



The Effect of Exploitative Leadership on Workplace Loneliness

Bo Wang

Henan Polytechnic University, Jiaozuo 454003, Henan, China

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Abstract: The study aims to examine the mediating role of emotional exhaustion and the moderating role of power distance between exploitative leadership and workplace loneliness. Data for the study were obtained from 215 questionnaires of Chinese full-time employees, hierarchical regression analysis and PROCESS Macro was used to test the research hypotheses. Based on affective events theory and the results of the data analysis, the authors found that exploitative leadership was positively related to workplace loneliness and that emotional exhaustion mediated this relationship. Moreover, the results showed that the power distance moderated the relationship between exploitative leadership and workplace loneliness, with the higher the power distance, the weaker the effect of exploitative leadership on workplace loneliness. Therefore, organizations should reject the exploitative leadership style and adopt a more egalitarian and honest approach to their followers.

Keywords: exploitative leadership, emotional exhaustion, power distance, loneliness in workplace

1. Introduction

Destructive leadership is widespread in organizations, current research is focused on despotic leadership[1], hubristic leadership[2] and narcissistic leadership[3], and existing research suggests that various types of destructive leadership can have a significant negative impact on employees' emotions. Exploitative leadership, a newly proposed destructive leadership style in recent years, has been more seriously detrimental to employee performance and emotional exhaustion, but it is currently less well researched[4]. Unlike other destructive leadership, exploitative leadership is leaders who seek personal gain by oppressing their subordinates, with self-interest of the leader as their main characteristic[4]. Previous research has demonstrated that exploitative leadership has many negative effects on employees, including reduced job satisfaction[4], increased workplace incivility[5] and caused employee turnover[6].

Although scholars have studied the negative impact of exploitative leadership on employee behavior, fewer have examined whether and how exploitative leadership affects employee workplace loneliness. Filling this research gap is important, since workplace loneliness is a prevalent issue among employees in this human-centered era and it can adversely affect their subsequent work behaviors, the most significant consequence is a decrease in employee job satisfaction[7]. Therefore, this paper explores the relationship between exploitative leadership and workplace loneliness based on affective events theory (AET). According to AET theory, an individual's emotions are influenced by certain aspects of their work environment, such as job autonomy, opportunities for advancement, and leadership styles[8]. Scholars have used affective events theory to discover that transformational leadership diminishes employee negativity, whereas leader narcissistic behaviors amplify employee negativity[9][10]. Given that exploitative leadership is a negative characteristic of work environments, employees may experience negative emotions when they feel exploited.

In addition to the direct effects of exploitative leadership on employees' workplace loneliness, we also argue that emotional exhaustion mediates this process. According to the AET theory, negative events experienced by employees in the workplace have a direct impact on emotions, and this emotional response in turn determines employees' attitudes and work behaviors[11]. Therefore, this paper suggests that emotional exhaustion may mediate the relationship between exploitative leadership and employee workplace loneliness.

Moreover, we should also be aware that different people perceive and react to events differently and do not all feel the same way when they are exploited. According to AET theory, employees' perceptions of environmental characteristics are influenced by their personality traits[8]. Power distance is a measure of an individual's psychological perception of the imbalance in the distribution of power within an organization, and it is a measure of an individual's tolerance level[12]. When the power distance of employees is high, their perception of the power gap between leaders and employees is not obvious, and they identify with their subordinate status, and they also identify more with their leaders' behavior[13].

Through the above analysis, this paper constructs a mediating a moderating theoretical model to verify the relationship between exploitative leadership and workplace loneliness. The study model is shown in Figure 1. Through this research

process, this paper is expected to make the following theoretical contributions. First, expand existing outcome variables on exploitative leadership by focusing on the newly proposed concept of destructive leadership and empirically exploring the behavioral responses that individual employees make to exploitative leadership. Second, this paper reveals that exploitative leaders create workplace loneliness for employees through the mediating role of emotional exhaustion through affective events theory. Third, this study enriches the antecedent variables of workplace loneliness and finds that the strength of the effect of exploitative leadership on workplace loneliness is moderated by employee power distance.

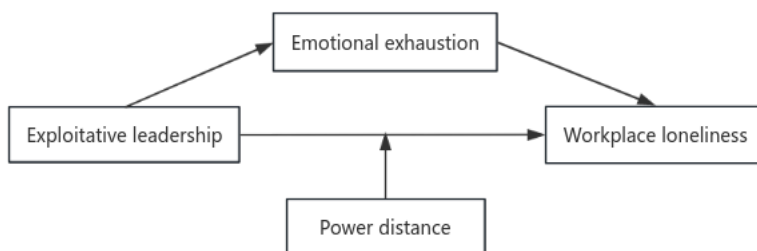


Figure 1. Research model

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1 Exploitative leadership and workplace loneliness

The key characteristic shared by exploitative and other destructive leaders is self-interested behavior, but unlike other destructive leaders exploitative leaders satisfy their personal self-interest by exploiting employees[14]. Exploitative leadership manifests itself in five dimensions: true egoism, appropriating the results of subordinates for themselves, pressure on subordinates, manipulating subordinates, and denying employees opportunities for development[4]. Specifically, true egoism means that leaders have power for the sole purpose of realizing their personal interests. Taking credit for subordinates' achievements is when a leader uses unreasonable means to take credit for subordinates' achievements without their consent. Pressure on subordinates is when a leader puts undue and unnecessary pressure on an employee in order to achieve a goal, regardless of the actual situation. Manipulation of subordinates refers to a leader's manipulation of subordinates for his or her own personal gain. Hindering the development of subordinates means that the leader assigns heavy and boring work to the employee, which is not useful for the employee's development.

Loneliness is an unavoidable emotional feeling in modern human socialization activities. The concept of workplace loneliness was first introduced by Gumpert and Boyd, who applied the definition of loneliness in general directly to workplace loneliness, arguing that it was due to employees' perceived deficits in the quantity and quality of their own interpersonal relationships in the workplace[15]. However, the current widely accepted definition is that of Wright, who builds on his predecessors by focusing on workplace loneliness in real work situations[7]. Loneliness in the workplace can have a significant impact on employees, not only causing them to become overly stressed or even depressed[16]. There is a rich body of research on the outcome variables of employee workplace loneliness, both at the individual and team level, and workplace loneliness reduces work performance[17], impairs the quality of employee-leader relationships[18], and reduces individual creativity[19]. As a result, more and more scholars are focusing on the causes of workplace loneliness, but there are fewer studies on how leadership affects workplace loneliness. Since leaders have a very important role in influencing employees' emotions and behaviors[20], we attempted to examine the antecedents of workplace loneliness from the perspective of exploitative leadership.

According to the AET theory, employees will encounter various positive or negative realities in the course of their work, and these events will stimulate employees to produce positive or negative emotions, which in turn induce subsequent work attitudes and behaviors[8]. The behavioral style of exploitative leaders is fully consistent with the negative events in the AET theory, and under the influence of exploitative leaders, employees do not feel the harmony and warmth of the organization in the workplace. In addition, exploitative leaders may even provoke relationships between employees in order to take credit, leading to a deterioration in the relationship between team members[4]. Exploitative leaders take away from the work of their employees, which makes them feel uneasy and helpless when they are at the bottom of an unequal relationship. According to this logic, under the management of an exploitative leader, employees develop a sense of workplace loneliness. Therefore, we assume that:

H1. Exploitative leadership is positively related to workplace loneliness.

2.2 The mediating role of emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is a state of gradual physical and emotional depletion, usually caused by work stress[21]. Stress at work comes from a number of sources, with exploitation by leaders being a significant source. According to AET theory, when employees are confronted with a series of negative events of exploitation by leaders in a work situation, it can have a huge impact on their emotions and cognition, and it is very likely to cause their emotional exhaustion. Some studies show increased job demands increase emotional exhaustion[22], and one of the characteristics of an exploitative leader is to put pressure on subordinates, and work pressure is one of them. Therefore, we argue that employees who endure exploitative leadership are more prone to emotional exhaustion.

Moreover, when employees are emotionally exhausted, they often become exhausted, lose interest and motivation, and develop distrust of others, and these reactions can lead to social withdrawal behaviors, making employees less inclined to socialize with others and more closed off in the workplace. Studies have shown that emotional exhaustion reduces employees' sense of organizational support and increases the probability of employee turnover[23]. When employees don't feel supported by the organization, they feel isolated. Therefore, we assume that:

H2. Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between exploitative leadership and workplace loneliness.

2.3 The moderating role of power distance.

According to AET theory, different people react differently in the face of negative events, which is related to their personal characteristics[8]. Power distance reflects employees' acceptance of the unequal distribution of power in the organization[12]. Employees with a high sense of power distance are more likely to accept the power difference between leaders and subordinates, so they may be more tolerant of exploitative behavior by their leaders. In addition, exploitative leadership can lead to feelings of stress and distrust among employees, but employees with a high sense of power distance are more likely to internalize these feelings rather than see them as unfair or exploitative. They are more likely to see it as a normal power structure, which in turn reduces the resulting sense of workplace loneliness. Finally, power distance affects employees' interpretation of leaders' behaviors. Employees with low power distance are more inclined to an inclusive, equal and open organizational atmosphere, and are more sensitive and averse to the behaviors of exploitative leaders. Employees with high power distance are more likely to obey and accept, and they are more likely to recognize the authority of the leader, even if this authority is unequal.

In conclusion, we speculate that power distance can affect employees' acceptance of unfair power and affect employees' handling of negative events. Therefore, we assume that:

H3. Power distance moderates the positive relationship between exploitative leaders and workplace loneliness, and the positive relationship will be weakened when the sense of power distance is high.

3. Methods

3.1 Sample and procedures

We selected 241 full-time employees from Zhengzhou, Wuhan and other places in China to conduct a questionnaire. Before the formal questionnaire survey, we formally introduced the content and purpose of this study, and ensured that the survey data were strictly confidential and would not reveal their personal privacy. After 241 questionnaires were collected, the problematic ones were excluded, and 215 valid questionnaires were obtained in total, with a recovery rate of 89.21%. The information of the questionnaire is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistical analysis

	category	proportion		category	proportion	
gender	man	40%	education	College degree or below	30.70%	
	woman	60%		undergraduate	50.50%	
age	<20	3.30%		Postgraduate degree		18.80%
	20-29	37.70%			State-owned enterprise	19.10%
	30-39	26.50%		Private enterprise	28.80%	
	40-49	19.50%		Enterprise category	Foreign capital	26.00%
	>=50	13.00%	Public institution		22.30%	
position	Grass-roots staff	55.60%	other		3.70%	
	Grass-roots manager	23.20%				
	Middle and senior management	21.20%				

3.2 Measures

In accordance with the translation procedure, we translated the questions used in the English questionnaire into Chinese. Exploitative leadership was measured using a 15-item scale developed by Schem[4]. Workplace loneliness was measured using a 16-item scale developed by Wright[7]. Emotional exhaustion was measured using a 3-item scale developed by Watkins[21]. Power distance was measured using a 6-item scale developed by Howell and Dorfman. All questions used a five-point Likert scale, with 1-5 representing the subjects' degree of approval.

3.3 Analytical strategy

All the programs were analyzed by SPSS and Amos software. We first conducted descriptive statistical analysis of the questionnaire, and then conducted reliability and validity analysis to ensure that the questionnaire could be used for follow-up research. Finally, we test the hypothesis by correlation analysis and hierarchical regression.

4. Results

4.1 Reliability and validity analysis

Cronbach's α coefficient of each scale is shown in Table2, Cronbach's α of each scale is higher than 0.6, which can measure the same concept well. Then AMOS software was used to test the confirmatory factors, and the fitting indexes of the four-factor model, three-factor model, two-factor model and single-factor model were compared The results of confirmatory factor analysis are shown in table3, The results show that the goodness of fit of the four-factor model ($X^2/df=1.234, CFI=0.961, TLI=0.955, IFI=0.962$) is superior to other models, and the discrimination validity of the four key variables (exploitative leadership, emotional exhaustion, power distance and loneliness in the workplace) is good, which can be follow-up research.

Table 2. Cronbach's α coefficient of each scale (N=215)

variable	Exploitative leadership	Emotional exhaustion	Power distance	Workplace loneliness
Number of items	15	3	6	10
Cronbach's α	0.93	0.74	0.834	0.909

Table 3. Confirmatory factor analysis results

Models	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	IFI	SRMR
Four-factor model	642.988	521	1.234	0.031	0.961	0.955	0.962	0.0437
Three-factor model	809.809	524	1.545	0.048	0.908	0.895	0.910	0.0479
Two-factor model	894.324	526	1.700	0.054	0.881	0.866	0.884	0.0537
Single factor model	997.048	527	1.892	0.059	0.879	0.803	0.832	0.0598

4.2 Common methods test for bias

In order to test whether there were serious collinearity problems among all the variables in this study, SPSS 25 software was used to conduct Harman single factor analysis to test the data. The variance explained by the first factor was 38.907%, which was less than 40% standard, and a total of 5 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted. It shows that there is no serious common method bias in this study.

4.3 Correlation test

The Pearson correlation coefficient among all variables is shown in Table 4. Exploitative leadership is significantly correlated with employees' sense of loneliness in the workplace ($\beta=0.818, p < 0.01$), exploitative leadership is significantly correlated with employees' emotional exhaustion ($\beta=0.577, p < 0.01$), and emotional exhaustion is significantly correlated with loneliness in the workplace ($\beta=0.783, p < 0.01$). The test of the theoretical model has been preliminarily verified

Table 4. Correlation between variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	1									
2. Age	-.144*	1								
3. Education	0.112	0.009	1							
4. Enterprise category	0.025	-0.107	-.135*	1						

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5. Position	0.057	0.107	0.118	-0.039	1					
6. Working years	-0.060	.157*	0.026	-0.021	.578**	1				
7. Exploitative leadership	-0.082	0.013	-0.022	0.047	0.058	0.011	1			
8. Emotional exhaustion	-0.041	0.003	-0.080	.151*	-0.038	0.033	.577**	1		
9. Power distance	-0.073	-0.010	0.012	0.009	0.044	-0.052	.761**	.292**	1	
10. Workplace loneliness	-0.082	-0.004	-0.063	0.115	0.071	0.042	.818**	.783**	.610**	1

4.4 Hypothesis testing

SPSS25 software was used to conduct hierarchical regression analysis of the data, and the analysis results were shown in Table 5. Six variables, such as gender, age, education, enterprise nature, position and working years, were taken as control variables. Taking workplace loneliness as the dependent variable and exploitative leadership as the independent variable, as shown in model 4, exploitative leadership positively affects employees' workplace loneliness ($\beta=0.579$, $p < 0.001$). Hypothesis 1 is tested.

To examine the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion on exploitative leadership and workplace loneliness. Model 2 shows that taking emotional exhaustion as the dependent variable, exploitative leadership has a significant positive impact on emotional exhaustion. Model 5 shows that taking workplace loneliness as the dependent variable, emotional exhaustion has a significant impact on workplace loneliness. Then, both emotional exhaustion and exploitative leadership are introduced into the model. Model 7 shows that the positive influence of exploitative leadership on workplace loneliness is weakened, and the fit degree of the model ($\Delta R^2=0.121$) is improved, indicating that emotional exhaustion plays an intermediary role in the relationship between exploitative leadership and workplace loneliness. Hypothesis 2 is tested.

In order to verify hypothesis 3, the interaction term of exploitative leadership and power distance is introduced in Table X. The analysis results show that the interaction term coefficient is significant at 0.01 level ($\beta=-0.010$, $p < 0.01$), and $\Delta R^2=0.005$ ($p < 0.01$). The results show that power distance has a significant negative moderating effect between exploitative leadership and workplace loneliness. The lower the sense of power distance, the higher the influence of exploitative leadership on workplace loneliness. Hypothesis 3 is tested.

Table 5. Results of hypotheses testing

	Variable	Emotional exhaustion		Workplace loneliness				
		model1	model2	model3	model 4	model 5	model 6	model 7
Control variable	Gender	-0.242	0.054	-1.570	-0.331	-1.031	-0.396	-0.470
	Age	-0.062	-0.067	-0.166	-0.185	-0.027	-0.103	-0.165
	Education	-0.095	-0.074	-0.157	-0.068	0.054	0.021	-0.025
	Enterprise category	0.328	0.256	0.772	0.470	0.042	0.159	0.310
	Position	-0.150	-0.287	0.416	-0.154	0.752	0.194	0.058
	Working years	0.263	0.327	0.006	0.275	-0.581	-0.123	0.031
Independent variable	Exploitative leadership		0.138***		0.579***		0.411***	0.641***
Intermediate variable	Emotional exhaustion					2.229***	1.216***	
Regulating variable	Power distance							-0.441***
Interaction term	Exploitative leadership * Power distance							-0.010**
	R ²	0.033	0.362	0.260	0.767	0.643	0.889	0.829
	ΔR^2	0.033	0.329	0.026	0.742	0.617	0.121	0.005
	F	1.172**	16.789**	0.930	97.952***	53.211***	206.648***	110.308***

5. Discussion

5.1 Conclusions and recommendations

Loneliness in workplace is now a widespread phenomenon in organizations, it seriously affects the mental health of employees and the achievement of organizational goals. Exploitative leadership has also been increasingly recognized by academics for its serious dangers. However, the current research on the two is carried out separately, so this paper explores the relationship between the two according to AET theory. Consistent with our hypothesis, the empirical results show that exploitative leadership leads to workplace loneliness among employees, and the power distance of employees moderates this effect. Emotional exhaustion plays a mediating role between exploitative leadership and workplace loneliness, which is also consistent with our hypothesis based on AET theory.

Therefore, in the management work, leaders should always pay attention to their own behavior and attitude, avoid real egoism, take the achievements of subordinates as their own, exert pressure on subordinates, manipulate subordinates, and deny employees the opportunity for development. In addition, leaders should always pay attention to the emotional changes of employees and conduct psychological counseling for employees in time to avoid emotional exhaustion of employees. Finally, leaders should pay attention to creating a harmonious, inclusive and sincere organizational atmosphere, so that employees can have a sense of belonging in the organization and avoid workplace loneliness.

5.2 Limitations and prospects

There are still some shortcomings and limitations in this study, which should be improved in future research. First of all, the research object of this paper is relatively simple, limited to Zhengzhou, Wuhan and Changsha in China, and only the individual employees are investigated. Future research can pair employees and leaders, and conduct investigation and research from the two perspectives of leaders and employees.

Second, there are few relevant studies on exploitative leadership, and even fewer studies on workplace loneliness. This paper only studies the mechanism of exploitative leadership on workplace loneliness from the aspect of employee emotional exhaustion based on AET theory. In the future, we should try to enrich the research on the mechanism of the two based on other theories.

Third, when exploring the mechanism of how exploitative leaders weaken employees' sense of loneliness in the workplace, this paper considers individual differences and chooses power distance as the regulating variable. In addition to individual differences, other influencing factors such as task nature and organizational climate should be taken into account in the follow-up study.

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