

Leader consultation mitigates the harmful effects of leader narcissism: A belongingness perspective

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from belongingness theory, the present study proposes and empirically tests the impact of leader narcissism on employees' citizenship and antagonistic behaviors via their organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) depending on conditions of leader consultation behaviors. Survey data collected from 262 leader-employee dyads at a large Chinese information technology company largely supported our predictions. The results show that leader narcissism threatens employees' OBSE and further exerts negative indirect effects on their promotive voice and helping behaviors and positive indirect effects on their dysfunctional resistance and badmouthing. The results further illustrate that the negative relationship between leader narcissism and employee OBSE and the indirect effects of leader narcissism on the four outcomes via OBSE are significant only under conditions where narcissistic leaders fail to consult with their employees. Such effects turn non-significant in the presence of high leader consultation. Theoretical and practical implications are offered along with limitations and suggestions for future research directions.

1. Introduction

Narcissistic leaders, those characterized by self-centeredness, an inflated ego, sense of entitlement, and excessive demand for admiration and compliance, are widely considered detrimental to employee outcomes (Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009; Maccoby, 2000). Indeed, conventional wisdom suggests that narcissistic leaders are interpersonally insensitive and dismissive (Lubit, 2002; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006) and that these behaviors are likely to frustrate and demotivate those they lead (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012). Yet, recent empirical evidence shows that narcissistic leaders may also sometimes display an apparent consideration and appreciation for others (Owens, Wallace, & Waldman, 2015), which can help counterbalance their detrimental impact on employees. Such behavioral inconsistencies are not entirely surprising, however, given that narcissists may intentionally use social influence to present themselves in more socially palatable ways in order to accomplish their own agenda (Jonason & Webster, 2012). Despite these fruitful findings and discussions, this line of research remains limited largely due to the lack of theoretical understanding about the mechanisms through which narcissistic leaders frustrate and demotivate their employees and the conditions under which their manipulative tendencies can mitigate this

impact (see Fig. 1).

The present study aims at contributing to the narcissism literature by offering a theoretically-driven explanation for why and how narcissistic leaders detract from employee outcomes, and why their deviation from narcissistic behavioral tendencies can mitigate such negative impacts. First, we provide a more nuanced understanding of the employee-related effects of leader narcissism by articulating the mediating mechanism that explains how employees react to their narcissistic leader. The identification of this mediating mechanism is an important step to advance the research on leader narcissism, as it is poorly understood in the existing literature. For example, Liu, Chiang, Fehr, Xu, and Wang (2017) found that when narcissistic leaders felt mistreated, they were more likely to engage in self-interested behaviors, therefore decreasing employees' prosocial or extra-role behaviors. Yet, it was unclear why employees chose to respond in such ways. Similarly, while Owens et al. (2015) found that the negative effects of leader narcissism on employee performance and job engagement were counterbalanced by leaders' humble behaviors, it remains theoretically unknown why employees reacted less negatively when their leader deviated from their narcissistic tendencies.

Drawing from belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), we propose employees' *sense of belonging* at work as a key psychological

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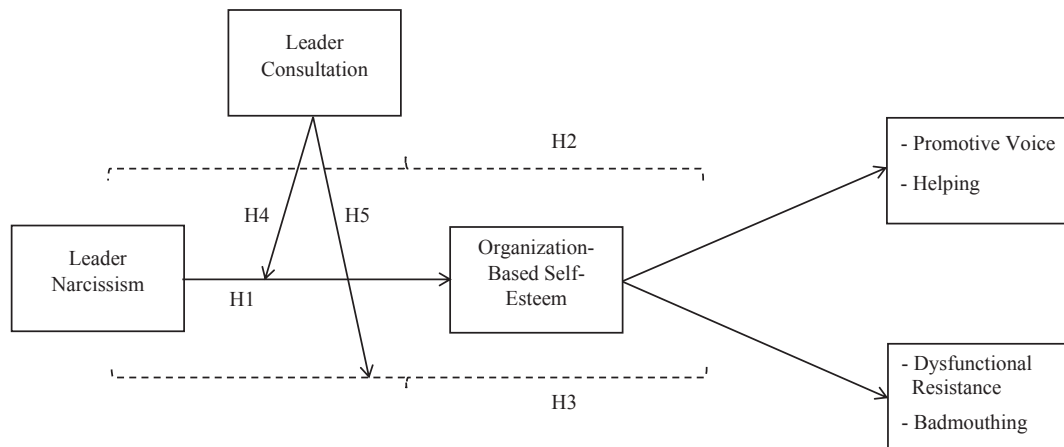


Fig. 1. Proposed research model of the belongingness consequences of leader narcissism.

mechanism underlying their behavioral reactions to leader narcissism. Stated briefly, belongingness theory posits that individuals possess a universal need to be accepted and valued by others (Thau, Aquino, & Poortvliet, 2007). Yet, unlike most individuals, narcissists tend to reject the “mutuality of status, caring, and respect that characterizes functional adult relationships” (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002, p. 116). We contend that employees are likely to interpret such lack of care and concern from their leader as a threat to their sense of value and acceptance at work. Therefore, we propose that leader narcissism is negatively associated with employees’ organization-based self-esteem (OBSE; Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989), defined as “the degree to which an individual believes him/herself to be capable, significant, and worthy as an organizational member” (Pierce & Gardner, 2004, p. 593).

Second, we draw further on belongingness theory to extend the nomological network of the distal outcomes of leader narcissism. Specifically, we illuminate how and why employees are likely to respond to the thwarted sense of belonging (i.e., diminished OBSE) experienced from interacting with a narcissistic leader. We propose that leader narcissism diminishes employees’ willingness to contribute to leadership outcomes in the form of citizenship behaviors, including *promotive voice*, which involves the communication of ideas and suggestions intended to improve the work-unit (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012), and *helping behavior*, which involves offering assistance in order to facilitate task accomplishment in the work group (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). We also expect employees to increase their covert antagonistic reactions toward the narcissistic leader, in the form of *dysfunctional resistance*, which involves noncompliance with leader requests with an intent to disrupt the workflow (Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001), and *badmouthing*, which refers to the communication of disparaging comments about the leader to others (Wilkerson, Evans, & Davis, 2008).

Finally, our research adds to the leader narcissism literature by theoretically explaining why and how narcissistic leaders deviate from their narcissistic behavioral tendencies, thus also providing empirical evidence to counter the claim that narcissists might lack sufficient self-control to enact behaviors helpful for the attainment of their goals (c.f., Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). The narcissism literature has suggested that narcissists can be manipulative and may intentionally engage in behaviors that can garner them more positive views or evaluations from others (Paunonen, Lönnqvist, Verkasalo, Leikas, & Nissinen, 2006; Vonk, Zeigler-Hill, Mayhew, & Mercer, 2013). A recent study also suggests that narcissistic leaders may use certain influence tactics to fulfill their need for control and dominance while satisfying their constituents’ sense of involvement in leadership processes (Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017). From a belongingness perspective, when narcissistic leaders employ such “soft” influence tactics (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012) by displaying a sense of interest in, and appreciation for,

employees and their contributions, the extent of deprivation employees experience from interacting with their narcissistic leader should lessen. Drawing from belongingness theory, we investigate the moderating role of *leader consultation* (Yukl & Falbe, 1990), which refers to circumstances where leaders invite employees to participate in the decision-making process. When narcissistic leaders deploy consultation tactics, they are signaling to employees the opportunity to be involved with an otherwise demeaning and inaccessible leader. Therefore, we expect that leader consultation helps to lessen the negative impact of leader narcissism on employees’ thwarted sense of belonging.

2. The belongingness consequences of leader narcissism

Belongingness theory posits that humans have a fundamental need to belong and be accepted by others, one that is fulfilled through (1) frequent interaction and (2) adequate care and concern in their relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). While it is ideal for one’s interpersonal interactions to be “affectively positive or pleasant”, the extent to which such interactions are conflict free and non-negative in nature is of most importance in satiating the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 505). Within belongingness theory, self-esteem is positioned as a “mental meter” by which individuals gauge whether their belongingness needs are being met (Baumeister, 2012, p. 9). Whereas general self-esteem captures “the anticipated long-term probability of belongingness” (Baumeister, 2012, p. 9), OBSE captures an employee’s transient sense of value and acceptance at work (Ferris, Brown, & Heller, 2009).

2.1. Leader narcissism and organization-based self-esteem

Drawing on belongingness theory, we argue leader narcissism constitutes an important threat to employees’ sense of belonging at work. Primarily driven by their own psychological needs for dominance and authority resulting from their fragile self-view (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Wink, 1991), narcissists are prone to engage in interpersonal behaviors that demonstrate their superiority, often by depreciating others and their contributions (Back et al., 2013). As Lubit (2002, p. 132) indicates, “to maintain a positive image of themselves, [narcissists] project all their negative qualities onto others and therefore devalue others.” For narcissistic leaders, this tendency toward devaluation can manifest in the form of socially harmful behaviors that publicly belittle or humiliate those they lead, such as by ridiculing their employees or making jokes at their expense (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993). Such exchanges are likely to be internalized by the target employee, causing a negative self-evaluation of their adequacy and overall sense of relational value and belongingness at work (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In addition, narcissists’ disinterest in the needs and welfare of others

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