



Traditional Chinese leadership and employee voice behavior: A cross-level examination



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ABSTRACT

To enhance the understanding of leadership influences on employee voice behavior, this study focused on traditional Chinese leadership (i.e., authoritarian leadership). We proposed that supervisor authoritarian leadership negatively affects employee voice behavior and manager authoritarian leadership has a cascading effect on such behavior through supervisor authoritarian leadership. Furthermore, these effects were either amplified or attenuated under different conditions (i.e., leader identification and power distance orientation). A cross-level investigation of voice behavior within 52 groups of employees from multiple Chinese companies in Beijing was conducted. The results showed that supervisor authoritarian leadership negatively affected employee voice behavior and mediated the negative relationship between manager authoritarian leadership and employee voice behavior. Leader identification moderated the indirect negative effect of manager authoritarian leadership on employee voice behavior via supervisor authoritarian leadership, while power distance orientation moderated the direct negative effect of supervisor authoritarian leadership on employee voice behavior.

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Introduction

Voice behavior refers to the discretionary provision of information intended to improve organizational functioning to someone inside an organization with the perceived authority to act, even though such information may challenge and upset the status quo of the organization and its power holders (Detert & Burris, 2007). As a type of extra-role behavior, employee voice behavior has been considered as a key driver of high-quality decisions and organizational success (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). However, employees often choose to remain silent about organizational problems and are usually reluctant to voice their thoughts to others in their organizations (Van Dyne, Cummings, & McLean Parks, 1995), especially in cultures such as China that have high power distance. As stated by some Chinese proverbs, “Too much talk leads to error, careless talk makes trouble” and “Speech is silver, and silence is gold”.

Not surprisingly, a common theme in voice research focuses on how to motivate employees to voice their thoughts and how to identify the factors that encourage employees to freely express their thoughts about organizational problems (Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010). In past decades, it has been found that several factors influence employees' voice behavior, including satisfaction (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998), personal control and organizational identification (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), and voice climate (Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, & Kamdar, 2011). Leaders are an important contextual factor and have been considered to play a key role in motivating employees to voice their thoughts (Detert & Burris, 2007). Nevertheless, extant knowledge about the influence of leadership on employee voice behavior has primarily focused on Western leadership styles. Relatively little is known about how non-Western leadership, such as traditional Chinese leadership (i.e., authoritarian leadership), influences employee voice behavior.

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As used here, the term authoritarian leadership refers to a special leadership style developed in Asian cultures that reflects the cultural characteristics of familial ties, paternalistic control, and submission to authority (Farh & Cheng, 2000). In Chinese organizations, authoritarian leadership is considered as a pervasive and effective leadership style because of its fit with traditional values (Cheng, Chou, Huang, Wu, & Farh, 2004). Although the construct domain of authoritarian leadership needs revision to keep pace with the development of Chinese society (Farh, Liang, Chou, & Cheng, 2008), authoritarian leadership still exists in modern Chinese organizations through the pan-familism process (Tsui, Wang, Xin, Zhang, & Fu, 2004). How authoritarian leadership influences employee voice behavior is an interesting theoretical and practical question that is worthy of investigation. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted on the impact of authoritarian leadership on employee voice behavior to date. Therefore, the first purpose of our research is to fill this gap and extend the research on leadership and voice behavior by examining whether authoritarian leadership inhibits employee voice behavior.

In addition, the extant research focuses on the direct effect of a single leader—usually an immediate supervisor—or on the indirect effect of top managers, via an organization's climate or structure, on employee voice behavior (Detert & Treviño, 2008), without considering the influence of the leader constellation (i.e., an employee's immediate supervisor and one or more skip-level leaders). Skip-level leaders refer to leaders above the focal employee's immediate supervisor in the organization's formal chain of command (Detert & Treviño, 2008). Sometimes it is only skip-level leaders who have the authority and power to solve important problems or to make crucial resource decisions that affect employees two or more levels below them (Detert & Treviño, 2008). Therefore, it is very important to understand how employees think about voice in complex organizations from the perspective of skip-level leaders. Detert and Treviño (2008) call for an investigation of cross-level leadership influences or the cascading-down effects of skip-level leaders. In response to this call, the current research examines the cascading effect of higher-level manager authoritarian leadership (i.e., its indirect influence via lower-level supervisor authoritarian leadership), along with the direct influence of immediate supervisor authoritarian leadership on employee voice behavior.

Another noticeable issue is the extent of the cascading-down effect. It has been argued that lower-level leaders mimic senior leaders' behavior (Bass, Waldman, Avolio, & Webb, 1987), causing that behavior to have an impact on first-line employees. However, the opposite phenomenon also exists. More specifically, intermediate leaders sometimes choose “contrasting” leadership behavior, actively seeking to reverse the impact of messages (and in particular, negative messages) from higher-level leaders (Yammarino, 1994). To understand the relationship among higher-level managers, lower-level supervisors, and employee behavior, we draw on social identity theory to examine how higher-level manager authoritarian leadership cascades down to trigger lower-level supervisor authoritarian leadership and in turn, to influence employee voice behavior. In particular, we examine the contingent effect of leader identification on the link between higher-level manager authoritarian leadership (hereinafter referred to as manager authoritarian leadership) and lower-level supervisor authoritarian leadership (hereinafter referred to as supervisor authoritarian leadership). Additionally, we explore the effect of power distance orientation on the association between supervisor authoritarian leadership and employee voice behavior.

By examining the relationship between authoritarian leadership and employee voice behavior, this research makes several contributions to the literature. First, we are among the first to explore whether traditional Chinese leadership exerts a negative effect on employee voice behavior. The examination of this effect may deepen the current understanding of leadership influences on employee voice behavior. Second, we simultaneously consider immediate supervisors (one level up from a focal employee) and supervisors' managers (i.e., two levels up from a focal employee) in our model. This multilevel examination extends current knowledge about the direct/indirect influence of skip-level leaders and the leader constellation on employee voice behavior. Third, our study deepens the understanding of the cascading-down effect of leader behaviors by clarifying the contingent conditions under which such an effect is either amplified or attenuated. Fourth, on the methodological front, we collected multisource data in different industries, answering Detert and Burris's (2007) call for further research on leadership behaviors and employee voice behavior using data from several sources and/or from various industries. Finally, this study enriches the authoritarian leadership literature by exploring its predictive power from a multilevel perspective. Fig. 1 summarizes the theoretical model examined in the present study. In the following section, we discuss the model in detail, using Fig. 1 as a guide.

Literature review and hypotheses

Immediate supervisors and employee voice behavior: the direct influence of authoritarian leadership

Voice behavior is defined as “proactively challenging the status quo and making constructive suggestions” (Van Dyne et al., 1995). It has three inherent characteristics: discretionary, challenge-oriented, and potentially risky (Liu et al., 2010). Due to the possibility of challenging an authority's status, engaging in voice behavior may cause a deterioration of the employee's relationship with others

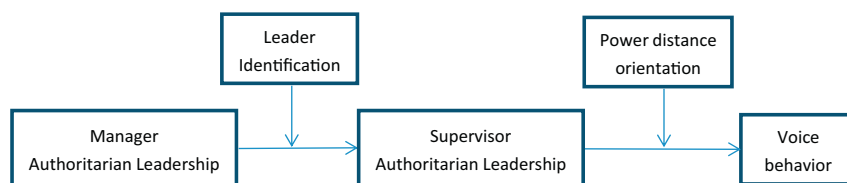


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

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