Leader-member Exchange Social Comparison and Employee Voice Behavior: An Empirical Study based on Multiple Linear Regression Model

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Abstract: In the context of Chinese culture, employee voice behavior is confronted with the awkward situation of the contradiction between individual interests and organizational interests. This paper used SPSS and AMOS to process the questionnaire data, and explored the relationship between leader-member exchange social comparison and employee voice behavior by establishing multiple regression model and structural equation model. The results show that leader-member exchange social comparison is positively correlated with employee voice behavior. This study enriches the leader-member exchange theory and provides theoretical support for the enterprise management mode reform in the modern market environment.

1 INTRODUCTION

After entering the 21st century, the rapid development of science and technology makes the environment facing enterprises more dynamic. In such a complex and changeable dynamic environment, enterprises must maintain the flexibility and innovation of the organization if they want to continue to develop. This process not only depends on the strategic vision and decisiveness of managers, but also on the suggestions of all employees of the organization (Morrison 2011). Many studies have shown that the expression of rationalization suggestions and opinions by employees can enhance the creativity of individuals and teams, and also improve the operating performance of organizations (Sherf et al. 2018; Deng et al. 2018). However, in the context of Chinese culture, employee voice behavior is confronted with the dilemma of contradiction between organizational interests and individual interests. Although employee voice behavior can benefit the organization and the leader, there are certain risks for the speaker, such as being regarded by the leader as a challenge to authority and affecting the career development of the employee (Fuller et al.

2015). Therefore, current organizational behavior researchers are more concerned about how to encourage employees' voice behavior.

Voice behavior refers to the behavior that employees actively put forward reasonable suggestions and ideas to the organization in order to improve the operating performance of the organization or in view of the problems existing in the organization (Zhan et al. 2016). Previous studies have shown that organizational context is an important antecedent of employee voice behavior. As the main object of employee voice behavior and the owner of the right to reward and punish, leaders undoubtedly have an important influence on employee voice behavior (Detert & Burris, 2007). Scholars also carried out some theoretical and empirical studies, which confirmed that leader-member exchange, inclusive leadership, management openness, emotional leadership and etc have an influence on voice behavior (Dyne et al., 2013; Qi et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2020). It can be seen from literature review that researches on the influence of leader-member exchange (LMX) on employee voice behavior mostly focus on the absolute value of LMX, while according to social comparison theory, employees will obtain

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self-related information from the comparison with colleagues to obtain their own cognition, especially their own social status. This perception of relative position will affect the organizational self-esteem of employees. According to social cognition theory, this kind of organization-based self-esteem enables employees to develop a positive attitude and do more things that are good for the organization outside of their job description. Therefore, this paper takes leader-member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) as the independent variable, organization-based self-esteem(OBSE) as the mediating variable, and team differential atmosphere(TDA) as the moderating variable to explore its influence mechanism on employee voice behavior (the research model is shown in Figure 1)
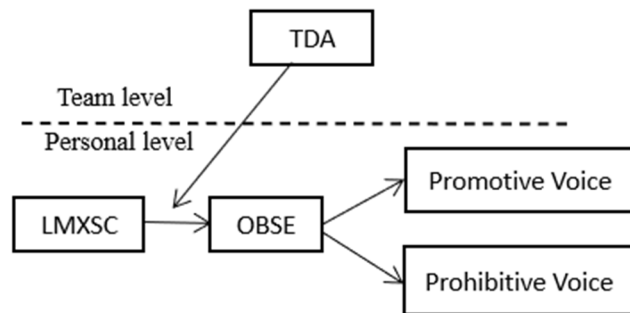

Figure 1: Research model

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS

2.1 LMXSC and Employee Voice Behavior

Voice behavior refers to the behavior of employees who take the initiative to put forward their own ideas or suggestions in order to improve organizational efficiency. Liang et al. (2012) divided it into Promotive Voice and Prohibitive Voice. Promotive voice behavior means that employees express new ideas or suggestions that are helpful to the development of the organization. Prohibitive voice behavior refers to that employees express their concern about the wrong working style and leadership style. The former focuses on the future of the enterprise and provides innovative ideas for the development of the enterprise, while the latter focuses on the present and aims to correct the existing problems of the enterprise to avoid worsening. Voice behavior, to some extent, is a challenge to the status quo of the organization by employees, reflecting their sense of responsibility and attitude (Liang et al. 2019). Based on social exchange theory, LMX theory holds that leaders tend to establish high-quality LMX with some members, give them sufficient trust, and make them feel obligated to return, thus generating

voice behavior, which is supported by a large number of empirical studies.

However, these studies treated the LMX in isolation. In the leader-member exchange situation, members are task related and communicate with each other, which provides effective social information for individual self-cognition. At the same time, LMX is regarded as a limited and scarce resource within a team, which leads to LMX competition among members and easily triggers individuals to conduct social comparison to define their relative social position and form leader-member social comparison (LMXSC).

Leader-member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) is an extension of leader-member exchange (LMX), which compares the mean value of employee LMX and team LMX, reflecting their relative social position in the team. Its theoretical basis is social comparison theory, which holds that individuals search for self-related information by comparing with others on certain characteristics, and finally obtain self-knowledge and discover self-reality, the special representative is the fact of relative social status (Festinger 1954, Wood 1996). Society exists widely in human society and is deeply embedded in organizational teams (Greenberg et al. 2007). As for the work team, subordinates under the same leader share some common practices, experiences and experiences in daily interaction, and tend to choose colleagues to compare and evaluate themselves (Hu&Liden 2013). Furthermore, a

number of studies have shown that self-evaluation generated by social comparison is also a motivating factor, which can affect individual attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, different from the sense of exchange and reciprocity generated by LMX, LMXSC, as a member of the self-recognition formed in team comparison, can also be transformed into a motivating factor to promote employee voice behavior. When members have high LMXSC, he will feel relative to the other employees, he had led more support and trust, this trust is not only close to the psychological distance between the higher and lower, also can strengthen the information sharing between the two sides, helps in emotional interaction with staff and working on, and then promote the staff recommendations. To sum up, this paper assumes:

H1:LMXSC has a positive impact on employee voice behavior.

2.2 The Mediating Role of Organizational Self-esteem

Organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) was proposed by Pierce, Gardnr and Cummings et al. (Pierce et al. 1989) on the basis of the concept of self-esteem, who defined organizational self-esteem as: The degree to which organization members believe that roles in the organizational context can meet their needs. Organization-based self-esteem reflects the self-perceived value of an employee as a member of a particular organization. Employees with high organization-based self-esteem felt that they were important and valuable to the organization, while those with low organization-based self-esteem felt that they were essential and worthless. Based on social cognition theory, some scholars believe that employees with higher organization-based self-esteem tend to have more positive psychological cognition, which leads to more positive behaviors (Yu & Wang 2017). Because direct leaders or supervisors control the distribution of resources and power, they are usually regarded as agents of the organization (Levinson 1965). Therefore, in some studies on organization-based self-esteem, leadership behaviors or characteristics are considered to have an important influence on organization-based self-esteem. Especially when leaders establish high-quality relationships with their subordinates, their sense of value in the organization will be enhanced (Lind et al. 2000), thus helping to enhance their organization-based self-esteem.

As mentioned above, subordinates with higher organization-based self-esteem will show more positive behaviors, such as employee voice behavior.

Based on the above logic, when employees think that they have a higher LMX than other members of the team, they will feel that their value in the organization is confirmed, and their organization-based self-esteem will be enhanced. Once an employee has a high level of organization-based self-esteem, he will naturally adjust his own behavior to maintain the level of organization-based self-esteem (Wilson etal. 2018) and participate more actively in all kinds of activities that are spontaneous and beneficial to the organization (Mayer et al. 2017). Expect to continue to be recognized and appreciated by leaders. Meanwhile, based on the theory of cognitive dissonance, individuals often act in a way consistent with their own cognition in order to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). Therefore, employees with high organization-based self-esteem will exhibit behaviors that match their own value, and voice behavior is just a specific behavior to prove their value and ability in the team. Based on the above analysis, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H2: Organization-based self-esteem plays a mediating role in the relationship between LMXSC and employee voice behavior.

2.3 The Moderating Effect of Team Differential Atmosphere

Team differential atmosphere, developed from the differential pattern proposed by Taiwan scholar Fei Xiaotong, refers to the degree of difference in the density of the relationship between team members around the team leader (Liu et al. 2009). Liu Jun et al. (2009) believe that team differential atmosphere is a relative concept generated by comparison, but it generally does not rely on subjective comparison, but depends on the differentiated treatment of individual relationships by the team resource controller's evaluation of affinity, loyalty and talent. The size of such differentiation is represented at the team level. There may be two scales of strong and weak differential atmosphere. The stronger the difference atmosphere is, the higher the team members perceive the differential treatment by the team leader.

In a team with a strong atmosphere of difference, it means that the leader treats the members differently and forms an obvious "circle" within the team. The relative position of high LMXSC members in the team is more significant, which can strengthen the psychological advantage transformed by social comparison, and thus improve the perception of self-worth. For low LMXSC members, the identity of "outsiders" makes them doubt the value of self in the

organization and produce lower organizational self-esteem. In the atmosphere of the weak group of difference, often means that the resources of the team members to get on the nature and quantity difference is small, the rights and status differences between team members is not obvious, even if high LMXSC members think relative position is higher than most people, but it is not very obvious, will weaken the psychological advantage due to social comparison, And then reduce the influence of LMXSC on organizational self-esteem. Therefore, based on the above analysis, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H3: Team difference atmosphere has a positive moderating effect on the impact of LMXSC on organization-based self-esteem. That is, the stronger the differential atmosphere, the greater the impact of LMXSC on organization-based self-esteem.

3 MODEL DESIGN

To test the above hypotheses in the paper, several test models are constructed.

For the hypotheses 1, the test models are constructed as:

$$PV^1_{T+1}= \beta_0 +\beta_1 LMXSC_T + \sum Controls + \varepsilon \qquad (1)$$

$$PV^2_{T+1}= \beta_0 +\beta_1 LMXSC_T + \sum Controls + \varepsilon \qquad (2)$$

For the hypotheses of mediating role of OBSE between LMXSC and employee voice behavior, the test models are constructed as:

$$OBSE_T= \beta_0 +\beta_1 LMXSC_T + \sum Controls + \varepsilon \qquad (3)$$

$$PV^1_{T+1}= \beta_0 +\beta_1 PV^1_T +\beta_2 LMXSC_T + \beta_3 OBSE_T \\ \sum Controls + \varepsilon \qquad (4)$$

$$PV^2_{T+1}= \beta_0 +\beta_1 PV^2_T +\beta_2 LMXSC_T + \beta_3 OBSE_T \\ \sum Controls + \varepsilon \qquad (5)$$

For the hypotheses of moderating role of TDA between LMXSC and OBSE, the test models are constructed as:

$$OBSE_T= \beta_0 +\beta_1 LMXSC_T +\beta_2 TDA + \\ \beta_3 LMXSC_T*TDA + \sum Controls + \varepsilon \qquad (6)$$

4 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Research Conclusions

Based on social comparison theory and social cognition theory, we find that LMXSC positively affects organizational self-esteem and employee voice behavior. Organizational self-esteem has a significant positive effect on employee voice behavior. Organizational self-esteem plays a partially mediating role in the influence of LMXSC on employee voice behavior. There is a positive moderating effect between LMXSC and organizational self-esteem.

4.2 Theoretical Significance

This study has the following theoretical significance: First, existing LMX theories basically deal with LMX in isolation, but LMX does not exist in isolation, and its scarcity is easy to cause competitive behaviors among employees and social comparison to form LMXSC. This paper discusses the influence mechanism of LMXSC on voice behavior, broadens the interpretation range of LMX theory and deepens the research content of LMXSC theory. Secondly, based on social comparison theory and social cognition theory, this study focuses on the indirect impact of LMXSC on employee voice behavior through organizational self-esteem in the context of Chinese organizations, deepening and expanding the theoretical research of LMXSC. Thirdly, LMX belongs to the individual-level construct, while LMXSC belongs to the individual-level construct within the team. This study found that LMXSC has a stronger impact on employees' organizational self-esteem in a strong team order atmosphere. From the theoretical perspective, this paper discussed the multi-level impact path of LMX phenomenon on organizational self-esteem, and confirmed the multi-level characteristics of LMX theory.

4.3 Significance of Management Practice

This study has guiding significance for management practice: First, leaders should differentiate LMX relationships as far as possible, and construct the social comparison process of key members in different situations to conduct self-evaluation and obtain social self-concept, and finally stimulate work enthusiasm. If a leader treats all subordinates equally,

it will frustrate the work enthusiasm of key members and cause a distant relationship between everyone and the leader, which may affect the voice behavior of employees. However, LMX differentiation will cause team conflict and destroy team integration (Li & Liao 2014). Therefore, leaders should appropriately differentiate LMX. Second, the information conveyed by leaders may influence employees' judgment of their own value to the organization. Therefore, leaders can express their trust and authorization to subordinates through various channels, improve the level of organizational self-esteem of team members, and thus promote more proactive behaviors of subordinates. Thirdly, leaders should constantly improve the level of knowledge and employment, and allocate resources and power according to working ability. If employees with different abilities perceive the same LMXSC, although the self-worth of employees can be improved, the improvement range is obviously different.

4.4 Limitations

First, the use of questionnaire survey is likely to produce homologous bias; Second, differential order patterns are common in Chinese organizational contexts, while other moderating variables may exist in other contexts. Third, there may be a limit to sample size.

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