



# Authoritarian leadership and employee creativity: The moderating role of psychological capital and the mediating role of fear and defensive silence<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing from the transactional theory of stress, we examined the relationships between authoritarian leadership, fear, defensive silence, and ultimately employee creativity. We also explored the moderating effect of employee psychological capital on these mediated relationships. We tested our hypothesized model in two studies of employee-supervisor dyads working in Africa (Nigeria; Study 1) and Asia (China; Study 2). The results of Study 1 revealed that the negative relationship between authoritarian leadership and creativity was mediated by employee defensive silence. Extending these findings in a three-wave study in Study 2, our results revealed a more complex relationship. Specifically, our results showed that both fear and defensive silence serially mediated the link between authoritarian leadership and employee creativity. In addition, we found that this mediated relationship was moderated by employee psychological capital such that the relationship was stronger when psychological capital was low (versus high). Implications for both theory and practice are discussed.

In today's rapidly changing and increasingly competitive work environment, employees are more than ever expected to produce novel and useful ideas about new products, services and procedures (i.e., exhibit creative behaviors; Zhou & Hoever, 2014). Creativity is important not only because it increases customer satisfaction and loyalty, but it also plays a crucial role in organizational success and survival (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009). As a result, organizations often seek to adopt policies that fuel employee creativity (Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009). To do so, researchers have underscored and focused on the role of positive forms of leadership (Bai, Lin, & Li, 2016; Shin & Zhou, 2003; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999). Although these studies have generated valuable insights, little attention has been paid to potentially darker or destructive sides of leadership and their relationship with employee creativity. An example of such leadership approach is authoritarian leadership (AL) (Aycan, 2006). Authoritarian leaders assert absolute authority and control over employees and expect unquestionable obedience (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004). Given

that the creative process often requires employees to use their own discretion to share and come up with useful ideas (Amabile, 1988; Gong et al., 2009), a growing body of work has suggested that AL can inhibit creativity (e.g., Wang, Chiang, Tsai, Lin, & Cheng, 2013; Zhang, Tsui, & Wang, 2011). Despite these important findings, there is still lack of a coherent theoretical framework that explicates the psychological processes and moderating factors of such relationship in more depth.

More specifically, aside from Zhang et al. (2011) who examined the mechanisms (i.e., reduced knowledge sharing in workgroups and collective efficacy) through which the AL – creativity link occurs at the group-level, our insight into why and when AL weaves its influence on individual employee creativity remains very limited. Such expanded insight is crucial because creativity is not merely an aggregated effort, but rather an opportunity for individuals to contribute uniquely (Amabile, 1996). Furthermore, several studies have revealed weak, and even in some cases positive associations between AL and employees' overall performance (e.g., Huang, Xu, Chiu, Lam, & Farh, 2015; Wang &

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Guan, 2018). Since creativity is a critical component of employees' performance (Raja & Johns, 2010), these mixed findings suggest that the AL – creativity link is far more complex than generally assumed by past research. They also emphasize the need for more detailed understanding of the mechanisms underlying this link as well as the moderating factors that may weaken or strengthen these processes. Such improved knowledge could then help organizations to alleviate the ill-effects of AL on creativity at work.

Accordingly, our primary goal in this paper is to develop and test a more comprehensive model linking AL to individual employee creativity. To do so, we draw from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress as an overarching theoretical framework to suggest two primary mechanisms: *fear* (the primarily felt emotion) and *defensive silence* (the coping mechanism adopted to reduce the potentially threatening relationship and feelings of fear) through which AL may relate to employee creativity. Briefly, Lazarus and Folkman's theory suggests that individuals who encounter stressors in the form of demanding or pressuring interpersonal interactions may experience fear and may adopt relevant coping mechanisms (e.g., reduce their work efforts). Because creativity is an important work effort that requires individuals to go above and beyond their normal job requirements (George, 2008), we suggest in this manuscript that being confronted with an authoritarian leader may be demanding, pressuring, and form a significant stressor for employees such that they experience fear and become defensively silent, which then inhibits their creativity.

Further, we examine the moderating effect of employee psychological capital (PsyCap) on the relationship between AL and fear. PsyCap is a higher-order construct combining efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007). We focus on PsyCap as a moderator in our model, because it is an individual's "positive appraisal of circumstances and probability for success based on motivated effort and perseverance" (Luthans et al., 2007, p. 550) and it serves as an important psychological resource useful for dealing with stressors (see Luthans & Youssef, 2017). The transactional theory of stress suggests that individuals react differently to stressful situations and that certain personal resources are particularly useful in this regard. Consistent with the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and research on personal coping resources (Hobfoll, 2001), we suggest that employees high in PsyCap can cope better with the stressful nature of AL, thus attenuating its effect on employee fear. In contrast, when an employee has low PsyCap, we propose that the effects of AL on employee fear will be more pronounced (compared to high PsyCap individuals).

By examining these relationships (see Fig. 1), our study makes at least four important contributions to the literature. First, to date, the literature on AL has primarily focused on social exchange and identity theories in explaining AL's effects on employee work outcomes (e.g., Chen, Eberly, Chiang, Farh, & Cheng, 2014; Schaubroeck, Shen, & Chong, 2017). While interesting insights have emerged from these theories, this limited theoretical perspective may restrict the complete understanding of how AL influences employees. Indeed, the use of a single theory is insufficient to fully capture how a specific leadership style affects employee motives, behaviors, and performance (e.g., Walumbwa et al., 2011). Against this backdrop, we aim to build upon the emerging evidence linking AL with reduced levels of creativity (e.g., Wang et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2011) by proposing a model wherein authoritarian leaders may influence employee creativity through

multiple pathways based on the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Second, our study contributes to AL literature, as it is one of the first to explicitly examine how authoritarian leaders influence employees' emotions and their resulting outcomes in the form of fear and defensive silence. By doing so, we add to leadership research focusing on how leader behaviors affect follower emotions and in turn follower outcomes. More specifically, we answer the call for more research on the role of negative emotions within leadership literature (Bono, Foldes, Vinson, & Muros, 2007; Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010). Indeed, leadership literature is heavily skewed towards the beneficial effects of positive emotions, leaving negative emotions vastly understudied (Gooty et al., 2010). Although previous research has suggested that authoritarian leaders may induce fear (Cheng et al., 2004; Farh, Cheng, Chou, & Chu, 2006), to our knowledge, the role of fear has not been directly/comprehensively investigated in the link between AL and creativity. By directly testing fear and defensive silence as the underlying mechanisms through which AL influences employees' creativity, our study provides a more comprehensive understanding of AL. Indeed, examining mediating mechanisms is a critical theory-building component that expands scholars and practitioners' knowledge of *why* certain processes occur in organizations (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007).

Third, this research further contributes to the growing literature on silence by examining the antecedents of a defensive form of silence and how it can influence critical work outcomes, such as creativity. Specifically, our research answers calls to identify potential antecedents and consequences of defensive silence (Brinsfield, 2013; Morrison, 2014). As Morrison (2014) noted, addressing such calls "requires a perspective that recognizes the role of emotions and nonconscious processes, as the failure to engage in voice does not always reflect a cognitive or deliberate decision process" (p. 175). Our study addresses these calls by identifying the roles of AL and the resulting emotion of fear in the emergence of defensive silence and its effect on employee creativity.

Finally, we add to the leadership and PsyCap literatures by examining how PsyCap influences follower responses to AL. More generally, there has been very limited understanding of how PsyCap may help employees navigate different leadership behaviors (see for example, Li, Wang, Yang, & Liu, 2016; Wang, Sui, Luthans, Wang, & Wu, 2014 for exceptions). As a result, scholars have called for more research investigating PsyCap as a moderator of leadership behaviors (Dawkins, Martin, Scott, & Sanderson, 2013; Newman, Ucbasaran, Zhu, & Hirst, 2014). We address this call and contribute to this emerging line of research by shedding light on PsyCap as an important personal resource that makes some employees more resistant to the negative effect of AL. More specifically, this research examines the mitigating effect of employee PsyCap on the negative effects of AL. As PsyCap represents a positive psychological state, doing so allows us to enrich our theoretical understanding of why some individuals are more resistant to the detrimental effects of AL. Additionally, we offer practical insights on how employees can cope with AL to alleviate its negative consequences on employee creativity and in doing so, also address the call for research on boundary conditions of AL in organizations (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008).

## 1. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 1.1. Transactional theory of stress

According to the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the cognitive appraisal of stress is a two-part process consisting of primary and secondary appraisal. During the primary appraisal, an individual will first determine the relevance of an event or situation for his/her well-being, and whether it can be categorized as stressful. If the situation is perceived stressful, it may be evaluated as a threat (alternatively, the situation can also be appraised as a potential harm or

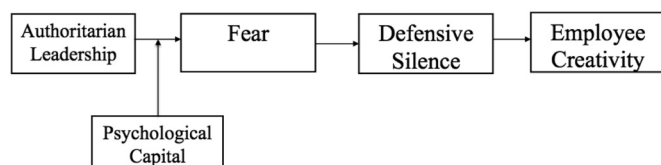


Fig. 1. Theoretical model of the current research.

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