Speaking up to the "emotional vampire": A conservation of resources perspective☆

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ABSTRACT

Although narcissists are commonly compared to "emotional vampires" who drain others of their energy, research examining the impact of narcissistic leadership on employee well-being and outcomes remain scant. Drawing from conservation of resources (COR) theory, we theorize that narcissistic leadership consumes employees' emotional and cognitive resources, thus negatively affecting their work energy, and voice behavior. Moreover, we further investigate how leader team-oriented accountability, which helps to reduce narcissistic leaders' self-serving tendencies, moderates this negative indirect effect. Three-wave survey data collected from 357 employees working at a large consulting firm (Study 1) and experimental data collected from 129 working professionals (Study 2) both provided support for the negative indirect effect of narcissistic leadership on employees' voice via their work energy. Additionally, this negative indirect effect is significant only when leaders are not accountable towards their team and that such negative indirect effect becomes non-significant when leaders exhibit high team-oriented accountability.

1. Introduction

Leaders are perhaps one of the most important factors influencing employees' feelings of enthusiasm and vitality at work (Atwater & Carmeli, 2009; Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007; Perry, Witt, Penney, & Atwater, 2010). One form of leadership that may be particularly relevant to employees' ability to thrive and feel energized in the work environment is narcissistic leadership, defined as leader behaviors that are "principally motivated by their own egomaniacal needs and beliefs, superseding the needs and interests of the constituents and institutions they lead" (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006, p. 629). Indeed, as a result of their grandiose sense of self-worth, self-centeredness, and persistent need for affirmation and admiration from others (Emmons, 1987; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991), narcissistic leaders are often compared to "emotional vampires" – those who leave their victims emotionally drained and de-energized (Bernstein, 2012, 2013). Despite such tendencies, sparse research attention has been devoted to understanding how and when narcissistic leadership affects employee well-being and work outcomes.

Drawing from conservation of resources theory (COR, Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018), which posits

that individuals seek relevant resources (e.g., conditions, energies) in order to manage job demands, we advance this literature by examining the influence of narcissistic leadership on *employee work energy*, defined as the experience of an affective, cognitive, and behavioral arousal which motivates individuals towards the completion of organizational objectives (Cole, Bruch, & Vogel, 2012). According to extant research, narcissists have an "others exist for me" illusion, whereby narcissists expect others to devote their time and effort attending to their needs while providing little attention or concern in return (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002; p. 106). As such, we expect narcissistic leadership to be negatively related to employee work energy. In addition, we further examine the distal impact of narcissistic leadership via employee work energy on *employee voice*, defined as the "discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning" (Morrison, 2011, p. 375). Voice not only reflects employees' ability to exert additional effort beyond their in-role duties (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), but recent research suggests that such discretionary behavior depends on employees' availability of energetic resources (Ng & Feldman, 2012). Consistent with the metaphor of the narcissist as an "emotional vampire" (Bernstein, 2012), we

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suggest that narcissistic leadership may impose demands that consume cognitive and emotional resources, thereby exhausting employee energy and further demotivating employees from speaking up.

Furthermore, we examine the boundary conditions under which the emotionally exhausting effects of narcissistic leadership might be tempered. Recent research suggests that, despite their desires for self-aggrandizement and excessively self-interested nature, narcissists may overcome their more noxious characteristics – and thus refrain from behaving in ways that harm others – when they believe that it is in their best interests to do so (Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017; Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012; Jonason & Webster, 2012; Liu, Chiang, Fehr, Xu, & Wang, 2017; Owens, Wallace, & Waldman, 2015). Within organizations, one notable way in which leaders may subordinate their own self-centered tendencies' and attend to the needs and interests of their team is through *leader team-oriented accountability*, defined as "the expectation that one has to justify one's actions to others" (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999, p. 255; see also Rus, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2012). Whereas narcissists' decisions and behaviors are driven predominantly by their own psychological needs (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006), a sense that accountability is expected may motivate narcissistic leaders to overcome these tendencies and pay more attention to the well-being of others (Giessner, van Knippenberg, van Ginkel, & Sleebos, 2013; Rus et al., 2012). Drawing from the tenets of COR theory, we suggest that a sense of accountability may help mitigate the energy-exhausting aspects of narcissistic leadership.

Our study contributes to the narcissistic leadership research, the COR literature, and the voice literature in at least three ways. First, drawing from COR theory, our study is among the first to explore the underlying mechanisms (i.e., work energy) and moderating conditions (i.e., leader team-oriented accountability) that transmit the impact of narcissistic leadership on employee well-being and outcomes. We consider narcissistic leadership as an important source of stressors that could exhaust employees' affective and cognitive resources and therefore have a negative impact on employees' work energy and voice behavior. Second, answering recent calls among leadership researchers to identify positive leader characteristics that can temper the negative aspects of their character (Owens et al., 2015; Spain, Harms, & LeBreton, 2014), we examine the buffering effect of leader team-oriented accountability. This extends COR theory by demonstrating that the source of stressors could also be motivating and therefore lessen the consumption of emotional and affective resources. Such empirical evidence we offer adds to recent research suggesting that narcissistic leaders may view the team they supervise as an extension of themselves and therefore show more caring towards the team (Galvin, Lange, & Ashforth, 2015). Third, our study also extends the leadership and voice literatures by investigating voice in a broader context of both narcissistic leadership and employees' well-being (i.e., energy). Our theoretical model appears in Fig. 1.

2. Conservation of resources

Advanced as a motivational theory of stress (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll

et al., 2018), COR theory posits that individuals strive to acquire, protect, and preserve valued resources as a means to guard against anxiety and distress. Resources may include any "objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies" that aid in the attainment of future resources, preserve current resources, or protect against the threat of resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). According to COR theory, loss or threat to one's resources causes psychological distress, and in turn, deleterious effects on one's state of well-being and work behavior (Hobfoll, 1989). As such, COR theory has important motivational implications centered on two primary tenets: resource acquisition and resource conservation (Halbesleben, Harvey, & Bolino, 2009; Hobfoll, 2001). The resource acquisition tenet suggests that individuals are motivated to actively engage with their environment to increase their current "reservoir" of resources (Perry et al., 2010, p. 1146). In contrast, the resource conservation tenet suggests that individuals are motivated to avoid (the threat of) resource loss, such as by withdrawing oneself from situations or behaviors viewed as threatening to one's current and future resources.

COR theory also predicts that employees will strategically invest resources in ways that maximize the accumulation of additional resources (Hobfoll, 2001). As a result, resources acquired from the workplace are often reinvested in work-related behavior (Halbesleben et al., 2009; Hobfoll, 2001). Importantly, Hobfoll (2001) later extended the resource investment tenet of COR theory by proposing two corollaries: the first suggests that individuals with a surplus of resources are better able to invest their resources, whereas the second suggests that lacking resources makes investment difficult. This is important because it helps explain when and why individuals might view the same behavior as potentially resource-enhancing or resource-exhausting (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014: p. 3; Ng & Feldman, 2012).

Since Hobfoll's (1989) foundational article, COR theorists have described and studied several important resources. One particularly meaningful resource in the stress literature is energy, as its presence is needed to avoid burnout (i.e., a state of exhaustion; Perry et al., 2010). While organizational researchers have only recently begun to explore employee energy at work, the existing research suggests that energy is vital to employee involvement, with its presence being associated with greater commitment to group goals, organizational involvement, and creativity (Atwater & Carmeli, 2009; Cole et al., 2012).

3. Narcissistic leadership and work energy

Drawing on COR theory, we argue that narcissistic leadership constitutes an important workplace stressor capable of exhausting employees' energy at work. To begin, employees are likely to *expend* considerable cognitive and emotional resources managing their narcissistic leader's fragile ego (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Wink, 1991). Indeed, narcissists require persistent adulation and validation of their superiority in order to maintain their inflated, but nonetheless tenuous, self-view (Grijalva & Harms, 2014; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), which manifests in their belief that others should care about their well-being as
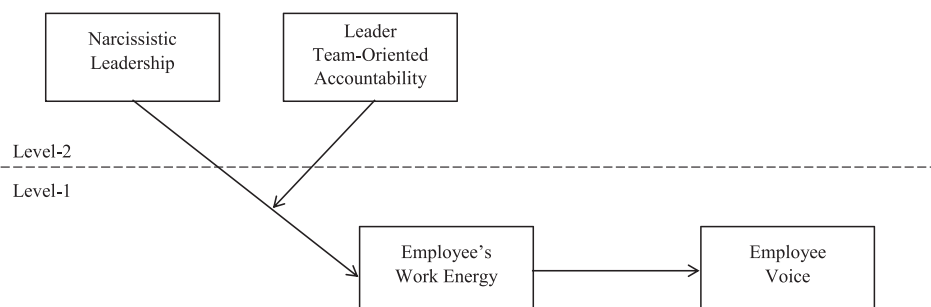
Fig. 1. Proposed research model.