

# The Double-Edged Sword of Benevolence: A Dual Paths Model of Benevolent Leadership and Creative Performance

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Based on the norm of reciprocity and role obligation, this study suggests that benevolent leadership (BL) might not only have positive effect on creative performance (CP) through psychological safety (PS) but also have negative effect on CP through subordinate obedience (SO). However, prior research has only found the positive relationship between BL and CP under certain situation. It is not clear regarding how and when BL influences CP negatively. In order to fill up the research gap, the present study investigated the mediating effect of PS and SO on the relationship between BL and CP as well as identifying job autonomy (JA) as a moderator that influence the mediating effect of PS and SO. Using 185 dyad of supervisors and subordinates as samples, the study found that BL influences CP positively through PS; however, BL does not have negative impact on CP via SO. Furthermore, JA significant moderated the mediating effect of BL on CP via SO. When JA is high, the negative mediating effect of SO is weaker; when JA is low, the negative mediating effect of SO is stronger. This study extends the creativity literature by exploring the mediating process between BL and CP.

Keywords: job autonomy, psychological safety, benevolent leadership, obedience, creative performance

# Summary

Previous research suggests that creativity, the generation of novel and useful ideas, is critical for organizations' survival and competitiveness (Amabile, 1988; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shalley, 1995). A growing body of research on the contextual antecedents of creativity has identified leadership as a key contextual factor for creativity (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004). In Chinese contexts, benevolent leadership has generally been considered a desirable leadership style (Chan & Mak, 2012). Although a substantial body of research has explored the consequences of benevolent leadership, few studies have examined the effect of benevolent leadership on creative performance.

There are two mechanisms through which benevolent leadership affects subordinate creativity: norm of reciprocity and role obligation. Norm of reciprocity, which is in accord with Western principles, suggests that evoking a strong sense of reciprocity in an individual leads to high creativity. Specifically, as benevolent leaders provide individualized care and holistic concern to subordinates by protecting them when they make grave errors and by avoiding embarrassing them in public (Farh, Liang, Chou, & Cheng, 2008), benevolent leaders give subordinates a feeling of psychological safety that may encourage out-of-the-box thinking, which is beneficial for creative performance. Role obligation, which is based on Confucian principles, defines the obligations of supervisors and subordinates to each other. Specifically, leaders demonstrate benevolence because this is part of their leader roles, and subordinates feel obligated to show personal loyalty and obedience to their leaders (Jiang & Cheng, 2003). However, such a sense of obligation may lead subordinates to strictly abide by the leader's instructions without dissent (Jiang, Cheng, Cheng, & Chou, 2007). The obligation to be obedient may be detrimental to creative performance. Accordingly, The Double-Edged Sword of Benevolence: A Dual Paths Model of Benevolent Leadership and Creative Performance

benevolent leadership may have both positive and negative effects on creative performance through the separate paths of psychological safety and obedience.

Although three studies have empirically investigated the mechanisms that link leadership and creativity (W. Lin, Ma, Zhang, Li, & Jiang, 2016; Wang & Cheng, 2010; Shen, Chou, Wei, & Zhang, 2017), none have simultaneously investigated the dual mediation mechanisms, especially the possibility that there is a negative path that is characteristic of Chinese culture. Furthermore, creative activity is a risk-taking behavior. Whether subordinates feel free to engage in creative endeavors or to fulfill their obligations in creative ways depends on the extent to which subordinates feel they have latitude to determine their work activities (i.e., job autonomy).

High levels of job autonomy provide a favorable situation for demonstrating creativity (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Subordinates with high job autonomy have feelings of psychological safety that may encourage them to engage in creative activities. In contrast, low levels of job autonomy are associated with a lack of choices and the need for discretion (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Spector, 1986), which hinder the possibility of using trial and error strategies. Subordinates with low job autonomy may hesitate to show creativity, even if they feel psychologically safe. Overall, we predict that job autonomy strengthens the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on creative performance through the mechanism of psychological safety.

Benevolent leadership may also enhance subordinates' sense of responsibility toward their role obligations (Farh & Cheng, 2000). However, autonomous job designs allow subordinates to fulfill their obligations in a creative manner (Wang & Cheng, 2010). In other words, job autonomy could weaken the negative effects of obedience on creative output. Alternately, a low level of job autonomy, which does not encourage creative actions, may strengthen obedient subordinates' desire to strictly follow benevolent leaders' rules and to not violate their directions. Overall, we predict that job autonomy weakens the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on creative performance through the mechanism of obedience.

Accordingly, this study examines the role of psychological safety and obedience as mediators of the relationship between benevolent leadership and creative performance. It also tests the moderating role of job autonomy on these pathways.

- *H*<sub>1</sub>: Benevolent leadership increases creative performance through psychological safety.
- *H*<sub>2</sub>: Benevolent leadership decreases creative performance through obedience.
- H<sub>3</sub>: Job autonomy moderates the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on creative performance through psychological safety, such that this indirect effect will be stronger when job autonomy is high.
- $H_4$ : Job autonomy moderates the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on creative performance through obedience, such that this indirect effect will be stronger when job autonomy is low.

# **METHOD**

Data for this study were obtained from a database of matched pairs of supervisors and their subordinates. Each supervisor randomly selected two or three subordinates to participate in the study. We received data on 185 completed and usable matching pairs. The average age of the responding subordinates was 32.42 years (SD = 8.62), with an average length of supervisor-subordinate relationship of 3.84 years (SD = 4.38). The majority of the sample was female (63.24%) and well educated (78.92% held bachelor's or higher degrees). The gender of the supervisors was balanced (49.73% was male). Their mean age was 43.03 years (SD = 9.75).

# Measures

Subordinates reported on all of the measures except for their creative performance. Chinese versions of the scales were created using the back-translation approach suggested by Brislin (1980). All of the scales were measured using a 7-point Likert agreement scale except for benevolent leadership. The response options ranged from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree."

## **Benevolent** leadership

Eleven items from the benevolent leadership scale developed by Cheng, Chou, and Farh (2000) were used ( $\alpha = .92$ ). This scale was measured with a 6-point Likert-type scale.

## **Psychological safety**

We used Tröster and van Knippenberg's (2012) 3-item scale to measure psychological safety. The internal consistency reliability was .90.

## **Obedience**

The 4-item scale developed by Jiang et al. (2007) was used to measure obedience ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

#### Job autonomy

Morgeson, Delaney-Klinger, and Hemingway's (2005) 3-item scale was used to measure job autonomy ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

#### Creative performance

We measured creative performance using Zhou and George's (2001) 13-item scale ( $\alpha = .97$ ).

## **Controls**

Subordinates' demographic variables, including gender, age, education, and the length of supervisorsubordinate relationship, were used as control variables.

# Statistical analyses

Due to the nested nature of the data, we followed the procedure recommended in previous studies (de Stobbeleir, Ashford, & Buyens, 2011; Lam, Huang, & Snape, 2007; Sun, Pan, & Chow, 2014) and conducted two series of analyses. In the first series, we tested our model using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) 6.08 to control for the effect of supervisors on the outcome variables. In the second series, we used the PROCESS method to test our model. In this paper, we only report the results of the PROCESS analysis for four reasons. First, the PROCESS results were similar to those of the HLM analyses. Second, PROCESS allowed us to simultaneously test two or more mediators in the moderated mediation model. Third, the group size was very small. The number of subordinates evaluated by each supervisor was 2.28. Fourth, to determine whether there was a supervisor effect on the nested data, we also conducted a design effect test (Kaiser, Woodruff, Bilukha, Spiegel, & Salama, 2006; Ukoumunne, Gulliford, Chinn, Sterne, & Burney, 1999). We found that the design effect of creative performance was 1.15 below the conventional cut-off point for the design effect (i.e., 2), suggesting that multilevel analyses were not necessary (Chan, Huang, Snape, & Lam, 2013).

# **RESULTS**

We first performed a set of confirmatory factor analyses to examine the distinctiveness of all of the measures. We created three parcels of items for benevolent leadership and for creative performance, using the random assignment procedure to raise the sample size to the parameter ratio. The results show that the hypothesized five-factor model was a good fit for the data,  $\chi^2(94) = 205.70$ , df = 94, CFI = .96, NNFI = .95, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .06.

Using the PROCESS method (model 4) developed by Hayes (2012) to generate 5000 bootstrap estimates, we found that benevolent leadership had an indirect effect on creative performance via psychological safety (95% CI = [.033, .279]) but not via obedience (95% CI = [-.121, .031]), supporting H<sub>1</sub> but not H<sub>2</sub>. Next, we used the PROCESS method (model 15) to test whether job autonomy moderated the second-stage indirect effect. In the test of psychological safety as a mediator, the moderated mediation was not significant (b = -.05, 95% CI = [-.143, .028]). Thus, H<sub>3</sub> was not supported. In the test of obedience as a mediator, the moderated mediation was significant (b = .05, 95% CI = [.001, .114]). Specifically, when job autonomy was low, benevolent leadership had

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an indirect effect on creative performance via obedience (b = -.09, 95% CI = [-.227, -.005]). When job autonomy was high, benevolent leadership did not have an indirect effect on creative performance via obedience (b = .02, 95% CI = [-.060, .117]). Accordingly, H<sub>4</sub> was supported.

# CONCLUSIONS

Benevolent leadership influences creative performance positively through psychological safety and that benevolent leadership does not have a negative impact on creative performance via obedience. Furthermore, job autonomy significantly moderates the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on creative performance via obedience. When job autonomy is high, the indirect effect is weaker; when job autonomy is low, the indirect effect is stronger.

This study makes three important theoretical contributions. First, this is the first study to verify that benevolent leadership has both positive and negative effects on creative performance through psychological safety and obedience and to confirm the existence of a negative mechanism. We also test the moderating role of job autonomy on these relationships in a secondstage moderation model. Second, previous research ignores the cultural mechanism of mutual obligation that underlies benevolent leadership. We regard obedience as an important mediator that reflects the sense of mutual obligation that is common in Chinese culture, thus increasing the study's cultural relevance. Third, Wang and Cheng (2010) only examined high-technology industries, limiting the generalizability of their results. In today's rapidly changing environment, the nature of work has dramatically changed (Shalley, Gilson, & Blum, 2009). These changes have increased the need for creativity from workers at all levels and in different types of jobs. Our multi-industry sample reflects the industrial structure in Taiwan. Accordingly, the effects we observe in this study are more suitable for generalization.

Practically, our findings suggest that benevolent leadership generally helps to improve creative performance, but if the subordinates lack autonomy, benevolent leadership may be harmful to creativity. To promote creativity, we recommend that organizations encourage leaders to simultaneously demonstrate benevolent leadership and implement autonomous work structures.

This study has several limitations. Although our study results are consistent with previous studies (Shen et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2016; Wang & Cheng, 2010; Wang, Chiang, Tsai, Lin, & Cheng, 2013), the crosssectional nature of our study does not allow for the inference of causality. We recommend that future studies use a longitudinal design or field experiments. Another limitation is that benevolent leadership is also prevalent in countries that value paternalism. The generalizability of our results for different cultures must be examined.

One interesting extension of this study is the question of how individual behaviors are driven by different motivations (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Cooper and Jayatilaka (2006) propose three types of motivation for creativity: other-directed extrinsic motivation, obligation motivation, and intrinsic motivation. Although most studies of creativity have adopted an intrinsic motivation perspective, this may not be suitable for a Chinese context. As mentioned in the introduction, obedience is a feature of role obligation, which matches with Cooper and Jayatilaka's obligation motivation. Future research could explore such a potential mediator linking benevolent leadership and creative performance.

This study provides preliminary evidence for a dualmediation model of benevolent leadership and creative performance. It also finds that job autonomy moderates the indirect effect of benevolent leadership on creative performance via obedience.