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Wen-Cheng SONG, Xiang-Qian ZHANG, Serena GIURA

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Effects of Leaders' Positive/Negative Emotional Expression on Subordinates' Voice Behavior: Mediation Effect of Subordinates' Liking to Superiors

Wen-Cheng SONG¹, Xiang-Qian ZHANG², Serena GIURA³

Abstract

Employees' voice could benefit organizational development and progress; however, emotional mechanism to induce such a behavior still requires further research. This study investigates the relations between leaders' different emotional expression and employees' voice behavior in China. By investigating 215 pairs of superior-subordinate samples of enterprises in China, it is discovered that leaders' positive emotional expression could enhance employees' voice, and the negative emotional expression would negatively affect employees' voice behavior. Meanwhile, subordinates' liking to superiors shows partial mediation effects on the effect of leaders' positive/negative emotional expression on employees' voice behavior. The research results reveal that leaders emphasize the function of positive emotional expression in organizational management. Future research could further investigate various influential paths and distinguish leaders' emotional expression.

Keywords: emotional labor, liking, positive expression, management, job satisfaction, cognitive process.

Introduction

Enterprises encounter severely competitive environment in the economic transition period in China that the transfer of employees' positive voice influences the development and progress of an organization. Under Chinese cultural

¹ Business School of Huaqiao University, Quanzhou, China; College of Business Administration, Fujian Jiangxia University, Fuzhou, CHINA. E-mail: song_wencheng@163.com

² Business School of Huaqiao University, Quanzhou, CHINA. E-mail: xqzhang1998@163.com (Corresponding author)

³ School of Business and Economics, University of Texas, Dallas, USA. E-mail: sg7334@gmail.com

background, it is discovered in management practice that employees often keep silence, hide real opinions, or simply make echoes when being requested for opinions. How to encourage employees' positive expression to propose high-quality voice becomes the highlight of management research and practice. There has not been the direct research proof, but based on the practice of organizational management and the correlated research results, leaders' emotional expression might affect employees' voice behavior. Leaders grasp the power and resources in the organizations that their emotion presents larger effects on subordinates than the communication contents (Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002). For instance, their emotional expression could effectively affect subordinates' performance (Gooty *et al.*, 2010) and organizational citizenship behavior (Koning & Kleef, 2015) to further influence the development of the organization (Ashforth, & Humphrey, 1993). Accordingly, this study attempts to discuss the effect of leaders' emotional expression on subordinates' voice behavior.

To better explain the influence process, discussions in the research is based on the "emotion as social information" model (EASI model). The model was proposed by Van Kleef (2009) to discuss how individual behaviors were affected by others' emotions in the social relationship. Emotion is a kind of information; emotional expressers deliver information to observers and affect the behavior through the paths of providing information related to situations (inferences) and affecting observers' emotion and the liking to expressers (affective reaction). Based on such theories, the effect of leaders' emotional expression on employees' voice behavior are shown in this study. Emotional expression could be divided into active emotion and negative emotion. Leaders have to express positive or negative emotion suitable for actual needs at work. Research discovered that leaders' angry emotion would have subordinates feel that they did not do well on the task completion to enhance the in-role performance, but it might induce subordinates' negative affective reaction to reduce the performance; especially when the expression was improper (Van Kleef, 2014; Dahling, 2017). In this case, it becomes the research motivation whether leaders should express active emotion or negative emotion when intending to enhance employees' extra-role behavior of voice.

Furthermore, research on social psychology revealed that affection might appear before cognitive processes; affective reaction was generally unconscious (Grecu & Mihailescu, 2018). For example, when superiors evaluated subordinates' performance, affective reaction (e.g. liking to subordinates) might unconsciously appear in the cognitive process (e.g. understanding of subordinates' actual performance) and result in higher performance evaluation (Dulebohn, Wu, & Liao, 2016). To discuss the effect of leaders' emotional expression on subordinates' voice behavior, the mediator of subordinates' liking to superiors is introduced to discuss the promotion or prohibition of subordinates' liking to the effect of leaders' emotional expression on subordinates' voice behavior.

In sum, superior-subordinate matched samples are collected for the statistical analysis in this study to discuss the effect of leaders' emotional expression on

employees' voice behavior through employees' liking to superiors, under Chinese background. The research would display whether leaders should take positive or negative emotional expression for subordinates' liking to further enhance the voice behavior. It is expected that the research could enrich leaders' management theory on emotional labor, assist managers in understanding effective emotional expression, and propose effective suggestions for the management practice of enterprises.

Literature review and research hypothesis

Relations between leaders' positive/negative emotional expression and subordinates' voice behavior

Voice behavior refers to constructive and work-related suggestions and points of view proposed by employees to explain organization innovation and successful adaptation to the dynamic business environment (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). Previous research on factors in voice proved that leaders' behaviors and styles would affect employees' voice (Wong, Spence Laschinger, & Cummings, 2010). As a matter of fact, leaders' emotional expression might influence subordinates' voice behavior, and the positive emotional expression and negative emotional expression showed distinct effects on subordinates' voice behavior. Such influence might relate to the following functions.

One is the function of emotional contagion. According to the EASI model, emotional expressers' affective reaction is the influence on observers, which is functioned through emotional contagion. Emotional contagion refers to people automatically and unconsciously catching people's emotional changes in the interactive process and automatically imitating others' expression, sound, gesture, and motion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992; Turgut *et al.*, 2016). A person's happiness would induce others' active emotions; similarly, a person's anger would induce the observers' anger (Cheshin, Rafaeli, & Bos, 2011). In this case, when leaders face subordinates with positive or negative emotions, the employees would be affected by the function of emotional contagion to generate positive or negative emotions. Meanwhile, employees' positive or negative emotions would affect the voice. In order to present dissatisfaction or seek for improvement, voice behaviors would challenge the authority of an organization that it shows certain risks (Detert & Burris, 2007; Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007). Research proved that active emotion would have an individual tend to taking risks, while negative emotion would have an individual pessimistically predict the possible future result and appear more risk aversion tendency (Lauriola & Levin, 2001). As a result, active emotion might positively affect voice behavior and negative emotion would show negative effects.

The other is emotional feedback. The theory of emotion as a feedback system considers that past emotional experience would leave affective residue to influence the emotional anticipation at the next similar situation to further affect behavioral decision (Baumeister *et al.*, 2007). Frequent interaction between superiors and subordinates occurs every day, and the emotional expression of organizational members in the previous interaction would affect the successive interaction tendency of both parties (Hu & Shi, 2015). When leaders often give negative emotional feedback to subordinates in the superior-subordinate interaction and communication, subordinates would leave negative affective residue on the communication with the leaders. Such unpleasant experience would result in escape behavior (Elfenbein, 2007) that subordinates might avoid contacting with the leaders. Meanwhile, voice is an extra-role behavior, not including in job performance, that subordinates might reduce voice behavior to avoid contacting with the leaders for the negative emotional feedback.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study.

H1a: Leaders' positive emotional expression would positively affect subordinates' voice behavior.

H1b: *Leaders' negative emotional expression would negatively affect subordinates' voice behavior.*

Leaders' positive/negative emotional expression and subordinates' liking to superiors

Liking refers to the attraction among people (Tsui & Barry, 1986). Research pointed out the effect of liking on various variables related to work results, e.g. performance evaluation (Whiteley, Sy, & Johnson, 2012) and leader-subordinate exchange (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012). According to the EASI theory, observers' affective reaction influenced by emotional expressers was to change observers' interpersonal impression and liking to expressers through emotional expression (Hareli & Hess, 2010). Research revealed that an individual, when facing a person expressing happy emotion, would enhance the liking to the person, but would reduce the liking to an angry person (Hess, Blairy, & Kleck, 2000). Research on team leaders discovered that angry leaders would influence team members to be angry and leave bad impression, while happy leaders would induce team members' happy emotion and leave good impression (Sy, Cote, & Saavedra, 2005). For this reason, leaders facing subordinates with positive emotions might enhance subordinates' liking to the superiors, while the expressed negative emotion might reduce the liking. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed in this study.

H2a: *Leaders' positive emotional expression would positively affect subordinates' liking to superiors.*

H2b: Leaders' negative emotional expression would negatively affect subordinates' liking to superiors.

Subordinates' liking to superiors and voice behavior

In the research on the antecedent of voice behavior, it was discovered that subordinates' voice behaviors were affected by leader-subordinate exchange (Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Joireman, 2008) and job satisfaction (Lepine & Van Dyne, 1998; Henderson & Argyle, 1985). The better leader-subordinate exchange relationship and higher job satisfaction of employees, according to the principle of reciprocity in social exchange theory, employees would make efforts exceeding the duties for returning the leaders and the organizations. For instance, employees would more positively propose voice when encountering some problems in the development of the organizations (Ng & Feldman, 2012). The meta-analysis also discovered that liking (including reports from the aspects of leaders and subordinates) would notably affect leader-subordinate exchange relationship and job satisfaction (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2016) and the liking between leaders and subordinates could enhance the exchange relationship of both parties and promote employees' job satisfaction. In other words, subordinates' liking to superiors might enhance the exchange quality between employees and leaders, promote employees' job satisfaction, and further facilitate employees' positive participation in voice to develop strategies for the organizations. In this case, subordinates' liking to superiors might enhance subordinates' voice. In the practice, it is also observed that an employee who likes the leaders and job might more possibly express the suggestions and opinions for the development of the organization. Accordingly, it is assumed in this study that

H3: Subordinates' liking to superiors would positively affect subordinates' voice behavior.

In sum, the hypothesis model in this study is shown in *Figure 1*.

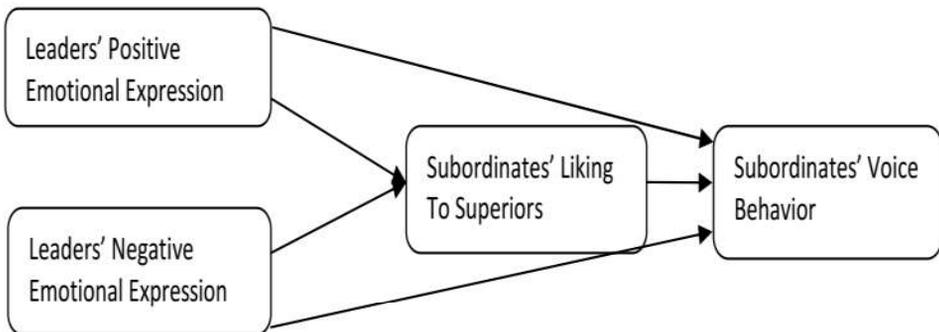


Figure 1: Research hypothesis model

Research design

Sample and data collection

In consideration of the universality of the research subject, leaders and employees of enterprises in different industries, including financial industry, educational training industry, consulting industry, Internet industry, machinery manufacturing, retail industry, real estate industry, and catering industry, are selected as the research objects to increase the representativeness of the research. With questionnaire survey, the questionnaire design and arrangement hides the item meanings to avoid common method variance (CMV), and both leaders and employees of enterprises are collected data. For the convenient survey in the enterprises, the researcher first requires the agreement and cooperation of the managers. Furthermore, leaders of enterprises select 1-3 direct subordinates and fill in the “leader questionnaire” according to the interaction with the subordinates, containing the emotional expression of the subordinates and the evaluation of the subordinates’ voice behavior. Afterwards, the employees selected by the leaders fill in the “subordinate questionnaire” to evaluate the liking to the superiors. To enhance the authenticity of the questionnaire, reduce the participants’ doubts, and avoid social desirability, all copies of questionnaire are anonymous, and the completed questionnaire is directly collected by the researcher. Total 242 pairs of questionnaire are distributed; after removing invalid ones, total 215 pairs are retrieved, with the retrieval rate 88.8%. Among the valid participants, leaders averagely age 35.3, 54.2% are male, and 67.3% show undergraduate degrees and above; subordinates averagely age 27.7, 60% are female, 49.5% present college and undergraduate degrees, the seniority is 1-3 years, and the average superior-subordinate partner period is 1.84 years.

Measurement scale

The scales used in this study are translated from English into Chinese; leaders fill in the “leaders’ positive/negative emotional expression scale” and the “employees’ voice behavior scale”, and employees fill in the “liking to superiors scale”.

The leaders’ positive/negative emotional expression scale is referred to DEELS (the Discrete Emotions Emotional Labor Scale) proposed by Glomb and Tews (2004); the scale focuses the measurement of emotional labor on emotional expression, including three subscales of true expression, false expression, and emotional depression; each subscale is further divided into positive emotion and negative emotion. True expression subscale is applied to this study; leaders are requested to carefully recall the emotional expression to certain subordinate in the past 6-month working experience, containing body language, facial expression, and tone expression, to answer the question that “How often do you express various emotions to the subordinate at work? For instance, when you are really angry, how

often do you express the emotion?” Fourteen common positive/negative emotions (9 negative emotions and 5 positive emotions), including “being irritated”, “scare”, “happiness”, “grief”, “like”, are listed in the scale for the participants selecting the expression frequency, covering “never”, “several time a month”, “several time a week”, “several time a day”, and “frequent expression in a day”. The Cronbach’s α of the scale appears 0.92.

The employees’ voice behavior scale was developed by Liang, Farh, and Farh (2012). Total 10 items are covered, including 5 for promotive voice, e.g. “He/She positively develops and proposes suggestions to influence the work” and “He/She positively proposes new projects beneficial to the work”, and 5 for prohibitive voice, including “He/She would present opinions which could influence the company efficiency, even though it would embarrass others” and “He/She would point out the problems at work, even though it might destroy interpersonal relationship”. The scale is measured with Likert 5-point scale (1 for completely inconsistent, and 5 for complete consistent). The scale is developed under Chinese situations that it conforms better to the voice behavior in Chinese organizations. The Cronbach’s α of the scale appears 0.87.

The liking to superiors scale was developed by Wayne and Ferris (1990), which was commonly used in the superior-subordinate two-factor research (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2016). The scale is composed of 4 items in a single dimension, containing “How much do you like your leader”, “I get along well with my leader”, “It is pleasant to work with my leader”, and “I think I can make good friends with my leader”. With Likert 5-point scale, the first item is scored from “completely dislike” to “extremely like”, and the rest 3 items are scored from 1 for “completely inconsistent” to 5 for “completely consistent”. The Cronbach’s α of the scale shows 0.92.

Based on the past research results, variables which might potentially affect voice behavior are selected as the control variable. Employees’ age, research pointed out the effect of age on employees’ voice behavior and silence (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008); employees’ gender, research showed higher voice frequency of males than females (Morrison, 2011); employees’ higher seniority, employees with higher seniority would more easily propose voice than junior employees (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003).

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

First, 4 variables in this study (leaders' positive emotional expression, leaders' negative emotional expression, subordinates' superiors liking, and subordinates' voice behavior) are proceeded Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Four-factor model is the benchmark model, where each variable is a factor. Single-factor model contains all variables; two-factor model combines leaders' positive/negative emotion into a factor, and subordinates' superiors liking and voice are combined as a factor; and, three-factor model combines leaders' positive/negative emotion into a factor. From Table 1, the assumed four-factor model presents better fit data ($\chi^2=954.374$, $df=342$, $RMR=0.104$, $GFI=0.755$, $AGFI=0.710$) than other models, and the 4 variables show better differential validity for the next study.

Table 1: Confirmatory Factor Analysis result (N=215)

model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	$\Delta\chi^2$	RMR	GFI	AGFI
single-factor model	2586.914	350	7.391		.162	.433	.373
two-factor model	2009.056	349	5.757	577	.154	.551	.478
three-factor model	1320.873	347	3.807	688	.120	.653	.594
assumed four-factor model	954.374	342	2.791	366	.104	.755	.710

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of variables and the correlation coefficients between variables. From *Table 2*, leaders' positive emotional expression presents significant correlations with negative emotional expression ($r=0.418$, $p<0.01$) and subordinates' voice behavior ($r=0.304$, $p<0.01$), leaders' negative emotional expression shows remarkable correlations with subordinates' liking to superiors ($r=-0.396$, $p<0.01$), and superiors' liking reveals notable correlations with voice behavior ($r=0.164$, $p<0.1$).

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficient of variable

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Subordinate Age	27.66	6.54	1								
Subordinate Gender	1.60	.49	-.123	1							
Subordinates' Educational Attainment	2.29	.83	-.241**	.028	1						
Subordinates' Seniority At Current Job	1.87	.81	.582**	.051	-.140*	1					
Superior-Subordinate Partner Time	1.84	2.22	.506**	.017	-.142*	.700**	1				
Leaders' Positive Emotional Expression	3.07	.67	.095	-.026	-.160*	.072	.00	1			
Leaders' Negative Emotional Expression	2.17	.88	.196**	.006	-.383**	.100	.088	.418**	1		
Subordinates' Liking To Superiors	3.74	.74	-.177**	.008	.098	-.108	-.107	-.040	-.396**	1	
Subordinates' Voice Behavior	3.34	.64	.036	-.049	.050	.103	.091	.304**	.020	.164*	1

** . Above the standard .01 (bilateral) with significant correlation.

* . Above the standard 0.05 (bilateral) with significant correlation.

Hypothesis test

Table 3 displays the structural equation model analyses of research hypotheses. According to the results of model fit indicators ($X^2 / df = 2.791$, $GFI = 0.755$, $AGFI = 0.710$, $RMR = 0.104$, $RMSEA = 0.091$, $CFI = 0.846$, $NFI = 0.780$), leaders' positive emotional expression positively affects subordinates' voice behavior ($\beta = 0.496$, $p < 0.001$) and the negative emotional expression negatively affects voice behavior ($\beta = -0.278$, $p < 0.01$). It reveals that leaders' active emotion could enhance subordinates' voice behavior, while the negative emotional expression would reduce subordinates' voice behavior that H1a and H1b are supported. In the relationship between leaders' emotional expression and subordinates' liking to superiors, positive emotional expression positively affects subordinates' liking to superiors ($\beta = 0.496$, $p < 0.005$), while negative emotional expression negatively affects subordinates' liking to superiors ($\beta = -0.524$, $p < 0.001$) that H2a and H2b are supported. Leaders' distinct emotional expression appears different effects

on subordinates' liking to superiors. Leaders expressing active emotion would enhance subordinates' liking, and the negative emotion expression would reduce subordinates' liking. Subordinates' liking to superiors reveals significantly positive effects on the voice behavior ($\beta=0.159$, $p<0.05$), explaining that subordinates' liking to superiors would enhance the voice behavior that H3 is supported.

Table 3: Hypothesis test result with structural equation model

1. major parameter estimate				
path			β	C.R.
Subordinates' liking to superiors	<---	leaders'	.195	2.206*
positive emotional expression			-.524	-6.215***
Subordinates' liking to superiors	<---	leaders'	.159	1.976*
negative emotional expression			.496	4.584***
Subordinates' voice behavior	<---	subordinates'	-.278	-2.820**
superiors liking				
Subordinates' voice behavior	<---	leaders'		
positive emotional expression				
Subordinates' voice behavior	<---	leaders'		
negative emotional expression				
2. model fit indicators				
$X^2/df=2.791$		RMSEA=0.091		
GFI=0.755		CFI=0.846		
AGFI=0.710		NFI=0.780		
RMR=0.104				

Note: * stands for $P < 0.05$, ** for $P < 0.01$, and *** for $P < 0.001$.

Discussion

Results discussion

First, research reveals the effect of leaders' positive/negative emotional expression on subordinates' voice behavior. The EASI theory regards emotional expression as the information delivery, where observers acquire information and adjust the behaviors. Leaders' active emotion (e.g. appraisal and encouragement) would affect subordinates through the function of emotional contagion to induce the active emotion and further enhance the voice behavior. Meanwhile, it also leaves positive affective residue to subordinates in the interaction through emotional feedback. Furthermore, subordinates' liking to superiors partially mediates the effect of leaders' active emotion on the voice behavior, i.e. a part of leaders' positive emotional expression being able to enhance subordinates' voice behavior because of the promotion subordinates' liking. It conforms to the EASI theory that observers would have affective reaction, according to expressers' emotional

expression, to influence observers' behaviors. On the contrary, leaders' negative emotion appears negative effects on subordinates' voice behavior.

Furthermore, the mediation effect of subordinates' liking to superiors is worth noticing. Research findings show significant effects of leaders' emotional expression on subordinates' liking to superiors, where positive emotional expression presents positive effects and negative emotional expression shows negative effects. It is consistent to the research result in psychology (Hess, Blairy, & Kleck, 2000) as well as presents non-rationality of people in management behaviors. As Barsade, Brief, and Spataro (2003) proposed, the "affective revolution" in organizational behavior reminded the researcher that non-rational factors in management should be emphasized in the research on organizations, particularly the effect of affective factors on various behaviors.

Management inspiration

First, leaders should take positive emotional expression but reduce the use of negative emotional expression to avoid inhibiting employees' voice behavior. According to the research results, employees would reduce the liking with leaders' negative emotional expression and further inhibit voice behavior; it would result in bad influence on the development of organizations. An enterprise could train the managers' emotion management to replace negative emotional expressions of blame with positive expression (e.g. encouragement) in the communication so as to enhance employees' liking to leaders and further increase voice behavior.

Moreover, the liking between superiors and subordinate should be established. Subordinates' liking to superiors shows primary mediation in this study; it reminds managers in enterprises of the importance of full understanding of liking. In management practice, it is hard to imagine that employees dislike the leaders would be willingness to proposing positive voice at work.

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