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The role of subordinate emotional masking in leader–member exchange and outcomes: A two-sample investigation ☆

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ABSTRACT

Recent developments in the leadership literature call for research that emphasizes the role of the follower as well as that of emotion in the leader–member exchange (LMX). In response to these calls, this research examines the relationship between subordinate emotional masking and LMX quality, as well as the mediating role of LMX quality in emotional masking/outcome relationships. We collect data from two samples of MBA students from the United States and China, respectively. In both samples, we find that emotional masking by subordinates is negatively related to LMX quality. The mediating role of LMX quality in the relationship between emotional masking and work-related outcomes is also supported. Suggestions for future research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory has been a prominent approach to understanding leadership ever since its inception in 1970s. Based on role theory and social exchange theory, LMX theory emphasizes the role-making process during the leader–member interaction, the supervisor's differentiation among subordinates, and the formation of in-groups and out-groups in the vertical dyadic relationship. At the heart of LMX theory is a relational view of leadership, and a closer attention to the role of subordinates in leadership (House & Aditya, 1997). This relational view of leadership is echoed by a recent conceptual development in the leadership literature that emphasizes the role of followership. It is argued that subordinates may demonstrate an array of proactive behaviors that influence leader–member interactions, and more research is needed to examine how subordinates approach their role as followers in the vertical dyad (e.g., Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Howell & Shamir, 2005).

Another recent development in the leadership literature is the exploration of the role of emotion in leadership. Scholars have increasingly recognized that emotion is an integral part of leading (Brotheridge & Lee, 2008; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2005). In a recent literature review, Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, and Gupta (2010) identified sixty-three

scholarly articles on the linkages between leadership and emotion. This review indicates that researchers have focused primarily on leaders. Gooty et al. (2010) concluded that current research on leadership and emotion assumes a very passive role for followers, that "little to nothing is known regarding follower behaviors that impact leader emotions and affect leader's style, behaviors and perhaps quality of exchanges," and that "an explicit focus on followership is required" in future research (p.1000).

In response to these recent calls for more attention on the role of followership and that of emotion in leadership research, we focus on subordinate emotional regulatory behavior in leader–member interactions. Specifically, we examine the role of subordinate emotional masking in LMX and work-related outcomes in a number of ways. First, we focus on the relationship between emotional masking and LMX. Emotional masking refers to emotional expressive behaviors that involve "perceived discrepancies between the inner experience and the outer expression of emotion or attempts at masking the expression of one's inner feelings for self-presentational purposes" (Gross & John, 1998, p.175). Emotional masking in leader–member interactions represents an emotional regulation behavior in the within-organization context. Whereas research to date has expanded the popular concept of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) to the within-organization context (e.g., Diefendorff & Greguras, 2009), the dynamics involved in emotional regulatory behaviors that occur in interpersonal interactions within organizations remains less understood.

Second, we examine a number of work-related outcomes, including affective wellbeing, job satisfaction, and turnover intention, as they relate to emotional masking. Due to the predominantly rational view of organizations, emotions are typically considered the opposite of rationality and professionalism (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). Thus, emotions

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are closely managed at the workplace, and are frequently experienced and expressed in inauthentic, or even distorted, ways. Trying to understand the implications of such emotion management on workers' wellbeing, work attitudes, and behaviors is an important endeavor because, when armed with such knowledge, organizations can then engage in practices that encourage the types of emotional expressive behaviors that are beneficial to organizational effectiveness and employee wellbeing, and remove factors that facilitate dysfunctional emotional management effort.

Lastly, we examine the mediating role of LMX in the relationships between emotional masking and work-related outcomes (see Fig. 1 for the research model). Contemporary jobs require a great deal of interdependence among organizational members. Thus, work relationships play an important role in members' access to resources and their ability to get things done in organizations (Brass & Burkhardt, 1993). Past research suggests significant relationships between emotional regulatory behaviors and interpersonal relationship quality (e.g., Butler et al., 2003). We expect that LMX, as a form of work relationship influential to important contingencies at work, will mediate the relationship between emotional masking and subordinate wellbeing, work attitudes, and intention to leave the organization. An understanding of such mediation mechanisms is important, because it offers insight into the important role leader–member relationships play in subordinate wellbeing, and inform leadership practices aimed at improving workplace effectiveness.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Emotional expression and emotional masking

Emotional expression plays an important role in interpersonal relationships. Emotional expressive cues help interaction partners understand each other and adjust interpersonal behaviors according to the relational dynamics, which forms the foundation of effective interpersonal coordination and social exchange (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994). Importantly, people often express or suppress emotions for self-representation or social-influence purposes (Goffman, 1959). In the context of leader–member exchange, subordinates may hide their anger toward a leader for fear of negative consequences, or they may exaggerate their liking of a leader simply to ingratiate. In such situations, emotional masking has occurred. We follow Gross and John (1998) to refer to emotional masking as an emotional behavior in which individuals try to disguise their true inner feelings by exaggerating, suppressing, or neutralizing their emotional expressions. Emotional masking is common in people's daily work lives. Mann (1999) reported with a British sample that over half of all communications at work involve expressions of unfelt emotions.

Like emotional labor that is exercised in the service context, emotional masking within organizations is conducted based upon one's perceptions of the display rules, which prescribe what one should do with one's emotions (Ekman & Friesen, 1975). Diefendorff and Richard (2008) differentiated between prescriptive and contextual display rules. Prescriptive display rules concern organizational expectations for emotional expression, which often translate into the expression of socially pleasant emotions and suppression of socially unpleasant emotions. Contextual display rules, in contrast, concern the rules that guide individuals' emotional expressions at any given moment. The adoption of contextual display rules, rather than being induced by externally prescribed expectations of organizations, is influenced by specific contextual features such as the power dynamics between interactive partners (Matsumoto, Yoo, Hirayama, & Petrova, 2005), and one's interpersonal intentions and goals (Thoits, 1996). Thus, individuals have much discretion in their adoption of various emotional regulatory strategies when trying to comply with contextual display rules. While emotional labor in the customer service context (e.g., Grandey, 2003; Van Dolen, De Ruyter, & Lemmink, 2004) is governed closely by prescriptive display rules, we argue that emotional regulatory behavior

in the within-organization context (i.e., in leader–member interactions), is governed primarily by contextual display rules.

2.2. Emotional masking and LMX

From the interpersonal perspective, emotional masking hinders interpersonal understanding because it distorts true feelings with false emotional expressions. In emotional masking, inner feelings of individuals are either suppressed, amplified, or neutralized, all of which decrease the ability of others to know an individual's true feelings. This decreased interpersonal understanding in turn reduces the levels of closeness in a relationship (cf., Gross & John, 2003). Subordinates' emotional expression is an integral part of leader–member communication. Leaders may, for example, use subordinates' emotional expressions to infer their reactions to certain issues, based upon which they may be able to make changes and adjustments. Without effective communication of emotions, mutual understanding becomes problematic, which in turn hinders interpersonal liking, trust, and commitment.

Moreover, emotional masking may not be effective in hiding true feelings (Gross & John, 1998). Emotions are expressed through multiple channels. "Leaky" channels such as body gesture or vocal tone that are less subjective to conscious monitoring may reveal hidden emotional information (Ekman & Friesen, 1975). Prior research suggests that observers can detect authenticity of emotional expression, and react negatively to inauthentic displays (Frank, Ekman, & Friesen, 1993). When untruthful expressions are detected, the quality of an interpersonal relationship is harmed (Gross & John, 2003). The development of high-quality LMX relations, like all other interpersonal relationships, depends in part on how emotions are experienced and expressed. In an experimental study, Newcombe and Ashkanasy (2002) found that presenting positive information with negative emotional expressions led to negative follower evaluations of, and a more negative relationship quality with, the leader. We expect similar patterns to be observed when subordinates demonstrate such emotional inauthenticity in leader–member interactions.

Note that leaders' reactions to follower emotional expressivity may be influenced by the perceived power differential between them. Past research suggests that low-status individuals tend to inhibit overt negative emotions when they interact with high-status individuals (Diefendorff & Richard, 2008). Thus, it is likely that followers' emotional masking may at times be well-received by leaders. However, this beneficial outcome of emotional masking is unlikely to overcome the impaired communication effectiveness due to lack of expressive emotional cues available within the relationship. Thus, taking everything into consideration, we argue that the overall relationship between emotional masking and LMX will be negative. Thus,

Hypothesis 1. Subordinate emotional masking is negatively related to LMX quality.

2.3. Emotional masking and work outcomes

Affective wellbeing refers to the degree to which one experiences more positive and less negative emotions. Past research suggests that felt authenticity is conducive to positive feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment and happiness, because it satisfies the fundamental human needs for autonomy and self-expression (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It is reasonable to expect that individuals who mask their emotions will feel a sense of inauthenticity, resulting in decreased level of affective wellbeing. In line with this argument, Gross and John (1998) reported that emotional masking was associated with increased negative emotional experiences and decreased positive emotional experiences. Thus, we propose that emotional masking is negatively related to affective wellbeing.

According to the Affective Event Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), employees' emotional experiences at work have direct influence on work attitudes. Prior research has shown a significant link between