



Workplace loneliness, leader-member exchange and creativity: The cross-level moderating role of leader compassion



Jian Peng ^{a,*}, Yushuai Chen ^a, Ying Xia ^b, Yaxuan Ran ^a

^a School of Management, Jinan University, 601 Huangpu Avenue West, Guangzhou, China

^b School of Management, Harbin Institute of Technology, 92 West Dazhi Street, Nan Gang District, Harbin, China

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ABSTRACT

Since previous research on the relation between negative emotions and creativity obtained mixed results, a call has been made for an examination of creativity from the perspective of specific emotions. In response to the call, we studied workplace loneliness—a specific negative emotion that has received little theoretical or empirical attention. We propose a multi-level moderated mediation model in which workplace loneliness inhibits creativity via leader-member exchange and this indirect effect is moderated by leader compassion. Results from a study of 67 teams show that subordinates' workplace loneliness has a negative indirect effect on their creativity through leader-member exchange that is significant, only if, leader compassion is low. These results contribute to the literature on creativity by clarifying why and when workplace loneliness is related to creativity.

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1. Introduction

Because of the rapidly changing environment and fleeting market opportunities, employee creativity — referring to the development of novel and useful ideas about products, procedures, solutions or services — is increasingly assuming a pivotal role in enhancing organizational effectiveness and competitive advantage (Amabile, 1983). To facilitate employees to be creative in organizational practice, a majority of researchers have examined the antecedents of creativity (e.g., Kim, Hon, & Lee, 2010; Tierney & Farmer, 2011) from the perspective of individual differences. Among the individual factors, emotional experience has been recognized widely as a predictor of creativity at work (James, Brodersen, & Eisenberg, 2004). By contrast, there is much confusion concerning the role of negative emotions; sometimes, negative emotional experiences seem to inhibit creativity while it is the opposite at other times (To, Fisher, & Ashkanasy, 2015). The reason lies perhaps in the fact that negative emotion is not monolithic in nature but is made up of a variety of specific emotions. However, in most prior studies, negative emotions were tested as a high-order construct, while didn't specified if distinct types of negative emotion have different effects on creativity, and consequently lead to mixed results. Hence, many calls have been made for examining creativity from the perspective of specific emotions (Baas, Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008).

In response to such calls, this study focuses on workplace loneliness which is defined as a painful feeling situationally induced by a lack of

desired social relationships in a work environment (Lam & Lau, 2012; Wright, Burt, & Strongman, 2006). Essentially, workplace loneliness is a workplace-specific emotion and coexists with certain characteristics of the working environment such as competitive climate, virtual teams and alternative work arrangements (Erdil & Ertosun, 2011; Lam & Lau, 2012). Owing to increased use of the Internet and virtual teams, and increasing competition in the workplace, genuine social relationships are becoming more and more difficult to establish. Consequently, workplace loneliness has become a serious issue that has attracted much attention in recent years, and has been found to have destructive effects on employee well-being (Ayazlar & Güzel, 2014) and job performance (Lam & Lau, 2012). Given that modern human spend as much or more of their lives at work than in other life domains and the critical impact of workplace loneliness on work outcomes, this study aims to investigate the effect of workplace loneliness on creativity along with the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions.

1.1. Workplace loneliness and creativity

To get a better understanding of the workplace loneliness-creativity relation, we use feelings-as-information theory as a useful explanatory framework for this paper. The theory posits that individuals tend to use their emotions as a source of information when evaluating an object or situation (Schwarz, 1990). During such evaluation, emotions provide the needed information, which includes both information about evaluators' own abilities and information about the current environment. First, in terms of the information about evaluators' own abilities, negative emotions will selectively prime negative thoughts and memories

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: pengjiannut@163.com (J. Peng).

used when making a judgment (Forgas & George, 2001). Those employees who experience loneliness in the workplace are likely to conclude from this emotion that they are incapable and unwelcome, and generate negative evaluations (such as low self-esteem and self-efficacy) towards themselves (Lam & Lau, 2012). Considering that any creative activity is a process full of risk (i.e., trial and error), employees who negatively evaluate themselves are likely to cringe from creative activities for fear of failure (Tierney & Farmer, 2002).

Negative emotions indicate on-going problems and a dangerous and miserable environment. Therefore, individuals under the control of negative emotions are more likely to adopt a more detail-oriented and analytical processing strategy to solve the problem at hand (Davis, 2009). As a kind of negative emotion, Loneliness often leads to a cautious and overly detailed cognitive processing with respect to information assessment (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). The novel components of creativity are largely a function of cognitive variation because the latter helps individuals to break the stereotype and deal with the problem in a novel way by relating to new things (De Dreu, Baas, & Nijstad, 2008). However, loneliness, which is accompanied by the detail-oriented and analytic processing, may impede such variation (Hirt, Devers, & McCrea, 2008; Lin, Tsai, Lin, & Chen, 2014) and, in turn, reduce the possibility of engaging in creativity. It is worth stressing that detail-oriented cognitive processing could influence individuals' efforts and persistence on the task activities at work, which can improve task performance but not necessarily creativity (Hirt, Levine, McDonald, Melton, & Martin, 1997).

Hypothesis 1. Workplace loneliness is negatively related to creativity.

1.2. The mediating role of leader-member exchange (LMX)

In addition to the direct relationship between workplace loneliness and creativity, we also seek to reveal the underlying processes linking workplace loneliness to creativity. Specifically, this paper focuses on the mediating role of LMX, which refers to a kind of social exchange between leaders and followers. The relationship is usually established in three stages, namely role-taking, role-making and role-routinization (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In these interactive processes, leaders will assign their followers certain roles, and based on the responses from followers, leaders will decide whether to send other roles for followers and continue to build the relationship or not. In a high-quality LMX, leaders regard followers as “in-group members”, and the social exchange relationship between them is characterized by mutual trust, support and respect. By contrast, in a low-quality LMX, leaders regard followers as “out-group members”, so the relationship is the opposite.

Based on feeling-as-information theory (Schwarz, 1990), individuals with negative emotions tend to focus on negative information, and make negative judgment towards themselves and others. Following this logic, we expect workplace loneliness to be negatively related to LMX over all. First, loneliness is always driven by interpersonal incompetence that makes people shy away from social opportunities (Wright et al., 2006). Lonely employees often suffer from low esteem and thus make negative evaluations towards themselves (Rokach, 2014); they think that they lack the ability to be in-group members and refuse to devote effort towards satisfying their leaders' role expectations (Chen, Wen, Peng, & Liu, 2016); inevitably, this will harm relation building between them and their own leaders. Further, when facing stress, lonely employees respond with a passive coping strategy (i.e., pessimism and avoidance) rather than actively seeking social relationships. As noted by Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, and Knowles (2005), lonely individuals are too anxious to re-establish connections during social interactions. Therefore, lonely employees tend to be less confident to do something (e.g., accept task) as a means for establishing social relationships.

Second, due to the lack of sense of affiliation in the organization, lonely employees may feel they are not valued and supported by the organization, and thereby blame their leaders representing the organization. Under such a condition, lonely employees are inclined to make negative judgments about their leaders, and distrust their leaders (Lam & Lau, 2012). Given that engaging in social exchange is a risky decision that requires trust (Schyns & Day, 2010), lonely employees who see leaders as less trustworthy are relatively less willing to accept the roles assigned by their leaders than their non-lonely peers. A frequent consequence is that the leaders prefer not to spend much time or resources on such employees, which works against further development of LMX. In addition, lonely people lacking social relationship cannot get adequate information (including the information about the leaders) from the peers, which impedes the comprehensiveness of their understanding of their leaders. This exacerbates employees' distrust in leaders and strengthens their unwillingness to fulfill the assigned roles.

LMX has been reported to play a crucial role in fostering employee creativity (Joo, Yang, & McLean, 2014). Following a high-quality LMX, the leaders are more confident in supporting the employees with the resources, information and autonomy needed in addition to psychological support through enhanced trust and expressions of liking. Under such conditions, employees would rather take more risks and make more attempts, thus improving employees' internal motivation to start engaging in creative activities (Pan, Sun, & Chow, 2012). Further, to secure continued mutual benefit, employees receiving such encouragement will start performing beyond the formally assigned organizational roles, for instance, by coming up with novel and useful ideas (Joo et al., 2014). Conversely, when LMX is at a low level, employees would be less motivated to innovate since they are afraid that they may not be able to garner the materials and psychological resources necessary to complete the tasks ahead; they are intimidated by the risks and uncertainty associated with creative activities (Zhao, Kessel, & Kratzer, 2014). In view of these arguments, this paper suggests that employees' loneliness firstly hinders the development of LMX and then dampens their creativity:

Hypothesis 2. LMX mediates the relationship between workplace loneliness and creativity.

1.3. The moderating role of leader compassion

Although workplace loneliness arouses employees' negative self-evaluation and distrust in leaders that may hinder the development of LMX, leaders can mitigate this destructive effect by demonstrating timely compassion. Compassion refers to empathetic responses to the inevitable pain of human existence, which mainly includes noticing others' suffering, resonating with others' sorrow and striving to get others out of whatever trouble they are facing (Atkins & Parker, 2011).

Leaders with high compassion create an atmosphere of support and warmth in employees' heart (Cosley, McCoy, Saslow, & Epel, 2010). Such actions make employees realize that they are valued by the organization, and then reduce the negative self-evaluation resulting from workplace loneliness. Due to the negative self-evaluation (i.e., self-esteem and self-efficacy) as a key underlying psychological process linking high loneliness to low LMX (Chen et al., 2016), leader compassion can buffer the effect of loneliness on LMX through impeding its negative psychological process. Besides, when lonely employees get a high level of compassion from their leaders, they will feel that their leaders are trustworthy and deserve to be followed (Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011; Lilius et al., 2008). Thus, lonely employee may still make positive judgements towards the compassionate leaders, and accept work role assignments willingly. In other words, no matter whether they experience loneliness or not, employees will be willing to accept the roles assigned by compassionate leaders and maintain social exchange relationship with them. In short, the negative

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