Unethical pro-supervisor behavior and employees' family satisfaction: The roles of workplace ostracism and work–home segmentation preference

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Abstract

The present study proposes a moderated mediation model that examines how and when unethical pro-supervisor behavior is related to employees' family satisfaction. The two-wave study design consisted of 207 full-time employees in China. The study results indicate that unethical pro-supervisor behavior is negatively related to family satisfaction, and that workplace ostracism mediates the influence of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on family satisfaction. In addition, the relationship between workplace ostracism and family satisfaction as well as the indirect influence of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on family satisfaction through workplace ostracism, are moderated by employees' work–home segmentation preference. The study findings not only enrich the literature on unethical pro-supervisor behavior, but also have important practical implications for organizational managers.

Keywords Unethical pro-supervisor behavior · Workplace ostracism · Work–home segmentation preference · Family satisfaction · Moderated mediation model

Introduction

Unethical pro-supervisor behavior refers to employees taking actions that are intended to promote their supervisors' interests but violate ethical norms, values, or standards of proper conduct (Johnson & Umphress, 2019), which is a common phenomenon in the workplace. For example, in 2015, a court ordered former Dole Foods CEO and general counsel C. Michael Carter to pay shareholders $148 million in partial improper ethical damages. Carter lied to the board about the financial impact of some business decisions and financial projections. He did this to drive down the share price so that his supervisor, CEO David Murdoch, could buy shares at a lower price (Frankel, 2015). The beneficiary of unethical pro-supervisor behavior is the supervisor, but

at times the supervisor's benefits may harm the interests of the organization and negatively impact its long-term development (Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). As such, business ethic scholars have recently started to systematically explore the potential shortcoming of employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior.

Currently, the majority of scholars have explored the antecedents of unethical pro-supervisor behavior from the perspective of individuals and external situations, although research on its consequences has been very limited (Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). Few studies have investigated the impact of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on employees' attitudes in the workplace. For example, Mesdaghinia et al. (2019), based on cognitive dissonance theory, they found that unethical pro-supervisor behavior is negatively related to employees' turnover intentions. However, there is still a lack of research on whether there is a spillover effect after employees engage in unethical pro-supervisor behavior, which make it difficult to have a deep and complete understanding of the consequence of unethical pro-supervisor behavior. At present, as the work and family domains continue to merge and the boundary between them becomes increasingly blurred, the influence of unethical

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pro-supervisor behavior may spread beyond the workplace and into employees' family domain (Chen et al., 2022). Although the existing studies have explored the spillover effects of unethical pro-organizational behavior (e.g., unethical pro-organizational behavior is positively related to employees' work-to-family conflict; Chen et al., 2022), there is no research on the spillover effects of unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Due to the strong local cultural compatibility of unethical pro-supervisor behavior, it is widely found in Chinese organizations characterized by relational and authoritarian orientations (Cheng et al., 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to explore the spillover effect of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on employees' family domain in the context of Chinese organizational workplace. The quality of employees' family life is mainly reflected in their family satisfaction (Turliuc & Buliga, 2014), which is an important indicator of spillover from employees' work domain to their family domain as well as the basis for good family relations and overall well-being (Liu et al., 2013; Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Therefore, this study attempts to explore the impact of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on employees' family satisfaction in the context of Chinese organizational management.

Unethical pro-supervisor behavior is a type of extra-role behavior (He & Yun, 2022) that requires employees to spend time and energy resources to benefit their supervisors. According to conservation of resources theory, individuals' resources are limited, when employees spend more time and energy on promoting their supervisors' interests, they may lack the resources needed to engage in in-role behaviors (e.g., extra-role behaviors negatively related to their in-role performance; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007) and others may think they are not able to do a good job, which will cause them to be neglected, excluded or rejected in the workplace (Bedi, 2021). After employees suffer from workplace ostracism, they will experience negative emotions and reduced work efficiency (Kuo & Wu, 2022; Wang et al., 2021), and thus they have to invest more resources to cope with their being ostracized. When employees spend excessive resources in the workplace, they will not have sufficient time and energy to care about their families and experience family happiness (Chen et al., 2022; Deng et al., 2021), and will therefore have low family satisfaction. Therefore, unethical pro-supervisor behavior may be related to family satisfaction via workplace ostracism. In addition, the impact of workplace ostracism on employees' family domain varies. Work–home segmentation preference is an important factor in determining the boundary between employees' work and family domains. Individuals with high levels of work–home segmentation preference have clear and strict lines of demarcation between their work and family domains (Liu et al., 2013; Xin et al., 2018), which makes workplace ostracism less likely to affect their family domain (Howard et al., 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to explore whether there are differences in the effects of workplace ostracism on family satisfaction under different levels of work–home segmentation preference, which subsequently affect the spillover effects of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on employees' family satisfaction.

Based on the aforementioned analysis, this study aims to investigate the mechanisms and boundary conditions of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on employees' family satisfaction. First, this study examines the impact of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on employees' family satisfaction in the context of Chinese organizational workplaces by drawing on conservation of resources theory. Second, this study explores the mediating role of workplace ostracism between unethical pro-supervisor behavior and employees' family satisfaction. It attempts to reveal the specific mechanism of how unethical pro-supervisor behavior affects employees' family satisfaction. Third, work–home segmentation preference is considered a resource variable of individual traits, and the moderating role of employees' work–home segmentation preference between workplace ostracism and family satisfaction is discussed. Finally, this study proposes a moderated mediation model to systematically analyze the mechanisms and boundary conditions of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on employees' family satisfaction. It attempts to expand the understanding of the consequences of unethical pro-supervisor behavior and its mechanism of action to provide references and suggestions for organizational managers.

Theory and hypotheses

Unethical pro-supervisor behavior and family satisfaction

In the workplace, employees not only conduct unethical behaviors to benefit their organizations, but may also do so to benefit their supervisors (Johnson & Umphress, 2019). Unethical pro-supervisor behavior includes two components: unethical in nature and intended to benefit the supervisors. Employees may engage in unethical acts to benefit their supervisors, such as lying to protect their supervisors, exaggerating the supervisor's job performance, or hiding information that could damage the supervisor's reputation.

Family satisfaction refers to the degree of happiness and satisfaction that individuals feel when evaluating the role of family in their life (Karatepe & Baddar, 2006) and is the main expression of the quality of their family life (Turliuc & Buliga, 2014). Previous studies have reported that employees' family satisfaction is affected by resources and stressors (e.g., job stress, work role ambiguity, and job involvement; Ford et al., 2007). As an extra-role behavior,

employees must invest additional resources to engage in unethical pro-supervisor behavior to benefit their supervisors. According to conservation of resources theory, the investment of resources into the work domain will leave employees less able to meet the requirements and expectations of the family domain (Chen et al., 2022). Therefore, employees who engage in unethical pro-supervisor behavior may not possess enough time and energy to invest in the family domain. In addition, the incompatibility of unethical pro-supervisor behavior (e.g., spending time and energy on concealing information from others that could be damaging to their supervisors) and family (e.g., house hold chores) demands escalates inter-role conflict when an employee applies their limited resources (e.g., time and energy) into extra-role behaviors and consequently can no longer invest these resources into caring for their families and experiencing family well-being (Germeys et al., 2019; Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 Unethical pro-supervisor behavior is negatively related to employees' family satisfaction.

The mediating role of workplace ostracism

Workplace ostracism refers to individuals' subjective feelings of neglect, exclusion and isolation from one or more others in the workplace (Ferris et al., 2008), which reflects a negative interpersonal relationship between individuals and others in the workplace. Individuals with uncivilized behaviors in the workplace have a higher risk of being ostracized by others (Scott et al., 2013). Workplace ostracism was found to have a negative influence on employees' workplace behavior (Haldorai et al., 2020), work attitude (Chung & Kim, 2017), and well-being (Wang et al., 2023).

Unethical pro-supervisor behavior is discretionary extra-role behavior that goes beyond an employee's contractual job duties (e.g., conducting additional behaviors to help a supervisor; He & Yun, 2022). Therefore, employees need to expend more resources (e.g., time and energy) to ensure that their unethical pro-supervisor behaviors can benefit their supervisors. This type of behavior requires employees to expand the scope of their responsibilities to include that extend beyond those required by their work role, which causes them to invest additional resources. According to conservation of resources theory, when employees devote more time and energy resources to benefiting their supervisors, they are more likely to lack the time and energy to maintain relationships with others in the workplace. As a result, they are relatively short of interpersonal resources in the workplace, thereby resulting in a greater possibility of

being rejected, ignored or excluded in the workplace (Liu et al., 2020). The existing studies have indicated that employees' organizational citizenship behavior may lead to role overload of employees (Bolino et al., 2010; Bolino & Grant, 2016), and that they do not have the resources required to maintain relationships with others in the workplace and may be ostracized as a result (Xia & Lin, 2021). In addition, the characteristics of unethical pro-supervisor behavior may damage the interests of the organization, thereby resulting in a breakdown of organizational rules and the interests of others being damaged in the workplace. Since individuals are more sensitive to resource loss, they may protect their own resources by rejecting those who engage in unethical pro-supervisor behavior (Wang, 2022).

The work and family domains are becoming increasingly integrated and the boundaries between them increasingly blurred. Workplace ostracism is likely to spillover into the family domain and affect employees' family life. Workplace ostracism, as a stressful situation for employees, can be understood to some extent as the threat of resource loss (Wang et al., 2023). According to conservation of resources theory, individuals in a state of resource loss will have increased expectations and demands for the supply of surrounding resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Individuals who suffer from workplace ostracism are in a state of chronic resource loss and scarcity and will expect their family to provide them with more resource replenishment (Deng et al., 2021). In the absence of increased resources, they will experience lower family well-being and satisfaction as a result of their relatively higher expectations for the family domain not being met (Halbesleben et al., 2004). In addition, employees who suffer from workplace ostracism are likely to experience a number of negative emotions (e.g., anxiety and depression), and thus need to spend extra time and effort to adjust to negative emotions and psychological stress, both of which consume psychological resources (Hagger et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2016). Individuals who deplete resources in one domain must obtain resources from other domains to replenish them (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Therefore, employees who suffer from workplace ostracism may divert time or energy resources away from the family domain, thus preventing them from caring for their families and experiencing family well-being. Based on the above analysis, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 Workplace ostracism mediates the relationship between unethical pro-supervisor behavior and family satisfaction.

The moderating role of work–home segmentation preference

Work–home segmentation preference refers to the extent to which individuals maintain separation between the work and home domains by establishing boundaries between them (Kreiner, 2006). Work–home segmentation preference is an important determinant of work–home boundary permeability and compartmentalization (Kreiner, 2006). Individuals with high levels of work–home segmentation preference may effectively separate the work domain from the family domain by severing the emotional and behavioral ties between them (Liu et al., 2013). In other words, individuals with higher levels of work–home segmentation preference tend to draw clear, distinct boundaries between the work and family domains (Liu et al., 2013). According to conservation of resources theory, negative personal traits may accelerate resource depletion, while positive personal traits may have the opposite effect (Hobfoll et al., 2001). This study considers work–home segmentation preference as a positive personality trait and coping strategy for balancing the work and home domains (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Achieving such a balance would moderate the negative relationship between workplace ostracism and family satisfaction. Specifically, employees with high levels of work–home segmentation preference, when experiencing workplace ostracism, are more likely to restrict the effects of resource attrition to within the work domain or to use non-family domain resources (e.g., the friendship resource) for resource substitution and supplementation (Ito & Brotheridge, 2003; Halbesleben & Buckleyet, 2004). Negative interpersonal experiences (e.g., neglect and ostracism) in the workplace are not brought into these employees' family domain, so their family satisfaction is not affected by their workplace ostracism. However, individuals with lower levels of work–home segmentation preference tend to integrate the work and family domains and blur the boundaries between them (Xin et al., 2018), so such employees may bring negative experiences into the family domain, which negatively affects their family satisfaction. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 Work–home segmentation preference moderates the negative relationship between workplace ostracism and family satisfaction such that the negative relationship is weaker when work–home segmentation preference is higher.

The preceding hypotheses propose that workplace ostracism mediates the relationship between employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior and family satisfaction (i.e., H2) and work–home segmentation preference moderates the relationship between workplace ostracism and family satisfaction (i.e., H3). By combining these two hypotheses, this study further proposes a moderated mediation hypothesis that work–home segmentation preference moderates the indirect influence of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on family satisfaction through workplace ostracism. Specifically, when work–home segmentation preference is high, the indirect effect of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on family satisfaction via workplace ostracism will be weakened. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 Work–home segmentation preference moderates the relationship between unethical pro-supervisor behavior and employees' family satisfaction through workplace ostracism such that this relationship will be weaker (stronger) for higher (lower) levels of work–home segmentation preference.

The conceptual model for this study is presented in Fig. 1.

Methods

Participants and procedures

The participants in this study are from 13 companies in China. Due to the unstable situation caused by the COVID-19
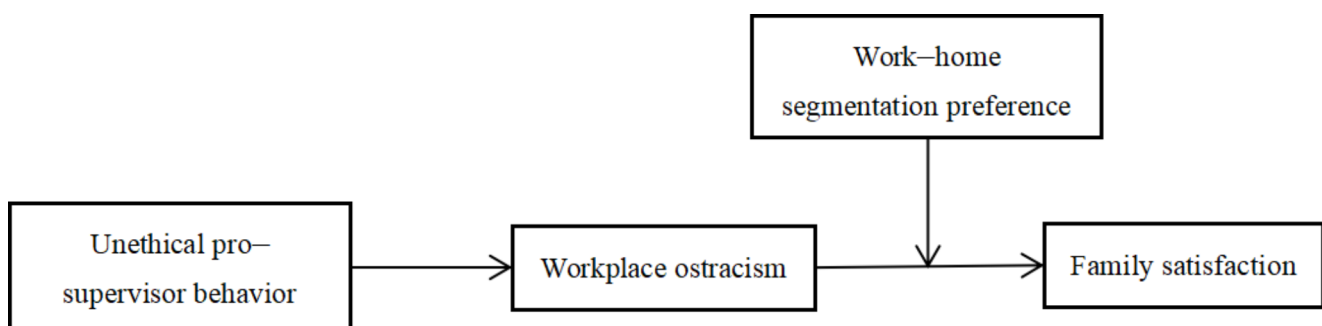

Fig. 1 Conceptual Model

pandemic in China, it was not convenient to conduct field research. Therefore, this study adopted the online survey method to collect sample data. Previous studies have shown that there is no significant difference between traditional offline paper questionnaires and online electronic questionnaires (Boyer et al., 2002). Therefore, this study collected sample data through the online survey platform Wenjuanxing (which functions similarly to Qualtrics). Prior to the questionnaire survey, we contacted the human resources (HR) managers from 13 companies, with whom the authors already had a preexisting relationship, to ensure their interest in participating in our two-wave survey. The HR managers who indicated that their organizations were interested in participating in our survey were requested to forward a personal email to their employees with a link to the questionnaire and a statement of purpose, which emphasized that personal information remains anonymous and participation is voluntary. To reduce the common method bias, our questionnaire survey employed a longitudinal design. At the first wave (Time 1), the participants fill out the questionnaire regarding unethical pro-supervisor behavior, workplace ostracism, and their demographic information (i.e., gender, age, education level, and tenure). In this stage, 267 valid questionnaires were collected. At the second wave (Time 2), which was approximately two weeks later, a survey on work–home segmentation preference and family satisfaction were delivered to the 267 participants who had provided usable responses at Time 1, of which 236 responded again. We removed the questionnaires with incomplete information. Finally, 207 matched questionnaires were gathered, for a response rate of 77.53%.

Among these 207 respondents, 43% are male. The average age of the participants is 29.18 years (SD = 4.59), and the average tenure is 31.92 months (SD = 33.66). In terms of education level, 7.25% of the participants have a high school education or below, 14.97% have a junior college degree, 53.62% have a college degree, 19.81% have a master's degree, and 4.35% have a Ph.D.

Measures

All of the scales in this study are cited from articles published in top journals, and we employ the translation–back translation method (Brislin, 1986) to convert the English scales to Chinese. Five-point Likert scales are used for all items of each measurement (i.e., unethical pro-supervisor behavior, workplace ostracism, work–home segmentation preference), except for the control variables, which range from 1 to 5 (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

Unethical pro-supervisor behavior Unethical pro-supervisor behavior is assessed using a six-item scale developed by Johnson and Umphress (2019). A sample item is

"Because it helped my supervisor, I have exaggerated the truth about my supervisor's performance to others." The Cronbach's α of the scale is 0.857.

Workplace ostracism Workplace ostracism is measured by employees using the ten-item scale developed by Ferris et al. (2008). A sample item is "Others refused to talk to you at work." The Cronbach's α of the scale is 0.932.

Work–home segmentation preference We measure work–home segmentation preference using the four-item scale developed by Kreiner (2006). A sample item is "I prefer to keep work life at work." The Cronbach's α of the scale is 0.850.

Family satisfaction Family satisfaction is evaluated using the three-item scale developed by Carlson et al. (2010). A sample item is "Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with my family life." The Cronbach's α of the scale is 0.966.

Control variables Previous studies found that some relevant variables are associated with employees' family satisfaction (Ferguson, 2012; Liu et al., 2019). Therefore, this study controls for employees' gender (1 = male, and 2 = female), age (in years), education level (1 = high school or less, 2 = technical college, 3 = bachelor's degree, 4 = master's degree, and 5 = doctor's degree or above), and tenure (in months).

Analytic strategy

SPSS 23.0 and Mplus 8.3 are employed to analyze the data in this study. First, Harman's single-factor analysis is conducted to examine the common method bias. Second, Person's correlation analysis is conducted to test the correlations between the main variables. Third, confirmatory factor analysis is conducted to examine the distinction validity of the main variables. Fourth, hierarchical regression analysis and bootstrap method are conducted to test the hypotheses.

Results

Test of common method variance

To reduce the effect of common method bias, we collect sample data from multiple time points. Additionally, we employ Harman's single-factor analysis (Podsakoff et al., 2003) to test the potential for common method bias. The results show that the variance explanation rate of the first common factor is 35.77%, which is less than the 40% standard (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Therefore, the study results are not likely to be significantly influenced by common method bias.

Table 1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Models	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	RMR
Single-Factor Model (UPSB + WO + FS + WSP)	1581.370	230	6.876	0.724	0.723	0.169	0.192
Two-Factor Model (WSP; UPSB + WO + FS)	1201.339	229	5.246	0.802	0.801	0.144	0.155
Three-Factor Model (WSP; WO; UPSB + FS)	812.483	227	3.579	0.881	0.880	0.112	0.138
Four-Factor Model (WSP; WO; UPSB; FS)	356.746	224	1.593	0.973	0.973	0.054	0.070

Note. $N = 207$; UPSB represents unethical pro-supervisor behavior; WO represents workplace ostracism; FS represents family satisfaction; WSP represents work–home segmentation preference; "+" represents two factors being combined into one factor

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1.570	0.490							
2. Age	29.180	4.590	–0.118						
3. Education	2.990	0.910	0.121	–0.103					
4. Tenure	31.920	33.660	–0.007	0.572**	–0.178*				
5. UPSB	2.621	0.770	–0.291**	–0.012	–0.002	–0.092			
6. WO	1.722	0.690	–0.186**	–0.036	–0.056	–0.006	0.375**		
7. FS	4.337	0.990	0.126	0.065	–0.019	0.014	–0.292**	–0.378**	
8. WSP	4.354	0.970	0.173*	–0.028	0.128	–0.099	–0.211**	–0.114	–0.319

Note. $N = 207$; UPSB represents unethical pro-supervisor behavior; WO represents workplace ostracism; FS represents family satisfaction; WSP represents work–home segmentation preference. * represents $p < 0.05$, ** represents $p > 0.01$.

Confirmatory factor analysis

We use confirmatory factor analysis to test the distinction validity of the study variables. As shown in Table 1, the results show that the four-factor model has the best fit ($\chi^2 = 356.746$, $df = 224$, $\chi^2/df = 1.593$, TLI = 0.973, CFI = 0.973, RMSEA = 0.054, RMR = 0.070), which confirms a good discriminant validity of this study.

Descriptive statistical analysis

We use Pearson correlation analysis to test the correlation among variables. Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables. As shown in Table 2, unethical pro-supervisor behavior is negatively related to employees' family satisfaction ($r = -0.292$, $p < 0.01$) and positively related to workplace ostracism ($r = 0.375$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, workplace ostracism is negatively related to employees' family satisfaction ($r = -0.378$, $p < 0.01$).

Hypotheses testing

The results are shown in Table 3. After controlling for gender, age, education level, and tenure, unethical pro-supervisor behavior has a significantly negative impact on family satisfaction (Model 4, $\beta = -0.281$, $p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 1 is supported.

We use the hierarchical regression analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) and bootstrap method to verify the mediating effect of workplace ostracism. According to the hierarchical regression analysis results in Table 3, unethical pro-supervisor behavior has a significantly positive effect on workplace ostracism (Model 2, $\beta = 0.319$, $p < 0.01$). As shown in Table 3, when workplace ostracism and unethical pro-supervisor behavior are entered into the regression equation, workplace ostracism has a significantly negative impact on family satisfaction (Model 5, $\beta = -0.307$, $p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 2 is supported. Furthermore, we test the mediating effect of workplace ostracism using the bootstrap method (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The results of 5,000 tests show that the 95% confidence interval for employees' workplace ostracism influence is [–0.237, –0.075] (excluding 0). This indicates that workplace ostracism has a significant mediating effect on the relationship between unethical pro-supervisor behavior and family satisfaction. Hypothesis 2 is thus further supported.

To test the moderating hypothesis (Hypothesis 3), we establish a moderation model (Model 7) in which an interaction term between workplace ostracism and work–home segmentation preference is added. As shown in Table 3, the interaction term between workplace ostracism and work–home segmentation preference is significantly related to family satisfaction (Model 7, $\beta = 0.235$, $p < 0.01$). This finding indicates that the negative relationship between workplace ostracism and family satisfaction is weaker for

Table 3 Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis

	Workplace Ostracism		Family Satisfaction				
	M 1	M 2	M 3	M 4	M 5	M 6	M 7
Gender	–0.269**	–0.123	0.143*	0.061	0.034	0.058	0.081
Age	–0.012	–0.013	0.109	0.112	0.086	0.013	0.011
Education	–0.027	–0.032	–0.034	–0.029	–0.042	–0.080	–0.083
Tenure	0.001	0.001	–0.054	–0.081	–0.061	0.001	0.001
UPSB		0.319**		–0.281**	–0.172*		
WO					–0.307**	–0.489**	–0.464**
WSP						0.293*	0.298*
WO*WSP							0.235**
R^2	0.040	0.154	0.025	0.096	0.176	0.229	0.255
ΔR^2	0.021	0.133	0.006	0.074	0.152	0.206	0.228
F-value	2.119	7.329**	1.293	4.289**	7.131**	9.919**	9.710**

Note. $N = 207$; UPSB represents unethical pro-supervisor behavior; WO represents workplace ostracism; FS represents family satisfaction; WSP represents work–home segmentation preference. * represents $p < 0.05$, ** represents $p < 0.01$.
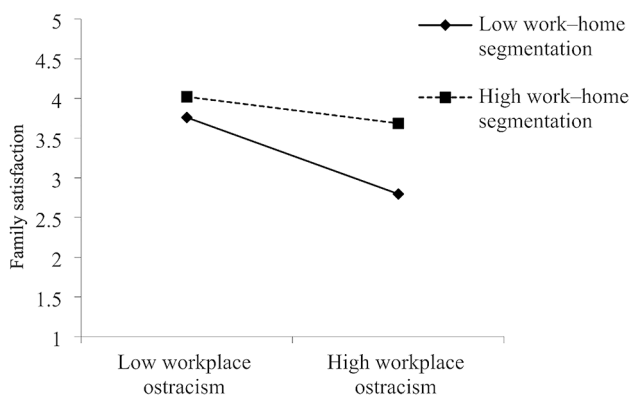

Fig. 2 The Interaction Effect of Workplace Ostracism and Work–Home Segmentation Preference on Family Satisfaction

Table 4 Results of the Moderated Mediating Effect Analysis

WSP	Indirect Effect	Standard Error	95% CI
High WSP (+ SD)	–0.104	0.122	[–0.335, 0.111]
Low WSP (–SD)	–0.976	0.148	[–1.282, – 0.705]
Difference (High WSP – Low WSP)	0.872	0.146	[0.633, 1.208]

Note. $N = 207$; WSP represents work–home segmentation preference. CI represents confidence interval.

employees with higher levels of work–home segmentation preference (see Fig. 2). Hypothesis 3 is therefore supported.

To further examine this interaction, this study uses the online calculator developed by Preacher et al. (2006) to calculate simple slopes that describe the influence of workplace ostracism on family satisfaction at varying levels of work–home segmentation preference. The mean + SD (– SD) indicates a higher (lower) work–home segmentation preference. When the level of work–home segmentation preference is high, workplace ostracism has a significantly negative impact on family satisfaction (simple slope = − 0.245, $p < 0.01$). When the level of work–home segmentation preference is low, the negative effect of workplace ostracism on family satisfaction is more significant (simple slope = − 0.700, $p < 0.01$).

In this study, the bootstrapping method is used to test the moderated mediating effect. As shown in Table 4, at higher levels of work–home segmentation preference, the indirect effect of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on family satisfaction through workplace ostracism is − 0.104, and the 95% confidence interval is [–0.335, 0.111] (including 0). At

lower levels of work–home segmentation preference, the indirect effect of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on family satisfaction through workplace ostracism is − 0.976, and the 95% confidence interval is [–1.282, − 0.705] (excluding 0). The difference between groups is 0.872, the 95% confidence interval is [0.633, 1.208], and the results are significant. This shows that the mediating effect of workplace ostracism is different at different levels of work–home segmentation preference—that is, the mediating effect of workplace ostracism is moderated by work–home segmentation preference. Hypothesis 4 is therefore supported.

Discussion

Unethical pro-supervisor behavior is widespread in organizations, so it is important to explore and understand whether, how and when it affects employees' family satisfaction. Based on conservation of resources theory, this study explores the spillover effects of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on employees' family satisfaction. This study concludes that workplace ostracism mediates the relationship between employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior and family satisfaction. Work–home segmentation preference moderates the relationship between workplace ostracism and family satisfaction as well as the indirect influence of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on family satisfaction

through workplace ostracism—that is, this relationship will be weaker for higher levels of work–home segmentation preference.

Theoretical implications

This study provides the following theoretical contributions. First, this study contributes to the unethical pro-supervisor behavior literature by exploring the effect of unethical pro-supervisor behavior across the work and family domains. Based on conservation of resources theory, our study explores the consequences of unethical pro-supervisor behavior, which answered the call of scholars and expanded the research on the consequences of unethical pro-supervisor behavior (e.g., Mesdaghinia et al., 2019; Zhong & Wang, 2019). The lack of investigation into the work-to-family consequences of unethical pro-supervisor behavior may inhibit our understanding of it being both pro-supervisor and unethical in nature. Behavioral ethics scholars have mainly focused on either the consequences of unethical pro-organizational behavior (e.g., Chen et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2018) or the antecedents (e.g., He & Yun, 2022; Li et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022; Lee, 2020; Johnson & Umphress, 2019) of unethical pro-supervisor behavior. In contrast, research on the consequences of unethical pro-supervisor behavior is scant. This study explores the consequences of unethical pro-supervisor behavior from the perspective of the work–home interface. Although some studies have examined the work outcomes of unethical behavior at work (e.g., Bonner et al., 2017; Shalvi et al., 2015), little attention has been paid to the potential impact of these unethical acts on employees in non-work domains. Because work and family roles are highly important and interrelated in adult life (Kossek, 2006), this study enriches the unethical pro-supervisor behavior literature by showing that such behavior can inhibit family satisfaction.

Second, this study uses the resource perspective to enrich our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the work–home effects of unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Previously, our understanding of unethical pro-supervisor behavior was primarily cultivated and expanded by social exchange theory (e.g., feelings of reciprocity toward supervisors; Li et al., 2022; He & Yun, 2022), and social identity theory (e.g., felt obligation; Sun et al., 2022; Lee, 2020). However, few studies have explored unethical pro-supervisor behavior from the resource perspective, especially in relation to resource spillover across domains. In this study, we employed conservation of resources theory to explore the effects of unethical pro-supervisor behavior from the work domain to the family domain. Using conservation of resources theory, we accounted for the influences of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on employees' family

satisfaction via workplace ostracism. This finding provides support for us to better understand the internal mechanism of how unethical pro-supervisor behavior affects employees' family satisfaction, and also responds to the call of scholars to extend the original perspective to explore the internal mechanisms underlying the spillover from the work domain to the family domain (e.g., Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Swimberghe et al., 2014).

Third, this study reveals the boundary conditions of the impact of employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior on family satisfaction and provides a new perspective on the organizational management of such behavior. The existing unethical pro-supervisor behavior literature provides evidence that can be used to explore the moderating variables that affect unethical pro-supervisor behavior (e.g., moral identity; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). Our study reveals employees' work–home segmentation preference as a boundary condition that can influence the effects of unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Specifically, negative work-to-family spillover caused by unethical pro-supervisor behavior may be inhibited by employees' work–home segmentation preference. This finding further clarifies our understanding of the influence of unethical pro-supervisor behavior by linking it with a boundary condition. Employees often face challenges in balancing the demands of multiple roles (Kossek, 2006), many of which are contradictory. Our findings suggest that work–home segmentation preference may benefit the work–family relationship by inhibiting the work-to-family spillover processes of some workplace behaviors.

Practical implications

This study has the following practical significance. First, the study findings indicate that the spillover effect of employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior on family satisfaction— that is, employees' unethical pro-supervisor behavior—will increase the possibility of their facing workplace "cold violence" which in turn reduces their family satisfaction. Based on this, the organization should formulate specific moral standards and incorporate moral assessment into the comprehensive employees assessment index to reduce or eliminate unethical pro-supervisor behavior. Organizational managers should monitor and detect such behavior and pay more attention to its potential negative impacts. Employees should be aware that unethical pro-supervisor behavior is unethical in nature, and engaging in such behaviors will bring adverse consequences. Second, the results of this study show that workplace ostracism can reduce employees' family satisfaction. Therefore, managers should be aware of the adverse effects of workplace ostracism and monitor its occurrence, actively establish a friendly and harmonious

organizational climate, and avoid or reduce negative interpersonal relationships within the organization. Finally, our findings indicate that employees' work–home segregation preference can effectively alleviate the negative impacts of workplace ostracism on employees' family satisfaction. Based on the above, managers should help employees realize the importance of work–home segregation preference, and improve employees' work–home segregation preference by carrying out training programs and setting up guidance plans.

Limitations and future directions

This study has some limitations. First, due to the sample data being collected from Chinese employees, specific cultural factors may influence the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should collect the sample data from other cultural contexts to assess the generalizability of the results. Second, this study explored the moderating role of work–home segmentation preference on the effect of unethical pro-supervisor behavior on family satisfaction and was limited to the perspective of employees themselves without considering the boundary conditions of external factors (e.g., organizational climate and leadership behavior). Therefore, future studies should explore the moderating role of external factors on this relationship. Third, we did not explore whether there is a causal relationship between unethical pro-supervisor behavior and workplace ostracism. Since workplace ostracism has many negative consequences, employees tend to adopt more acceptable behaviors to change their situation such that they seek benefits and avoid harm. In such cases, employees can improve their status by informing their supervisor when they feel excluded by others, although they may still choose to prove their value by engaging in unethical behavior that benefits their supervisor. Therefore, future research should use a cross-lagged analytical model to further explore the relationship between unethical pro-supervisor behavior and workplace ostracism.

Declarations

Ethical approval The study was conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

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