

The Influence of Paternalistic Leadership on Employee Behaviors through Affective Experiences: An Exploratory Study

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Paternalistic leadership is an important leadership behavior in the Chinese context. Although Farh et al. (2006) suggested that affective reactions are fundamental channels through which paternalistic leadership influences employees, few studies have examined this relationship. Building on affective event theory, we examined the influence processes of authoritarian and benevolent leadership behaviors on employees' subsequent work behaviors (i.e., compliance behavior and repayment) by eliciting employees' feelings (i.e., awe, shame, fear, anger, gratitude, and indebtedness). The results based on 201 employees indicated that while authoritarian leadership elicited awe, shame, fear, and anger in employees, only anger mediated the relationship between authoritarian leadership and compliance behavior. Furthermore, benevolent leadership elicited employees' feelings of gratitude and indebtedness, with only gratitude mediating the relationship between benevolent leadership and repayment. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of the study findings and provide some directions for future research on paternalistic leadership.

Keywords: *affect event theory, emotional leadership behavior, paternalistic leadership*

Extended Abstract

Leadership is a social influence process that plays a pivotal role in organizational effectiveness. While early studies on leadership in the Chinese context were predominantly based on Western leadership theories, the rise of the Asian economy in the 1990s prompted Chinese researchers to adopt an emic approach to examining leadership. Considering the paternalistic societal context, Cheng (1995a) acknowledged the uniqueness of paternalistic leadership that is common in Chinese enterprises. Paternalistic leadership has since become the mainstream focus of leadership research among Chinese scholars.

Farh and Cheng (2000) identified three essential characteristics of paternalistic leadership: authoritarian, benevolent, and moral. They proposed a model that specifies the process by which paternalistic leadership influences employee psychological responses.

Specifically, authoritarian, benevolent, and moral forms of leadership aim to influence employees' work attitudes and behaviors by triggering dependence and compliance, indebtedness and obligation to repay, and respect and identification, respectively. Furthermore, emotional experiences, such as awe and gratitude, mediate the link between leadership and employee work behaviors.

Farh et al. (2006) categorized the consequences of paternalistic leadership into proximal (work-related feelings) and distal (compliance and repayment) outcomes. For example, awe is a proximal reaction to authoritarian leadership, whereas compliance is a distal response to authoritarian leadership. Similarly, benevolent leadership affects reciprocity (distal) through increased gratitude (proximal). To explore the aforementioned affective influence process, Farh et al. (2006) investigated the association between paternalistic

leadership, emotional reactions (i.e., fear and gratitude), and behavioral responses (i.e., compliance, reciprocity, and identification). However, they did not address certain feelings commonly associated with paternalistic leadership, such as shame, anger, and indebtedness. Because leadership behavior is inseparable from employee emotional and behavioral responses (Gooty et al., 2010), clarifying the process through which paternalistic leadership influences employee behavior can deepen our understanding of paternalistic leadership. However, with the exception of Farh et al. (2006), few scholars have examined how paternalistic leadership influences employees' behaviors by invoking employees' feelings.

According to Cheng (1995a, 1995b), authoritarian leadership triggers negative emotional reactions in employees, while benevolent leadership elicits positive emotional responses from employees, in line with affective event theory (AET), which regards interpersonal interactions in the workplace as affective events in the workplace. Empirical studies on leadership have applied AET to conceptualize leader-employee interactions as emotional events and examine how leadership affects employees' behavioral reactions by shaping employees' emotional responses (Bader et al., 2023; Hao et al., 2014). Specifically, paternalistic leadership behaviors can evoke negative emotions, such as anger or fear evoked by being reprimanded by a supervisor, or positive emotions, such as gratitude for assistance from a supervisor in seeking medical help for a family member. The feelings that these employees experience influence their work attitudes and behaviors (Gooty et al., 2010; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Weiss & Beal, 2005).

From the AET perspective, we perceive paternalistic leadership as a sequence of interactive events that can evoke emotional responses in employees. Accordingly, this study sought to investigate the affective mechanisms through which paternalistic leadership influences employees' behaviors.

Methods

Using purposive sampling, we surveyed Taiwanese

full-time employees involved in ongoing mentoring relationships in their company. We recruited potential participants from a continuing education program at a public university located in northern Taiwan in March 2022 (T1). The participants who met the study's criteria and were willing to participate were given a survey package that included a questionnaire and a postage-prepaid return envelope. This approach aimed to reduce the potential response bias associated with social desirability (Ensher et al., 2001).

The questionnaire first provided a definition of "mentor-protégé relationship" and described its functions to ensure that the participants had a clear understanding of such relationships. The questionnaire items assessed the participants' demographic characteristics, the authoritarian leadership of the mentor, the benevolent leadership of the mentor, and the participants' work-related emotions (i.e., awe, shame, fear, anger, gratitude, and indebtedness). A total of 202 questionnaires were distributed at T1. Two months later (T2), a link to an online survey assessing workplace behaviors (i.e., compliance behavior and repayment) was sent to the participants, using the email addresses that they had provided in the initial questionnaire. Across both time points, 201 valid questionnaire responses were collected, yielding an overall response rate of 99.50%. Women made up 70.05% of the participants, and 66.33% held a bachelor's degree. Their average age was 36.58 years ($SD = 11.75$), and their average organizational tenure was 5.80 years ($SD = 7.30$).

All of the variables were measured using established scales. We used the 10-item paternalistic leadership scale (five items for authoritarian leadership and five items for benevolent leadership) developed by Cheng et al. (2014) to assess the protégés' perceptions of their mentors' leadership behaviors. Sample items are "Appears to be intimidating in front of his/her subordinates" (authoritarian leadership) and "Understands my preferences well enough to accommodate my requests" (benevolent leadership). The response options ranged from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*Always*). The alpha reliability coefficients were .86 (authoritarian) and .88 (benevolent) in this study. We adopted a single item to measure

workplace feelings (i.e., awe, shame, fear, anger, gratitude, and indebtedness). The respondents were asked to rate the strength of each feeling in their interactions with their mentor. The response options ranged from 1 (*Very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*Very strongly*). The protégés' compliance behavior was assessed using the five-item compliance without dissent scale developed by Cheng et al. (2004). A sample item is "When there is a new method to be implemented, I'm willing to follow my mentor's request." The response options ranged from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). The scale's alpha reliability coefficient was .84 in this study. The protégés' repayment was assessed using the seven-item gratitude and repayment scale developed by Farh et al. (2006). A sample item is "When I get the opportunity, I'll repay my mentor for the kindness shown." The response options ranged from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). The scale's alpha reliability coefficient was .83 in this study.

Results

Before testing our hypotheses, we assessed the construct validity of the four-factor model containing the main dimensions under investigation (authoritarian leadership, benevolent leadership, compliance behavior, and repayment). We conducted confirmatory factor analyses to compare our hypothesized measurement models with alternative models. The four-factor model fitted the data well ($\chi^2 = 236.75$, $df = 129$, $\chi^2 / df = 1.84$, confirmatory fit index = .94, Tucker-Lewis index = .93, standardized root mean square residual = .07, root mean square error of approximation = .06) and showed a better fit than the three-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2_{(3)} = 472.79$, $p < .01$; $\Delta\chi^2_{(3)} = 151.61$, $p < .001$), two-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2_{(5)} = 620.41$, $p < .01$), and one-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2_{(6)} = 973.62$, $p < .001$). Collectively, these results supported the construct validity of the study's variables.

Next, we conducted correlational analyses. As we expected, the results showed that authoritarian leadership had a positive association with awe ($r = .22$, $p < .01$), shame ($r = .29$, $p < .01$), fear ($r = .57$, $p < .01$), and anger ($r = .44$, $p < .01$) but showed no significant correlation

with compliance behavior ($r = .09$, $p > .05$) or repayment ($r = .02$, $p > .05$). Benevolent leadership had a positive association with gratitude ($r = .57$, $p < .001$), compliance behavior ($r = .27$, $p < .001$), and repayment ($r = .39$, $p < .001$). However, benevolent leadership showed no significant correlation with indebtedness ($r = .07$, $p > .05$).

Finally, we applied path analysis and used a bias-corrected confidence interval (CI) with 5,000 simulated results to test our hypotheses. The research model is shown in Figure 1. We considered an indirect effect to be significant when the 95% CI did not include zero. We entered awe, shame, fear, and anger as mediator variables, with compliance as a dependent variable. The results indicated a positive association between authoritarian leadership and four feelings (awe: $b = .28$, $p < .001$; shame: $b = .30$, $p < .001$; fear: $b = .55$, $p < .001$; anger: $b = .42$, $p < .001$). However, only anger mediated the relationship between authoritarian leadership and compliance behavior [indirect effect = $-.08$, 95% CI = $(-.19, -.01)$]. The other feelings (i.e., awe, shame, and fear) did not mediate this relationship [awe: indirect effect = $.03$, 95% CI = $(-.02, .08)$; shame: indirect effect = $.04$, 95% CI = $(-.002, .13)$; fear: indirect effect = $.01$, 95% CI = $(-.11, .11)$].

We included gratitude and indebtedness as mediating variables, with repayment as a dependent variable. The results indicated that benevolent leadership was positively related to two feelings (gratitude: $b = .58$, $p < .001$; indebtedness: $b = .16$, $p < .05$) and repayment ($b = .16$, $p < .05$). Only the feeling of gratitude mediated the relationship between benevolent leadership and repayment [indirect effect = $.14$, 95% CI = $(.03, .27)$]; the feeling of indebtedness did not mediate this relationship [indirect effect = $.01$, 95% CI = $(-.01, .05)$].

Conclusions

Although we found evidence of the affective influence of authoritarian leadership on employee work behaviors, the identified mediating feelings were partially inconsistent with the model proposed by Farh and Cheng (2000). Specifically, while authoritarian leadership

correlated positively with negative feelings (awe, shame, fear, and anger), only anger mediated the relationship between authoritarian leadership and compliance behavior. Furthermore, benevolent leadership showed positive associations with feelings of gratitude and indebtedness, with gratitude mediating the relationship between benevolent leadership and repayment. Such discrepancies suggest that more research is needed to explore the mechanism through which authoritarian leadership influences employees' work experiences.

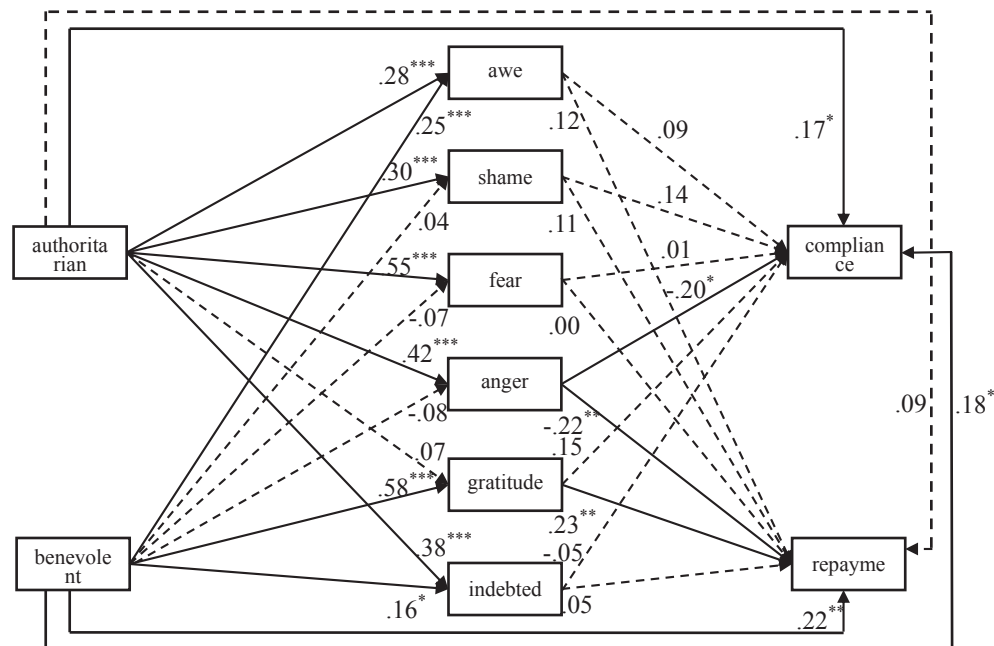
Overall, our findings support AET, indicating that workplace interpersonal interaction can trigger emotional responses in employees, subsequently influencing their behavioral outcomes. However, the negative feelings induced by authoritarian leadership do not necessarily increase employee compliance. While authoritarian

leadership may evoke various negative feelings among employees, anger appears to have the most significant effect on their attitudes and behaviors.

Moreover, the study identified the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between benevolent leadership and repayment. Leveraging reciprocity principles in interpersonal interactions, gratitude and indebtedness were found to be important positive and negative mediating variables, respectively, in the relationship between benevolent leadership and repayment behavior.

In summary, our study contributes to the empirical literature on paternalistic leadership by testing and identifying potential affective mediators of the effects of authoritarian and benevolent leadership behaviors on employee behavioral responses.

Figure 1
Path analysis results of the hypothesized model



Note: Solid lines represent significant paths, while dashed lines represent non-significant paths.
*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.