

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Serving the cause when my organization does not: A self-affirmation model of employees' compensatory responses to ideological contract breach

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Abstract

Transactional and relational contract breach occur when organizations fail to deliver on promised personal benefits for employees and are associated with negative behaviors reciprocating such mistreatment. However, recent research suggests that ideological contract breach, a unique form of contract breach, may yield constructive behaviors because it is not organizations' direct personal mistreatment of employees, but organizations' abandonment of a valued cause to benefit a third party. Such an interesting prediction goes beyond the dominant social-exchange framework, which mainly forecasts destructive responses to breach. In this research, we develop a novel self-affirmation model to explain how ideological contract breach results in counterintuitive positive outcomes. In a hospital field study among medical professionals ($N = 362$) and their supervisors ($N = 129$), we found that ideological contract breach induces employees' rumination about the breach, which in turn prompts them to self-affirm core values at work. This

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self-affirmation eventually spurs proactive serving behavior and self-improvement behavior to compensate for the breached ideology. Professional identification enhances this self-affirmation process.

KEYWORDS

ideological contract breach, proactive behavior, professional identification, self-affirmation

1 | INTRODUCTION

For decades, psychological contract breach has been conceptualized and researched based on transactional (e.g., fair compensation and safe working environment) and relational (e.g., career development and job security) inducements (for a review, see Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019). These inducements are *personal benefits* which employees expect organizations to provide in exchange for their contributions (Rousseau, 1995). Meta-analyses (Jayaweera et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2007) have demonstrated that these types of psychological contract breach are associated with counterproductive behaviors such as deviance, withdrawal, and poor performance. This is because transactional and relational contract breach stir up negative social exchange (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960) in which employees feel victimized by their organizations and display tit-for-tat responses to even the score (Bordia et al., 2008).

More recently, researchers have recognized a third type of breach—*ideological contract breach*, defined as organizations' deviation from commitment to a *valued cause* implicitly promised and expected in the employee-organization relationship (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). Consider that doctors may expect their hospitals to provide meaningful support for the cause of improving health, and journalists may expect their newspapers to commit to serving as a public watchdog in the name of people. The doctors and journalists will experience ideological contract breach when their employers fail to deliver on such expectations. Similarly, ideological contract breach may occur when zookeepers find the management focusing solely on making profit and ignoring the well-being of animals, or when teachers find the school departing from providing quality education for students.

Although it also concerns organizations' violation of promises, ideological contract breach is unique. Specifically, behind transactional and relational contract breach are employees' instrumental calculations of what their employers owe them and what they owe their employers (Rousseau & Parks, 1993). However, ideological contract breach goes beyond such a two-party reciprocal structure because "ideological contracts invoke obligations to a cause that benefit a third party or external entity" and "represent a clear departure from the more dyadic nature of relational or transactional contracts" (Bingham et al., 2014, p. 75). Put differently, ideological contract breach does not originate from organizations' direct personal mistreatment of employees, but from organizations' abandonment of an espoused principle (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). In short, ideological contract breach differs from transactional/relational contract breach in both the nature of the content (non-instrumental vs. instrumental) and the victims (external constituency vs. employees themselves). The distinctiveness of ideological contract breach may render negative reciprocity inadequate in understanding employees' reactions to ideological contract breach. Indeed, scholars in this nascent field believe (and have obtained preliminary evidence) that not only do employees not withdraw when ideological contract breach occurs, they may even make greater efforts to "rectify the violation on moral grounds" (Jones & Griep, 2018; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003, p. 577). Such a prediction could not be extrapolated from the established social exchange perspective, which forecasts destructive employee behaviors following contract breach (Zhao et al., 2007).

Despite the conceptual importance of this interesting possibility, no research has unraveled *why* ideological contract breach can lead to counterintuitive positive behaviors (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Vantilborgh et al., 2014). In

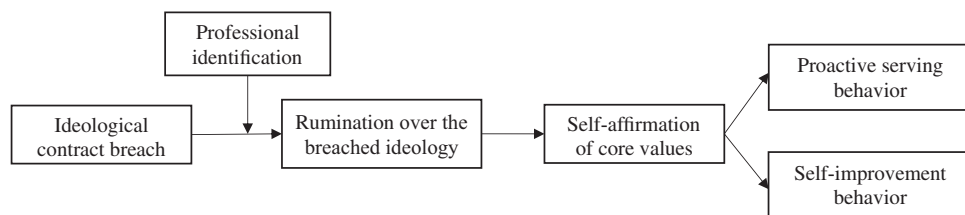


FIGURE 1 Overall conceptual model.

this study, we aim to unpack the psychological mechanism behind employees' constructive response to ideological contract breach and the related boundary condition by drawing upon self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988). This theory is particularly relevant to our research purpose as it explicates how individuals *constructively* react to threats to the self. As elaborated later, because ideology reflects the deep meaning of one's job (Parks & Smith, 2012), a breach of it could essentially be "a threat to an individual's self-concept" (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003, p. 577) and trigger motivation and behavior to protect the compromised self-conceptions.

The three central tenets of self-affirmation theory are as follows: (1) people are motivated to maintain a global sense that they are morally and adaptively adequate; (2) provoking sources that hurt self-concepts evoke threatening cognitions (i.e., rumination, Critcher & Dunning, 2015), which prompt individuals to reaffirm their core values and engage in proactive actions to restore such a sense of adequacy; and (3) individuals who hold stronger self-concepts are more prone to self-affirmation, because the importance of the threats looms larger (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; McQueen & Klein, 2006). Accordingly, as shown in Figure 1, we propose that ideological contract breach ignites a self-affirmation process by first giving rise to rumination over the breached ideology, motivating cognitive self-affirmation, which subsequently elicits two types of behaviors that reaffirm the ideology: proactive serving behavior (i.e., taking the initiative to serve the beneficiaries of the ideology) and self-improvement behavior (i.e., improving professional skills to advance the ideology). We expect this process to be more pronounced among those with stronger professional identification, a sense of oneness with one's profession or work (Hekman et al., 2009), as it may elevate the significance of breached ideology.

Our research makes several theoretical contributions. First, we tackle a "breakdown," or a question that cannot be answered using the existing dominant lenses (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The constructive consequences of ideological contract breach cannot be accounted for by the norm of negative reciprocity. The self-affirmation framework addresses our focal question and provides a useful addition to the theoretical arsenal of the psychological contract literature. Our research model explains *how* (i.e., the self-affirmation mechanism) ideological contract breach drives behaviors to rectify such deviation and *when* (i.e., the boundary condition of professional identification) this reparative process is likely to occur. Relatedly, identifying proactive serving behavior and self-improvement behavior as two specific actions tells us what employees will do to save their breached cause and answers the call to shed light on breach's unconventional implications beyond traditional negative behaviors (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019).

Second, our study extends the role of professional identification in shaping the influence of psychological contract breach. Professional identification has previously been examined as a moderator in the psychological contract breach literature from other perspectives. For example, professional identification has been found to exacerbate employees' reduction in productivity and policy compliance (Hekman et al., 2009) and dampen employees' resource depletion (Deng et al., 2018) in response to psychological contract violation. The rationale is that those high in professional identification, as they identify with their profession but not necessarily their organization, tend to walk away and keep themselves distant from the organization after experiencing psychological contract violation. In contrast, our self-affirmation framework suggests that higher professional identification enhances employees' constructive behaviors after experiencing ideological contract breach because it heightens the significance of the ideology in their employment and motivates employees to take actions to compensate for the breached ideology. In brief, our study suggests

the need to zoom into the types of psychological contract breach when examining the moderating role of professional identification.

Finally, our research represents an effort to test and extend self-affirmation theory. Self-affirmation theory is well-established in experimental psychology, but it is still at the edge of organizational behavior research and has been rarely applied to understand work-related phenomena. Our study offers a test of the theory in a new context by showing that ideological contract breach, a workplace self-concept threat, can trigger self-affirmation. Moreover, while the ideas that (1) rumination can be the first response to self-threat and (2) self-affirmation can be spontaneous (rather than externally imposed) have been discussed (Emanuel et al., 2018; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010; Taber, 2016), they remain conceptual understandings only. We directly operationalize these chained responses to unpack the full self-affirmation process. Our study extends the application of the theory.

2 | THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 | Transactional/relational contract breach and social exchange

Regardless of the type, psychological contracts are employees' expectations of the implicit and unwritten promises and obligations in their relationships with their employers (Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Rousseau, 1995). They are perceptions that exist in the minds of employees alone (Rousseau & Parks, 1993). A key premise underlying previous theorizations was that the terms exchanged in a psychological contract are transactional or relational. From an employee perspective, transactional contract breach occurs when organizations fail to fulfill promised economic and short-term obligations such as fair payment; relational contract breach describes organizations' underfulfillment of commitment to employees' socioemotional and long-term benefits such as support for employee well-being (Rousseau, 1990). Despite the differences in the specific content, these two forms of psychological contract breach represent a "self-interested" model of exchange in which employees are the immediate victims (Bingham, 2005; Robinson & Morrison, 1995). A large number of studies have incontrovertibly attested to the direct social exchange responses to transactional and relational breach such as reduced productivity and citizenship behavior, and even retaliatory behavior (Bal et al., 2008; Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018a, 2018b; Montes & Irving, 2008; Rousseau & Parks, 1993). Previous research has focused on revenge cognitions, or the motivational intent of harmful behaviors directed at the target of revenge (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999), as a representative of the social exchange mechanism to explain these negative consequences (e.g., Bordia et al., 2008; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Deng et al., 2018; Restubog et al., 2015).

2.2 | The distinctive characteristics of ideological contract breach

Extending the premises of psychological contracts, Thompson and Bunderson (2003) suggested that employees' expectations of their organization's obligations are grounded not merely in their own personal entitlements but also in the promotion of a valued ideology. Many companies explicitly state a deeper purpose in their organizational mission (e.g., Sony: "To be a company that inspires and fulfils your curiosity"). In ideological psychological contracts, employees believe that organizations are obligated to demonstrate credible commitment to a principle, and they themselves are obligated to contribute to the organizations' capacity to promote that principle. When organizations fall short of that commitment, ideological contract breach occurs. Thompson and Bunderson's (2003) work echoes Blau's (1964) overlooked notion that in addition to economic and relational rewards, the employment relationship can be founded on ideological rewards and that "helping to advance cherished ideals is intrinsically rewarding" (p. 239).

An ideological contract is not based on instrumental exchange but on covenantal exchange, whereby organizations and employees pledge to serve common values and causes beyond the dyadic relationship (Van Dyne et al., 1994).

Ideological contract breach (e.g., failing to commit to serving the poor or protecting people's welfare) mainly hurts the interests of broader society without incurring direct losses on employees themselves (Thompson & Hart, 2006). Therefore, the victims of organizations' breach of ideological contracts are society, people, or intangible principles (Jones & Griep, 2018; Vantilborgh et al., 2014). For example, a hospital's failure in promoting the health of the public does not hurt doctors but rather the community they serve.

Understanding ideological contract breach warrants also understanding the importance of ideology to employees' self-concept. Research generally recognizes that, to varying degrees, employees tend to endorse ideology in their employment due to the moral imagination and ideals inherent in human nature (Bal & Vink, 2011; Bingham et al., 2013). Scholars in early research asserted that "the ideology of the system gears into the very functions in which individuals are engaged and invests them with a significance and meaning they would otherwise not possess" (Katz & Kahn, 1966, p. 56). Subsequently, Thompson and Bunderson (2003, p. 584) argued that "pursuit of a cause at work can provide a deep sense of purpose and enhance an employee's self-concept." Although "everyone wants to be fairly compensated," true motivation "comes from believing that their work has a purpose, and that they are part of a larger effort to achieve something truly worthwhile" (George, 2001, p. 42). The importance of ideology at work is also backed by empirical evidence. For instance, experienced meaningfulness of one's work has proved to be the most critical psychological impetus (Barrick et al., 2013; Humphrey et al., 2007). In fact, employees may cherish a cause long before they join an organization, and an organization's espousal of a similar ideology might be what provides the initial thrust to gain membership in that organization (Bingham, 2005). Such a phenomenon reflects the well-known similarity-attraction mechanism, which is driven by an internal motive to reinforce and protect the continuity of self-concept (Dutton et al., 1994). On the flip side, employees are often ashamed of their organization's violation of a socially valued cause, because such misconduct hurts their purpose of work and moral self-concept (Chi et al., 2015; Piening et al., 2020).

The above analysis suggests that, compared with transactional and relational contract breach, ideological contract breach may be perceived not as an attack on personal interest but as a threat to moral values and self-concepts (Vantilborgh et al., 2014). The implications of this distinction are important. First, the social exchange perspective, serving as a grounding theory in research on transactional and relational psychological contract breach, cannot fully explain the possible consequences of ideological contract breach, which "operates differently by not adhering to the tit for tat underpinning of the norm of reciprocity" (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019, p. 151). Second, employees may react to ideological contract breach with constructive behaviors to salvage the cause rather than harmful behaviors typically seen in transactional and relational contract breach (Jones & Griep, 2018; Vantilborgh et al., 2014).

2.3 | Overview of self-affirmation theory

Self-affirmation theory (Sherman, 2013; Steele, 1988) suggests that a self-system exists to make sense of ourselves and the world at large, to sustain adequate self-conceptions morally and adaptively. A central question of self-affirmation theory is how people adaptively cope with and self-regulate in the presence of a threat to the self. It starts with the notion that threatening cognitions arising from a violation of the self arouse a motive to reaffirm the self to re-establish a perception of global self-worth (Steele, 1988). Such a motive for self-affirmation can be manifested in cognitive and behavioral efforts to reaffirm core values important to individuals' self-adequacy. The theory further posits that the importance of a threat to the self may determine the extent to which individuals are affected by it and the intensity of the self-affirmation process. In short, self-affirmation can be activated when environmental information threatens a core self-concept and functions as an inner protective mechanism against the threat in order to restore a sense of self-adequacy (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Note that the goal of self-affirmation is to maintain an overarching positive narrative of the self through self-initiated activities, not to appraise a threat in a self-enhancing way.

Numerous empirical studies in social psychology have corroborated the key notions in self-affirmation theory and the constructive power of self-affirmation processes in the context of self-threats (for reviews, see Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Research has found that self-affirmation by simply thinking about core values increases health-related behavioral intentions when receiving threatening medical information (Van Koningsbruggen et al., 2009), promotes effective learning among stereotyped group members to achieve higher academic performance (Cohen et al., 2009), and mobilizes prosocial behavior and self-improvement in the face of self-threat (Lindsay & Creswell, 2014; Sherman & Hartson, 2011). Recent advancements suggest that people spontaneously reaffirm their values and beliefs in everyday life to cope with self-relevant threats (Emanuel et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2019; McGregor et al., 2001; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010; Taber, 2016).

In short, self-affirmation theory articulates the processes through which a self-threat winds up eliciting constructive responses from individuals. It lends itself well to address our research question: how can ideological contract breach lead to compensatory behaviors? Social exchange theory, which emphasizes negative reciprocity, falls short in answering this question. Therefore, self-affirmation theory is called for to answer our specific question. However, we are not suggesting that self-affirmation theory is irrelevant to other types of psychological contract breach (e.g., relational contract breach). It is likely that this theory can apply to them as well, to address different research questions.

In the following section, we develop our hypotheses based on this framework. We propose that ideological contract breach stimulates rumination over breached ideology (especially for those with stronger professional identification), prompting self-affirmation of work-related core values, which leads to compensatory behaviors (i.e., proactive serving behavior and self-improvement behavior). Following established tradition in the psychological contract breach literature (e.g., Bordia et al., 2008; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Restubog et al., 2015; Vantilborgh et al., 2014), we view ideological contract breach as employees' general perception of their organizations' failure to deliver on expected ideological obligations. The focus here is on whether employees who generally perceive a higher level of ideological contract breach are more likely to engage in the proposed self-affirmation responses.

2.4 | Ideological contract breach and rumination over breached ideology

To reiterate, employees are usually sensitive to whether their organizations do enough to promote a valued cause at work, because that ideology is tied to their self-concept (Bingham et al., 2014; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Employees are likely to view their organizations as an embodiment of what they stand for; organizations' actions that "contradict deeply held values therefore pose a threat to an individual's self-concept" (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003, p. 577). Employees experience ideological contract breach when their organizations fall short of promised commitment to a cause (Bunderson, 2001). Because ideology grants moral significance to what employees do, organizations' deviation from ideological obligations undermines the true meaning of their work as well as their moral sense of self-worth. Therefore, ideological contract breach may come across as an attack on the self that deprives employees of a sense of self-adequacy (Bingham et al., 2014; Thompson & Hart, 2006).

Self-affirmation theory suggests that provoking sources closely related to the self instigates threatening cognitions, which arouse an omnipotent self-affirmation motive to reflect on personally important values (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988). A recent development in self-affirmation theory points out that "when threatened, the working self-concept constricts and ruminates on the threatened identity" (Critcher & Dunning, 2015, p. 5). Rumination, as an integral aspect of self-regulation (Koole et al., 1999), refers to a state of having repetitive and intrusive thoughts about self-threatening experiences or perceptions without immediate cueing for an extended period of time (Martin & Tesser, 1996). Experiences that hurt self-concepts are particularly likely to heighten the accessibility of the relevant cognitions, instigating the enduring psychological syndrome of ruminative thinking (Martin et al., 2004). As explained before, ideological contract breach by organizations damages the significance of one's purpose of work and thwarts the goal of maintaining an adequate sense of self-worth. Therefore, casting rumination as a threatening cognition that

occurs as an immediate response to such ideological contract breach seems plausible. Supporting this idea, previous studies from other fields have found that morally threatening situations, such as being considered a bad leader by acting abusively and engaging in morally discrediting behaviors, can induce employees' ruminative thinking (Deng et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2018). Based on this reasoning and evidence, we propose that ideological contract breach is likely to trigger employees' rumination over the breached ideology:

Hypothesis 1. Ideological contract breach is positively related to rumination over breached ideology.

2.5 | The moderating effect of professional identification

We next propose that professional identification will moderate the relationship between ideological contract breach and rumination over breached ideology. Although there may be other suitable moderators (e.g., moral identity), we chose to focus on professional identification for two reasons. First, professional identification and ideology in employment have been long recognized as intertwined in other fields, such that the former is viewed as kept together by the social cement of the latter (e.g., Deuze, 2005; O'Donohue & Nelson, 2007). Since ideological contract breach emphasizes ideology central to one's employment or profession (Bunderson, 2001), it makes sense to investigate how employees' professional identification shapes their responses following such breach. Second, as professional identification reflects a sense of oneness individuals have with a profession, those possessing stronger professional identification can be more sensitive and vulnerable to threats to what they value in their profession. In other words, higher professional identification is likely to exacerbate the importance of the breach of ideology at work to employees (Deuze, 2005; Grubenmann & Meckel, 2017). It is thus theoretically coherent to examine the moderating effect of professional identification under the self-affirmation framework, which argues that the intensity of self-affirmation in response to a threat depends on the perceived salience of the threat (Steele, 1988).

Specifically, we argue that those high in professional identification are more likely to ruminate over breached ideology than their counterparts when perceiving ideological contract breach. Because employees with strong professional identification tend to see their professional work as part of their self-concepts (Krause & Moore, 2017; O'Donohue & Nelson, 2007), they care about ideals in their employment (e.g., highest quality of service). They are also likely to value the ideology associated with their professional work, which defines the core features of their profession and serves to differentiate their profession from others, and to be motivated to materialize the ideology through their employment to demonstrate who they are. A breach of ideological contract will thus pose a greater challenge to those high in professional identification, because it prevents them from pursuing the ideology core to their work and their self-concepts, undermining the significance of their purpose of work and their sense of self-adequacy (Bingham et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2004; Thompson & Hart, 2006). Consequently, they are more likely to ruminate over breached ideology when they experience ideological contract breach. Imagine, when a hospital breaches the ideology of prioritizing people's health over financial gain, a nurse who strongly identifies with the meaning and purpose of the medical profession may perceive the breach as more threatening and ruminate more about it. By contrast, for employees with weak professional identification, ideological contract breach in their employment may be less psychologically consequential to their self-concepts, thereby threatening their perception of self-adequacy to a lesser extent. Naturally, the same mechanism is attenuated or operates less strongly among those employees. As a result, employees with lower professional identification are less likely to ruminate over ideological contract breach. The following hypothesis reflects our reasoning:

Hypothesis 2. Professional identification moderates the relationship between ideological contract breach and rumination over breached ideology such that this association is stronger when professional identification is high than when it is low.

2.6 | Rumination over breached ideology and self-affirmation of core values

We have theorized in the preceding section that rumination stems from a self-threat that challenges or thwarts an important self-goal (e.g., maintaining a positive view of self-adequacy). Rumination can be intrapsychically disturbing because of its repetitive and unwanted nature (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Therefore, chronic rumination has been associated with the onset and maintenance of mental health issues (Ciarocco et al., 2010; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). This is particularly true when individuals ruminate over subjective feelings such as anger and sadness. However, rumination can also be adaptively motivating when it focuses on the objective problems (e.g., a breached ideology) that have caused it (Cropley & Zijlstra, 2011; Querstret & Cropley, 2012). That is, rumination may prompt constructive self-regulation to eliminate such psychological discomfort (Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996; Martin et al., 2004). For example, rumination instigated by a threat to self-concept propels individuals to stop it by affirming important aspects of the self initially challenged by the threat (Critcher & Dunning, 2015). Research has shown that ruminative thinking about events may be “part of the process of attempting to resolve the discrepancy between stressful events and core beliefs and assumptions” (Greenberg, 1995; Horowitz, 1985; Watkins, 2008, p. 164) and “a way to search for meaning and purpose” (Gabriel et al., 2021, p. 1520). In short, rumination over a self-threat can be viewed as a necessary intermediary step in resolving the distress caused by the self-threat (Watkins, 2008).

We next suggest that rumination over breached ideology triggers self-affirmation of core values. Theory on rumination has pointed to affirmation of core values that are important to the self as a useful strategy to quell distressing thoughts (Koole et al., 1999). Because rumination results from a self-threatening situation that blocks self-goals and hurts self-worth, it drives individuals to engage in self-affirmation, which reminds them of their core values and what really matters to them. Doing so reduces the goal discrepancy (in viewing oneself positively) and repairs their damaged sense of adequacy (Dodgson & Wood, 1998; Koole et al., 1999). In other words, self-affirmation through reflecting upon core values provides protective consolidation of a sense of self-adequacy (Steele, 1999). Such reflection broadens psychological resources and focuses attention on what is valuable and away from troubling thoughts regarding the self-threat (Aronson et al., 1999; McGregor, 2004).

Notably, although self-affirmation theory suggests that the core values employed for self-affirmation are not necessarily related to the source of the provoking threat, it also emphasizes that “self-affirmation changes addressed to the threat should be more effective than changes that affirmed unrelated, valued aspects of the self” (Steele, 1988, p. 292; 1999). It specifically points out a situation in which relatedness is vital: when the most important aspects of the self are threatened, only self-affirmation of core values in the related domains can heal the wounded self. An example provided in Steele (1999) is that for a young tennis professional, playing tennis well is most important to their self-concept; a sense of self-worth threatened by losing at tennis cannot be restored by self-affirmation in any alternative aspects of the self but only in the area related to the profession. Following this logic, employees whose self-concepts are hurt by ideological contract breach in their employment are likely to self-affirm regarding employment-related core values to assuage rumination.

By engaging in self-affirmation, employees who are ruminating can restore their general sense of adequacy and reinforce the belief that they are worthy individuals who stand firmly by their moral values despite their organizations' ideological contract breach. For example, to reaffirm the self, a doctor ruminating on their hospital's breach of medical ideology may engage in personal reflection upon core principles associated with being a doctor, what drove them to enter this career initially, and what they truly believe in this profession. Although other forms of self-affirmation may exist, we follow previous research and focus on thinking about core values (Harris et al., 2019), which is the most often used and most salient form (for a review, see McQueen & Klein, 2006). Supporting our reasoning, empirical studies have found that rumination over a self-threat incites spontaneous assertion of core values to block heightened awareness of the threat (McGregor et al., 2001). Therefore, we hypothesize that employees who ruminate because of ideological contract breach may engage in self-affirmation of core values.

Hypothesis 3. Rumination over breached ideology is positively related to self-affirmation of core values.

2.7 | Self-affirmation of core values and subsequent behaviors

Self-affirmation of core values sets in motion positive self-initiative and channels people into “a cycle of adaptive potential” by fostering an approach orientation after a self-threat (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 335). When self-defining values are made salient by self-affirmation, individuals may feel propelled to create opportunities for themselves to manifest such values and support a more positive conception of the self through acts in relevant domains (Aronson et al., 1999; Steele, 1988). In other words, employees who have self-affirmed may feel an urge to enact compensatory efforts to consolidate their identity. For example, in a political setting, self-affirmation of core values has been found to encourage more political participation (McClendon & Riedl, 2015).

We identify proactive serving behavior and self-improvement behavior as the two types of consolidation actions following self-affirmation in the context of ideological contract breach. Proactive serving behavior reflects employees' altruistic initiative in providing help and service that exceed what is specified in a job description and are important for clients' well-being (Rank et al., 2007; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2000). Self-improvement behavior consists of self-initiated acts that aim to improve and advance professional skills via information search, feedback-seeking, and experimenting (Noe et al., 2013). Both types of behaviors are proactive and can be seen as value-based actions triggered to enact a central identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Farmer & Van Dyne, 2010). Whereas proactive serving behavior is client-oriented and helps employees strengthen ideology by exerting a positive impact on beneficiaries, self-improvement behavior is expertise-oriented and helps employees reinforce their identity by building professional skills and knowledge.

We argue that these two behaviors should be considered together in a work setting. The relevance of the first behavior is obvious because clients are important beneficiaries of a professional cause. However, to make a positive impact on them, employees must also achieve a high level of professionalism by possessing specialized skills and knowledge (Grant, 2007; Harris et al., 2002). For example, for medical employees, improving the well-being of patients is a core value tightly bound to their ideology, and to achieve this, they need to continuously acquire highly specialized skills in their specific areas. The same holds for employees in other professions (e.g., manufacturing) where high-quality service requires skills that need to be cultivated and developed (Bunderson, 2001; Krause & Moore, 2017). Therefore, it seems natural for employees to exert compensatory behaviors related to both their clients and their professional skills as behavioral manifestations of their affirmed core values. This idea is consistent with the insight from the proactivity literature that having a strong intrinsic reason, such as to “express values that are central to the self” (Parker et al., 2010, p. 837), can motivate individuals to proactively improve their work and themselves.

Hypothesis 4. Self-affirmation of core values is positively related to proactive serving behavior.

Hypothesis 5. Self-affirmation of core values is positively related to self-improvement behavior.

2.8 | A moderated mediation model

So far, we have hypothesized that ideological contract breach leads employees to experience rumination over the breached ideology, and this effect is more pronounced among people with stronger professional identification (Hypotheses 1 and 2); rumination over this type of breach motivates employees to reaffirm their core values in their profession (Hypothesis 3) and ultimately engage in proactive serving behavior and self-improvement behavior (Hypotheses 4 and 5). When integrated, these hypotheses constitute a moderated serial mediation model (as shown in Figure 1) in which the effect of ideological contract breach is transmitted to the two behavioral outcomes, first through rumination over the breached ideology and then through self-affirmation of core values, especially when professional identification is high. This overall model reflects the compensatory adaption logic depicted in self-affirmation theory (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988), delineating why and when a negative organizational

stimulus such as ideological contract breach can ignite constructive and proactive outcomes. Thus, we posit the following:

Hypothesis 6. The effect of ideological contract breach on proactive serving behavior is sequentially mediated by rumination over the breached ideology and self-affirmation of core values; this indirect effect is stronger when professional identification is high than when it is low.

Hypothesis 7. The effect of ideological contract breach on self-improvement behavior is sequentially mediated by rumination over the breached ideology and self-affirmation of core values; this indirect effect is stronger when professional identification is high than when it is low.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Sample and procedure

We tested our model with medical professionals (specialist doctors and nurses) in a large, top-tier public hospital in China (The data collection was approved by the Ethics Sub-Committee at Department of Management, London School of Economics and Political Science). A public hospital is usually believed to be obliged to contribute to the health of the general community. Similarly, the mission statements on the focal hospital's website included that the hospital was devoted to "improving the health of people" and "prioritizing life and social responsibilities over everything else." These mission statements echoed the themes in the Hippocratic Oath (a modified form for Chinese medical schools and hospitals, e.g., "strive to eliminate people's suffering," "enhance people's health conditions and uphold the honor of medicine," and "heal the wounded and rescue the dying"). At the same time, as is the case in many other organizations, hospitals (including the one where we collected the data) may experience increasing financial pressure to be more business-like for the sake of sustainability and growth (Li & He, 2019; McDonald, 2007). Therefore, the public hospital we chose was an appropriate context for examining ideological contract breach. To encourage participation, we attended a series of annual staff meetings organized by the hospital to provide briefings on the purpose of the research. We also gained support from the management of the hospital after meeting with the directors and department heads. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was assured.

To reduce the influence of common method variance, we employed a time-lagged, multisource design (Podsakoff et al., 2012) in which we collected data from medical professionals (i.e., employees) in three waves with a 3- to 4-week lag in between, and gathered data on the two behavioral outcomes from their supervisors at the third measurement occasion. One of the authors was on-site throughout the entire data collection process. At Time 1, employees answered questions about ideological contract breach and controlled predictors (i.e., transactional contract breach and relational contract breach). We distributed 771 questionnaires, and 579 were returned. At Time 2, employees answered questions about rumination over the breached ideology and professional identification. Of the 579 surveys sent out in this wave, 424 were returned. At Time 3, employees evaluated their self-affirmation of core values and revenge cognitions, a control variable capturing the social exchange mechanism. Surveys were distributed to the 424 employees, and 381 were completed. Also, at Time 3, we invited supervisors of all employees to assess their employees' proactive serving behavior and self-improvement behavior. After matching all three rounds of employee surveys and the supervisor survey, we obtained 362 sets of valid employee surveys nested in 129 supervisors. The overall response rate was 47%. This response rate was comparable to that reported in previous studies conducted in hospitals (e.g., van Woerkom et al., 2016). In the final sample, employees' average age was 32.87 years, and the average tenure was 9.58 years. Women accounted for 81% of the sample. They were from a highly diverse set of specialized areas such as cardiology, pediatrics, and gynecology.

3.2 | Measures

All measures used a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) unless otherwise stated. All scales were translated from English into Chinese following back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1980).

3.2.1 | Ideological contract breach

We measured ideological contract breach by adapting a seven-item ideological contract scale developed by Bingham (2005) and validated by Vantilborgh et al. (2014). This scale captures breach as a generalized state and a continuous variable without imposing a specific time frame, which is consistent with our research focus. This scale identifies different aspects in which organizations can make credible commitment to an ideology. We revised the statements slightly to capture a sense of breach or failure to deliver on ideological obligations in the medical context. A brief definition of ideology and examples were provided to facilitate participants' understanding of the items. Specifically, we stated that "many organizations incorporate ideology, that is, a valued social cause that goes beyond striving for successful financial performance, into their missions. Consider the examples of a hospital adopting the ideology of providing compassionate, high-quality health care to the community and an education institution adopting a social cause of nurturing responsible citizens and enabling their intellectual and social growth." Before they responded to these items, we asked participants to describe the ideological obligations they expected from their hospital. This step was critical to ensure our participants indeed formed expectations of their hospital to fulfill the espoused ideological obligations. Because swearing the modified form of the Hippocratic Oath is a rite of passage for all medical professionals in China and can occur in different career stages, all participants were not only able to portray expectations clearly, but also provided consistent answers that either directly quoted or paraphrased the key themes in the Oath or the hospital's mission statements. In other words, participants' answers converged toward caring and providing good service for the health of people. Participants then evaluated their general perceptions on the extent to which their hospital had breached their ideological contract. Sample items include: "My organization fails to act as a public advocate of the ideology of the medical profession as promised" and "My organization does not establish the expected internal practices and policies to advance our ideals" ($\alpha = .94$).

3.2.2 | Rumination over the breached ideology

We asked participants to report their experiences of rumination over breached ideology in the past few weeks by using a well-established eight-item scale (McCullough et al., 2007). Previous research has used a similar time-lag approach to measuring rumination (Calderwood et al., 2018; Deng et al., 2021; Mehmood & Hamstra, 2021). Sample items include: "Thoughts and feelings about my hospital's breach of medical ideology kept running through my head" and "I couldn't stop thinking about my hospital's breach of medical ideology" ($\alpha = .98$).

3.2.3 | Professional identification

We measured this variable using a three-item social identity scale by replacing the identifying target with the profession (for a similar practice, see Hekman et al., 2009). Sample items include: "Being a doctor/nurse is a big part of my identity" and "I feel proud to be a doctor/nurse" ($\alpha = .87$).

3.2.4 | Self-affirmation of core values

Self-affirmation can take the form of cognitively "reflecting upon a personally important value" (Harris et al., 2017, p. 281). Therefore, we measured this variable using a four-item scale that focuses on self-affirmation of core

values/principles (Harris et al., 2019). We revised the measure slightly so that it captures self-affirmation of core values in a medical context. Sample items include: "I think about my profession-related values" and "I think about what I stand for as a doctor/nurse" ($\alpha = .92$).

3.2.5 | Proactive serving behavior

We measured this variable using a scale originally developed to measure teachers' proactive serving behavior for students (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2000). We consulted hospital experts to ensure we included behaviors that capture what medical professionals would do additionally for patients. Four items were deemed appropriate for our research context: "This employee stays after hospital hours to help and treat patients," "This employee goes to the hospital on his/her free days for high-risk patients," "This employee voluntarily creates partnerships with other doctors/nurses to better serve patients," and "This employee communicates a patient's specific needs to colleagues from the next shift and voluntarily helps even if not on duty" ($\alpha = .77$).

3.2.6 | Self-improvement behavior

We measured this variable by adapting six items from a self-initiated learning scale (Noe et al., 2013) to the medical context. Sample items include: "This employee proactively interacts with and learns from mentors, colleagues, or people who have more experience" and "This employee proactively reads professional journals and books to learn new knowledge" ($\alpha = .92$).

3.2.7 | Control variables

We controlled for transactional and relational contract breach to demonstrate the unique effect of ideological contract breach on rumination and other self-affirmation responses. We measured these two forms of breach using a six-item scale and a five-item scale, respectively, like those used in Bingham (2005) and Vantilborgh et al. (2014). Participants evaluated the items on a 5-point scale (1 = *I receive much more than my hospital is obligated to provide*, 5 = *I receive much less than my hospital is obligated to provide*), with a higher value reflecting a greater extent of breach. A sample item for transactional contract breach is "payment for the specific duties I perform" ($\alpha = .94$). A sample item for relational contract breach is "concern about my short- and long-term well-being" ($\alpha = .95$).

As mentioned before, most previous studies have focused on a social exchange mechanism captured by revenge cognitions (e.g., Bordia et al., 2008). Revenge cognitions mainly explain the negative consequences of economic and socioemotional contract breach. We control for it here to show that it cannot explain the link between ideological contract breach and the two behavioral outcomes. We measured revenge cognitions using a seven-item scale developed by Bradfield and Aquino (1999) and used in previous psychological contract research (e.g., Bordia et al., 2008). A sample item is "I wish something bad would happen to this hospital" ($\alpha = .96$).

To demonstrate the robustness of our results, we ran analyses with and without demographics such as gender, age, and job type (doctor vs. nurse). The two sets of the results were similar. We reported the results without these variables (Becker, 2005; Carlson & Wu, 2012). We included the results with the demographic controls in a table as an online supplement.

3.3 | Measurement analysis

We conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to examine the measurement model. Because the subject-to-item ratio was far below the recommended 10:1 for accurate estimation (Bandalos, 2002), we randomly created three parcels for constructs that were measured by more than three items (Bandalos & Finney,

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Ideological contract breach	1.65	.95	-								
2. Professional identification	4.54	.64	-.26**	-							
3. Rumination over the breached ideology	3.22	1.25	.22**	-.00	-						
4. Self-affirmation of core values	4.42	.80	-.08	.39**	.12*	-					
5. Proactive serving behavior	4.43	.62	.06	.11*	.03	.16**	-				
6. Self-improvement behavior	4.23	.74	.06	.07	.05	.19**	.78**	-			
7. Transactional contract breach	2.76	.88	.37**	-.25**	.07	-.07	.01	-.02	-		
8. Relational contract breach	2.74	.93	.40**	-.30**	.08	-.09	.04	.03	.84**	-	
9. Revenge cognitions	1.21	.62	.20**	-.24**	.10	-.11*	-.08	-.07	.11*	.13*	-

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.

2001).¹ The hypothesized nine-factor model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 498.00$, $df = 288$, $p = .00$, CFI = .98, TLI = .97, SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .05), better than an eight-factor model combining ideological and transactional contract breach ($\Delta\chi^2 = 741.34$, $\Delta df = 8$, $p < .01$), an eight-factor model combining ideological and relational contract breach ($\Delta\chi^2 = 719.52$, $\Delta df = 8$, $p < .01$), an eight-factor model combining transactional and relational contract breach ($\Delta\chi^2 = 151.99$, $\Delta df = 8$, $p < .01$), and a seven-factor model combining all three types of breach ($\Delta\chi^2 = 877.36$, $\Delta df = 15$, $p < .01$). We did these comparisons because the three types of psychological contract breach are inter-related and it is necessary to demonstrate their discriminant validity (Bingham et al., 2014). We also compared the hypothesized model with an eight-factor model combining proactive serving behavior and self-improvement behavior ($\Delta\chi^2 = 102.77$, $\Delta df = 8$, $p < .01$). This comparison was to show that the two outcome behaviors were perceived as different constructs despite both being proactive in nature.

4 | RESULTS

We report the descriptive statistics and correlations of the main study in Table 1.² Although both the theory and measurement were at the individual level, our data structure was partly nested because some employees shared the same supervisor whereas others were independent. We therefore tested the model using TYPE = COMPLEX in Mplus to take into account the potential influence of nonindependence. It is particularly suitable for research that involves data nonindependence with theorizing at a single level (Wu & Kwok, 2012). We mean-centered ideological contract breach and professional identification (Aiken & West, 1991).

We first estimated a model with the mediation process only (Table 2). Supporting Hypothesis 1, ideological contract breach was positively related to rumination over the breached ideology after controlling for transactional and relational contract breach ($b = .30$, $p = .00$). We then included the moderator and estimated the full moderated mediation model. The results are presented in Table 3 and Figure 2. Supporting Hypothesis 2, we found a significant interaction between ideological contract breach and professional identification on rumination over the breached ideology ($b = .22$, $p = .00$). We plotted this interaction at one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderator (Figure 3). As shown, the relationship between ideological contract breach and rumination over the breached ideology was stronger when professional identification was high (simple slope = .47, $p = .00$) than when it was low (simple slope = .19, $p = .01$). We also found a significant association between rumination over the breached ideology and self-affirmation of core values ($b = .09$, $p = .02$), supporting Hypothesis 3. Finally, self-affirmation of core values

TABLE 2 Results of the mediation process

	Rumination over the breached ideology	Self-affirmation of core values	Revenge cognitions	Proactive serving behavior	Self-improvement behavior
Transactional contract breach	-.02 (.12)	.03 (.07)	-.03 (.06)	-.07 (.11)	-.13 (.12)
Relational contract breach	-.01 (.11)	-.08 (.07)	.06 (.06)	.08 (.09)	.12 (.10)
Ideological contract breach	.30 (.06)**	-.07 (.04)	.11 (.06)	.05 (.04)	.07 (.04)
Rumination over the breached ideology		.09 (.04)*		.00 (.02)	.01 (.03)
Self-affirmation of core values				.13 (.06)*	.18 (.08)*
Revenge cognitions				-.08 (.06)	-.08 (.08)

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

TABLE 3 Results of the full moderated mediation model

	Rumination over the breached ideology	Self-affirmation of core values	Revenge cognitions	Proactive serving behavior	Self- improvement behavior
Transactional contract breach	-.03 (.12)	.03 (.07)	-.03 (.06)	-.07 (.11)	-.13 (.13)
Relational contract breach	.01 (.12)	-.08 (.07)	.06 (.06)	.08 (.09)	.12 (.11)
Ideological contract breach	.33 (.06)**	-.07 (.04)	.11 (.06)	.05 (.04)	.07 (.04)
Professional identification	.04 (.10)				
Ideological contract breach × PI	.22 (.08)**				
Rumination over the breached ideology		.09 (.04)*		.00 (.02)	.01 (.03)
Self-affirmation of core values				.13 (.06)*	.18 (.08)
Revenge cognitions				-.08 (.06)	-.08 (.08)

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Abbreviation: PI, Professional Identification.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

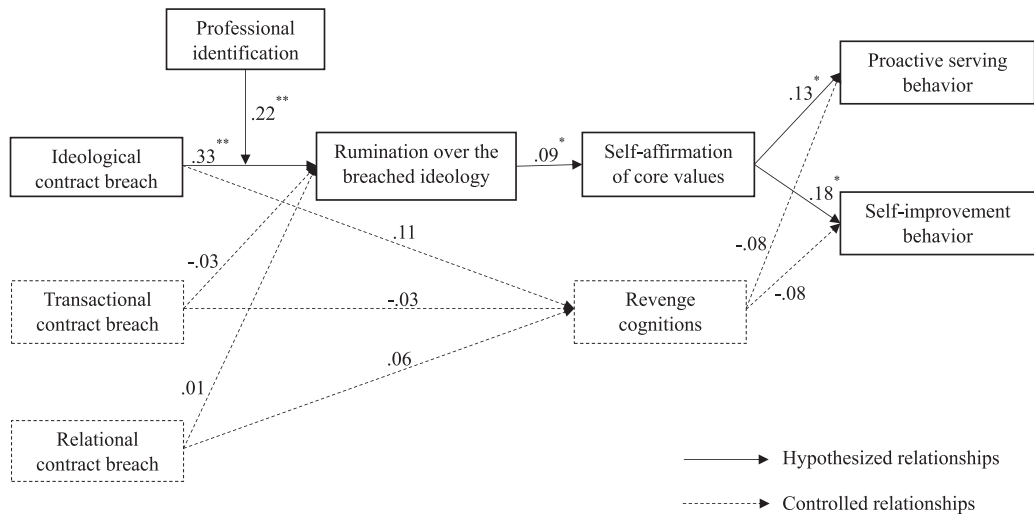


FIGURE 2 Path coefficients of the full model. Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. For parsimony, the direct effects of ideological/transactional/relational contract breach on self-affirmation and the outcomes as well as the direct effects of rumination on the outcomes are not shown in the figure. They are reported in Table 3. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

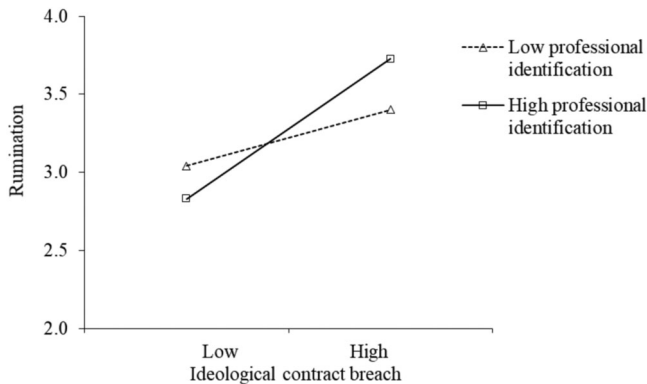


FIGURE 3 Interaction between ideological contract breach and professional identification on rumination over the breached ideology.

was positively related to both self-improvement behavior ($b = .18, p = .02$) and proactive serving behavior ($b = .13, p = .03$) after controlling for revenge cognitions, supporting Hypotheses 4 and 5, respectively.

To test the serial mediation effects (Hypotheses 6 and 7), we used a bootstrap approach with 10,000 resamples because products of coefficients are usually not normally distributed (MacKinnon et al., 2004). Traditional estimation of products of path coefficients suffers from low power due to the normal distribution assumption of the products (MacKinnon et al., 2004). The bootstrap approach provides bias-corrected estimates for non-normally distributed indirect effects (MacKinnon et al., 2007).

Although not formally hypothesized, we first examined the conditional indirect effect of ideological contract breach on self-affirmation through rumination over the breached ideology. We found that the indirect effect was stronger when professional identification was high (conditional indirect effect = .043, 95%CI = [.009, .090]) than when it was low (conditional indirect effect = .018, 95%CI = [.002, .048]). We next tested the conditional serial indirect effects of ideological contract breach on the two behavioral outcomes through rumination over the breached ideology and self-affirmation of core values. We found that under high professional identification, ideological contract breach

had significant and stronger indirect effects on proactive serving behavior (conditional serial indirect effect = .005, 95%CI = [.001, .019]) and self-improvement behavior (conditional serial indirect effect = .008, 95%CI = [.001, .027]) than those under low professional identification (whose confidence intervals included zero; conditional serial indirect effect = .002, 95%CI = [.000, .009] on proactive serving behavior; conditional serial indirect effect = .003, 95%CI = [.000, .013] on self-improvement behavior). Hypotheses 6 and 7 were thus supported.

5 | DISCUSSION

The literature has generally assumed that organizations' breach of psychological contract begets negative employee behaviors, but this may not be true for ideological contract breach (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019). We draw on self-affirmation theory and examine the counterintuitive implications of ideological contract breach for employees. This model identifies the psychological mechanism and boundary condition under which employees' perception of ideological contract breach eventually elicits compensatory behaviors such as proactive serving behavior and self-improvement behavior. In a hospital setting, we found that ideological contract breach sequentially triggers employees' rumination over the breached ideology and self-affirmation of core values, which in turn prompts self-initiated compensatory actions. Moreover, these psychological and behavioral responses are contingent on employees' professional identification such that they are more likely to occur among those high in professional identification.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

Our research makes theoretical contributions to different lines of literature. First, the investigation of the consequences of ideological contract breach from a self-affirmation perspective advances the understanding of how employees react to this specific type of contract breach psychologically and behaviorally. Despite the importance of ideology for employees, theoretical development and empirical evidence on how organizations' breach of ideological obligations influences employees' behaviors is scant (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019). To date, the overwhelming majority of work has focused on the implications of transactional and relational contract breach, primarily through a social exchange lens (e.g., Bordia et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2007). As explained before, the dominant social exchange framework may not depict the full dynamics involved in ideological contract breach. Psychological contract scholars have hinted that employees' responses to ideological contract breach may not be singularly negative (Thompson & Bunder-son, 2003). A few studies have suggested that ideological contract breach increases rather than decreases employees' effort (Jones & Griep, 2018; Vantilborgh et al., 2014). However, the mechanism underlying this effect remains largely unknown. Building on self-affirmation theory, we clarified how ideological contract breach counterintuitively spurs compensatory behaviors and why some employees become even more engaged because of such a negative experience. We found that employees affected by ideological contract breach become ruminative over the breached ideology and then adapt to it by self-affirming cognitively and performing constructive actions (i.e., proactive serving behavior and self-improvement behavior) to consolidate themselves. The social exchange mechanism (i.e., revenge cognitions) cannot account for the association between ideological contract breach and constructive actions. Our findings therefore support the value of introducing a self-affirmation perspective to understand employees' responses to ideological contract breach.

Moreover, we not only adopt a new self-affirmation perspective to explain the counterintuitive effects of ideological contract breach, but also provide insights into the boundary condition of the psychological process. Our focus on professional identification is in line with the conceptualization of ideological contract breach that stresses the importance of contributing to a cause through what people do at work. Our results suggest that employees with stronger professional identification may find ideological contract breach more self-threatening and experience more intense

rumination over the breached ideology, thereby prompting stronger motivation to reaffirm themselves cognitively and behaviorally. We provide a more complete understanding of the types of employees most likely to follow the proposed compensatory path and to respond constructively to ideological contract breach.

Interestingly, professional identification has previously been investigated as a boundary condition for the effects of psychological contract violation due to the breaking of transactional or relational terms by organizations. Specifically, Hekman et al. (2009), building on social exchange theory, found that the negative reciprocity between psychological contract violation and productivity is heightened among physicians with high professional identification. The authors argued that those physicians tend to see hospital management as an outsider (and their professional group as an insider) and particularly want to punish the outsider when feeling violated. Relying on conservation of resources theory, Deng et al. (2018) found that professional identification dampens medical employees' resource depletion in response to psychological contract violation. The authors explain that those with strong professional identification more easily process the distress, because viewing their hospital employer as an outsider enables them to keep a personal distance from the violation. Focusing on ideological contract breach, our findings show that professional identification can enhance the self-affirmation process and the associated beneficial outcomes incited by this type of breach. This interactive effect is not caused by professional identification's impact on orienting employees toward viewing their organizations as outsiders but by its influence in increasing the salience of ideological contract breach's threat to the meaning and purpose of one's work. An integrative consideration of the previous and current findings suggests that how professional identification shapes the influence of psychological contract breach may hinge on the type of contract breach, the outcome of interest, and the theoretical perspectives.

Finally, we contribute to self-affirmation theory by directly capturing the psychological process involved and testing it in a new context. The vast majority of research in the self-affirmation literature is based on laboratory experiments in which self-affirmation is externally imposed and manipulated after the occurrence of self-threat (McQueen & Klein, 2006). The original proposition by Steele (1988) and more recent advocacy by other scholars (Emanuel et al., 2018; McGregor et al., 2001; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010; Taber, 2016) hold that individuals may spontaneously respond to threats to self-concepts with self-affirmation of core values and principles. Critcher and Dunning (2015) have further theorized that provoking stressors instigate rumination on the threatened identity before the self-affirmation motive is activated. These important conceptual notions have rarely been empirically examined. By directly measuring and testing these key variables and relationships, our research provides initial empirical evidence for these ideas. The application of self-affirmation in our research also helps attest to its generalizability in the organizational context, a territory in which it has received much less attention.

5.2 | Practical implications

Our findings have relevance for managerial practice. Organizations should try to avoid ideological contract breach. For example, they could create more realistic expectations by clearly communicating what employees can reasonably expect regarding organizational contribution to a valued cause (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). However, organizations are not always able to fulfill expected ideological promises owing to practical constraints such as market pressures and financial concerns. Thus, it is important for organizations to understand how to respond when ideological contract breach occurs. According to our findings, when experiencing ideological contract breach, employees will ruminate over the breached ideology (due to the self-concept threat), feel an urge to reaffirm themselves, and engage in effortful compensatory behaviors to rectify their organization's mistake. Therefore, to help with employees' recovery from ideological contract breach, organizations may consider offering alternative ways to engage with the ideology. For instance, a hospital that cannot invest in a promised charity project can organize less costly free medical consultation in communities and other volunteer activities. In addition, organizations can provide opportunities for employees to reaffirm themselves. For example, to facilitate employees' self-affirmation, organizations can hold sessions for them to discuss and reflect on what they value the most in their job and why. These measures not only mitigate the

uncomfortable experience of rumination on the breach and improve employees' well-being, but also promote constructive behaviors that are helpful to the cause.

The finding that professional identification accentuates the self-affirmation process leading to positive adaptations is also informative for organizations. Professional identification seems to function as a double-edged sword. Professional identification eventually leads to a higher likelihood of employees overcoming the threat of ideological contract breach and reaffirming themselves with pro-client and self-improvement actions. However, it does not mean that organizations can unscrupulously breach ideological contracts and then count on employees with strong professional identification to do the right thing. The reason is that higher professional identification also increases the well-being cost of employees (i.e., rumination) when they perceive ideological contract breach. Moreover, the accentuating moderating role of professional identification means that employees high in such identification are likely to push themselves beyond their limits and potentially experience burnout, a phenomenon commonly seen when employees strive to pursue meaningful work (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Jones & Griep, 2018). Our research serves as a cautionary note that organizations should develop a balanced view of how professional identification shapes reactions to ideological contract breach.

Our research findings also have practical implications beyond the context of ideological contract breach. Proactive behavior is generally desirable, and many organizations rely on employees' personal initiative to cope with a fast-changing business environment (Griffin et al., 2007). Organizations interested in promoting proactive behavior can make use of the finding that employees' self-affirmation is conducive to this type of behavior. In our research, employees exercised spontaneous self-affirmation (Emanuel et al., 2018) in response to ideological contract breach. However, self-affirmation can also be externally induced, as demonstrated in previous experimental studies (e.g., Koole et al., 1999; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Organizations could use established methods of self-affirmation (Crocker et al., 2008; Koole et al., 1999), such as asking employees to write down or think about important values they strive for at work during special organizational occasions or ceremonies. Doing so can motivate employees to display proactive behavior to reinforce and promote the values that matter to them.

5.3 | Limitations and future research directions

Our research has several limitations that future research could address. First, we conducted the study in China and in a hospital context, raising concerns about the generalizability of our findings. Relatedly, we acknowledge that the content of an ideology may differ across employment contexts; it can be "intangible" (e.g., safeguard the freedom of speech in the name of people; Deuze, 2005) or "tangible" (e.g., produce a safe product to benefit our world; Krause & Moore, 2017). As our theorizing is firmly based on self-affirmation theory and the ideology contract literature, we do not expect our model to be tied to such content specificity. That is, regardless of what ideology has been breached, ideology contract breach is self-threatening and will trigger the proposed self-affirmation processes. Nevertheless, culture and organization type might subtly affect the specific psychological reactions to ideological contract breach. We suggest that future studies extend our theoretical model in different settings.

Second, the distribution of ideological contract breach was skewed, with a low mean and a low standard deviation. These characteristics suggest a low base rate of ideological contract breach, which is not uncommon in phenomena with a strong negative connotation (e.g., abusive supervision; Deng et al., 2021; Tepper et al., 2008). The fact that we collected our data in a public hospital, for which espousing a cause is essential to operate, may also explain the relatively low levels of ideological contract breach. However, a closer look at our data indicated that some participants did report high levels of breach, and thus the full range of the scale was used. Moreover, due to the moral significance and the potential implications of ideological contract breach (Dixon-Fowler et al., 2020; Hart & Thompson, 2007; Johnson et al., 2002), we believe that having a low base rate is not a reason to write off the importance of our research. Finally, as a robustness check, we reran our models using the MLR estimator, which produces estimates "robust to non-normality" (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017, p. 668), and obtain the same results.

Third, the coefficients of the serial mediation effects in our data were quite small. However, this does not necessarily mean that they were not meaningful (Song et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2008), especially considering the relatively long time lag and the use of a multisource design. Moreover, other published studies have reported similar effect sizes (Liu et al., 2021; Montal-Rosenberg et al., 2022). That said, we encourage future research to constructively replicate the proposed effects using different samples and designs.

Beyond addressing these limitations, our research points to a number of directions for future research. First, we focused on self-affirmation of work-related core values, as this approach is consistent with our research context and theory. Steele (1988) specifically stressed that self-affirmation in threat-related domains would be more effective than that in threat-unrelated domains, especially when a threat is very important to self-concept. As what is hurt by ideological contract breach is employees' values and principles in their employment, it makes sense to focus on employment-related core values in self-affirmation. Nevertheless, self-affirmation can also take place in threat-irrelevant domains as long as they are perceived as important to the self (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). For example, doctors who perceive ideological contract breach as a self-threat may resort to family values (e.g., "it is important to be a good parent and spend more time with my children") to reaffirm themselves and then engage in more family-oriented constructive behaviors (rather than work-related ones) to restore a global sense of adequacy. The examination of this possibility may uncover interesting cross-domain spillover effects of ideological contract breach. A related issue is that the scale of self-affirmation used in this research (Harris et al., 2019) primarily emphasizes the thinking aspect of self-affirmation. We encourage scholars to replicate our findings using alternative measures.

Second, as mentioned before, although we apply self-affirmation theory specifically to ideological contract breach in this research, the gist of the theory can be useful to understand other types of psychological contract breach. To illustrate, when an employee experiences relational contract breach (due to their organizations' failure to provide personal growth opportunities, for example), they may ruminate over the breach and reaffirm in a corresponding domain. According to the self-affirmation perspective, it is quite plausible that this employee may reaffirm their worthiness and competence as a professional and be motivated to proactively search for a better job. Extending our model in this direction may help establish the relevance of self-affirmation theory to the general psychological contract literature.

Third, we investigated professional identification as a contingency factor, but other variables may also play a moderating role. For example, prosocial motive (Grant et al., 2009) and calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009) may similarly enhance the psychological significance of ideological contract breach and thus strengthen the proposed self-affirmation process. Examining how moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002) shapes the responses to ideological contract breach is also interesting. Employees who have a very strong moral identity may feel deeply offended by ideological contract breach and resort to more intense means, such as public protest and defiance, to correct the circumstance and restore their identity (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). These ideas are worthy of future investigation.

Fourth, in research focusing on transactional and relational terms, breach and fulfillment are expected to have symmetric or opposite consequences. Prior studies have found that breach on these terms is negatively associated with organizational citizenship behavior, and fulfillment on the same terms is positively associated with it (e.g., Restubog et al., 2008; Turnley et al., 2003). However, this assumption may not hold for ideological contracts because they are based on fundamentally different terms and induce unique psychological processes. We found in this research that ideological contract breach can trigger constructive employee behaviors as attempts to salvage the breached ideology. However, we cannot apply the logic of symmetry to extrapolate that ideological contract fulfillment will reduce these behaviors. Instead, when employees perceive that their organizations have made good on the promise to a valued cause, they are likely to experience an elevated sense of responsibility and feel obligated to contribute their share to the cause (cf. Vantilborgh et al., 2014). This interesting possibility of asymmetric effects of ideological contract breach and fulfillment warrants further exploration.

Finally, we found that through a self-affirmation mechanism, employees engage in compensatory behaviors as a form of overperforming to help with the ideology breached by their organizations. However, we do not know how sustainable this internal drive can remain in the face of repeated contract breach (Jones & Griep, 2018). At a certain point, employees may start to feel exploited, become exhausted, and consequently stop trying to rescue the cause if

their organization continues to breach their ideological obligations. Or they may develop chronic rumination that they can no longer cope with and suffer mental health issues. Future studies could use a time-sensitive longitudinal design to examine the dynamic change of the proposed self-affirmation process. Moreover, the well-meaning compensatory behaviors may have some unintended “dark side” effects. Future research could explore whether overworked employees in the context of persistent ideological contract breach may involuntarily display undesirable behaviors. For example, employees may make too much compensatory effort and have little energy left to perform well in other domains at work or to seize opportunities that can advance their careers. It is also likely that employees may experience work-family conflict because they devote themselves to protect the breached cause and engage less in family duties.

6 | CONCLUSION

The norm of negative reciprocity, a dominant perspective in the psychological contract literature, is insufficient for understanding constructive employee behaviors following ideological contract breach. As such, we propose a self-affirmation framework to unpack the processes underlying ideological contract breach's counterintuitive consequences and identify professional identification as a key boundary condition. We break new ground in research on ideological contract breach by joining this emerging topic with the self-affirmation literature—two areas that had yet to be integrated. Our work represents an important step in exploring the unique consequences of ideological contract breach.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ENDNOTES

¹Although using parceling might increase the risk of biased estimation in CFA, this risk was low in our data because all constructs are unidimensional (Bandalos, 2002; Bandalos & Finney, 2001). Moreover, the hypothesis testing was based on composite scores rather than individual items, and our conclusion should not be influenced by the use of this strategy.

²The correlation between transactional contract breach and relational contract breach was relatively strong ($r = .84, p < .01$). However, the CFA results above demonstrated that treating them as two separate constructs fit the data better. To provide more evidence about their distinctiveness, we calculated their average variance extracted (AVE) indices (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). AVE should be higher than .50 for a construct's indicators to support convergent validity, and the AVE values for any two constructs should be higher than the squared correlation between them to support discriminant validity. Both conditions were met with AVE values for transactional contract breach (.82) and relational contract breach (.84) exceeding both the cut-off value of .50 and the squared correlation (.71). Finally, we repeated the analyses for hypotheses tests without controlling for these two variables. Results were similar to those with them controlled, except for a negative link from ideological contract breach to self-affirmation of core values. However, this effect was not reliable across analyses with or without the controls. We reported the results as an online supplement.

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