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# Exemplifying Procedural Justice While Strengthening Organizational Identification: The Complex Relationship Between Identity Leadership and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

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## ABSTRACT

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) aims at advantaging the organization while transgressing relevant laws or widely held norms of ethical conduct. Across three studies (Study 1  $N = 138$ ; Study 2  $N = 413$ ; Study 3  $N = 139$ ), the paper examines whether identity leadership plays as an antecedent of employees' UPB intention based on two simultaneous processes: one process related to identity leaders being perceived as exemplary group members, who model and inspire given standards of behavior as a function of the procedural justice employees experience within their workgroup; the other process related to identity leaders strengthening employees' organizational identification. The obtained results provided consistent evidence that identity leadership is associated directly with employees' UPB intention by interacting negatively with procedural justice and that, at the same time, it is associated with it indirectly, through the mediation of organizational identification. Discussion focuses on the complexity of both UPB, where an ethical and a pro-organizational dimensions are intertwined, and identity leadership, whose contents are conditional on the meanings employees associate with their group membership.

Magnifying the characteristics of the organization's products or services in front of customers or omitting information to protect the organization's image are just a few examples of a whole category of behavior that aim at advantaging the organization but that, at the same time, transgress relevant societal values, norms, laws or standards of conduct, that is, unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB, Umphress and Bingham 2011; Umphress, Bingham, and Mitchell 2010). UPB often brings about several negative consequences not only for society and external stakeholders but also for the organizations themselves, especially when UPB examples hit the media and backfire on organizational reputation (e.g., Volkswagen's case of cheating on emission tests). This notwithstanding, UPB is quite common

in organizations, to the extent that it is often perceived as normal and sometimes even re-framed as morally neutral (e.g., "omitting is not lying"), and encouraged.

Two distinct dimensions are intertwined in UPB: on the one hand, an unethical dimension since UPB transgresses "standards of ethical behavior judged in terms of justice, law, or widely held social norms" (Donaldson and Dunfee 1994, quoted in Umphress and Bingham 2011, 622); on the other hand, a pro-organizational dimension since UPB is enacted to promote the organization. That intertwining of unethical and pro-organizational dimensions contributes to the complexity of UPB and may explain why it is encouraged by otherwise positive

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leadership styles. For example, ethical leadership is likely to enhance employees' moral attentiveness, thus decreasing their intention to engage in UPB. At the same time, however, it may inadvertently encourage UPB by strengthening employees' identification with their organizations (Kim, Miao, and Park 2015). Indeed, according to social identity theory and its applications to organizational contexts, when people identify with their organizations, an important part of their self-image is based on their organizational membership with the consequence that organizational success is experienced as personal success (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Tajfel and Turner 1979). As a result, the stronger employees' organizational identification, the more likely they are to give all their efforts to promote organizational interests to ensure a positive image of themselves as group members. Driven to the extreme, organizational identification may thus lead employees to pursue organizational interests whatever it takes, even when it implies engaging in UPB (e.g., Chen, Chen, and Sheldon 2016; Conroy et al. 2017).

Although organizational identification is an established antecedent of UPB (Luan et al. 2023), the association between UPB and the leadership style that is rooted in the social identity theory, that is, identity leadership (Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2011; Van Dick et al. 2018), has never been investigated so far. Similar to other leadership styles already examined as antecedents of UPB, identity leadership strengthens employees' organizational identification (e.g., Steffens et al. 2014). Moreover, identity leaders are perceived as exemplary group members, who embody at best what it means to be part of a given group and, based on that meaning, set standards of thought and behavior (e.g., Steffens et al. 2013; van Knippenberg 2011). As such, distinctively, identity leadership may promote a wide range of behaviors, both ethical and unethical ones, because its contents are not fixed or pre-defined in advance. Rather, they are crafted by leaders and followers through discursive interactions and may vary a great deal as a function of the meanings leaders and followers associate with their shared group membership in a given context (Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2011; Hogg and Reid 2006; Reicher, Haslam, and Hopkins 2005; Reicher and Hopkins 2003; Seyranian 2014; Seyranian and Bligh 2008). A core part of the experience employees have of their group membership is represented by procedural justice, i.e. the extent to which they perceive that within their workgroup, authorities make decisions according to transparent and consistent criteria, based on accurate and unbiased information, and respecting people's needs and interests (e.g., Colquitt and Zipay 2015; Tyler and De Cremer 2005). Thus one could argue that employees who experience a high level of procedural justice within their workgroup and, at the same time, perceive their leader as an identity one would be likely both to conform to the standards of integrity and respect for others modelled by their leader, which would weaken their UPB intention, and, simultaneously, to develop strong organizational identification, which would instead strengthen their UPB intention. Starting from that idea, across three studies the present paper tests the hypothesis that identity leadership would be associated with UPB based on two simultaneous processes. On the one hand, identity leadership would be associated with UPB indirectly, through the mediating role played by organizational identification. On the other hand, simultaneously, identity leadership would be associated with UPB also directly by interacting with

the level of procedural justice group members experience within their workgroup.

## 1 | Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior and Leadership

A growing body of research has investigated the antecedents that may drive employees to engage in UPB (see Mishra, Ghosh, and Sharma 2022; Mo et al. 2023 for reviews), and several studies have focused on leadership. Three main theoretical approaches can be distinguished: the social learning approach, the social exchange approach, and the social identity approach.

In line with the social learning theory, some studies have tested the idea that employees would (or would not) engage in UPB because they observe and imitate their leader's behavior. For example, Zhang and colleagues found that leader UPB is positively associated with employee UPB: by repeated exposure to their leader UPB, employees are likely to learn the principles underlying their supervisor behavior, which probably leads them to justify their own UPB thanks to moral disengagement (Azhar, Zhang, and Simha 2024; Nguyen, Zhang, and Morand 2021; Zhang, He, and Sun 2018). Employees are more likely to engage in UPB when they witness their leader engaging in UPB, especially if they think that their leader dissociates performance judgment from moral judgment (Fehr et al. 2019). Consistent with this line of reasoning, previous studies have paid special attention to the role played by ethical leadership. Ethical leadership has been described as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005, 120). Thus ethical leadership embodies a model of ethical conduct and reminds the followers of the importance of ethical behavior: as such, it has the potential to discourage UPB among them. Indeed, ethical leadership has turned out to be negatively associated with employees' intention to enact UPB (Hsieh et al. 2020; Miao et al. 2019; see Mo et al. 2023 for a review).

The studies that have referred to the social exchange theory have tested the idea that employees engage in UPB to reciprocate the benefits they receive from their leaders or organizations to build and maintain positive relationships with them. For example, employees may reciprocate the positive treatment they receive from empowering leaders (e.g., autonomy in decision-making) by engaging in pro-organizational behavior even when this implies the transgression of ethical norms. Similarly, employees who perceive to have good quality exchange relationship with their supervisor are more likely to engage in UPB: when the exchange relationship employees have with their supervisor is featured by mutual trust, and focus on each other's needs and interests, employees are likely to reciprocate by showing pro-organizational behavior, among which UPB (Bryant and Merritt 2021; Wang et al. 2019, 2023; Zhang et al. 2021; see Mo et al. 2023 for a review).

The social identity approach to the relationship between UPB and leadership has started from the idea that organizational

identification is likely to be a core antecedent of behaviors that aim at advantaging the organization. Indeed, when employees identify with their organization, they consider their organization's successes (or failures) as their own (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Thus, the higher employees' organizational identification is, the stronger their motivation to pursue the success of the organization. While organizational identification predicts constructive and positive cooperation in collective goals, it may have a dark side too (Conroy et al. 2017). Indeed, strong organizational identification may lead employees to enact behavior that transgresses relevant laws, values or norms of ethical conduct if this may advantage the organization, that is, UPB, thanks to the mediating role played by moral disengagement and psychological entitlement (inter alia, Baur et al. 2020; Chen, Chen, and Sheldon 2016; Kong 2016; Naseer et al. 2020; see Chenyang 2024 for a recent meta-analysis of the association between organizational identification and UPB moderated by different cultures). Consistently, the social identity approach to the relationship between UPB and leadership has highlighted that positive leadership styles may inadvertently encourage followers' UPB because they foster their organizational identification. Thus, even leadership styles whose direct association with UPB is negative may have an indirect positive association with it through organizational identification. For example, thanks to the communication of an attractive vision, transformational leadership fosters employees' organizational identification, and through this way their willingness to engage in UPB (Effelsberg, Solga, and Gurt 2014). Ethical leadership nurtures followers' moral attentiveness and, through this way, weakens their intention to engage in UPB. However, at the same time, ethical leadership strengthens employees' organizational identification too, which in turn drives them to UPB (Kim, Miao, and Park 2015). Similarly, moral leadership is associated negatively with UPB through responsibility—taking but, at the same time, it is associated positively with it thanks to the mediating role played by employees' identification with the supervisor (Wang and Li 2019).

Thus the social identity approach to UPB has highlighted how complex the relationship between UPB and leadership is. To my knowledge, however, no research so far has investigated the association between UPB and the leadership style that is based on the social identity theory itself, i.e. identity leadership.

## 2 | Identity Leadership

Identity leadership is rooted in group identification processes and it includes four dimensions (Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2011; Van Dick et al. 2018). First, identity leaders are perceived to embody the unique and distinctive features that define the group they lead, i.e. the group prototype. As such, identity leaders are perceived to exemplify the standards of thought and behavior associated with group membership, thus contributing to establishing shared norms of behavior within the group (identity prototypicality, “being one of us”). Second, identity leaders are perceived to promote the group's goals and to champion its core interests (identity advancement, “doing it for us”). As a consequence, group members are very likely to

trust identity leaders and give them leeway even when they pursue discussible aims (Giessner and van Knippenberg 2008; van Knippenberg 2011). Third, through discursive interactions with other group members, identity leaders craft the meanings associated with group membership, and they present themselves as the best representatives of the sense of “us” they have crafted. As a result, identity leaders can unite diverse employees around a shared sense of “us” and motivate them to pursue collective goals (identity entrepreneurship, “crafting a sense of us”; Hogg 2018; Reicher, Haslam, and Hopkins 2005; Steffens et al. 2018). Finally, identity leaders create opportunities and contexts where group members can live their shared group membership in real and meaningful ways (identity impresarioship, “making us matter”; Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2011).

Similarly to other leadership styles, identity leadership strengthens followers' organizational identification (e.g., Steffens et al. 2014). As a consequence, based on the mediating role organizational identification plays in the relationship between other leadership styles and UPB (e.g., Effelsberg, Solga, and Gurt 2014; Kim, Miao, and Park 2015), one can hypothesize that also the association between identity leadership and employees' UPB is likely to be indirect and mediated through organizational identification.

Moreover, one could argue that identity leadership could be associated with employees' UPB not only thanks to the strength of organizational identification it is likely to promote, but also based on the meanings it is likely to inspire, to some extent similar to ethical leadership. However, different from ethical leaders, identity leaders connect with their followers thanks to a shared sense of “us,” whose meanings are not fixed or pre-defined in advance. Rather, the meanings associated with that shared sense of “us” (e.g., “who we are, what we do and how we are expected to behave”) are constructed and negotiated through discursive interactions within the group. Since they depend on what is observed, discussed, and interpreted as a distinctive feature of a given group, those meanings can vary a great deal and they can legitimate both ethical and unethical behaviors. As a consequence, identity leadership might encourage both ethical and unethical behaviors, provided that those behaviors are crafted as consistent with the sense of “us” leaders and followers share. Previous research on identity leadership provides some evidence that identity leaders can engage group members both in ethical and unethical behaviors. For example, on the one hand, McLaren et al. (2021) found that in the context of youth sports, athletes' perception of their leaders as identity ones is associated with athletes' moral behavior, with higher perceived identity leadership being associated with athletes enacting more prosocial behavior toward their teammates. On the other hand, Haslam and Reicher proposed that the experimenters at the lead of the Stanford Prison Experiment and Milgram's obedience studies probably crafted an ethically discussible shared sense of “us” among the participants and persuaded those who played the role of the “guards” or of the “teachers” respectively to act consistently with it, even when that implied inflicting serious harm to other people, in the name of the “higher” scientific goal the organization was purportedly pursuing (Haslam et al. 2015; Haslam, Reicher, and Van Bavel 2019). In the same vein, by analysing

the speech Trump gave on January 6, 2021, Haslam and Reicher showed that he charged with moral meaning the sense of “us” he shared with his followers, thus providing them with a warrant to storm the U.S. Capitol (Ntontis et al. 2024). Interestingly, Haslam and colleagues argued also that followers who are engaged by identity leaders are likely to interpret creatively what that shared “sense of us” may imply, which makes them different from mere imitators of their leaders’ behavior or passive executors of their orders (Haslam, Reicher, and Van Bavel 2019). In other words, the kinds of behavior identity leadership is likely to encourage (or discourage) are not pre-defined in advance because they are based on the various meanings leaders and followers associate with their shared group membership. Moreover, followers engaged by identity leaders would enact those various kinds of behavior more as being inspired by the general principles of thought and conduct their identity leaders embody as exemplary group members rather than out of imitation or order execution.

Thus, identity leadership might be associated with employees’ UPB indirectly, based on the strength of the organizational identification identity leadership is likely to promote among them. At the same time, identity leadership might be associated with employees’ UPB also directly, as a function of the meanings employees associate with their group membership and identity leaders, as exemplary group member, are likely to embody and inspire. The present paper tests that latter hypothesis by examining a core perception of what it means to be a group member, that is, employees’ perception of procedural justice within their workgroup.

### 3 | Procedural Justice

In organizational contexts, procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of the decisional procedures within a workgroup. Group members experience a high level of procedural justice when they believe that within the group, decisions are made according to transparent and consistent criteria and based upon reliable and unbiased information, when they feel to be informed and given voice, and when they experience that their needs and rights are acknowledged and respected (inter alia Lind and Tyler 1988; Tyler and De Cremer 2005; Tyler and Lind 1992). Procedural justice often includes also interpersonal (or interactional) justice, which corresponds to the feeling of being treated with respect and dignity during interactions and to the evaluation that the explanations received are accurate and of good quality (Konovsky and Cropanzano 1991; Tyler, DeGoey, and Smith 1996).

Since procedural justice strengthens employees’ perception of being acknowledged and respected within their work group, it contributes to nurturing employees’ positive image of themselves as group members and thus it is associated with their organizational identification (Blader and Tyler 2009; Tyler and Blader 2003). However, the experience of procedural justice within one’s workgroup might have implications that go beyond the positive image of themselves as group members and extend to include standards of treatment and interaction with other people outside the workgroup. Indeed, experiencing procedural

justice implies perceiving honesty and transparency when group authorities make decisions, feeling that group authorities’ decisions are based on accurate and impartial information as well as enjoying voice during the decision process itself. From that point of view, procedural justice and UPB are concerned in opposite ways with integrity, transparency, respect, and acknowledgment of other people’s rights and interests. While UPB implies deviousness, obscurity, and lack of consideration of external stakeholders’ rights and interests, procedural justice is based upon honest and overt processes and takes individuals’ rights and interests into account.

The association between procedural justice and the UPB that is targeted at the organization has not been researched so far. However, Bryant and Merritt (2021) investigated the association between the interpersonal dimension of procedural justice and employees’ intention to engage in supervisor–focused UPB, that is, the UPB that aims to benefit employees’ direct supervisor. More precisely, they examined whether employees’ perception of being treated politely and with dignity by their supervisor is associated with supervisor–focused UPB through the quality of the leader-member exchange (LMX). Results showed that employees’ perception of interpersonal justice was not associated with supervisor–focused UPB directly. However, an indirect positive association emerged, mediated through the affect and loyalty employees felt toward their supervisor, as subdimensions of the LMX. Interestingly, Bryant and Merritt (2021) also found that, when the variance explained by the quality of the LMX was controlled for, employees’ perception of interpersonal justice was associated negatively with their intention to engage in supervisor–focused UPB. Based on those results, the authors argue that the “perception of fair interpersonal treatment beyond the personalized relationship with the supervisor may indicate an overall culture of respect, integrity, and fairness,” which may discourage employees from engaging in UPB (Bryant and Merritt 2021, 787).

Since direct supervisors are likely to be perceived as representatives of the organization (Connelly et al. 2011) and interpersonal justice is a dimension of procedural justice (Tyler, DeGoey, and Smith 1996), the results found in Bryant and Merritt’s study hint at the possibility that employees’ perception of procedural justice within their workgroup might be associated negatively with UPB once their feelings of loyalty and affection toward the organization are taken into account. That possibility is consistent with the notion that the rules at the basis of perceived procedural justice such as “consistency, accuracy, bias suppression, voice, equity, respect, and truthfulness should be viewed as core values of an organization” and can help in creating a justice culture (Colquitt, Hill, and De Cremer 2023, 426) as well as with the widespread agreement that, generally speaking, the higher organizational justice employees perceive, the more likely they are to behave ethically (Cropanzano and Stein 2009; Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, and Kish-Gephart 2015). Consistent with that line of reasoning, among the employees who experience a high level of procedural justice within their workgroup, an identity leader, as an exemplary group member, would be likely to be perceived to embody honesty and integrity in interactions as well as respect and acknowledgment of others’ interests and rights and would thus inspire the employees to behave according to the same

justice principles. As a consequence, one might hypothesize that as compared with the employees who feel to be treated less fairly within their workgroup, those who perceive to be treated more fairly and, at the same time, to be supervised by an identity leader would show a weaker intention to engage in UPB, independently of the drive to enact it that may stem from their organizational identification.

#### 4 | Overview and Hypotheses

Developing the view of UPB as a complex behavior, where two distinct dimensions are intertwined, the present paper seeks evidence of the idea that identity leadership would be associated with UPB based on two simultaneous and independent processes: one related to the UPB unethical dimension, as a function of the level of procedural justice employees experience within their workgroup and of the corresponding behavior identity leaders, as exemplary group members, are likely to inspire; the other one related to the UPB pro-organizational dimension, based on the strength of the organizational identification identity leaders are likely to promote among the employees.

So, on the one hand, concerning the UPB unethical dimension, the present paper aim at examining how identity leadership interacts with procedural justice in its direct association with UPB, independently of its indirect association with it through organizational identification. That aim is consistent with the idea that identity leaders would be perceived as exemplary group members, who would engage and inspire employees to follow the same principles of justice they experience within their workgroup. So, identity leaders would weaken employees' UPB intention among those employees who experience a higher level of procedural justice within their workgroup because identity leaders, as model group members, would be perceived to embody and inspire the principles of respect, integrity, and fairness those employees experience within their group. The

reverse would happen among those employees who experience a lower level of procedural justice within their workgroup. Among those latter employees, leaders who are perceived as exemplary group members would be probably perceived also to embody disrespect, deviousness, and lack of consideration of others' rights and thus they would foster the employees' UPB intention. Based on that line of reasoning, identity leadership would interact negatively with procedural justice in its direct relationship with employees' UPB intention, independently of its indirect association with it through organizational identification.

On the other hand, regarding the UPB pro-organizational dimension, simultaneously, identity leaders would strengthen employees' UPB intention by inducing them to see the organization's success as their own, that is, by leveraging the strength of employees' identification with the organization. In other words, since identity leaders promote employees' organizational identification and, in turn, the stronger organizational identification is, the higher UPB intention, the relationship between identity leadership and employees' UPB intention would be mediated by organizational identification, similar to what emerged about other leadership styles already investigated as antecedents of UPB. Thus, independently of its interaction with procedural justice, identity leadership would be associated indirectly and positively with employees' UPB intention thanks to the mediating role played by organizational identification.

Across three studies, the present paper tests the hypotheses that the association between identity leadership and employees' UPB intention would be direct and conditional on the levels of procedural justice employees experience within their workgroup (Hp1) independently of the simultaneous indirect association identity leadership would have with employees' UPB intention through organizational identification (Hp2). Figure 1 displays the conceptual model tested in the present paper.

Across three studies, participants were invited to think about their real-life working experience. In Study 1, identity

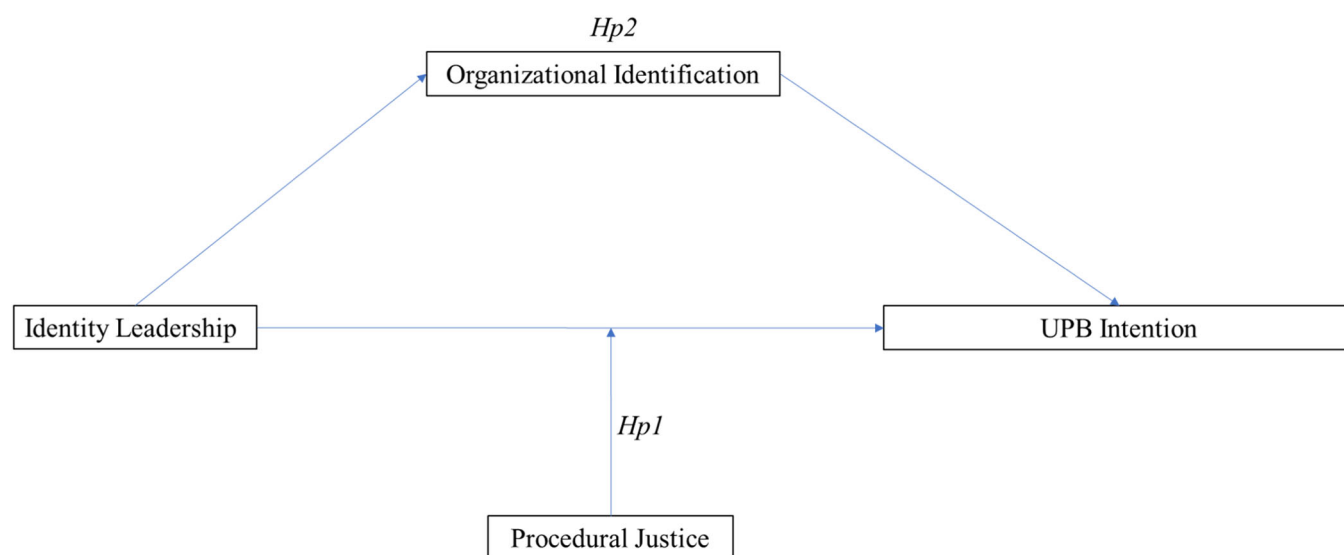


FIGURE 1 | The conceptual model.

leadership was manipulated by asking participants to think about their real-life supervisor as an identity leader versus the opposite of an identity leader; in Studies 2 and 3, identity leadership was instead assessed thanks to participants' ratings of their real-life supervisor as an identity leader.

## 5 | Study 1

Study 1 was the first to investigate the relationship between identity leadership and UPB. In their recent review of UPB, Mo and colleagues (2023) suggested that inviting participants to write their thoughts in response to a prompt could help assess the causal impact of temporary particular emotional or cognitive states on UPB. Following that recommendation and, at the same time, to carry out a study in a real-life context, the employees who participated in Study 1 were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: in one condition, they were invited to write the features based on which their real-life supervisor could be considered an identity leader, that is, a typical member of the workgroup and its best representative; in the other condition, they were invited to write the features based on which their real-life supervisor could be considered a sort of an opposite of an identity leader, that is, a stranger in the workgroup and completely detached from it. After writing their answers to that question, all the participants filled out a questionnaire focused on their experience in their workgroup.

### 5.1 | Method

#### 5.1.1 | Participants

Participants were approached with the help of graduating students who posted an invitation to join a research project on their social media accounts. The invitation stated that the research project dealt with people's working experience and contained a link to an online questionnaire. On the first introductory page of the questionnaire, participants were informed that the questions covered a variety of issues linked to people's working lives, including ethical ones, and that some questions dealt with participants' direct supervisors and workgroup colleagues. The only requirement to join the research project was that participants had been operating within a workgroup under a direct supervisor for at least 1 year. It was highlighted that participation was anonymous, that consent to participation was fully discretionary, and that participants could withdraw their consent at any moment by interrupting the completion of the questionnaire, in which case their answers would not be considered. To fully protect participants' anonymity, no specific information about the organization where they were employed was collected in the questionnaire but for the economic sector (i.e., primary, secondary, or tertiary sector).

Out of 233 individuals who clicked on the questionnaire link, 138 working adults consented to participate and completed the questionnaire. Most participants were men (79 men, 58 women, and one participant who preferred not to state his/her gender), employed in the tertiary sector (81.9%), with a permanent contract (58%). Participants' mean age was 35.53 years

(SD = 13.65). They had been working in their current organization for an average of 8.60 years (SD = 9.73), in their current workgroup for an average of 4.68 years (SD = 5.32), and with their current supervisor for an average of 3.38 years (SD = 3.28).

UPB intention was unrelated to participants' age ( $r = -0.007$ ,  $p = 0.934$ ), their tenure in the organization ( $r = -0.013$ ,  $p = 0.883$ ), in the workgroup ( $r = 0.025$ ,  $p = 0.772$ ), and with the supervisor ( $r = -0.051$ ,  $p = 0.551$ ). No difference emerged in UPB intention as a function of the type of contract,  $F(1, 136) = 0.000$ ,  $p = 0.988$ , or sector of employment,  $F(1, 136) = 3.282$ ,  $p = 0.072$ . However, consistent with some previous findings (Luan et al. 2023), men ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ) were more likely to state that they would engage in UPB than women ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ),  $F(1, 135) = 7.028$ ,  $p = 0.009$ . For that reason, participants' gender was included as a covariate in the following analyses.

#### 5.1.2 | Procedure and Measures

At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were invited to think about their direct supervisor and randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the "identity leader" condition ( $N = 71$ ), they were invited to write the features that made their supervisor a representative of the work group and a typical member of it. In the "opposite of an identity leader" condition ( $N = 67$ ), participants were invited to write the features that made their supervisor detached from the work group and a stranger in it.

Participants in the "identity leader" condition did not differ from participants in the "opposite of an identity leader" condition as regards their gender ( $\chi^2(1) = 1.355$ ,  $p = 0.244$ ), age,  $F(1, 135) = 0.058$ ,  $p = 0.810$ , tenure in the organization,  $F(1, 135) = 0.027$ ,  $p = 0.869$ , tenure with the supervisor,  $F(1, 135) = 2.544$ ,  $p = 0.113$ , tenure in the workgroup,  $F(1, 134) = 0.003$ ,  $p = 0.957$ , type of contract,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.084$ ,  $p = 0.772$ , and sector of employment,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.145$ ,  $p = 0.703$ .

After writing their answers about the features of their supervisor, all participants were invited to answer the following questions about their working experience.

All variables were assessed based on 7-point scales, from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*.

**5.1.2.1 | Identity Leadership.** Participants rated their agreement with the four items of the short form of the Identity Leadership Inventory (ILI-SF, Steffens et al. 2014; Van Dick et al. 2018). Sample items include: "This leader is a model member of this workgroup" and "This leader acts as a champion for this workgroup" ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ;  $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ).

**5.1.2.2 | Procedural Justice.** Participants rated their agreement with six items, based on Tyler and De Cremer's (2005) measure of procedural justice in organizations (e.g., "Within this workgroup, employees' rights are respected/employees are kept informed/decisions are unbiased";  $\alpha = 0.94$ ;  $M = 5.51$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ).

**5.1.2.3 | Organizational Identification.** Organizational identification was assessed based on the six-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). Sample items are: “When someone praises this organization, it feels like a personal compliment” and “This organization’s successes are my successes” ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ;  $M = 5.23$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ).

**5.1.2.4 | UPB Intention.** Participants rated their intention to engage in UPB on the following four items, based on the scale developed by Umphress, Bingham, and Mitchell (2010): “If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good”; “If it would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company’s products or services to customers and clients”; “If it would benefit my organization, I would withhold negative information about my company or its products from customers and clients”; “If needed, I would conceal information from the public that could be damaging to my organization” ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ;  $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ).

### 5.1.3 | Confirmatory Factor Analyses

A confirmatory factor analysis with the four latent variables related to their respective indicators showed a good fit,  $\chi^2(164) = 235.124$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.05$ ,  $CFI = 0.97$ ,  $TLI = 0.97$ ,  $SRMR = 0.06$ . All path loadings were significant. An alternative confirmatory factor analysis that included all the items as indicators of a common latent factor showed a poor fit,  $\chi^2(170) = 852.131$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.16$ ,  $CFI = 0.72$ ,  $TLI = 0.69$ ,  $SRMR = 0.12$ .

## 5.2 | Results

Thirteen participants in the “identity leader” condition and 16 participants in the “opposite of an identity leader” condition gave ambiguous answers about the features of their direct supervisor (e.g., “I would not know what to answer”, “Yes”) or answers that were inconsistent with the experimental instructions (e.g., in the “identity leader” condition, “He is not a typical group member. He thinks only to himself”; in the “opposite of an identity leader” condition, “He has excellent leadership and group management qualities”). This is understandable since the randomized experimental instructions might not correspond to participants’ experience with their real-life supervisors: in such cases, participants may have found it difficult to respond to experimental demands. This may hint at the possibility that the manipulation of participants’ perception of their supervisor as an identity leader (or as the opposite of an identity leader)

might have been partly unsuccessful, at least for those participants whose answers were ambiguous or inconsistent with the experimental condition to which they were assigned. As a consequence, those 29 participants who gave ambiguous or inconsistent answers were dropped in the analysis that aimed at hypothesis testing. This led to retaining 109 participants, “identity leader” condition  $N = 58$  versus “opposite of an identity leader” condition  $N = 51$ .

No difference between the two manipulated conditions emerged for UPB intention,  $F(1, 107) = 0.962$ ,  $p = 0.329$ . Consistent with the manipulated conditions, participants in the “identity leader” condition reported higher ratings of their supervisor as an identity leader ( $M = 5.98$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) than participants in the “opposite of an identity leader” condition ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ),  $F(1, 107) = 59.691$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Participants in the “identity leader” condition reported higher ratings also on organizational identification ( $M = 5.58$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) and procedural justice ( $M = 5.83$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) than participants in the “opposite of an identity leader” condition (organizational identification  $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ,  $F(1, 107) = 19.061$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; procedural justice  $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ,  $F(1, 107) = 17.325$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 1 displays the bivariate correlations between the continuous variables. UPB intention was negatively associated with procedural justice and identity leadership ratings but it was not related to organizational identification. Procedural justice, organizational identification, and identity leadership ratings were positively correlated with each other.

To test the hypotheses that identity leadership would interact negatively with procedural justice in its direct association with UPB intention (Hp1) independently from its indirect positive association with it through organizational identification (Hp2), I used Model 5 of Process macro for Spss (Hayes 2013). Model 5 allows to assess direct, indirect, and conditional direct effects simultaneously, which is consistent with the hypotheses that identity leadership would be associated with UPB intention based on two distinct simultaneous processes: one process that concerns the UPB unethical dimension and the other one that concerns the UPB pro-organizational dimension. Thanks to Process Model 5, I tested the interaction between procedural justice and identity leadership manipulation in predicting UPB intention while controlling for organizational identification (Hp1), and the indirect effect of identity leadership manipulation on UPB intention through organizational identification while accounting for its interaction with procedural justice (Hp2). Participants’ gender was included as a covariate. Procedural justice was mean-centered before the analysis. Post hoc power analysis via G\*Power with five tested predictors showed

**TABLE 1** | Bivariate correlations between the continuous variables, Study 1 ( $N = 109$ ).

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. UPB intention	—			
2. Procedural justice	−0.31***	—		
3. Organizational identification	−0.12	0.57***	—	
4. Identity leadership ratings	−0.24**	0.77***	0.60***	—

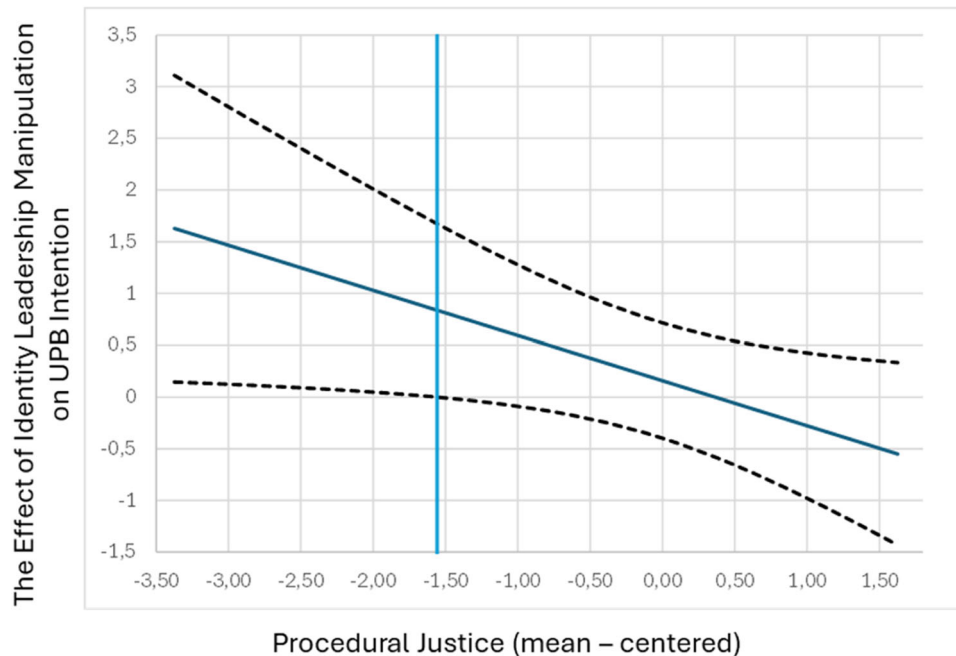
\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**TABLE 2** | Regressions of UPB intention on identity leadership manipulation through the mediation of organizational identification, and on the interaction between identity leadership manipulation and procedural justice, Study 1 ( $N = 109$ ).

	Organizational identification					UPB intention						
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI		
					LL	UL				LL	UL	
Constant	4.675	0.176	26.592	0.000	4.326	5.023						
Id. leadership manip.	0.950	0.217	4.371	0.000	0.520	1.382						
Gender	-0.097	0.220	-0.441	0.660	-0.534	0.340						
$R^2$	0.15											
Constant							3.318	0.663	5.007	0.000	2.004	4.633
Organizational identif.							0.111	0.129	0.859	0.392	-0.145	0.367
Id. leadership manip.							0.158	0.280	0.565	0.573	-0.398	0.714
Procedural justice							-0.246	0.158	-1.559	0.122	-0.559	0.067
Id. leadership manip. X Proc. justice							-0.436	0.208	-2.097	0.038	-0.848	-0.024
Gender							-0.850	0.261	-3.263	0.001	-1.367	-0.333
$R^2$							0.23					

Note: Gender was coded as follows: woman = 1; man = 0. The identity leadership manipulation was coded as follows: "identity leader" condition = 1; "opposite of an identity leader" condition = 0.





**FIGURE 2** | The effect of identity leadership manipulation on UPB intention as a function of procedural justice (Study 1). *Note:* Participants' gender and organizational identification were controlled for. Gender was coded as follows: woman = 1; man = 0. Identity leadership manipulation was coded as follows: "identity leadership" condition = 1; "opposite of an identity leadership" condition = 0. The slope moved to significance when procedural justice was equal to or lower than  $-1.5572$  (corresponding to 3.8174).

a power of 88% to detect an effect size  $f^2 = 0.15$  (Faul et al. 2009). Results are displayed in Table 2.

Thinking about one's supervisor as an identity leader versus the opposite of an identity leader interacted negatively with procedural justice in predicting UPB intention. Johnson-Neyman analysis showed that the effect of the identity leadership manipulation on UPB intention became significant and positive at all values of perceived procedural justice equal to or lower than the mean-centered score of  $-1.5572$  (corresponding to 3.8174), which included 14.68% of the cases in the data set. Figure 2 displays the Johnson-Neyman interaction plot based on the Process output (Lin 2020). Thinking about one's supervisor as an exemplary group member versus detached from the group strengthened UPB intention among those participants who rated procedural justice within their workgroup as very low. Those results are consistent with Hp1 and indicate that, independently of their organizational identification, employees who are supervised by a leader they perceive as a model group member are likely to show a stronger intention to enact UPB if they perceive to be treated very unfairly within their workgroup.

Thinking about one's supervisor as an identity leader versus the opposite of an identity leader was positively associated also with organizational identification. However, organizational identification was unrelated to UPB intention. Thus in Study 1, the indirect association of identity leadership with UPB intention through organizational identification was not different from 0,  $IE = 0.106$ ,  $SE = 0.139$ , 95% CI  $[-0.178, 0.384]$ , which did not confirm Hp2.

The same analysis described above was re-run including participants' ratings of identity leadership as the focal predictor and its manipulation as a further qualitative covariate along with

participants' gender. Procedural justice and identity leadership ratings were mean-centered prior the analysis. Once again, identity leadership interacted negatively with procedural justice in predicting UPB intention ( $b = -0.2617$ ,  $SE = 0.0544$ ,  $t = -4.8115$ ,  $p = 0.0000$ ; 95% CI  $[-0.3696, -0.1538]$ ). Consistent with the previous analysis, the association between identity leadership ratings and UPB intention was significant and positive at all values of procedural justice equal to or lower than the mean-centered score of  $-1.4375$  (corresponding to 3.9371), which concerned the 15.60% of the cases. Moreover, the association between identity leadership ratings and UPB intention became significant and negative also at all values of procedural justice equal to or higher than the mean-centered score of 0.8048 (corresponding to 6.1794), which involved the 29.36% of the cases in the data set. Finally, similar to the previous analysis, the indirect association of identity leadership ratings with UPB intention through organizational identification was not different from 0,  $IE = 0.0655$ ,  $SE = 0.0654$ , 95% CI  $[-0.0646, 0.1990]$ . Thus the analysis based on participants' ratings of identity leadership further confirmed Hp1 by suggesting that perceiving one's supervisor as an identity leader may be positively associated with UPB intention among those employees who experience lower procedural justice within their workgroup and it added that it may be also negatively associated with it among those ones who perceive higher procedural justice. However, neither that latter analysis could confirm Hp2.

### 5.3 | Discussion

Study 1 was the first to investigate the relationship between identity leadership and UPB intention. The paper's core hypotheses were that identity leadership would be associated

with UPB intention based on two simultaneous processes: one concerned with the UPB unethical dimension and related with identity leaders being exemplary group members, who model and inspire the justice behavioral standards employees experience within their group (Hp1); the other one concerned with the UPB pro-organizational dimension and related with identity leaders strengthening employees' organizational identification (Hp2).

Study 1 results showed that controlling for organizational identification, identity leadership interacted negatively with procedural justice in predicting UPB intention. Both the analyses carried out in Study 1 indicated that being supervised by an identity leader is likely to strengthen UPB intention among the employees whose experience of group membership is featured by deep procedural injustice. Furthermore, the analysis based on participants' ratings of identity leadership added that being supervised by a leader who is perceived as an exemplary group member may also weaken UPB intention among the employees who enjoy higher procedural justice within their work group. Thus the results obtained in Study 1 confirmed Hp1.

Regarding Hp2, in Study 1, identity leadership fostered participants' organizational identification. However, organizational identification turned out to be unrelated to UPB intention and thus it did not mediate between identity leadership and UPB intention. That latter result did not confirm Hp2 and it is different from the findings of previous research about the mediating role played by organizational identification in the association between other leadership styles and UPB (Effelsberg, Solga, and Gurt 2014; Kim, Miao, and Park 2015; Wang and Li 2019).

Study 1 was the first to seek evidence of a causal relationship between identity leadership and UPB. To this end, it was designed based on Mo and colleagues' (2023) recommendation to assign real-life employees to different manipulated conditions. Based on Study 1 results, one could state that identity leadership exerts a direct effect on employees' UPB intention, which may be positive or negative conditional on the experience of procedural justice employees have of their group membership.

However, inducing an experimental manipulation in real-life contexts brought about some problems too. First, in quite a few cases the manipulation of employees' perception of their direct supervisor as an identity leader vs. the opposite of an identity leader was unsuccessful, which led to the exclusion of several participants and restricted the sample size. Second, as described above, the experimental instructions of the "identity leader" condition increased participants' ratings also of procedural justice and organizational identification. While this is unlikely to have affected the interaction effect, it might be at the origin of the failure to detect the expected mediating role of organizational identification due to a sort of a ceiling effect in that latter variable.

Study 2 was carried out to overcome the limitations of Study 1 and to retest the paper hypotheses.

## 6 | Study 2

Study 2 aimed at re-testing whether, controlling for organizational identification, identity leadership interacts negatively with procedural justice in its direct relationship with UPB intention (Hp1) and whether, at the same time, identity leadership is associated with UPB intention also indirectly through organizational identification (Hp2). To overcome Study 1 limitations, Study 2 was based on a correlational method and involved a wider sample of participants.

### 6.1 | Method

#### 6.1.1 | Participants

Students of an introductory psychology class were asked to contact acquaintances who had been working within a workgroup under a direct supervisor for at least 1 year and to invite them to fill out a paper-and-pencil questionnaire about their experience at work. The students were blind to the paper's hypotheses and they were not subjected to any evaluation by the author because she was not the course teacher nor she played any instructor role. The students delivered the questionnaires (no more than five questionnaires for each student, amounting to 500 questionnaires distributed) as part of their regular course attendance. Similar to Study 1, on the first page of the questionnaire participants were informed that the questions dealt with various issues about people's working experience, including ethical ones. To promote response honesty, it was highlighted that the questionnaire was anonymous, that participation was discretionary, and that participants could withdraw their consent to participation at any time by interrupting the completion of the questionnaire. Once again, to preserve participants' full anonymity, the questionnaire did not collect any information about the organization where the participants were employed other than the economic sector.

Four hundred thirteen working adults consented to participate and completed the questionnaire. Most of them were women (230 women, 182 men, and one participant who did not declare his/her gender), employed in the tertiary sector (67.3%), and with a permanent contract (73.6%). Participants' mean age was 40.81 years ( $SD = 13.29$ ). They had been working in their current organization for an average of 11.36 years ( $SD = 11.12$ ), in their current workgroup for an average of 6.73 years ( $SD = 7.50$ ), and with their current supervisor for an average of 6.03 years ( $SD = 7.45$ ).

No difference in UPB intention emerged as a function of participants' gender,  $F(1, 410) = 1.285$ ,  $p = 0.26$ , sector of employment,  $F(1, 411) = 0.000$ ,  $p = 0.98$ , and type of contract,  $F(1, 411) = 0.001$ ,  $p = 0.97$ . UPB intention was unrelated to participants' age ( $r = -0.05$ ,  $p = 0.34$ ), their tenure in the organization ( $r = -0.04$ ,  $p = 0.44$ ), in their work group ( $r = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.57$ ), and with their supervisor ( $r = 0.10$ ,  $p = 0.06$ ).

#### 6.1.2 | Measures

For all the measures, participants responded on 7-point scales ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*.

**6.1.2.1 | Identity Leadership.** Participants rated their agreement with the same items employed in Study 1 (ILI-SF, Steffens et al. 2014), ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ;  $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ).

**6.1.2.2 | Procedural Justice.** Participants rated their agreement with the same six items used in Study 1 ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ;  $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ).

**6.1.2.3 | Organizational Identification.** Organizational identification was measured using the same scale employed in Study 1 ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ;  $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ).

**6.1.2.4 | UPB Intention.** Participants rated their intention to engage in UPB on the same items as those used in Study 1 ( $\alpha = 0.66$ ;  $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ).

### 6.1.3 | Confirmatory Factor Analyses

A confirmatory factor analysis with the four latent variables related to their respective indicators indicated that the four-factor model yielded an acceptable fit,  $\chi^2(164) = 408.421$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ,  $CFI = 0.94$ ,  $TLI = 0.93$ ,  $SRMR = 0.05$ . All the path loadings were significant. An alternative confirmatory factor analysis that included all the items as indicators of a common latent factor showed a poor fit to the data,  $\chi^2(170) = 1542.809$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.14$ ,  $CFI = 0.64$ ,  $TLI = 0.61$ ,  $SRMR = 0.12$ .

## 6.2 | Results

The bivariate correlations between the investigated variables are displayed in Table 3. UPB intention showed a strong positive association with organizational identification and weak positive correlations with identity leadership and procedural justice. Identity leadership showed strong positive correlations both with organizational identification and procedural justice.

To test whether identity leadership interacts with procedural justice in its direct relationship with UPB intention (Hp1) while controlling for its indirect association with it through organizational identification (Hp2), I used once again Model 5 of Process macro for Spss (Hayes 2013). Identity leadership and procedural justice were mean-centered before the analyses. Post hoc power analysis via G\*Power with four tested predictors showed a power of 99% to detect an effect size  $f^2 = 0.15$ .

**TABLE 3** | Correlations between the investigated variables, Study 2 ( $N = 413$ ).

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. UPB intention	—			
2. Identity leadership	0.14**	—		
3. Procedural justice	0.16***	0.66***	—	
4. Organizational identification	0.51***	0.42***	0.46***	—

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Results can be found in Table 4. Similar to Study 1, identity leadership interacted negatively with procedural justice in predicting UPB intention, which confirmed Hp1. As displayed in Figure 3, Johnson–Neyman analysis showed that the association between identity leadership ratings and UPB intention became significant and negative at all values of perceived procedural justice equal to or higher than the mean-centered score of 0.8216 (corresponding to 5.5693), which included 28.81% of the cases in the data set. Being in a higher agreement that one's supervisor could be considered an exemplary group member weakened UPB intention among those employees who perceived a higher level of procedural justice.

In Study 2, it also emerged that, at the same time, identity leadership was positively associated with organizational identification, and that, in turn, organizational identification was positively associated with UPB intention, with the indirect association between identity leadership and UPB intention through organizational identification being different from 0 ( $IE = 0.191$ ,  $SE = 0.031$ , 95% CI [0.135, 0.255]), which confirmed Hp2.

## 6.3 | Discussion

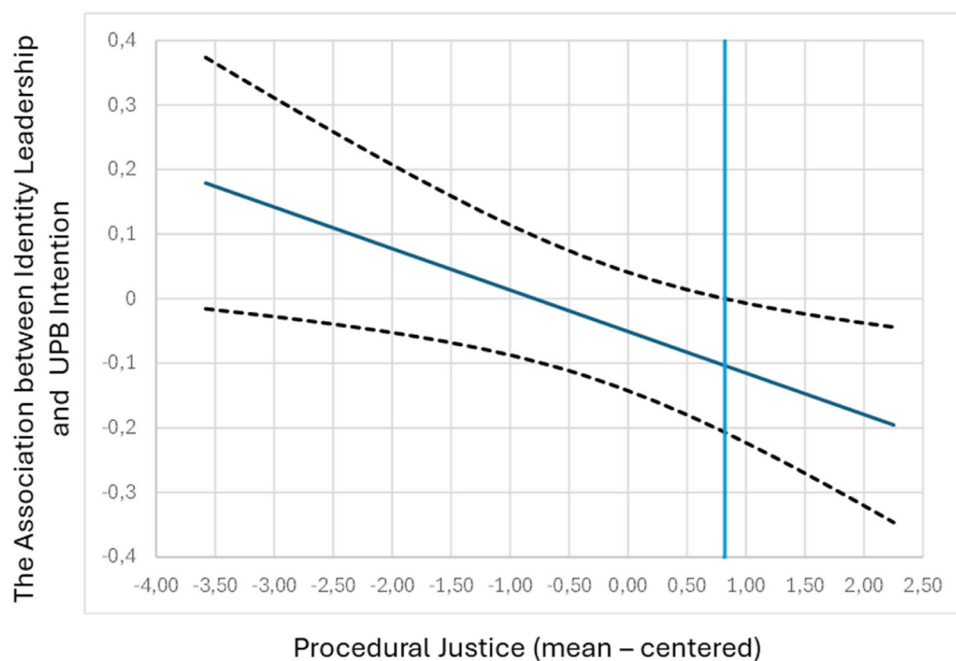
By using a correlational method and involving a wider sample than Study 1, Study 2 retested the paper's hypotheses that identity leadership would interact with procedural justice in its direct relationship with UPB intention (Hp1) and that, at the same time, the association between identity leadership and UPB intention would be indirect and mediated through organizational identification (Hp2).

The obtained results are consistent both with Hp1 and with Hp2, that is, with the idea that identity leadership is associated with UPB based on two simultaneous processes. Study 2 showed that independently of organizational identification, identity leadership was associated negatively with UPB intention among those employees who perceived a higher level of procedural justice within their workgroup. In other words, the more the employees considered their supervisor an exemplary group member, who embodied behavioral standards typical of the group, the less they intended to enact UPB provided that high procedural justice featured their experience of group membership. Furthermore, Study 2 showed that identity leadership was likely also to foster UPB intention indirectly, that is, through the mediation of organizational identification.

Study 2 results were similar to those obtained in Study 1 in that they replicated that, controlling for organizational identification, identity leadership interacts negatively with procedural justice in its direct relationship with UPB intention. Those results are consistent with the view that identity leadership may be linked with UPB based on a process related to the UPB unethical dimension. By showing that the association between identity leadership and UPB intention may be positive or negative as a function of the level of procedural justice participants experience within their workgroup, Study 1 and Study 2 support the idea that identity leaders can encourage or discourage employees' UPB because they are perceived to embody and inspire

**TABLE 4** | Regressions of UPB intention on identity leadership through the mediation of organizational identification, and on the interaction between identity leadership and procedural justice, Study 2 ( $N = 413$ ).

	Organizational identification						UPB intention					
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI		<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
					LL	UL					LL	UL
Constant	4.557	0.058	78.109	0.000	4.442	4.672						
Identity lead.	0.348	0.037	9.306	0.000	0.274	0.421						
$R^2$	0.17											
Constant							1.653	0.224	7.388	0.000	1.213	2.092
Organizational id.							0.550	0.047	11.667	0.000	0.457	0.643
Identity lead.							-0.051	0.046	-1.090	0.276	-0.142	0.041
Procedural justice							-0.106	0.064	-1.659	0.098	-0.231	0.020
Id. lead. X							-0.064	0.025	-2.516	0.012	-0.114	-0.014
Proc. Just.												
$R^2$							0.28					



**FIGURE 3** | The association between identity leadership and UPB intention as a function of procedural justice (Study 2). *Note:* Organizational identification was controlled for. The slope moved to significance when procedural justice was equal to or higher than 0.8216 (corresponding to 5.5693).

the (un)ethical behavioral standards employees experience as group members.

Moreover, Study 2 confirmed also that identity leadership has a simultaneous indirect positive association with UPB intention through organizational identification, that is, leveraging the UPB pro-organizational dimension.

Overall, Study 2 confirmed the paper's core idea that the association between identity leadership and UPB is complex, consisting of two simultaneous distinct processes: one related to identity leaders being perceived as exemplary group members;

the other one related to identity leaders being promoters of organizational identification. On the one hand, as a distinctive feature of this leadership style, identity leadership is likely to provide employees with the standards of interpersonal treatment that are perceived as distinctive and typical of their experience within their workgroup. On the other hand, similarly to other leadership styles, identity leadership can be associated with UPB indirectly and positively, thanks to the mediating role played by organizational identification.

Both Studies 1 and 2 were limited by the fact that socially desirable responding was not assessed (Paulhus 2002). One

could be quite confident that participants' answers were likely to be sincere because the questionnaires were completely anonymous, and participation was discretionary. Moreover, the items that assess participants' intention to engage in UPB do not have one clear correct answer because they focus on types of behavior that are simultaneously beneficial for the organization and detrimental for external stakeholders. This might be the reason why according to a recent meta-analysis (Luan et al. 2023), social desirability is not significantly related to UPB. Anyway, in Studies 1 and 2 socially desirable responding could not be excluded completely.

Both Study 1 and Study 2 found that identity leadership interacted negatively with procedural justice in its direct association with UPB intention. However, Study 1 found that identity leadership encouraged UPB intention at lower values of procedural justice, which did not emerge in Study 2. Moreover, Study 1 did not find that identity leadership is related to UPB intention indirectly through organizational identification, while Study 2 confirmed that mediation.

Thus, to corroborate further the results emerged in Studies 1 and 2, I carried out Study 3.

## 7 | Study 3

Study 3 was carried out to retest the hypotheses that, on the one hand, identity leadership would interact negatively with procedural justice in its direct relationship with UPB intention (Hp1) and that, on the other hand, it would be associated with it through the mediation of organizational identification (Hp2). To overcome a limitation of Studies 1 and 2, Study 3 included a short measure of socially desirable responding.

Similar to Study 2, Study 3 was based on a correlational method. Correlational studies are often considered weaker than experimental ones for hypothesis testing. However, participants would have not been able to anticipate the hypothesized interaction effect (Spector 2019). Moreover, manipulating people's real-life experience of leadership proved to be very problematic in Study 1. So, to seek replication of the findings already obtained in Studies 1 and 2, a correlational study seemed a way that could be reasonably sound and viable in real-life contexts.

### 7.1 | Method

#### 7.1.1 | Participants

Similar to Study 1, graduating students posted an invitation to join a research project about people's working experience on their social media accounts. The invitation addressed working adults operating within a workgroup and under a direct supervisor for at least 1 year and contained a link to an online questionnaire. Once again, the introductory page of the questionnaire highlighted that the questionnaire concerned a variety of aspects of working experience, potentially including some ethical issues. To promote response honesty, it was stressed that participation was completely anonymous and voluntary and

that it was possible to withdraw from participation at any time and interrupt the completion of the questionnaire, in which case the responses already given would not be considered. No specific information about the organization where the participants worked was collected except for the economic sector.

Out of 326 individuals who clicked on the questionnaire link, 139 working adults consented to participate and completed the questionnaire. Seventy-nine were women, 58 men, and 2 participants preferred not to disclose their gender. Most participants (87.8%) were employed in the tertiary sector. Eighty-three (59.7%) had a permanent contract. Participants' mean age was 40.35 years (SD = 13.90). In Study 3, no information about participants' tenure in the organization, in their workgroup and with the same supervisor was collected. No specific information about the organization where participants were employed was collected either, except for the economic sector.

No difference emerged in UPB intention as a function of participants' gender,  $F(1, 135) = 0.119$ ,  $p = 0.731$ , sector of employment,  $F(1, 137) = 0.004$ ,  $p = 0.951$ , or participants' age ( $r = 0.042$ ,  $p = 0.625$ ). However, participants who were employed based on a permanent contract showed a stronger intention to enact UPB ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) than participants employed based on a temporary contract ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ),  $F(1, 137) = 4.645$ ,  $p = 0.033$ . For this reason, the type of contract was included as a covariate in the analyses that aimed at hypothesis testing.

#### 7.1.2 | Measures

Similar to the previous studies, participants rated their agreement on 7-point scales, from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*.

**7.1.2.1 | Identity Leadership.** Participants' agreement that their supervisor could be considered an identity leader was measured thanks to the same 4 items employed in Studies 1 and 2 (ILI-SF; Steffens et al. 2014;  $\alpha = 0.92$ ;  $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ).

**7.1.2.2 | Procedural Justice.** Participants' experience of procedural justice within their workgroup was assessed based on the same six items used in Studies 1 and 2 ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ;  $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ).

**7.1.2.3 | Organizational Identification.** Participants' identification with their organization was measured thanks to the same six items used in the two previous studies ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ;  $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ).

**7.1.2.4 | UPB Intention.** UPB intention was measured based on the same 4 items employed in Studies 1 and 2, plus one item (*If my organization needed me to, I would withhold issuing a refund to a customer or client accidentally overcharged*) always drawn from Umphress, Bingham, and Mitchell (2010) ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ;  $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ).

**7.1.2.5 | Socially Desirable Responding.** Participants' tendency to give socially desirable answers was measured

thanks to three items (e.g., *I am very confident in my judgments*; Leite and Beretvas 2005; Paulhus 2002;  $\alpha = 0.64$ ;  $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ).

### 7.1.3 | Confirmatory Factor Analyses

A confirmatory factor analysis with the five latent variables related to their respective indicators showed that the five-factor model yielded a sufficient fit,  $\chi^2(242) = 457.016$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.08$ ,  $CFI = 0.89$ ,  $TLI = 0.88$ ,  $SRMR = 0.07$ . All the path loadings were significant. An alternative confirmatory factor analysis that included all the items as indicators of a common latent factor showed a poorer fit to the data,  $\chi^2(252) = 854.631$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.13$ ,  $CFI = 0.70$ ,  $TLI = 0.67$ ,  $SRMR = 0.10$ .

## 7.2 | Results

Table 5 displays the bivariate correlations between the investigated variables. Similar to Study 2, UPB intention was strongly associated with organizational identification and it was positively associated also with procedural justice and identity leadership. Consistent with the two previous studies, identity leadership showed a strong positive association also with procedural justice and organizational identification. Social desirability was positively though weakly correlated with all the investigated variables, except for procedural justice. For this reason, social desirability was included as a covariate in the analyses that aimed at hypothesis testing.

Similar to Studies 1 and 2, Hp1 and Hp2 were tested using Model 5 of Process macro for Spss (Hayes 2013). As said above, the type of contract and social desirability were included as covariates. Identity leadership and procedural justice were mean-centered before the analyses. Post hoc power analysis via G\*Power with six tested predictors showed a power of 94% to detect an effect size  $f^2 = 0.15$ .

Results are displayed in Table 6. Once again, identity leadership interacted negatively with procedural justice in predicting UPB intention, which confirmed Hp1. As displayed in Figure 4, Johnson–Neyman analysis showed that the association between identity leadership ratings and UPB intention was significant and negative at all values of procedural justice equal to or higher than the mean-centered score of 1.0405 (corresponding to 5.6784), which included 30.93% of the cases in the data set. On the contrary, the association between identity leadership ratings and UPB intention was significant and positive at all values of procedural justice equal to or lower than the mean-centered score of  $-2.8898$  (corresponding to 1.7481), which included 5.75% of the cases in the data set. In other words, being in a higher agreement that one's supervisor could be considered an exemplary group member weakened UPB intention among those employees who experienced a higher level of procedural justice within their workgroup, which is similar to what was observed in Studies 1 and 2. On the contrary, it strengthened UPB intention among those employees who rated procedural justice within their workgroup as very low, which is similar to the findings of Study 1.

Furthermore, consistent with Hp2 and with Study 2, at the same time, identity leadership was positively associated with organizational identification, which in turn was positively associated with UPB intention, with the indirect association between identity leadership and UPB intention through organizational identification being different from 0 ( $IE = 0.2595$ ,  $SE = 0.0693$ , 95% CI [0.1351, 0.4043]).

## 7.3 | Discussion

Study 3 retested and confirmed the paper's hypotheses that identity leadership is associated with UPB intention based on two simultaneous processes. One process leverages identity leadership as modelling and inspiring the principles of justice employees experience within their workgroup (Hp1). The obtained results support the idea that identity leaders can encourage or discourage employees' UPB intention by embodying what an exemplary group membership means and implies, whose contents may vary according to the experience employees have of procedural justice within their workgroup.

The other simultaneous process leverages identity leadership as strengthening employees' organizational identification (Hp2). The obtained results are consistent with the idea that independently of its direct association with UPB intention, conditional on procedural justice, identity leadership can be associated with it also indirectly and positively through the mediating role played by organizational identification.

## 8 | General Discussion

UPB aims to benefit the organization by ensuring its success even when this implies the transgression of ethical norms of conduct (Umphress and Bingham 2011). As such, UPB can be considered emblematic of the multifaceted and problematic implications of a strong relationship between an organization and its employees (Conroy et al. 2017). That relationship can be interpreted in terms of identification processes and indeed UPB has been often explained with reference to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979). According to that theoretical framework, the more the employees identify with their organization, the more they include their organizational membership in their self-image, the more they consider the organization's success (or failure) as their own, the harder they work to promote their organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Driven to the extreme, a strong organizational identification may lead employees to assign absolute priority to organizational success over other stakeholders' well-being or interests, which implies that they may be willing to transgress laws or norms of moral conduct provided that this ensures the pursue of organizational aims (e.g., Chen, Chen, and Sheldon 2016).

The present paper is the first to examine the association between UPB and the leadership style that leverages the social identification processes within the workgroup, that is, identity leadership. Identity leaders craft the meaning of group membership, embody a shared sense of “who we are, what we do, and how we are expected to behave,” and inspire their followers

**TABLE 5** | Correlations between the investigated variables, Study 3 ( $N = 139$ ).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. UPB intention	—				
2. Identity leadership	0.24**	—			
3. Procedural justice	0.31***	0.72***	—		
4. Organizational identification	0.49***	0.63***	0.74***	—	
5. Socially desirable responding	0.20*	0.21*	0.14	0.29***	—

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**TABLE 6** | Regressions of UPB intention on identity leadership through the mediation of organizational identification, and on the interaction between identity leadership and procedural justice, Study 3 ( $N = 139$ ).

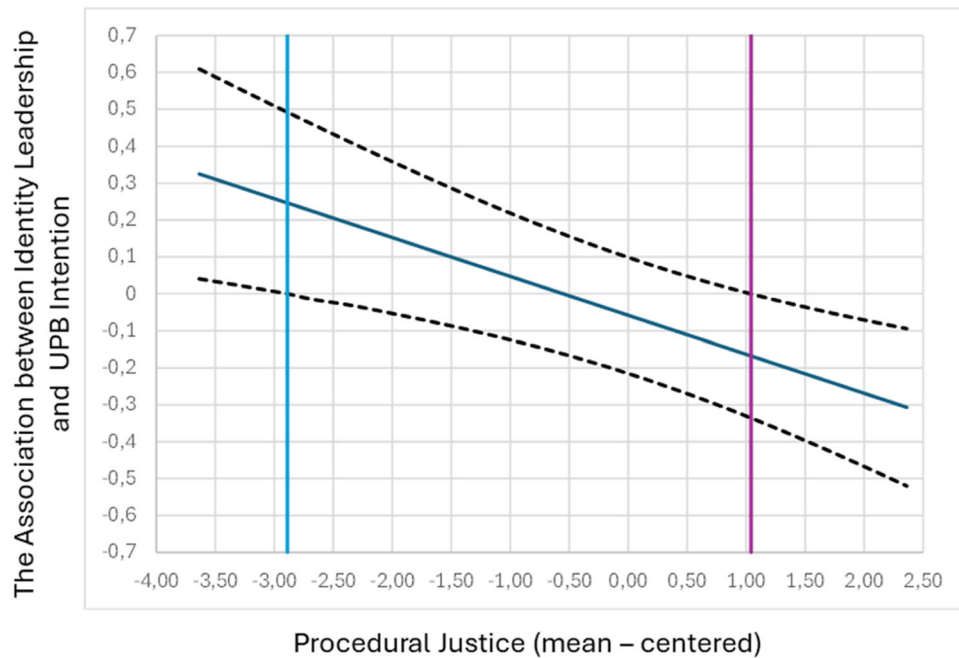
	Organizational identification						UPB intention					
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI		<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
					LL	UL					LL	UL
Constant	3.270	0.387	8.442	0.000	2.504	4.036						
Identity lead.	0.545	0.061	8.951	0.000	0.425	0.665						
Contract	0.259	0.224	1.156	0.249	-0.184	0.703						
Social desirability	0.180	0.091	1.975	0.050	0.000	0.360						
$R^2$	0.43											
Constant							1.554	0.459	3.384	0.001	0.645	2.462
Organizational id.							0.476	0.092	5.191	0.000	0.295	0.658
Identity lead.							-0.058	0.079	-0.735	0.464	-0.215	0.099
Procedural justice							-0.127	0.102	-1.247	0.214	-0.329	0.075
Id. lead. X Proc. Just.							-0.105	0.032	-3.276	0.001	-0.169	-0.042
Contract							0.088	0.204	0.432	0.666	-0.316	0.492
Social desirability							0.032	0.084	0.385	0.701	-0.134	0.199
$R^2$							0.31					

Note: Contract was coded as follows: permanent = 1; temporary = 0.

to behave consistently with that shared sense of “us” they have created. Identity leaders also nurture employees’ organizational identification thus driving them to work collectively in the name of the organization’s goals (Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2011, 2019; Van Dick et al. 2018). The present paper tests the idea that UPB intention may be associated with identity leadership based on two simultaneous processes. One process would be founded on identity leaders being perceived as exemplary group members, who embody the meaning employees associate with their group membership and inspire them to behave accordingly. As a core part of the meaning employees associate with their group membership, the present paper focuses on perceived procedural justice (Colquitt, Hill, and De Cremer 2023; Tyler and Lind 1992). Based on that process, identity leadership would be associated with employees’ UPB intention positively or negatively as a function of the level of procedural justice employees experience within their work group. The other process would stem from identity leaders strengthening employees’ organizational identification, through

which identity leadership would be associated with UPB, similar to other leadership styles already investigated as antecedents of UPB (Effelsberg, Solga, and Gurt 2014; Kim, Miao, and Park 2015). Thanks to three studies, the paper tests the hypotheses that identity leadership would be associated with employees’ UPB intention directly by interacting with procedural justice (Hp1) and, at the same time, indirectly, that is, through the mediation of organizational identification (Hp2).

As regards the interplay between identity leadership and procedural justice in their relationship with employees’ UPB intention, the three studies consistently showed that independently of employees’ organizational identification, identity leadership interacts negatively with procedural justice in its direct association with UPB intention, thus confirming Hp1. The Johnson–Neyman analyses indicated similar regions of significance at higher values of procedural justice across all three studies. In two out of three studies, the Johnson–Neyman analyses highlighted regions of significance also at lower values



**FIGURE 4** | The association between identity leadership and UPB intention as a function of procedural justice (Study 3). *Note:* The type of contract, socially desirable responding, and organizational identification were controlled for. The type of contract was coded as follows: permanent = 1; temporary = 0. The slope moved to significance when procedural justice was equal to or lower than  $-2.8898$  (corresponding to  $1.7481$ ) and equal to or higher than  $1.0405$  (corresponding to  $5.6784$ ).

of procedural justice. Although  $H_{p1}$  was not concerned with specific values of procedural justice as the moderator and thus they might not be given too weight (Finsaas and Goldstein 2021), future studies should investigate further the exact nature of the negative interaction between identity leadership and procedural justice to confirm both the negative association between identity leadership and UPB at higher values of procedural justice and the positive one at very low values of procedural justice.

Overall, the present paper provides consistent evidence that independently of participants' organizational identification, identity leadership can be associated negatively with UPB intention among the employees who experience a higher level of procedural justice. In other words, independently of organizational identification, among the employees who experience fair, transparent, and dignitous treatment within their workgroup, an identity leader, as an exemplary group member, would probably model and inspire the same standards of integer treatment and respectful interaction with others, which is likely to discourage employees' UPB intention. Studies 1 and 3 added that identity leadership can be associated with UPB intention also positively among those employees who experience very low levels of procedural justice within their work group. That is, very low standards of integrity and fairness would be available for those employees who experience devious and disrespectful treatment within their workgroup and, at the same time, perceive their leader as an exemplary group member. Those results are consistent with, and extend, Bryant and Merritt's (2021) finding that interpersonal justice is negatively associated with supervisor-focused UPB, once LMX relationship is controlled for. They are also consistent with previous findings that when employees perceive overall organizational justice, they are more likely to conform to ethical rules (Cropanzano and Stein 2009).

Further, they add to those findings that an organizational culture based on respect, integrity, and fair treatment is a necessary condition for identity leadership to discourage employees from enacting UPB. The findings obtained in the present paper suggest also that, independently of the mediation through organization identification, identity leadership may even encourage UPB if it is combined with very low levels of perceived procedural justice within the workgroup.

As regards the indirect association between identity leadership and UPB intention through the mediation of organizational identification, Studies 2 and 3 confirmed it, consistently with the findings of previous research focused on the relationship between other leadership styles and UPB (Effelsberg, Solga, and Gurt 2014; Kim, Miao, and Park 2015; Luan et al. 2023). However, that indirect association did not emerge in Study 1. As said above, the failure to observe the indirect association between identity leadership and UPB intention in Study 1 might be due to the unintended effect that the manipulation of identity leadership had on organizational identification. Future studies should design how to manipulate identity leadership in real-life contexts in ways that do not affect other variables that may be relevant to the study of the association between identity leadership and UPB.

The variables examined as antecedents of UPB intention, that is, identity leadership, organizational identification, and procedural justice, are all positively correlated with each other. As a consequence, alternative associations among those variables could be hypothesized. For example, one might hypothesize that the relationship between identity leadership and UPB intention is based on one process only, that is, on the mediating role played by organizational identification, with procedural justice moderating either the association between identity



leadership and organizational identification or the association between organizational identification and UPB intention. The interaction between identity leadership and procedural justice in predicting organizational identification never reached significance in any of the three studies (Study 1:  $b = -0.0285$ ,  $SE = 0.1576$ ,  $t = -0.1806$ ,  $p = 0.8571$ , 95% CI  $[-0.3411, 0.2841]$ ; Study 2:  $b = -0.0022$ ,  $SE = 0.0268$ ,  $t = -0.0821$ ,  $p = 0.9346$ , 95% CI  $[-0.0548, 0.0504]$ ; Study 3:  $b = 0.0364$ ,  $SE = 0.0302$ ,  $t = 1.2046$ ,  $p = 0.2305$ , 95% CI  $[-0.0234, 0.0963]$ ). The interaction between procedural justice and organizational identification in predicting UPB intention was significant and negative in Study 1 ( $b = -0.2367$ ,  $SE = 0.0678$ ,  $t = -3.4936$ ,  $p = 0.0007$ , 95% CI  $[-0.3711, -0.1023]$ ; index of moderated mediation =  $-0.2251$ ,  $SE = 0.1016$ , 95% CI  $[-0.4770, -0.0837]$ ) but not significant in Study 2 ( $b = -0.0579$ ,  $SE = 0.0312$ ,  $t = -1.8577$ ,  $p = 0.0639$ ; 95% CI  $[-0.1192, 0.0034]$ ; index of moderated mediation =  $-0.0201$ ,  $SE = 0.0132$ , 95% CI  $[-0.0469, 0.0046]$ ). In Study 3, organizational identification interacted negatively with procedural justice in predicting UPB ( $b = -0.0907$ ,  $SE = 0.0394$ ,  $t = -2.3003$ ,  $p = 0.0230$ , 95% CI  $[-0.1687, -0.0127]$ ) but the index of moderated mediation was not different from 0 (index of moderated mediation =  $-0.0495$ ,  $SE = 0.0272$ , 95% CI  $[-0.1056, 0.0021]$ ). Thus the evidence collected so far is inconsistent and inconclusive as regards the alternative hypothesis that identity leadership is associated with UPB intention based on one process only, that is, on its strengthening organizational identification. On the contrary, the present paper found consistent evidence that identity leadership is likely to be associated with UPB intention based on two simultaneous processes. One process is related to the meanings employees associate with their group membership and it takes place because identity leaders are perceived as exemplary group members, who embody those meanings and inspire employees to behave consistently with them. The other process is related to the strength of organizational identification and it unfolds thanks to identity leaders fostering it among their employees. That multiplicity of processes is consistent with the view of UPB as a kind of behavior that is constituted by two independent dimensions and that can thus be predicted by two distinct simultaneous processes. It is consistent also with the peculiarity of identity leadership as a leadership style that promotes organizational identification but whose contents are not fixed or pre-defined in advance. Anyway, the present paper is the first to investigate the relationship between identity leadership and UPB. So more studies are needed to investigate further whether identity leadership is related to UPB based on one process only or on two simultaneous processes.

The present paper deepens the knowledge about the leadership styles that may promote or discourage UPB by extending the investigation for the first time to identity leadership. As such, it contributes to the growing body of research that examines the association between UPB and the leadership approaches that do not have an explicit ethical component, such as empowering leadership (e.g., Dennerlein and Kirkman 2022). The present paper enlarges also the knowledge about identity leadership by examining a kind of behavior that so far has never been investigated as one of its possible outcomes. By showing that a discussible behavioral intention such as UPB intention may be promoted by identity leaders, it contributes to shedding light on the dark sides of this powerful leadership style and provides a

further matter of concern about its ethical implications. However, the present findings also highlight that in given conditions, identity leaders can discourage employees from UPB, which leads to the key role procedural justice is likely to play in the process that may lead to UPB. The moderating role procedural justice plays in the association between identity leadership and employees' UPB intention adds a piece of knowledge to the already voluminous body of research about the consequences of procedural justice in organizations, and it highlights once again the importance of creating and promoting a justice culture within organizations (Colquitt, Hill, and De Cremer 2023).

The present paper is affected by several limitations that future research should address. First identity leadership was examined as a whole, without making any distinction among its four constitutive dimensions. Future studies could examine whether the four dimensions of identity leadership are associated with UPB in different ways.

Second, in the present paper, I collected ratings of participants' self-reported intention to engage in UPB rather than measures of their actual UPB. This is quite common in research about organizational behaviors since behavioral intentions are usually accepted as strong predictors of actual behavior and research about UPB does not make an exception (Mo et al. 2023). Moreover, this is the first paper that investigates the association between UPB and identity leadership. Thus future research is surely needed to test whether the results here observed about UPB intention can be extended to actual UPB.

Third, in cross-sectional studies common method variance can be a concern. However, the interaction effects observed between identity leadership and procedural justice in their relationship with UPB intention emerged consistently across the three studies. This is unlikely to be due to common method variance because participants are not able to anticipate interaction effects (Siemsen, Roth, and Oliveira 2010; Spector 2019). Moreover, in all the three studies, a confirmatory factor analysis established that the investigated constructs were empirically distinct. Furthermore, in Study 3 socially desirable responding was controlled for. Anyway, surely future longitudinal studies are needed to corroborate the obtained results.

Recent research has highlighted that in organizations, unethical behavior may be enacted to benefit also the direct supervisor and other team members (Mo et al. 2023). Thus future research could investigate how identity leadership is associated with the unethical behaviors that are targeted at the direct supervisors or other team members. Indeed, identity leaders connect with employees based on a "sense of us" they share with them as members of the same group and are perceived as exemplary group members. Thus identity leadership could be associated also with the kinds of unethical pro-social behavior specifically targeted at the direct supervisor or at members of the same workgroup.

The present paper focuses on procedural justice as a moderator of the direct association between identity leadership and UPB. Future studies could extend the investigation to other meanings organizational members may associate with their experience of

group membership since they could play as moderators in the direct association between identity leadership and UPB. Other experiences of organizational membership such as, for example, perceived organizational politics or perceived risk of social exclusion, might play a similar moderating role (Thau et al. 2015; Valle, Kacmar, and Zivnuska 2019).

To conclude, the present paper suggests that identity leadership appears a double-edged sword in the relationship with UPB. On the one hand, it is likely to promote it by strengthening employees' organizational identification. On the other hand, it is likely to discourage or encourage it as a function of the level of procedural justice employees experience within their workgroup. The pandemic along with the economic and socio-political crises and the uncertainty due to fast and continuing technological changes has brought about increased competitiveness among organizations and frequent organizational downsizing and restructuring. At the same time, many employees are striving for better arrangements including hybrid work, more growth opportunities, and better work-life balance. Employees are more likely to engage in UPB when competitiveness is enhanced (Chen, Chen, and Sheldon 2016) as well as when their status within the organization is uncertain (Thau et al. 2015) or when they suffer from increased job insecurity due to organizational crisis (Genqiang et al. 2024). Thus there is a plausible risk that in current contexts, UPB will become more and more frequent, bringing about a host of negative consequences both for the organizations and for the communities. The present research suggests that ensuring a high level of procedural justice within the workgroup may be one of the critical conditions that, combined with a powerful leadership style such as identity leadership, may weaken employees' intention to engage in UPB, thus promoting long-term organizational success as well as community thriving.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the corresponding author.

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