Knowledge sharing and unethical pro-organizational behavior in a Mexican organization: Moderating effects of dispositional resistance to change and perceived organizational politics

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Abstract

Purpose—This article investigates the relationship of knowledge sharing with unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), as well as the potential augmenting effects of two factors: employees' dispositional resistance to change and perceptions of organizational politics.

Design/methodology/approach—Quantitative data come from employees in a Mexican manufacturing organization. The hypotheses tests use hierarchical regression analysis.

Findings—Knowledge sharing increases the risk that employees engage in UPB. This effect is most salient when employees tend to resist organizational change or believe the organizational climate is highly political.

Practical implications—Organizations should discourage UPB with their ranks, and to do so, they must realize that employees' likelihood to engage in it may be enhanced by their access to peer knowledge. Employees with such access may feel more confident that they can protect their organization against external scrutiny through such unethical means. This process can be activated by both personal and organizational factors that make UPB appear more desirable.

Originality/value—This study contributes to organizational research by providing a deeper understanding of the risk that employees will engage in UPB, according to the extent of their knowledge sharing. It also explicates when knowledge sharing might have the greatest impact, both for good and for ill.

Keywords—unethical pro-organizational behavior; knowledge sharing; resistance to change; perceived organizational politics

Paper type—Research paper

Introduction

Business ethics research emphasizes the significant impact of employees' unethical behaviors on the business landscape (Lawrence and Kacmar, 2017; Vardi and Weiner, 1996; Zuber, 2015). Unethical behavior undermines public trust and is costly to organizational reputations and society overall (Martin et al., 2014; Treviño et al., 2006). In light of the prevalence of unethical behavior in many organizations though, researchers have sought a better understanding of which factors spur such behaviors, such as the love of money (Tang and Liu, 2012), job insecurity (Lawrence and Kacmar, 2017), or organizational cultures (Campbell and Göritz, 2014). Even though unethical behaviors are essentially harmful for organizations, the notion of unethical *pro-organizational* behavior (UPB) acknowledges that some employees engage in such behaviors in a misguided effort to serve the interests of their organization (Chen et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2015; Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Such UPB is not limited to extreme activities such as falsifying documents or committing accounting fraud (Amernic and Craig 2010); it also includes offering a positive referral of an incompetent employee to another company, lying to customers about product imperfections, or withholding internal information from the public (Kalshoven et al., 2016; Miao et al., 2013; Umphress and Bingham 2011). An important motive for these activities, from employees' perspective, is to help the organization meet its short-term goals (Chen et al., 2016; Umphress and Bingham 2011).

In particular, UPB might be prevalent in organizations subjected to external scrutiny by stakeholders in terms of how they operate or make decisions (Baek and Kim, 2014; Guerci and Shani, 2013). Employees in such organizations might anticipate rewards from their employer if they successfully hide negative information from external stakeholders (Effelsberg et al., 2014; Umphress et al., 2010). In this sense, UPB might appear beneficial; employees believe that they

will receive positive credit by standing up for the organization, even though doing so violates standards for proper conduct (Umphress et al., 2010). Previous studies that seek to explain such unethical behavior focus mostly on factors that spur employees' *motivation* to engage—such as organizational identification (Chen et al., 2016; Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Umphress et al., 2010), affective commitment (Matherne and Litchfield, 2012), positive social exchange relationships (Umphress and Bingham, 2011), or supportive leadership styles (Graham et al., 2015; Kalshoven et al., 2016)—but it ignores their *ability* to perform such unethical acts. For this study, we propose that employees who seek to protect their organization against external charges may lack sufficient knowledge about how to provide this protection single-handedly (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Accordingly, their well-intended but morally questionable UPB might be more likely when employees believe that they can overcome their knowledge deficiencies through extensive knowledge-sharing efforts with peers (Wang and Noe, 2010).

Understanding this ability component of UPB is critical to help organizations discourage UPB within their ranks. These behaviors pose significant threats. In addition to the direct harms that UPB can cause for external stakeholders, such as customers and investors, it can evoke negative outcomes for the organization, in the form of reputational damage, compromised trust, and even lawsuits (Graham et al. 2015; Tian and Peterson, 2016; Umphress et al. 2010). Undertaking UPB can harm the employees too, in that they might suffer from personal reputation losses if true information about the organization comes to light, have compromised career prospects beyond their current employment, and experience damage to their mental well-being (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Vadera and Pratt, 2013). To avoid these negative outcomes, organizations need to be able to recognize the presence of UPB, which might not be uncommon,

and understand how and why some employees may mistakenly perceive UPB as an acceptable method to help the employer thrive in its external marketplace (Umphress and Bingham 2011).

In support of this effort, we propose that UPB might be more likely to the extent that employees feel more confident about their *ability* to protect their organization against external charges of malpractice, because they can tap relevant knowledge that resides within the organization (Matherne and Litchfield, 2012; Umphress and Bingham, 2010). That is, the tendency of employees to undertake UPB might be higher when they also engage in intensive knowledge sharing with other organizational members, defined as the extent to which employees regularly communicate with one another (De Clercq et al., 2016; Wang and Noe, 2010). Previous research typically emphasizes the positive outcomes of such knowledge sharing, which can lead to effective decision making (Devine, 1999), enhanced creativity (Gong et al., 2013; Kessel et al., 2012), and better job performance (Quigley et al., 2007). To complement this research line, we argue that the extent to which employees engage in knowledge sharing with colleagues also might have a negative side effect, in the form of UPB. Even if employees' access to a wider set of peer knowledge enables them to understand how they can contribute to their organization's well-being in a positive manner (Gong et al., 2013; Grant, 1996; Kogut and Zander, 1992), we propose that it also might inform and enhance their ability to create new insights about unethical ways to help their organization when it is subjected to scrutiny from external stakeholders.

Contributions

This study contributes to research at the nexus of pro-organizational behavior and ethical decision making by focusing on the hitherto unexplored role of employees' knowledge sharing in determining the extent to which they undertake UPB. As mentioned, previous research into the drivers of UPB has mostly focused on the direct effects of motivational factors, such as

organizational identification or commitment (Chen et al., 2016; Matherne and Litchfield, 2012), without considering factors that might increase employees' ability to engage in this behavior. By acknowledging that employees' access to peer knowledge might spur their UPB, we seek to help organizations recognize that employees' knowledge-sharing activities may inform their perceptions of the *feasibility* of protecting their employer against external scrutiny using unethical means (Cabrera et al., 2006; Grant, 1996). By identifying UPB as a possible outcome of knowledge sharing, we also seek to complement the limited research that acknowledges the potentially negative outcomes of extensive knowledge sharing for organizations—such as generating groupthink (Janis, 1962) or unwanted information leakage (Anand and Goyal, 2009)—and that stands in contrast with the prevailing focus on positive behavioral outcomes, such as enhanced innovation and creativity levels (De Clercq et al., 2016; Gong et al., 2013).

Moreover, organizations need to understand *when* knowledge sharing might be most likely to escalate into negative work behaviors. We propose that the risk that knowledge sharing translates into enhanced UPB may be more prominent when employees are *motivated* to protect their organization against external scrutiny by leveraging relevant peer knowledge (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). To establish this contribution, we propose contingent effects of two critical factors: (1) employees' dispositional resistance to change, or the extent to which they have a negative orientation toward organizational change (Oreg and Sverdlik, 2011), and (2) their perceptions of organizational politics, or beliefs that organizational decision-making processes are based on self-serving motives or favoritism (Abbas et al., 2014). First, dispositional resistance to change is a personal orientation that captures whether employees tend to experience change as harmful to their daily functioning (Oreg and Sverdlik, 2011). We focus on its emotional aspect, which speaks to the stress and discomfort that employees may experience in

response to any changes that they anticipate for their organization (Oreg, 2013).[1] This personal factor may inform the desirability of applying relevant knowledge to UPB, because UBP prevents organizations from having to change their current practices in response to external scrutiny (Graham et al., 2015). Second, perceptions of organizational politics capture employees' beliefs that the organizational climate is strongly political and marked by self-serving tendencies that support a "behind-the-scenes" mentality (Abbas et al., 2014; Kacmar and Ferris, 1991). Such politicized organizational environments may make the translation of organizational knowledge into UPB more attractive, because UPB likely appears more acceptable in such environments (Kacmar and Baron, 1999).

Other factors clearly could inform the relationship between knowledge sharing and UPB, but in selecting these two contingent factors, we acknowledge their similar effect, in that they both increase the perceived *desirability* for employees to leverage insights gained from their knowledge-sharing efforts in UPB (Cabrera et al., 2006; Grant, 1996). Moreover, these two contingencies provide a parsimonious yet comprehensive view of how both personal *and* organizational factors might increase the perceived attractiveness of applying relevant knowledge to UPB. Finally, by considering how these negative factors moderate the anticipated usefulness of knowledge sharing for UPB, we extend previous business ethics research that (1) notes the moderating roles of *positive* factors, such as employees' moral identity (Matherne and Litchfield, 2012) or strong employee–leader relationships (Miao et al., 2013), for predicting UPB, or (2) has focused on the *direct* effects of negative factors on unethical work behaviors,

[1] In light of our theoretical focus on explaining the factors that invigorate the perceived usefulness of knowledge sharing for UPB, we define dispositional resistance to change not in terms of employees' reactions to a managed change process but rather their anticipated reaction if their organization had to change its current practices, due to external pressures.

such as interpersonal conflict (Fox et al., 2001), interpersonal unfairness (Yang et al., 2013), or destructive leadership (Schyns and Schilling, 2013).

Relevance of study context

To establish these contributions, we investigate a company in Mexico and thereby respond to calls for more empirical investigations of unethical behaviors in less commonly studied, non-Western settings (e.g., De Clercq et al., 2014; Tang and Liu, 2012; Zhao and Xu, 2013). Compared with the more frequently investigated U.S. setting, people in a collectivistic country such as Mexico strongly value social relationships (Hofstede et al., 2010), so knowledge sharing among employees might be a particularly important enabler of behaviors that seek to contribute to the well-being of the organization, even if these behaviors do not follow socially accepted norms. Moreover, the culture in Mexico is marked by a general tendency to avoid uncertain situations (Hofstede et al., 2010), so people's resistance to change may be a particularly important trigger for translating their knowledge-sharing efforts into UPB. Similarly, the higher power distance that marks Mexican culture (Hofstede et al., 2010) implies that employees likely experience strong normative pressure from powerful organizational members to engage in activities that help protect the organization, even if such protection efforts might be unethical. The core issue of this study—the impact of dispositional resistance to change and perceived organizational politics on the role of knowledge sharing in spurring UPB—thus should be particularly salient in this study context, as well as offering great practical relevance for other Latin American countries whose cultural profiles are similar to Mexico's.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

The study of UPB is a pertinent issue for many organizations, because this behavior informs how employees and their organization relate to various external stakeholders, including

customers, other business partners, and society in general (Graham et al., 2015; Umphress and Bingham, 2011). In its essence, UPB harms external stakeholders and society, as well as organizations and employees. Hiding negative information ultimately may lead to irreparable reputation losses for both employees and their employers (Graham et al., 2015); for employees specifically, it might be experienced as highly stressful and diminish their chances of finding alternative employment if their unethical behavior became public (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Nonetheless, undertaking UPB also might provide short-term benefits, from the perspective of the employees. If they put the interests of their employer ahead of their moral obligation to divulge possibly negative information about it, they seek to keep organizational malpractices from coming to light, to protect the organization's competitive position (Vadera and Pratt, 2003). Employees might feel motivated to protect their organization against external scrutiny in the belief that the organization will reciprocate such behaviors, by rewarding them financially or accelerating their career progress (Umphress et al., 2010),

Once employees come to believe that they can benefit from engaging in UPB, they still confront a complex process associated with protecting the organization against external scrutiny. Their anticipation of the success of their efforts might depend on whether they have detailed knowledge about how possible malpractices come about and are manifest in the organization's daily functioning (Vadera and Pratt, 2013). Such knowledge is difficult to achieve single-handedly. Following a knowledge-based logic (Cabrera et al., 2006; Wang and Noe, 2010), we propose that employees might feel more confident that they can overcome the challenge of knowledge deficiencies, when seeking to protect their organization against external scrutiny, to the extent that they have access to relevant organizational knowledge.

We focus in particular on employees' knowledge-sharing efforts, or the extent to which they regularly communicate (De Clercq et al., 2016; Wang and Noe, 2010). According to the knowledge-based view, frequent sharing of knowledge is critical for the creation of *new* knowledge (Chiang et al., 2015; Grant, 1996; Levin and Cross, 2004); such extensive knowledge sharing also might provide employees with critical insights into how they can defend their organization against external scrutiny (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Moreover, the translation of knowledge-sharing efforts into enhanced UPB may be stronger to the extent that employees believe they can benefit personally from this process (Cabrera et al., 2006; Wang and Noe, 2010). In this sense, we consider how two contingent factors may influence the personal gains that employees anticipate to receive from applying their collective knowledge bases to UPB: (1) a natural disposition to resist change and (2) perceptions of a politicized organizational climate.

Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical framework and its constitutive hypotheses. The baseline relationship pertains to the link between employees' knowledge sharing and UPB, moderated by the two contingency factors. In the next sections, we explain why knowledge sharing should spur UPB and why this effect may be greater among employees with higher dispositional resistance to change and stronger perceptions of organizational politics.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Knowledge sharing and UPB

Our baseline hypothesis predicts a positive relationship between employees' knowledge sharing and UPB. When employees openly share knowledge with organizational peers, they might be better equipped to identify effective solutions that protect their organization against external scrutiny (Chiang et al., 2015; Wang and Noe, 2010). Such solutions tend to require a

deep understanding of how the organization operates, so employees who communicate only sporadically probably cannot identify these solutions (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). Thus, extensive knowledge flows likely *enable* employees to recognize a broader set of solution possibilities for certain problems that their organization might encounter in its relationships with external stakeholders, which in turn should increase the perceived feasibility of success in these endeavors (Cabrera et al., 2006; De Clercq et al., 2016). That is, employees should feel more confident that they can find effective solutions to the external pressures that their organization might face when they are in a position to assess and compare different decision alternatives simultaneously, as might be achieved through frequent knowledge sharing with organizational peers (Wang and Noe, 2010).

Moreover, engaging in unethical behaviors that protect the organization may be risky and have negative consequences for employees in the long term—by undermining their personal reputations or compromising their employment mobility (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Vadera and Pratt, 2013), for example—but knowledge-sharing efforts with other organizational members may provide insights into ways to minimize or avoid these negative consequences. Previous research similarly indicates that employees who can draw from wider knowledge bases are less likely to refrain from risky or controversial work behaviors (Chiang et al., 2015; Gong et al., 2013). Accordingly, in the presence of greater knowledge sharing with other members, employees might be better positioned to anticipate and reduce negative reactions to their controversial behaviors, such that their propensity to engage in UPB should increase. Conversely, employees who cannot draw from the support of their colleagues through extensive knowledge sharing might be less likely to focus on activities that seem risky and controversial (De Clercq et al., 2016). In short, knowledge sharing endows employees with a greater ability to

gain insights and support from other members, in terms of finding adequate solutions that protect their organization against external pressures or protecting themselves against the personal risks associated with UPB.

> **Hypothesis 1:** There is a positive relationship between employees' knowledge sharing and UPB.

Moderating effect of dispositional resistance to change

We also hypothesize that the perceived usefulness of knowledge sharing for UPB may be higher among employees with a stronger dispositional resistance to change. These employees should be particularly motivated to leverage their collective knowledge bases, in the form of UPB, because protecting their organization against external scrutiny diminishes the likelihood that the organization must undergo significant changes in response to such scrutiny (Graham et al., 2015; Umphress and Bingham, 2011). In line with a knowledge-based perspective (Cabrera et al., 2006; Woe and Noe, 2010), we predict that the anticipated usefulness of leveraging insights gained from knowledge sharing into behaviors that help the organization retain its current practices should increase when employees exhibit greater dispositional resistance to change, because they consider any change in these practices a significant threat (Oreg, 2003). Conversely, if they do not feel threatened by organizational change, employees will be less motivated to allocate their collective knowledge bases to unethical activities that prevent the organization from needing to change its practices in response to external pressures.

Moreover, the more uncomfortable employees are with organizational change, the more valuable it may appear to them to gather other organizational members' insights into how to protect their shared organization against external scrutiny (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). The positive interaction between knowledge sharing and dispositional resistance to change, as a means to explain UPB, thus might also arise because employees perceive sharing insights with

colleagues as a useful tactic to *convince* their peers of the need to find collective solutions to the threat that is represented by the expectation that their organization might need to change its current practices in response to external pressures (Vadera and Pratt, 2013). Conversely, if their dispositional resistance to change is low, employees should be less concerned about whether their current situation might change (Mulki et al., 2012), so the relative attractiveness of convincing other members to protect the organizational status quo through UPB may diminish. A lower dispositional resistance to change among employees thus should lead to a weaker positive effect of knowledge sharing on UPB.

> **Hypothesis 2**: The positive relationship between employees' knowledge sharing and UPB is moderated by their dispositional resistance to change, such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of dispositional resistance to change.

Moderating effect of perceived organizational politics

The anticipated usefulness of leveraging insights gained from knowledge sharing to undertake UPB also might increase to the extent that employees operate in strongly politicized organizational environments, such that they develop a belief that their UPB would be endorsed by organizational decision makers (Kacmar and Baron, 1999). When employees sense that they operate in an organizational climate in which decision making is predicated on self-serving tendencies, they may become particularly keen to leverage collective knowledge bases in support of unethical behaviors that are consistent with these political tendencies (Umphress et al., 2010). When they exchange extensive knowledge, employees become aware of how other members operate and make decisions in the strongly politicized organizational environment (Bouckenooghe, 2012; De Clercq et al., 2016), so leveraging knowledge-sharing activities to engage in unethical behaviors that mirror such environments may appear particularly desirable (Cabrera et al., 2006). Conversely, if the organizational climate appears *not* very political,

employees likely perceive misalignment between unethical behaviors and the organizational culture (Abbas et al., 2014), so the perceived usefulness of leveraging their combined knowledge bases to develop UPB should be lower.

More generally, the proposed invigorating effect of perceptions of perceived organizational politics reflects arguments from previous research that strongly politicized work environments are not always harmful; they even can benefit employees, to the extent that access to relevant peer knowledge helps them improve their personal situation (De Clercq et al., 2016; Perrewé et al., 2000). As a complement to this research, we predict how and why employees might engage in behaviors to protect their organization against external scrutiny. The allocation of their collective knowledge bases to UPB should appear particularly desirable if other members can provide insights into how the self-serving tendencies that mark the organizational climate also might apply to efforts to protect the organization against external charges (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002). The more political the organizational climate is—as manifested, for example, in people's tendency to hide certain information to advance their own interests—the more useful it may seem for employees to leverage their colleagues' political skills, through extensive knowledge sharing, in the form of UPB (Ferris et al., 2000). But in the absence of a strongly politicized climate, other organizational members likely cannot provide useful insights into the best ways to undertake UPB, so the perceived value of leveraging knowledge sharing for such behaviors should decrease.

> **Hypothesis 3:** The positive relationship between employees' knowledge sharing and their UPB is moderated by their perceived organizational politics, such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of perceived organizational politics.

Research method

Sample and data collection

We collected survey data from employees who work in a chemical company in Mexico that manufactures plastic products. The company operates in a very competitive environment, facing both foreign and local competitors that seek to survive in this relatively stable industry. Previous research suggests that in organizations that encounter significant external challenges due to intense industrial competition, employees may go out of their way to satisfy the competitive needs of their organization, even if it implies undertaking activities that violate socially acceptable norms (Chen et al., 2016; Wildschut et al., 2002). The organization under study explicitly does not promote behaviors that violate social norms, yet the external competitive pressure that it faces suggests that some of its employees may be motivated to engage in UPB, because they believe that the well-being or survival of their organization could be at stake if they did not do so. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that some of the employees we survey believe, to varying extents, that a given act of UPB could be instrumental for their organization's ability to stay in business, and its precarious competitive situation may override their personal or societal morality considerations (Chen et al., 2016).

The nature of the company's internal operations—an integrated system that seeks to anchor employees' job activities throughout the entire value chain, from inbound logistics to product delivery—also demands a certain level of interdependence among employees to execute their job tasks. Therefore, they already experience a strong need to share their respective knowledge bases. For example, the organization has implemented an integrated quality control system that requires employees to coordinate their efforts to meet strict competition, ranging from the input side of the value chain (i.e., purchase and processing of raw materials) to the delivery of high-quality end products to industrial customers. Overall, this organizational context is pertinent for investigating how extensive knowledge sharing may be leveraged to undertake

UPB, as well as how this process might be invigorated by the presence of relevant individual and organizational factors.

For the data collection, the survey was first prepared in English and then translated into Spanish. To ensure validity and avoid cultural bias, the Spanish version was back-translated into English (Brislin et al., 1973). We assessed any discrepancies between the two English versions, which led to the final Spanish version. We also pretested a preliminary version of the survey with five employees who did not participate in the actual data collection. By incorporating the feedback from these employees into a revised version, we improved the survey's readability and data quality. Participants were guaranteed complete confidentiality, assured that there were no right or wrong answers, and asked to answer the questions as honestly as possible; these measures minimized the chances that their responses would suffer from social desirability or acquiescence biases (Spector, 2006).

The final survey version was distributed to a random selection of 200 employees, and we received 157 responses. The high response rate (79%) reflects the strong support for this study from the organization's top management, as well as a comment in the cover letter accompanying the survey that the insights generated from the study could create a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities that employees may encounter in the daily execution of their job tasks. The cover letter also emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary and that their organization would not receive any information about who participated. In terms of the respondents' characteristics, 40% were women, they had worked for the organization for 14 years on average, 47% occupied a primarily operational function, and 40% had supervisory responsibilities.

Measures

The measurement items came from previous research and used Likert scales ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”).

Unethical pro-organizational behavior. To assess the extent to which employees engage in behaviors to protect their organization against external scrutiny, we applied the six-item scale of UPB developed by Umphress and colleagues (2010). This scale captures employees’ willingness to undertake unethical behaviors that serve the interests of their organization; it has been used in various studies to predict UPB (e.g., Chen et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2015; Kalshoven et al., 2016; Miao et al., 2013). Two sample items are, “If it would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company's products or services to customers and clients” and “If needed, I would conceal information from the public that could be damaging to my organization” (Cronbach’s alpha = .82). The application of a self-reported measure is common and perhaps even preferable, because employees themselves are best positioned to assess the range of UPB in which they might engage (Effelsberg et al., 2014; Miao et al., 2013; Umphress et al., 2010). Self-reported measures also tend to generate superior assessments of behaviors that might be perceived as controversial (Jones, 2009).

Knowledge sharing. We used a four-item scale to assess the extent to which employees engage in extensive knowledge sharing with other organizational members, drawn from previous research (De Clercq et al., 2016). For example, respondents indicated their agreement with the following two statements: “There is a high level of knowledge sharing between my colleagues and myself” and “My colleagues and I regularly communicate with each other” (Cronbach’s alpha = .87).

Dispositional resistance to change. In light of our focus on the emotional aspect of how employees tend to experience organizational changes, we relied on Oreg’s (2003) four-item scale

of emotional reactions to imposed change. Two items were: "If I were to be informed that there's going to be a significant change regarding the way things are done at work, I would probably feel stressed" and "When things don't go according to plans, it stresses me out" (Cronbach's alpha = .80).

Perceived organizational politics. To measure employees' beliefs that organizational decision making is marked by self-serving behaviors, we applied a four-item scale of perceived organizational politics used in previous research (De Clercq et al., 2016). Sample items included, "There is a lot of self-serving behavior going on in the company" and "People are working behind the scenes to ensure that they get their piece of the pie" (Cronbach's alpha = .80).

Control variables. Our models also featured several control variables: *gender* (measured as a dummy variable, with male as the base category), *education* (3-point scale: secondary, post-secondary non-university, and post-secondary university); *organizational tenure* (measured in years); *job function*, which reflected whether employees' responsibilities were primarily operational (e.g., production, quality control) or supportive (e.g., accounting, human resource management), with the latter as the base category; and *job level* (i.e., whether employees had supervisory responsibilities).

A confirmatory factor analysis revealed significant factor loadings for each of the measurement items on their corresponding constructs ($t > 2.0$, $p < .05$), in support of convergent validity (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988). To assess discriminant validity, we compared the chi-square fit indices for the constrained and unconstrained models that corresponded with each of the six pairs resulting from the four constructs. The correlations between the two constructs were set to equal 1 in the constrained models but set free in the unconstrained counterparts. We found

significant chi-square differences for each pair ($\Delta\chi^2(1) > 3.84$), indicating the presence of discriminant validity (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

To check for common method bias, we undertook two tests. First, Harman's single-factor test revealed that the first extracted factor explained only 26% of the total variance in the data, which suggests common method bias was not a major concern (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). Second, a confirmatory factor analysis revealed that the fit of a model in which all items loaded on a single factor was significantly worse than that of the aforementioned four-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2(6) = 627.72$, $p < .01$). This result further alleviated concerns about common method bias. In addition, previous studies note that conceptual models such as ours that rely on moderating effects are less subject to common method bias, because it is challenging for respondents to anticipate or recognize those effects (Brockner et al., 1997; Simons and Peterson, 2000).

Results

In Table 1, we provide the zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics, and in Table 2, we report the regression results. Model 1 included the control variables; Model 2 added knowledge sharing and the two moderators, dispositional resistance to change and perceived organizational politics; and Models 3 and 4 added the two interaction terms, knowledge sharing × dispositional resistance to change and knowledge sharing × perceived organizational politics, respectively. Adding multiple interaction terms separately is appropriate, because the inclusion of multiple interaction terms in a single model might mask the true moderating effects (Covin et al., 2006; De Clercq et al., 2014; Zahra and Hayton 2008). For both interaction terms, we applied the well-established practice of mean centering the variables before calculating their product (Aiken and West, 1991).

Insert Tables 1 and 2about here

Consistent with our argument that employees' perceived ability to protect their organization against external scrutiny about possible malpractice is enhanced by their access to peer knowledge, in Model 2, knowledge sharing relates positively to UPB ($\beta = .23$, $p < .01$), in support of Hypothesis 1. Even though these relationships are not explicitly part of our theoretical framework, Model 2 also reveals direct, positive links of dispositional resistance to change ($\beta = .33$, $p < .01$) and perceived organizational politics ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$) with UPB.

Models 3 and 4 support the hypothesized invigorating effects of dispositional resistance to change ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$) and perceived organizational politics ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$) on the relationship between knowledge sharing and UPB. The perceived usefulness of extensive knowledge sharing as a means to spur unethical behaviors that benefit the organization is greater when employees exhibit a higher dispositional resistance to change (Hypothesis 2) and perceive higher levels of organizational politics (Hypothesis 3). To explain these interaction effects, we plot the effects of knowledge sharing on UPB at high versus low levels of the two moderators in Figures 2 and 3, respectively, complemented with a simple slope analysis (Aiken and West, 1991). The results in Figure 2 reveal that the relationship between knowledge sharing and UPB is positive at high levels of dispositional resistance to change ($\beta = .32$, $p < .01$) but insignificant at low levels ($\beta = .10$, *ns*). Similarly, Figure 3 indicates that the relationship between knowledge sharing and UPB is positive when perceptions of organizational politics are high ($\beta = .28$, $p < .01$) but not significant when these perceptions are low ($\beta = .06$, *ns*). These results further corroborate Hypotheses 2 and 3.

Insert Figures 2 and 3 about here

Discussion

We have sought to contribute to extant research by investigating how employees' knowledge-sharing efforts with colleagues might influence their propensity to engage in unethical behavior that protects their organization against external scrutiny, as well as when this process might be more prominent. Undertaking UPB can lead to organizational and personal reputation losses (Graham et al., 2015; Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Vadera and Pratt, 2013), yet UPB might seem attractive to employees in the short term. For example, previous research suggests that engaging in UBP may appear acceptable and desirable to the extent that employees' decision making is driven by intuition and based on post hoc moral reasoning, even if the approach ultimately undermines the quality of organizational decision making (Rausch and Anderson, 2011; Sonenshein, 2007). To discourage UPB within their ranks, organizations must first recognize that some of their employees are likely to engage in such activities, in the belief that they are serving the interests of their organization by doing so (Umphress and Bingham 2011). To complement prior research that has focused mostly on factors that spur employees' motivation to engage in UPB, we have examined a critical factor that informs their *ability* to do so. With a basis in the knowledge-based perspective (Cabrera et al., 2006; Grant, 1996; Wang and Noe, 2010), we considered how knowledge sharing may spur UPB, as well as how two contingency factors may increase the risk that this process unfolds: (1) employees' natural tendency to resist change and (2) beliefs that organizational decision making is marked by self-serving tendencies. Our findings support the theoretical predictions.

Employees might believe that protecting the organization against external charges can generate personal gains, in that their employer will reward them for this behavior (Umphress et al., 2010). Yet employees also might lack confidence that they can be successful in these

activities (Matherne and Litchfield, 2012), and to overcome this challenge, we propose that they might aim to share relevant knowledge with other organizational members (Wang and Noe, 2010). Employees who regularly communicate with their colleagues may become more convinced of the feasibility of their efforts to protect their organization's interests against external scrutiny (Cabrera et al., 2006; Wang and Noe, 2010). For example, combining personal knowledge with peers' knowledge may leave employees more confident that they can hide negative information from external stakeholders, which would enhance their perceptions of their ability to help the organization (Floyd and Lane, 2000). In addition, sharing knowledge with other members might generate *novel* ideas among employees about how to limit unethical behaviors from going public or compromising their future career prospects (Chiang et al., 2015).

The results also show that the positive relationship between knowledge sharing and UPB is stronger when employees believe that applying the insights they derive from knowledge-sharing efforts to protect their organization is an attractive or desirable tactic (Cabrera et al., 2006; Wang and Noe, 2010), whether due to their natural resistance to organizational change (Oreg, 2003) or their belief in the prevalence of politics in their organization (Abbas et al., 2014). To the extent that employees prefer the organizational status quo or recognize the salience of self-serving tendencies in their organization, the anticipated value of applying their collective knowledge bases to UPB increases significantly. First, protecting the organization from external pressures increases the likelihood that the organization can continue its current activities, so the application of insights derived from knowledge sharing with peers to engage in UPB is attractive among employees who favor the status quo (Oreg, 2013). Second, leveraging their collective knowledge bases in the form of pro-organizational behavior that violates certain ethical standards

may appear more acceptable and useful when this behavior aligns with a highly political organizational climate (Kacmar and Baron, 1999).

From a theoretical perspective, the invigorating effects of the two contingency factors reflect the argument that the application of valuable knowledge to certain work behaviors is more likely in conditions that make such knowledge applications more desirable (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002). When employees worry that their current positions may be undermined by organizational changes or believe that questionable behaviors are accepted in the organization, it may seem more attractive to them to leverage insights gained from knowledge sharing in the form of UPB (Umphress et al., 2010). Notably, our focus on the invigorating roles of dispositional resistance to change and perceived organizational politics underscores the *incremental* role of knowledge sharing in spurring UPB. Empirically, this incremental contribution reveals itself in slope differences at different levels of the contingency factors. The pattern of the interaction plots in Figures 2 and 3, together with the associated slope analysis, indicate that extensive knowledge sharing does not spur UPB when employees perceive little value in this behavior. Thus, extensive knowledge sharing has a positive relationship with UPB only if the relevant contingency factors make this behavior appear sufficiently attractive.

Limitations and future research directions

This study contains some limitations that offer opportunities for further research. First, the focal relationship between knowledge sharing and UPB might work in the opposite direction, in that the insights gained from efforts to protect their organization may prompt employees to engage in further knowledge sharing with their colleagues, to make their efforts even more effective. Longitudinal research designs could examine the causal processes that link knowledge sharing with UPB explicitly, as well as the contingency conditions that inform this process. In a

related vein, our UBP measurement scale captures employees' *willingness* to undertake unethical behaviors that protect their organization, rather than their actual behaviors. Continued studies could include supervisors' assessments of employees' UPB or company records that might detail such behavior.

Second, we conceptualized and measured knowledge sharing as the frequency, not the quality, of communication with other members; we also did not capture which specific issues employees communicate about when seeking insights that might help them protect their organization against external scrutiny. Continued research could distinguish different knowledge types—such as general versus specialized (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998) or explicit versus implicit (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995)—to determine which types have a more prominent role in spurring UBP. To complement our focus on the *concurrent* effects of knowledge sharing and two contingent factors (dispositional resistance to change and perceived organizational politics), future research also might examine how the propensity of employees to exchange knowledge about how to protect their organization again external scrutiny may itself be informed by their personal orientation toward change or their beliefs about the prominence of political decision making.

Third, we theorized, but did not directly measure, that the positive relationship between knowledge sharing and UPB could be explained by employees' perceptions of their ability to engage in such behavior, and that the invigorating effects of dispositional resistance to change and perceived organizational politics are predicated on the perceived desirability of applying relevant knowledge to UPB. Additional studies could measure these mechanisms directly, as well as alternative mechanisms, such as the social pressures that employees might experience as a result of extensive knowledge sharing or politically oriented climates (Lindebaum et al., 2017).

Fourth, we offered an explanation of employees' unethical behaviors to protect their organization against external scrutiny, but we did not address the organizational outcomes of these activities. A useful elaboration of this study would be to examine whether and how employees' efforts to withhold negative information about their organization, as informed by their knowledge sharing with peers, actually enable their organization to defend itself successfully against external charges of malpractices. Another avenue for research related to outcomes would be to determine how undertaking UPB influences employees' mental well-being, in terms of their satisfaction, stress, or guilt levels.

Fifth, our focus on two specific contingency factors leaves room for investigations that consider other factors that may strengthen the positive relationship between knowledge sharing and UPB. For example, additional studies might address the potentially invigorating roles of individual factors such as employees' Machiavellianism (Zheng et al., 2017) or organizational commitment (Matherne and Litchfield, 2012), as well as contextual factors such as organizational culture (Campbell and Göritz, 2014) or perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1990). To the extent that these personal or contextual factors are more prominent, the expected value of leveraging knowledge sharing in UPB, for which they expect future rewards, might be greater.

Sixth, an empirical weakness of this study is the relatively small sample size, generated among employees who work for one organization that operates in the chemical sector. These features might limit the generalizability of the results. Even though smaller samples provide more conservative statistical tests of the theoretical relationships, particularly for conceptual frameworks that include moderating effects (Bouckenooghe et al., 2014), future research could benefit from larger sample sizes. Our theoretical arguments also are not industry-specific, yet the

single-organization design prevents us from investigating the role of relevant industry factors, such as the level of competitive intensity in organizations' external markets (Porter, 1996). Competitive intensity could make employees more willing to engage in UPB in their attempt to help their organization, because they may believe that without their support, the firm will not survive the extreme external competitive pressures (Chen et al., 2016; Lahiri et al., 2008). Future studies could consider organizations that operate in various labor-intensive industries (e.g., petrochemicals, automotive) to specify how relevant industry factors (e.g., competitive rivalry) might interfere with the factors that we study for the prediction of UPB.

Seventh, we studied an organization located in Mexico. As mentioned in the Introduction, the traits that mark Mexican culture (i.e., high levels of collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance) make this study context highly relevant for testing the proposed conceptual framework. Nor are our theoretical arguments country-specific, so even if the strength of the hypothesized relationships may differ in other country settings, their nature should not. Accordingly, it would be useful to undertake cross-country studies that compare the prominence of knowledge sharing for increasing employees' propensity to engage in UPB, as well as the potency of the underlying moderators in this process, in cultural contexts inside and outside Latin America, to investigate explicitly how different cultural factors affect the relative importance of our focal variables.

Practical implications

Our investigation of the interplay of knowledge sharing and selected contingency factors, to predict UPB, has practical relevance in several domains. Primarily, organizations need to discourage UPB among their employees. Even if UPB seems to contribute to organizational performance in the short term, it is unethical and likely to backfire, creating reputation loss,

societal sanctions, and other punitive measures (Umphress and Bingham, 2011; Weaver et al. 1999). Yet some employees might perceive UPB as acceptable, especially if they observe salient work role models (e.g., top managers, supervisors, coworkers) behaving unethically to protect their own interests (Burnes and By, 2011). When employees notice that others earn rewards for their unethical acts, they may consider these activities appropriate and copy them. Employees who have been rewarded for UBP in the past also may be more inclined to perform similar behaviors in the future. To overcome these effects, organizations must recognize their prevalence, then set specific ethical performance goals, along with conventional or financial performance goals, to make it clear that the latter cannot come at the expense of the former (Umphress and Bingham, 2011).

Another possible means to reduce UPB is to organize ethics training programs, to discuss ethically difficult cases openly and make decisions on the basis of ethical standards imposed by organizational leaders. These training programs might provide historical examples of how unethical decision making backfires and undermines organizational effectiveness (Ciulla, 2011). They should educate employees about the danger of ethical misconduct, even if their original intentions to help were good. Training efforts also might expose employees to a variety of ethically questionable behaviors, teach them how to recognize their patterns, and establish strategies to diminish their likelihood in daily activities (Morrison, 2001). A more extreme measure would entail sanctions imposed on employees who, in their attempt to help the organization, cross the line and engage in unethical behavior. Even if employees who undertake UPB have positive motives—such as being a "good soldier" and protecting the organization against external scrutiny—organizations can impose strict disciplinary sanctions on employees who act unethically, to signal what is acceptable behavior and what is not. Without such

disciplinary measures, employees may persist in their UPB, which eventually can harm their organization, themselves, and society in general: damaged organizational reputations, enhanced stress levels and diminished mental well-being among employees who know that their unethical behaviors may backfire over time, and negative impacts on society in the form of diminished morality and heightened costs.

Finally, a critical component of our conceptual framework is the positive relationship between knowledge sharing and UPB. In light of the negative consequences of UPB, we take care to note that we are not suggesting that organizations should discourage employees from sharing their knowledge bases. Rather, our findings alert organizations to the need to be aware that employees who extensively share knowledge, potentially about means to protect the interests of their organization, might develop a tendency to engage in unethical behaviors that eventually will damage the organizations' reputations, because of their enhanced confidence that they can succeed in these protection efforts. Accordingly, the aforementioned measures to reduce UPB—setting ethical performance goals, organizing ethical training programs, or undertaking disciplinary actions—should be implemented in ways that encourage employees to share knowledge about how to generate novel, *ethical* solutions to protect the organization, rather than cutting corners and stimulating behaviors with detrimental consequences for the organization's reputation and ethical posture. This focus on implementing ethical solutions should be particularly useful for employees with a natural tendency to resist organizational change and in organizational climates that are marked by politically oriented decision-making processes.

Conclusion

With this study, we contribute to organizational research by investigating an understudied factor that might increase the risk of unethical pro-organizational behavior, as well as the

conditions in which this process is prominent, in an organizational context marked by significant external competitive pressures. The propensity to engage in UPB may increase with employees' extensive knowledge sharing, and the motivation to leverage knowledge sharing this way may further increase when employees tend to resist organizational change or believe that they operate in highly politicized organizational environments. We hope these findings inform and encourage additional research into the processes that may lead employees to engage in unethical behaviors that help protect their organization against external threats or pressures, and particularly the development of measures that can discourage such behaviors.

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Figure 1. Conceptual framework

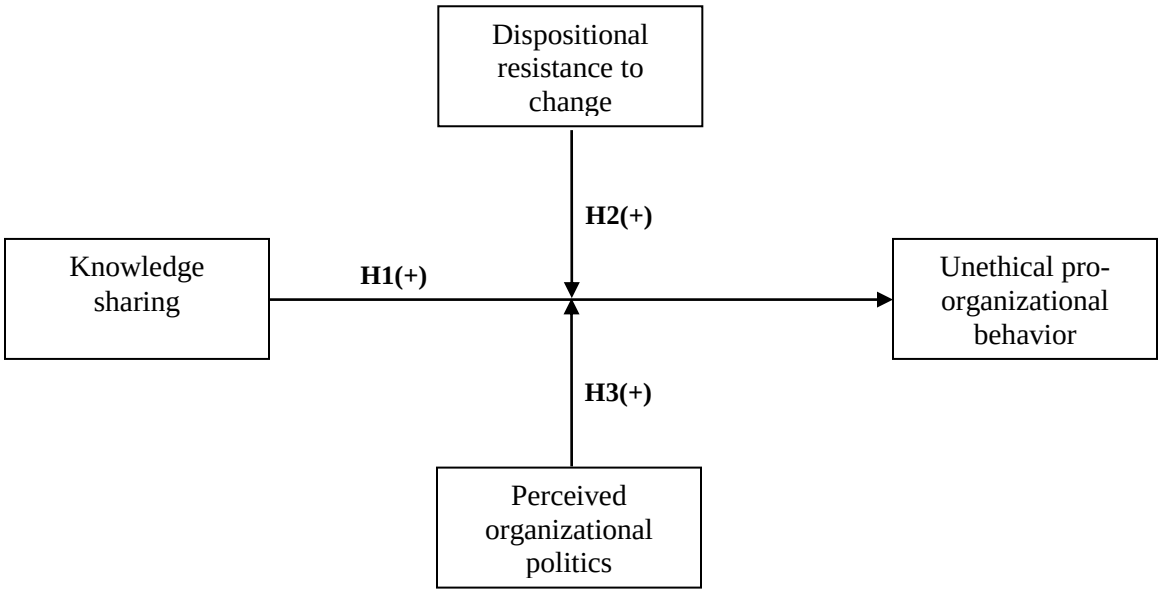

Figure 2. Moderating effect of dispositional resistance to change on the relationship between knowledge sharing and unethical pro-organizational behavior

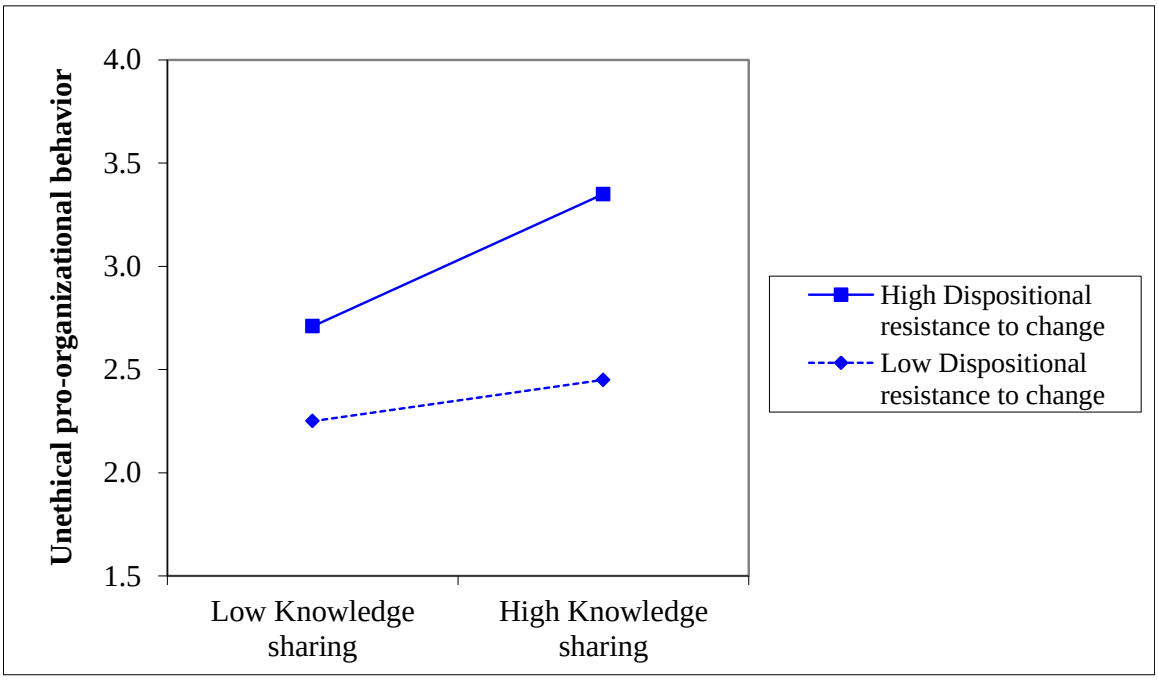

Figure 3. Moderating effect of perceived organizational politics on the relationship between knowledge sharing and unethical pro-organizational behavior

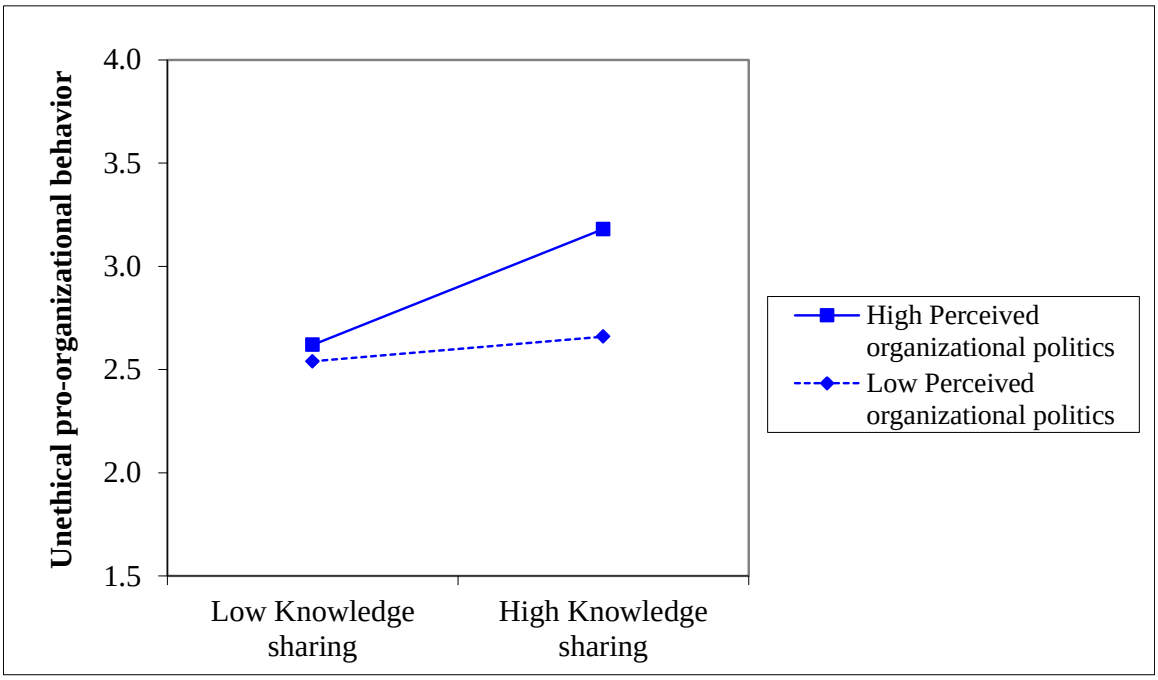

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Unethical pro-organizational behavior	2.80	1.50								
2. Knowledge sharing	5.31	1.25	.13							
3. Dispositional resistance to change	3.54	1.55	.43**	-.12						
4. Perceived organizational politics	3.66	1.55	.27**	-.29**	.38**					
5. Gender (1 = female)	.40	.49	-.16	-.14	.01	.029				
6. Education	1.88	.79	-.32**	-.04	-.29**	-.103	.14			
7. Organizational tenure	13.64	1.29	-.06	-.07	-.02	.015	-.16	.00		
8. Job function (1 = operational)	.47	.50	.03	.08	.03	-.066	-.44**	-.03	.07	
9. Job level (1 = supervisory)	.40	.49	-.13	.00	-.06	-.141	-.27**	.21**	.33**	.50**

Notes: N = 157.
**$p < .01$; *$p < .05$.

Table 2: Regression results (Dependent variable: unethical pro-organizational behavior)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Gender (1= female)	-.45^{+}	-.44^{+}	-.45^{+}	-.51*
Education	-.53**	-.31*	-.28^{+}	-.26^{+}
Organizational tenure	-.01	.00	.00	.00
Job function (1 = operational)	.04	-.03	-.03	-.07
Job level (1 = supervisory)	-.31	-.23	-.20	-.26
H_1: Knowledge sharing		.23**	.21*	.17^{+}
Dispositional resistance to change		.33**	.34**	.34**
Perceived organizational politics		.16*	.16*	.15*
H_2: Knowledge sharing × Dispositional resistance to change			.11*	
H_3: Knowledge sharing × Perceived organizational politics				.11*
R^2	.12	.30	.33	.32
R^2 change		.18***	.03*	.02*

Notes: N = 157.
**$p < .01$; *$p < .05$; $^{+}p < .10$ (two-tailed).