
1. Mood regulation	-.38	.16	-.26	-2.32*	-.70	-.06	1.62
2. Emotion perception and empathy	-.29	.12	-.28	-2.43*	-.52	-.05	1.69
3. Knowledge and emotional insight	-.01	.17	-.01	-.06	-.34	.32	1.84
Model summary							
<i>F</i> (7,95)	9.70***						
<i>R</i> ²	.23						
Adjusted <i>R</i> ² (<i>SR</i> ²)	.20						

Note. *B* and β – unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients, respectively, *SE* – standard error, 95% PU – 95% confidence interval within which the true β value falls with 95% confidence, VIF – variance inflation factor, $n = 103$.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

The multivariate regression analysis conducted (enter method) shown in Table 2 (p. 102) revealed two significant predictors of UPB, namely mood regulation and emotion perception and empathy. These predictors, along with the non-significant predictor, knowledge and emotional insight, together explain about 20% of the variance in UPB. Mood regulation and emotion perception and empathy clearly emerge as significant predictors of decreased willingness to undertake UPB.

Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the correlation analysis, it should be concluded that emotional intelligence and its components are negatively associated with willingness to undertake UPB. Most likely, mood regulation as well as emotion perception and empathy lower the tendency to undertake UPB, as suggested by the regression analysis conducted. At the same time, it should be remembered that knowledge and emotional insight are strongly associated with both mood regulation and emotion perception and empathy.

In summary, people with higher levels of emotional intelligence are likely to be less inclined to undertake UPB. Mood regulation, that is, the ability to cope with and reduce negative emotional states, may lead to a lower propensity to undertake UPB, since these behaviors, as harmful to the addressees, may be the source of precisely the negative emotions experienced by those likely to undertake UPB. Higher emotional intelligence is also the ability to perceive certain states experienced by others and to empathize, including anticipating what others may be experiencing under certain circumstances. The anticipation by potential UPB performers (characterized by higher EI) of certain states that may be experienced by UPB recipients may also effectively inhibit the willingness of these performers to undertake UPB.

The studies presented here complement the lack of research on the relationship between EI and UPB. Their results are consistent with the studies on the relationship of EI with OCB and CWB. OCB as behaviors associated with positive emotions (Grabowski et al., 2019) correlate positively with EI (Greenidge & Coyne, 2014), CWB as behaviors associated with negative emotions (Grabowski et al., 2019) correlate negatively with EI (Bibi et al., 2013; Greenidge & Coyne, 2014). Such relationships should be considered a manifestation of abilities and skills to anticipate what recipients of CWB, OCB may feel, and what may emerge as an organizational outcome of these behaviors (emotions, negative effects and emotions, positive effects, respectively). Individuals with high levels of EI seeking to maintain positive emotions and reduce negative emotions will therefore be inclined to avoid CWB and UPB. Further research is needed to definitively confirm the negative association of EI with UPB.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The research presented here has some drawbacks. First, they are correlational studies that examined all variables at one point in time. In future studies,

more care should be taken to separate the measurement of the predictors (EI) and the explained variable (UPB) (Grabowski et al., 2019). Second, more tools need to be used to measure EI and focus on both intelligence-trait and intelligence-ability, and therefore consider using questionnaire and test methods (Greenidge & Coyne, 2014).

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