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Jake Harrison

Utah State University, jakethomasharrison@gmail.com

Alexander C. Romney

Utah State University, alex.romney@usu.edu

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CREATING SILENCE: HOW MANAGERIAL NARCISSISM DECREASES EMPLOYEE VOICE

Jake Harrison, Alexander C. Romney

Department of Management

1. INTRODUCTION

Employees' ideas, suggestions, and opinions about how to improve organizational functioning are crucial to organizations' ability to adapt, change, and learn (Morrison, 2014). The importance of employee voice for organizations is likely to increase in the coming years, as innovation and technology adoption become more prevalent. For good or for ill, leaders play a crucial role in setting the tone and environment around how open an organization is to employee voice (Fast, Burris, & Bartel, 2014). When leaders exhibit concern for others, empathy, and compassion, they make it more likely that employees will feel safe to express their improvement oriented ideas (Detert & Burris, 2007). Conversely, when leaders are self-focused and dominant towards others, they make it more difficult for employees to express voice (Detert & Trevino, 2010). In this paper, we explore the relationship between leader narcissism and employee voice. Drawing upon previous research on narcissism and employee voice, we develop and test several hypotheses in a field study with 257 employees. The results of this field study demonstrate the influence that a leader's narcissism has on employee voice. We also discuss both the theoretical and practical contributions this research makes.

2. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Employee Voice

Employee voice is employee initiated communication intended to improve organizations (Morrison, 2011). Employee voice has been distinguished by whether it is promotive or prohibitive in nature (Liang, 2012). While promotive voice is focused on proactively pointing out opportunities for improvement, prohibitive voice generates awareness of specific dissatisfying aspects of work (Chamberlin, Newton, & Lepine, 2017; Liang, 2012). In the current study, we focus on promotive voice as it has been shown to more strongly relate to important outcomes such as performance compared to prohibitive voice (Chamberlin et al., 2017).

Narcissism

Narcissism in organizations is becoming increasingly prevalent, as evidenced by the growing number of leaders that seek acclaim and dominance, often at the expense of others (Chatterjee,

2017). *Narcissism* is defined as “individuals for whom enhancing the positivity of the self (specifically, to achieve status and esteem) is overwhelmingly important” (Campbell, 2004). While narcissistic leaders can be perceived as confident and effective (Judge, Lepine, & Rich, 2006), they can also wield a detrimental influence on organizations. For example, narcissism has been shown to predict aggression (Park & Colvin, 2015), exploitation (Sedikides & Campbell, 2017), and unethical behavior (Watts, Lilienfeld, Smith, Miller, Campbell, & Waldman, 2013). Narcissism within organizational leadership has shown to lead employees to view managers’ behavior as self-serving, lowering perceptions of managerial trustworthiness and increasing the likelihood of employee silence (Hamstra, 2019). Thus, the perception of narcissism in a manager will decrease the probability that employees will engage in voice behavior, particularly promotive voice. The proactivity that employees display by participating in promotive voice behavior is often minimized or depleted under narcissistic leaders.

Hypothesis 1: Perceived managerial narcissism will relate negatively to employee promotive voice (Employees who perceive narcissism in their managers will be less likely to speak up about ideas they have that would benefit the organization).

Employee Self-efficacy

To add another dimension to the current argument, we introduce the construct of *Self-efficacy*, which is defined as “a person’s estimate that a given behavior will lead to certain outcomes” (Bandura, 1977). In this study, we measure general self-efficacy, rather than task specific self-efficacy. Ultimately, employees who have a high degree of self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to act to make a difference in their lives, will also be more likely to speak up to make a difference in their organization. Employees who hold a stronger sense of personal self-efficacy will display more active efforts to improve their organization (Bandura, 1977). Further, this positive motivation will incite employees to express promotive voice, seeing as how they are more willing to voice ideas that will have an acknowledged positive effect. Furthermore, when employees have a boss who is narcissistic, the demeaning and self-oriented leadership style narcissistic leaders display is unlikely to allow employees the opportunity to learn and grow, thus hindering the development of a sense of self-efficacy in their work. In other words, the more narcissistic a leader is, the lower an employee’s sense of self-efficacy is likely to be. Taken together, we suggest that the negative effect leader narcissism has on promotive voice will go through employees reduced feelings of self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 2: Employee self-efficacy will mediate the relationship between managerial narcissism and promotive voice (The degree to which employees believe that their behavior will be efficacious explains the relationship between managerial narcissism and promotive voice).

Public vs. Private Voice

Within the employee voice line of research, it has been demonstrated that the social setting in which voice occurs can affect managerial reactions to it (Isaakyan, 2018). For our use, *Public Voice* refers to “situations where voice is communicated in the presence of people besides the voicing employee and the manager” and *Private Voice* refers to “situations where the employee communicates voice only to the manager, such that no other person is, in that particular situation, exposed to the raised ideas, opinions, or concerns” (Isaakyan, 2018). Both public and private voice situations could include promotive voice displays, prohibitive voice displays, or a mixture of the two. It can be supposed that the degree to which employees engage in voice behavior, both in public and in private, can be attributed to a myriad of organizational factors, including the perceived narcissism of the organization’s leadership. When attempting to inspire employees to speak up, “organizations can highlight to managers and employees that voicing in private as well as in public is welcomed and considered normative” (Isaakyan, 2018). When employees express voice in public and their leader is not narcissistic, they will gain confidence and their feelings of self-efficacy will grow, supporting the moderation of the narcissism-self-efficacy relationship.

Hypothesis 3: Voice setting will moderate the relationship between managerial narcissism and employee’s sense of self-efficacy (Whether the employee’s voice activity took place in public or in private will strengthen or weaken the relationship between managerial narcissism and employee’s sense of efficacy).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Testing for these hypotheses was achieved by recruiting 257 full time employees within the United States to complete an online survey. (117 Male, 144 Female; Mean age= 41, SD= 11.51; 77% White, 12% Black, 3% Hispanic, 1% Native American, 2% Other). The items in question were presented without manipulation and answers were recorded using a Likert-style scale. The independent and dependent variables controlled for are as follows:

Measures

Leader Narcissism: 6 items e.g. “My boss is a very self-centered person”(1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree), (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012).

Promotive Voice: 5 items e.g. “I Proactively develop and make suggestions for issues that may influence the unit.” (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree), (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012).

Voice Setting Public / Private: 5 items e.g. “Over the last three months, please indicate whether you made suggestions about how to do things in a new or more effective way at work in public, or in private.” (1 = *Always in Private*, 2 = *Usually in Private*, 3 = *Equally Often in Private and in Public*, 4 = *Usually in Public*, 5 = *Always in Public*), (Isaakyan, 2018).

Employee Self-efficacy: 8 items e.g. “Please assess your agreement with the following statement: I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself.” (1=*strongly disagree*, 5=*strongly agree*), (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001).

Analysis

Descriptive statistics (Mean, SD) and correlations among all key study variables are displayed in Table 1. As a formal test of Hypothesis 2—that perception of leader narcissism has a negative indirect effect on promotive voice, through lower employee self-efficacy—we employed a bootstrapping procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) with 5,000 iterations. To test Hypothesis 3—that public voice enhances the negative relationship between leader narcissism and employee self-efficacy—we also used Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS to test the moderation effect, and again employed a bootstrapping approach (with 5,000 iterations).

4. RESULTS

Perceptions of leader narcissism was negatively related to promotive voice ($r = -.29, p = .00$). We thus found support for Hypothesis 1. Results of the Hypothesis 2 analysis provided a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (BC CI) of $[-.14, -.04]$ around an unstandardized indirect of $-.09$. Because zero is excluded from the confidence interval, we interpret this negative indirect effect to be statistically significant, and therefore find support for Hypothesis 2—that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between managerial narcissism and promotive voice (See Fig 1).

Hypothesis 3 testing found that the interaction between leader narcissism and public voice on employee self-efficacy was significant calling x psychological safety ($b = -.05, SE = .02, \beta = -2.5, p = .01$), $R^2 = .36, R^2 = .12, F(1,256) = 12.57, p = .00$. We therefore found support for Hypothesis 3, such that the less an employee perceives their supervisor as narcissistic the more self-efficacy they feel, especially when they engage in greater amounts of public voice. In this way, when employees speak up and others give audience to them, the more efficacious they feel

(See Fig. 2). As well, the strength of an employee's sense of self-efficacy was lessened in public settings.

5. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Our research findings suggest, along with the current leadership literature, that employees will behave differently based on perceptions of their leaders' character. More specifically, employees who perceive traits of narcissism in their leaders are less likely to speak up about ideas they have that will improve their workplace. However, if leaders can inspire higher levels of self-efficacy in the relationships they have with their subordinates, those followers will continue to voice ideas, even with a perceived sense of narcissism. Therefore, high levels of employee self-efficacy can mitigate the negative voice effects of perceived narcissism, because those employees believe their ideas will be effective, regardless of their leader's narcissism.

Additionally, employee promotive voice behavior is partially dependent on the setting of the voice display, or where and how the employee speaks up. Individuals who voice ideas in public will see a more drastic effect in their unlikeliness to engage in voice behavior when dealing with a narcissistic leader. In contrast, individuals who voice ideas in private will not see as drastic of an effect in terms of their willingness to voice around a narcissistic leader.

This study contributes to the literature by explaining the negative effects that leader narcissism can have on organizations as well as the positive effects that self-efficacy can have in terms of voice behavior. If leaders promote self-efficacy within their organizations, they can combat the negative perceptions employees may have towards them. Ultimately, if leaders understand how their subordinates are perceiving them, they can adapt and act accordingly in order to receive the best possible performance in their organization, which is one where employees are regularly voicing their best ideas in a comfortable manner. In addition, giving employees opportunities to voice regularly both in public and private will offset any perceived narcissism. Given that employees see a less drastic effect on their willingness to voice in the presence of a narcissistic leader in private settings than in public settings, organizations can implement more opportunities for private voice behavior, and the result will be a higher quality and frequency of promotive voice.

6. FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Many additional applications could be observed regarding the findings of this research. Practical situations that occur across a variety of disciplines could very well deserve a deeper look into the narcissism/voice relationship. For example, how many medical errors are a direct result of an employee failing to voice due to perceived narcissism in their manager? In another context, how much revenue is lost in a company when the employees within do not feel comfortable talking with those they report to?

Another potential line of research revolves around situations where leader narcissism may yield positive organizational outcomes. Presently, the negative outcomes are widely noticed, yet unique situations that contradict our findings could very well exist. As well, leader humility could be explored, which would likely yield effects that are opposite of narcissism.

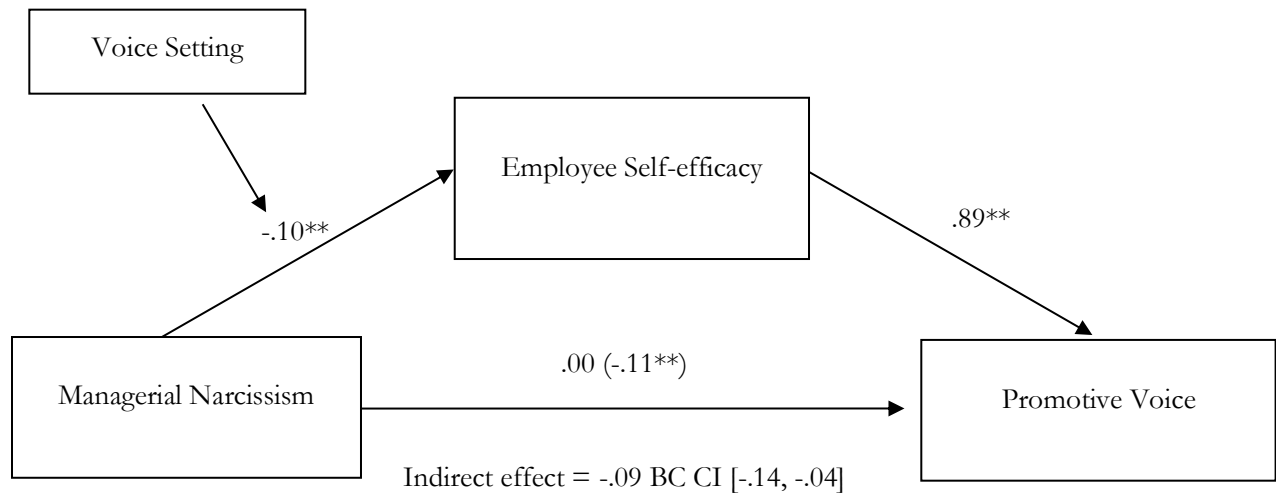
Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) Leader Narcissism	2.97	1.76	(.95)			
(2) Employee Self- efficacy	4.10	.64	-.27*	(.92)		
(3) Promotive Voice	5.42	1.23	-.29*	.51*	(.94)	
(4) Public Voice	2.69	1.02	.02	.17*	.28*	(.95)

Note. $N=257$. Scale reliabilities appear in the diagonal.

* $p < .05$

Figure 1: Results of Mediation Analysis Predicting Promotive Voice

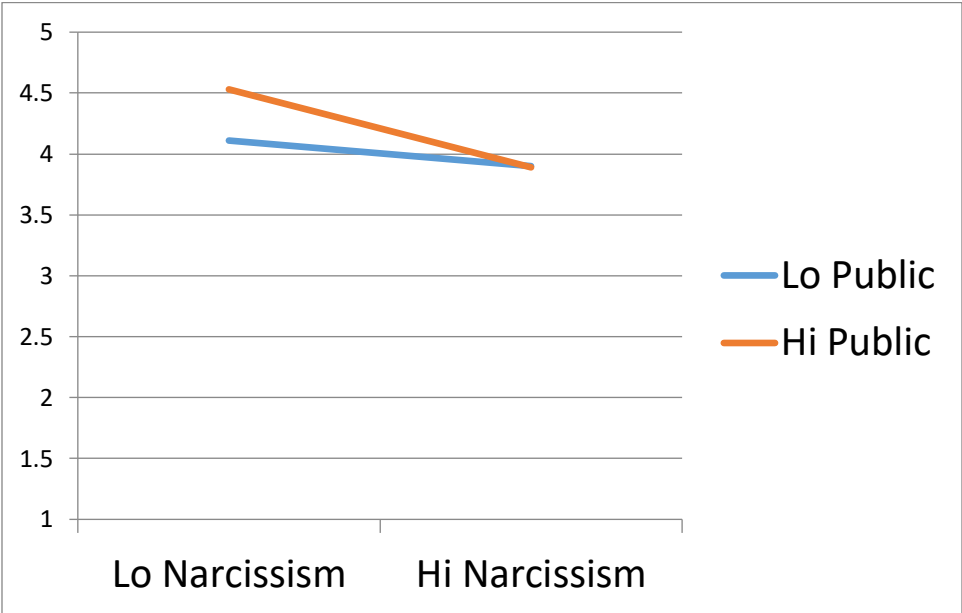


Note. Values are standardized regression coefficients. Values in parentheses represent coefficients before the mediator Trust was included in the model.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Figure 2: Interaction Plot of Leader Narcissism and Public Voice on Employee Self-Efficacy



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