

HOW SUPERVISOR NARCISSISM CONTRIBUTES TO EMPLOYEE SILENCE: ROLES OF NEGATIVE ANTICIPATIONS AND LEADER–MEMBER EXCHANGE

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We integrated the theory of reasoned action and leader–member exchange (LMX) to construct a research model of the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee silence. Through a 3-wave survey with 292 employees of 3 Chinese companies, we examined the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee silence, the mediating role of negative anticipations, and the moderating role of LMX. Results showed that supervisor narcissism had a significant positive impact on employee silence, and negative anticipations played a partial mediating role between them. LMX significantly moderated the relationship between supervisor narcissism and negative anticipations, with a positive correlation between supervisor narcissism and negative anticipations that was more significant in the condition of low LMX than in high LMX. We also found that LMX negatively moderated the mediating effect of negative anticipations on the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee silence, whereby the higher the quality of the LMX the weaker was the mediating effect.

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When faced with the negative consequences of poor decisions by supervisors or with one of many other challenges that may arise within an organization, an employee who could have put forward a valuable proposal or idea may be reluctant to speak up. *Employee silence* (Morrison, 2014) has become a widespread phenomenon in organizations, and has attracted much interest in the field of organizational behavior research (Morrison, 2014). Researchers have linked employee silence to many important individual and organizational outcomes, including lower employee commitment and job satisfaction (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005), employee stress and depression (Cortina & Magley, 2003), organizational failure to address ethical transgressions (Clapham & Cooper, 2005), and decreased innovation in the organization (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Antecedents of employee silence in the workplace include psychological safety (see e.g., Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Morrison & Milliken, 2000), diffusion of responsibility (see e.g., Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Morrison & Milliken, 2000), trust (see e.g., Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Morrison & Milliken, 2000), personality (Lepine & Van Dyne), self-esteem (Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003), and justice (Huang & Huang, 2016). Although the focus in prior research has largely been on the individual factors for remaining silent (see e.g., Brinsfield, 2013), there is also evidence to suggest that silence may often be influenced by organizational factors. Because supervisors are typically the recipients of employee voice and largely determine the promotion of employees, supervisors are considered to be one of the most important organizational factors influencing employee silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Therefore, in the current study we were particularly concerned about the impact of leadership on employee silence.

A leader's dark personality and its outcomes have become important research topics (e.g., Harms & Spain, 2015). Known as one of the dark triad of personality traits, narcissism is generally regarded as a destructive leadership trait (Godkin & Allcorn, 2011). Empirical findings in research and anecdotal accounts have routinely linked supervisor narcissism to negative workplace behaviors (e.g., Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). However, we found that there is a lack of relevant literature in which the intervening effects of supervisor narcissism on employee silence are identified.

Narcissistic supervisors tend toward having a hypersensitivity to criticism and an exaggerated need for admiration, resulting in the intellectual inhibition of their subordinates (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). We, therefore, argued that the negative behaviors of narcissistic supervisors would induce the formation of negative psychological cognition in their employees. Based on the theory

of cognitive psychology (Sternberg, Sternberg, & Mio, 2008), we put forward negative anticipations (Zhang, Zhang, & Wang, 2010) as a mediator, and inferred that supervisor narcissism would increase negative anticipations of employee voice behavior, resulting in employee silence.

Researchers have also shown that the influence of leadership on employee psychology or behavior will be affected by the quality of the interaction between leaders and their subordinates (see e.g., Han & Yang, 2011). Thus, there may be great differences in the influence of supervisor narcissism on employees' negative anticipations because of the difference in quality of the leader–member exchange (LMX) relationship (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Therefore, we selected LMX as a factor to examine as a moderator to enhance the situational cognition of supervisor narcissism.

Therefore, our aim was to clarify the influence of narcissistic leadership on employee silence, followed by a discussion of the mediating role of negative anticipations and the moderating role of LMX in this relationship.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Supervisor Narcissism and Employee Silence

Narcissism is a personality trait encompassing grandiosity, arrogance, fragile self-esteem, self-absorption, entitlement, and hostility. Narcissistic leaders are generally motivated by their need for power and admiration rather than their interest in the institutions they lead (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Khoo and Burch (2008) argued that narcissistic leaders exercise power largely for personal or selfish ends, and characterized the attributes of narcissistic leadership as negative rather than positive. Through a review of relevant literature, we found that Ouimet (2010) proposed five components of narcissistic leadership as follows: a) charisma (meaning grace, favor, or divine gift); b) self-interest influence (mainly motivated by the satisfaction of their own needs); c) deceptive motivation (recklessness driven by the pursuit of desirable results); d) intellectual inhibition (aggressiveness towards negative feedback); and e) simulated consideration (in the form of manipulation and exploitation of employees).

We argued that subordinates would be more prone to keeping silent when faced with a narcissistic supervisor. First, a narcissistic supervisor's negative behaviors, such as bullying and coercion, will destroy subordinate trust (Benson & Hogan, 2008); consequently, employees will be unwilling to offer feedback to a narcissistic supervisor regarding situations within the organization. Second, narcissistic supervisors tend to be self-centered, making it difficult for them to listen to the views of subordinates. Therefore, they may ignore, or view as hostile, any opinions inconsistent with their own because of being highly sensitive to the judgments of others. Narcissistic supervisors often react aggressively to what they consider negative feedback (Martinez, Zeichner, Reidy, & Miller, 2008), or

if they perceive a threat to the integrity of self. Thus, in order to avoid potential risks, employees will consider the behaviors and psychology of their supervisor before contributing opinions or ideas in the workplace. When employees perceive a supervisor's preference for having power and control, they are more inclined to simply obey and perform more silence behaviors. In addition, in empirical research it has been found that, because of the self-centered nature of narcissistic supervisors, these people tend to give preference to information that they have obtained and contributed themselves, and they are unwilling to seek the views of subordinates (Nevecká, Ten Velden, De Hoogh, & Van Vianen, 2011). According to expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), an employee's estimation that a supervisor has already decided on a solution to a problem, and the remoteness of the possibility of the employee's own suggestions being adopted, results in a natural tendency for the employee to keep his or her views to him/herself. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Supervisor narcissism will be positively related to employee silence.

Mediating Effect of Negative Anticipations

As a well-known saying goes, "Plan ahead for when a rainy day comes." Thus, people tend to prepare themselves mentally for what might happen. According to cognitive psychology, this type of psychological preparation is called psychological anticipation. In cognitive psychology studies it has been shown that individuals will form *psychological anticipation* according to the indication of emotional content of the subsequent target (e.g., Galli, Wolpe, & Otten, 2011). Through reflecting on, and psychologically accepting, positive or negative events, an individual is helped to reduce the emotional impact of the circumstances, and adapts more easily to the environment. Therefore, *negative anticipations* mainly refer to an individual's psychological preparation for the subsequent occurrence of emotional stimulation in the case of negative events (Carlson & Mujica-Parodi, 2010). Zhang et al. (2010) developed the concept of negative anticipations as a way for individuals to deal with conflict, and as a strategy to enable them to avoid conflict. To some extent, negative psychological anticipation is a kind of self-protection mechanism when individuals will face adverse situations. Therefore, people with negative anticipations may take prudent and safe measures based on the need to protect the interests of self.

We took the view that supervisor narcissism would promote the formation of subordinate negative anticipations. First, narcissistic supervisors generally have an exaggerated need for admiration (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006), so they are unlikely to allow for views inconsistent with their own. Findings reported in studies have indicated that in response to perceived assaults on their ego, narcissistic individuals act aggressively and in a derogatory manner toward others in order to bolster their own feelings of self-worth (e.g., Parks & Colvin, 2015).

Many scholars have reported that narcissistic supervisors are more antagonistic than nonnarcissistic supervisors are in behaviors of intellectual inhibition of employees (e.g., Martinez et al., 2008). Second, narcissistic supervisors lack empathy and are resistant in accepting the views of others, resulting in a rigid working atmosphere. Therefore, if employees were to offer suggestions to a narcissistic supervisor, whether the voice behavior is promotive or prohibitive, they would believe that their suggestions may create conflict that would not only destroy the relationship with their supervisor (Leung, 1997), but would also lead to their receiving a negative work evaluation, whereby they would lose the attention of the supervisor, such as losing opportunities for promotion. It is possible for narcissistic supervisors to threaten and attack employees voicing opinions that are different from their own (e.g., Martinez et al., 2008). Facing potential negative behaviors of narcissistic supervisors, employees are likely to have negative anticipations.

We believed that the employees with negative anticipations would be likely to remain silent in the organization. Generally, a supervisor's responsibilities include the allocation of resources, assignment of tasks, and employee evaluations. Consequently, employees may worry that offering advice to narcissistic leaders will result in interpersonal conflict and the employee who offers the advice being labeled as a bad employee, or perhaps receiving punishment, such as criticism or exclusion. As a result, an employee's negative anticipations about relationships and work will make him or her reluctant to share ideas. In the theory of reasoned action it is pointed out that an important determinant of individual behavioral intention is how individuals evaluate the consequences of their behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). If an individual evaluates a certain behavior as leading to a negative outcome, his or her behavioral intention will be weakened. Similarly, if employees assume that the effect of sharing ideas or giving advice to their supervisors will be a poor outcome or that voice behavior will bring negative consequences for them, then naturally they will prefer to remain silent (Detert & Burris, 2007). Thus, we proposed our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Negative anticipations will play a mediating role in the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee silence. Supervisor narcissism will lead to employees forming negative anticipations, which will, in turn, lead to employee silence.

The Moderating Effect of Leader–Member Exchange

In the theory of LMX it is suggested that leaders and their subordinates develop different relationships through a series of interactions and cooperation (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). We believed that a high-quality superior–subordinate relationship would be conducive to reducing the negative anticipations of employees. When the interaction is frequent and trust is established, this will

result in a high-quality superior–subordinate relationship. Then employees will shift attention from the negative content of the event and will focus on the nonemotional aspect. Therefore, when the superior–subordinate relationship is good, this will reduce the negative anticipations triggered by the reaction of narcissistic supervisors to subordinates' suggestions. Conversely, in low-quality LMX situations employees begin to feel a lack of approval and support from their leader, which fosters a lack of trust and low self-esteem in the employees so that they focus on negative consequences and emotional content instead of the nonemotional aspect. Therefore, when the superior–subordinate relationship is negative, this will increase the subordinates' anticipated anxiety about adverse events, namely it will increase negative anticipations. Thus, we proposed our third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: The type of leader–member exchange relationship will significantly moderate the relationship between supervisor narcissism and subordinates' negative anticipations. The correlation between supervisor narcissism and negative anticipations will be positive at a more significant level in a low leader–member exchange relationship than it will in a high leader–member exchange relationship.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Study participants were employees of three companies in China (in Wuhan, Guangzhou, and Shanghai). In order to ensure the quality of the data, we collected data through a three-wave survey. In May 2016, for the first stage, we collected data on subordinates' gender, age, education level, organizational tenure, and tenure with the current supervisor (demographic variables), and supervisor narcissism (independent variable). We distributed 463 survey forms and retrieved 421 forms, resulting in the collection of 385 valid forms. In June 2016, we conducted the second survey and collected data on negative anticipations (mediator variable) and LMX (moderator variable). This time we distributed 385 survey forms, retrieved 353 forms, and this resulted in 334 valid surveys. In August 2016, in the third stage, we collected data on employee silence (dependent variable). We distributed 334 surveys and retrieved 303 of which 292 were valid. Therefore, the effective return rate for the three-wave survey was 63.1%. Among the 292 respondents, the average age was 29.46 years ($SD = 7.05$); 59.6% of the respondents were men. The average tenure of respondents with the organizations was 5.36 years ($SD = 6.40$) and average tenure with their current supervisor was 22.72 months ($SD = 31.70$). Of the 292 respondents, 68.4% of them had a college diploma or higher educational qualification and the remainder had received a junior or senior secondary school education.

Measures

Most measurement scales we used in this study had been verified in a Chinese organizational context with the exception of the Supervisor Narcissism Scale (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012). The scales that had been developed by western scholars were translated into Chinese from English by experts qualified in the fields of organizational behavior or linguistics according to the translation-back translation method developed by Brislin (1980). The response format was a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Supervisor narcissism. Because of the sensitivity of the term narcissism, self-raters often do not report the facts. Taking this into consideration, we used the Supervisor Narcissism Scale developed by Hochwarter and Thompson (2012), which is based on conceptualizations found in both personality and leadership research domains. The scale consists of six items ($\alpha = .75$). Sample items include “My boss is a very self-centered person,” and “My boss has an inflated view of him/herself.”

Negative anticipations. Negative anticipations were assessed with the scale adjusted by Wei and Zhang (2010), which is based on the voice situation from the Negative Anticipations Scale developed by Zhang et al. (2010). The scale consists of five items ($\alpha = .87$). Sample items include “My voice behavior would offend my supervisor,” and “The quality of the relationship with my supervisor will be lowered if I give him/her advice.”

Leader–member exchange. For the purposes of this paper, we used the Leader–Member Exchange Scale (Chen, Friedman, Yu, Fang, & Lu, 2009), which was specially developed in the Chinese context for the supervisor–subordinate guanxi relationship—that is, the system of social networks and influential relationships that facilitate business and other dealings in Chinese society. The scale consists of 13 items ($\alpha = .78$). Sample items include “My supervisor and I always share thoughts, opinions, and feelings toward work and life.”

Employee silence. Employee silence was measured with four items from Detert and Edmondson’s (2011) Silence Scale ($\alpha = .78$). Sample items include “I withheld ideas for changing inefficient work policies.”

Control variables. Findings in previous studies have shown that subordinates’ gender, age, level of education, organizational tenure, and tenure with the current supervisor may affect silence at work (Huang & Huang, 2016). We therefore considered them as possible control variables to account for potential confounding effects.

Data Analysis and Results

Common Method Variance Analysis

In this paper, Harman’s single-factor method was used to test for common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). First, we

constructed a factor including all the variables of the study. Second, through exploratory factor analysis we found the nonrotating factor explained 18.3% of the variance, which was less than half of the total variance (53.6%). This result showed that we had the variance under control and ensures that the variance will not affect research conclusions.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

In order to examine the distinctiveness of all factors with structural equation modeling, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) by calculating normed fit index, comparative fit index, Tucker-Lewis index, and root mean square error of approximation. Table 1 shows the results of the CFA and it was found that, of all models, the four-factor model fits best. Thus, we could say there is good discriminant validity among the four factors of supervisor narcissism, negative anticipations, LMX, and employee silence.

Table 1. *Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Discriminant Validity of Study Variables*

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	NFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Four-factor model: SN, LMX, NA, ES	841.3	321	2.621	.895	.923	.914	.062
Three-factor model: SN, NA + ES, LMX	1301.6	247	5.270	.821	.821	.823	.134
Two-factor model: SN + NA + LMX, ES	1515.7	256	5.921	.642	.681	.656	.156
One-factor model: SN + LMX + NA + ES	2521.8	235	10.731	.462	.472	.431	.219

Note. SN refers to supervisor narcissism, LMX refers to leader–member exchange, NA refers to negative anticipations, ES refers to employee silence, + denotes two factors were combined into one factor. CFI = comparative fit index, TLI = Tucker-Lewis index, NFI = normed fit index, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

Correlation Analysis of Variables

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. Data in Table 2 show that supervisor narcissism is positively correlated with both negative anticipations and employee silence.

Table 2. *Variables' Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. SN	2.43	0.82	(.79)			
2. NA	2.97	0.93	.37**	(.69)		
3. LMX	3.42	0.45	-.04	-.05	(.81)	
4. ES	2.54	0.72	.26**	.31**	-.18*	(.87)

Note. SN refers to supervisor narcissism, LMX refers to leader–member exchange, NA refers to negative anticipations, ES refers to employee silence. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Results of Hypothesis Tests

To test the mediating effect of negative anticipations, we adopted the testing method proposed by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), with bootstrapping on SPSS PROCESS. We controlled the participants' gender, age, education, organizational tenure, and tenure with the current supervisor, and the beta coefficients of the direct and indirect effects and the 95% bootstrap confidence intervals (CI) are presented in Table 3. The relationship between supervisor narcissism and negative anticipations is significant and the relationship between negative anticipations and employee silence is significant. Moreover, the indirect effect of supervisor narcissism on employee silence through negative anticipations is statistically significant. The results indicate that negative anticipations partially mediated the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee silence. Therefore, H1 and H2 were supported.

Table 3. *Results of Mediating Effect of Negative Anticipations*

Variables	β	SE	t
Mediator model (outcome = NA)			
SN	.372	0.06	7.52
Dependent variable model (outcome = ES)			
SN	.164**	0.08	5.87
NA	.272***	0.05	3.42
	Boot indirect	Boot SE	Boot 95%CI
Indirect effect	.10	0.04	[.14, .24]

Note. Unstandardized beta coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. CI = confidence interval. 95% bootstrap confidence interval is reported. SN refers to supervisor narcissism, LMX refers to leader–member exchange, NA refers to negative anticipations, ES refers to employee silence. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

In order to examine the moderating effect of negative anticipations, we adopted the testing method proposed by Aiken and West (1991). Following their steps, the test process is shown in Table 4 with the results of the moderating effect. After the variables (gender, age, education, organizational tenure, and tenure with the current supervisor) are controlled, the coefficient of determination shows that explanatory effect of supervisor narcissism to negative anticipations significantly increases after the moderating variable LMX is added to the regression equation. Consistent with H3, the results indicate that LMX moderates the relationship between supervisor narcissism and negative anticipations.

Table 4. Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for the Moderation of Leader–Member Exchange in the Relationship Between Supervisor Narcissism and Negative Anticipations

Variables	Negative anticipations		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Controls			
Gender	-.121	-.118	-.119
Age	.062	.067	.065
Education	.031	.030	.032
O-tenure	.082	.081	.083
S-tenure	.091	.087	.085
Step 1 (Main effect)			
SN		.371***	.355**
LMX		-.183**	-.169***
Step 2 (Interaction effect)			
SN × LMX			.154***
<i>F</i>	1.284	5.253***	6.532***
<i>R</i> ²	0.026	0.115	0.137
ΔR^2		0.089***	0.022***

Note. *N* = 292. SN refers to supervisor narcissism, LMX refers to leader–member exchange. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (Two-tailed test).

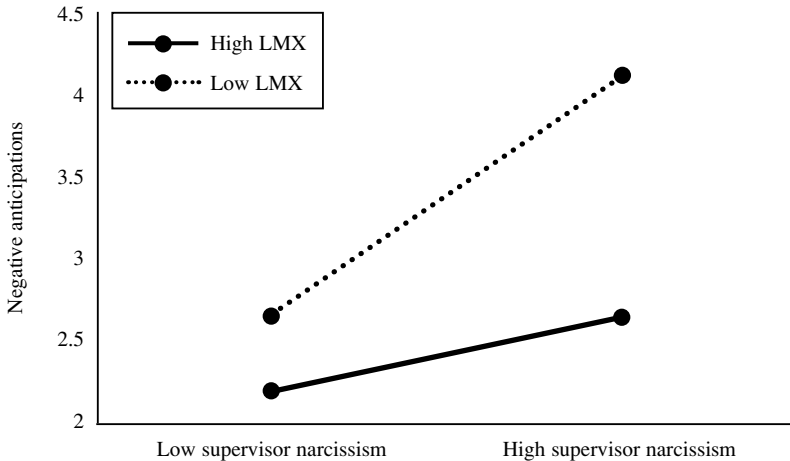


Figure 1. Interaction effect of supervisor narcissism and leader–member exchange.

In order to explain the interactive effect clearly, we plotted the interaction by developing separate equations using one standard deviation above and below the mean to represent high versus low for each respective variable (Aiken & West, 1991). The relationship between supervisor narcissism and negative anticipations is positive and stronger for subordinates lower in LMX than for those higher in LMX, supporting H3 (see Figure 1).

Discussion

We constructed a research framework based on the theory of reasoned action and LMX theory and investigated the cause of employee silence from the perspective of supervisor narcissistic personality. The results indicate that supervisor narcissism significantly influenced employee silence among our respondents and this corresponds with the conclusions in prior studies. Many researchers have proposed that supervisor narcissism will result in a significant negative impact on employees and organizations, including destroying the relationship between leaders and subordinates (Blair, Hoffman, & Helland, 2008), causing employee burnout (Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, & Hiller, 2009), and forming an emotionally toxic working atmosphere (Goldman, 2006). Second, we found that the influence of supervisor narcissism on employee silence was partly mediated by negative anticipations. This shows that supervisor narcissism will increase the negative anticipations of subordinates, which will result in the emergence of employee silence; this also concurs with the findings of many other scholars. For example, Miron-Spektor, Efrat-Treister, Rafaeli, and Schwarz-Cohen (2011) suggested that external threats will evoke the individual's defense reflex. Therefore, subordinates may stay silent in order to protect their interests when facing the threat of a narcissistic supervisor. Finally, the leadership effectiveness of a narcissistic supervisor is influenced by specific situations. Our results revealed that employees with high-quality LMX will gain more support and trust than other employees do from supervisors, which would reduce their negative anticipations about offering advice to a narcissistic supervisor. On the contrary, employees who have a low-quality LMX relationship with their narcissistic supervisor will have an increase of negative anticipations. This is consistent with the conclusions of many researchers who have asserted that an employee who has a good leader-member relationship will be in a comfortable and safe situation, which helps to reduce his or her psychological defense and facilitates free expression and voice behavior (e.g., Edmondson, 2004).

The first main theoretical contribution of this study is that we conducted an investigation of the influence of supervisor narcissism on employee silence, which enriches the literature on the consequences of supervisor narcissism. Although western scholars have made great progress in research on workplace outcomes of individual narcissism, more studies are focused on the impact of narcissism on individual workplace outcomes, such as counterproductive work behavior, performance, and aggression. However, research on the impact of narcissism on others is still lacking, in particular the impact of supervisor narcissism on employee behaviors. In our research we have not only provided insights on the workplace effect of supervisor narcissism, we have also added to the research on supervisor narcissism in the Chinese context.

Our second contribution is that although, in the past, researchers have mainly focused on the influence of leadership on employee silence from the perspectives of interactional justice (Wang & Jiang, 2015) and psychological security (Brinsfield, 2013), our findings in the current study reveal the process of narcissism's influence on employee silence from the perspective of cognitive psychology. Last, we have extended the boundary condition of employee silence. As hierarchy and interpersonal harmony are attributed great importance in Chinese society, we took into account the impact of guanxi when discussing the mechanism of the formation of employee silence.

A practical implication of our study is that managers of organizations should take effective measures to prevent the negative effects of narcissistic leaders. The actions could include putting preventive measures in place, such as instituting a mandatory narcissistic personality test for managerial candidates, whereby candidates revealing excessive narcissism would not be hired. Additionally, punitive measures could be implemented when narcissistic supervisors' acts harm the collective interest of the organization.

A second implication is that managers should avoid exerting a negative influence on the behaviors of employees, and should strive to create an environment that is helpful in reducing negative anticipations of subordinates, an environment where employees feel comfortable, have a sense of psychological safety, and perceive that they are free to express their opinions. Thus, managers should be more inclusive of subordinates with ideas that are different from the managers' own ideas, and should encourage employees to be proactive in offering advice. Last, managers should actively strengthen their interaction with employees and should establish trust, thereby improving the quality of the LMX relationship, which, ultimately, will enhance the managers' effectiveness as leaders.

Because of a limitation of research resources, we adopted a convenience sample. Therefore, this limits the representativeness of our study sample. This limitation offers opportunities for future researchers to expand the sample size to include different industries and regions to further test our conclusions. A second limitation of our research was that the measurement of narcissism has not yet been fully unified, so there will be some deviation in different measuring methods. Again, our results would need to be further verified with other measurement scales to ensure accuracy.

We suggest that future studies be carried out from the following aspects: a) Giving attention to other negative effects of supervisor narcissism on employees or organizations, such as employee career success and work engagement; b) investigating other possible mediating mechanisms between supervisor narcissism and employee silence, including interactive justice and negative emotions; c) exploring other boundary conditions of the influence of supervisor narcissism on employee silence, such as the moderating roles of leader distance and employee traditionality.

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