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Leader Interpersonal Emotion Regulation and Follower Performance

Abstract

Interpersonal emotion regulation involves influencing other people's feelings. In this study, we examined whether leaders can strategically alter their followers' emotions in order to elicit desired performance effects, using a multisource field study involving 31 leaders and 157 followers. Results from multilevel structural equation modelling supported a mediation model in which leaders' attempts to improve their followers' feelings enhancing followers' task performance via the followers' experience of positive affect. In contrast, leaders' use of affect-worsening actions was associated with the experience of followers' negative affect, but not related to task performance. These findings contribute by expanding the known outcomes of interpersonal emotion regulation and enhancing knowledge on the affective underpinnings of the leader-follower relationship.

Keywords:

interpersonal emotion regulation, task performance, leadership

Leader Interpersonal Emotion Regulation and Follower Performance

Interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) is defined as the actions by which a person initiates, maintains, modulates or changes the occurrence, intensity or timespan of others' affect, and involves the use of strategies to improve or worsen followers' feelings (Niven, Totterdell, & Holman, 2009). The process of IER has been increasingly viewed as relevant to the dynamics of the workplace, with studies suggesting that IER is an everyday process within organizations that has effects on the well-being and relationship quality of both parties involved (i.e., agents and targets; e.g., Little, Kluemper, Nelson, & Ward, 2013; Niven, Holman, & Totterdell, 2012). However, it is unclear whether IER actually has performance implications in the workplace.

The aim of the present paper is to examine whether leaders can intentionally and strategically alter their followers' emotions in order to elicit desired performance effects. There has been increasing interest in the affective processes involved in leader-follower performance dynamics (Cropanzano, Dasborough, & Weiss, 2017), but most theoretical and empirical work to date has emphasized subconscious processes through which leaders influence their followers' feelings and thereby performance, such as emotional contagion (e.g., Sy & Choi, 2013). While there have been some attempts to study leaders' use of IER, these have mostly been within the context of laboratory settings or simulated workplaces (e.g., Thiel, Griffith, & Connelly, 2015), and those studies in the field have only captured attempts to improve followers' feelings (Little, Gooty, & Williams, 2016), even though worsening followers' feelings might be an important part of the leadership role. We therefore seek to expand this stream of research by presenting a multisource field study examining the performance consequences of leader IER used to improve and to worsen their followers' emotions.

We argue that when leaders make attempts to improve their followers' feelings, this will lead to the experience of positive affect in followers, in turn enhancing followers' task performance, namely, the extent to which followers execute their basic tasks in an effective way. Conversely, we expect that leaders' use of affect-worsening IER will be associated with the experience of followers' negative affect and therefore poorer task performance. Regarding the association between leader IER and follower affect, it is well established that affective behavior communicates information to others about a person's goals, attitudes, and intentions (Van Kleef, 2009). Thus, when a leader uses affect-improving IER, such as demonstrating authentic interest in followers' problems, followers could infer that the leader is concerned about their well-being, which ought to elicit positive feelings. In contrast, when a leader uses affect-worsening IER behaviors, such as criticizing, followers are likely to infer a lack of care and support, resulting in negative feelings.

Hypothesis 1: Leader affect-improving IER will be positively related to follower positive affect.

Hypothesis 2: Leader affect-worsening IER will be positively related to follower negative affect.

In turn, we expect the effects of leader IER on follower affect to translate into effects on follower task performance. Carver and White (1994) propose that there are two general motivational systems underpinning behavior and affect, namely, the behavioral approach and inhibition systems. Positive affective states are thought to be a manifestation of the approach system, in which positive emotional experiences give people more energy and lead them to expect more positive outcomes, which causes them to devote more effort to their tasks (Seo & Ilies, 2009). In contrast, negative feelings are more representative of the inhibition system, which

promotes avoidance-related and withdrawal behaviors, and therefore reduce the likelihood of optimal performance. While some studies have reported positive effects of negative emotions on performance (e.g., George & Zhou, 2007), on balance the theoretical and empirical evidence is suggestive of a likely negative effect of negative affect on task performance (Kaplan, Bradley, Luchman, & Haynes, 2009). Thus, we propose two mediation processes:

Hypothesis 3: Follower positive affect will mediate the positive relationship between leader affect-improving IER and task performance.

Hypothesis 4: Follower negative affect will mediate the negative relationship between leader affect-worsening IER and task performance.

Method

Procedure

We conducted a multisource survey study with a retail organization in Chile. One hundred fifty-seven employees nested in 31 leaders took part. On average, supervisors were associated with 5.06 (SD = 1.41) followers. Participants were 72% male, average age was 31.2 years (SD = 8.62), and mean job tenure was 3.6 years (SD = 5.27). Job roles were 48.4% selling agents, 10.8% administrative, 5.1% technical, 8.3% professional staff, 4.6% manager and 12.7% others.

Two online surveys were utilized. Employees responded to a survey in which they provided ratings of their leader's IER and their own affect. In an independent survey administered a week later, leaders provided ratings of each of their followers' performance. This two-source strategy attended to possible issues regarding common methods bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012) relative to the dependent variable in the study.

Measures

In the team member survey, leader IER was measured using 13-items adapted from Niven et al. (2011). Followers indicated the extent to which their leader uses strategies to improve the way they feel, e.g., "discusses team members' positive characteristics" (α = .95) or worsen the way they feel, e.g., "talks about team members' shortcomings" (α = .91), on a 5-point scale (*not at all – a great extent*). Followers' affect was measured with 6 items from the scale of Warr, Bindl, Parker, and Inceoglu (2014), which asked followers to rate the extent to which they experience an array of feelings on a response scale of 1: *never* – 5: *always/almost always*. Items were "enthusiastic", "joyful" and "inspired" for positive affect (α = .81), and "worried", "anxious" and "tense" for negative affect (α = .68). Followers also reported interaction frequency with their leaders with the single item "how frequently do you interact with your leader?" (1: *almost never* – 5: *everyday*), for use as a control in subsequent analyses, under the assumption that leaders' IER would likely have stronger effects on followers if they were exposed to more interaction time. In the leader survey, a three-item measure assessed individual task performance (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Leaders rated each of their followers' task performance in terms of effort, quality, and quantity (1: *little/low* – 7: *much/high*; α = .86).

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to determine the robustness of the measurement model involved in hypothesis testing. The analysis suggested acceptable goodness-of-fit (Byrne, 2012) for a model defined by leader interpersonal emotion regulation, follower affect, and follower task performance, $\chi^2 = 343.59$, *df* (199), RMSEA = .07, CFI = .94, TLI = .94.

Means, standard deviations, correlations and reliabilities are summarized in Table 1. We tested our hypotheses using multilevel structural equation modelling (MSEM; Figure 1) because

employees were nested in their respective leaders. Thus, hypotheses were tested at the employee level of analysis (level-1) controlling for the variance at the leader level of analysis (level-2). Hypotheses 1 and 2 proposed effects of leader IER on follower positive and negative affect, respectively. In support of these hypotheses, results showed a positive association between leaders' affect-improving IER and follower positive affect, $b = .33$, $SE = .06$, $p < .01$, and a positive association between leaders' affect-worsening IER and follower negative affect, $b = .34$, $SE = .07$, $p < .01$. Hypothesis 3 stated that follower positive affect would mediate the positive relationship between leader affect-improving IER and task performance. Results of mediation analysis supported this, showing a positive indirect effect, $b = .12$, $p < .05$. Hypothesis 4 indicated that follower negative affect would mediate the negative relationship between leader affect-worsening IER and task performance. Mediation analyses revealed a non-significant direct effect between the predictor and the outcome variable, such that a mediation process was not likely. As a result, hypothesis 4 was not supported.[1]

[INSERT TABLE 1 AND FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

Discussion

Our findings indicate that leader IER has a proximal effect on followers' affect and a more distal influence on followers' task performance. Leader affect-improving IER was positively related to followers' positive affect, which in turn was positively related to the effort, quality, and quantity of their task performance. Conversely, leader affect-worsening IER was positively related to followers' unpleasant feelings. However, contrary to expectations, we did not find a significant relationship between followers' negative affect and their task performance.

[1] Although we did not form a hypothesis to this effect, supplementary analysis revealed a significant negative indirect effect of leader affect-worsening IER on follower performance via follower positive affect, $b = -.15$, $p < .01$.

There is debate within the literature about the performance effects of negative affect, with some studies suggesting that it can bring individuals the energy and disposition to perform a task (e.g., George & Zhou, 2007), and that negative affect expressed by leaders can motivate stronger performance in their followers (e.g., Van Kleef et al., 2009). It may therefore be that leaders' affect-worsening IER has ambivalent effects on followers' task performance. Alternatively, as suggested by our supplementary analysis, it may be that leaders' affect-worsening transmits its effects on follower performance mainly via lowering followers' positive affect.

As one of the first field studies on IER in leader-follower relationships, our research contributes to apply this form of affective behavior to the work context, by developing a theoretical rationale based on the integration of IER with affect-as-communication theories. As such, we also contribute to the literature by providing evidence that leaders do engage in IER in everyday life and that doing so influences follower performance via the pathway of follower affect. The study is also the first to document the use and show the effects of leaders' affect-worsening IER.

In practical terms, our findings have implications for developing leadership interventions aimed to foster employee performance. Because leaders' IER has the potential to influence followers' affect and behavior, managers and practitioners should consider training programs addressing leaders' IER. For example, leaders could be informed about the benefits of generating positive affect in their followers and specific ways in which they can do so. Practitioners might also consider the assessment of these behaviors in their selection processes as an important feature to assess in potential leaders.

Despite its strengths, such as the use of multisource data based on dozens of leader-followers dyads, the current research also has some limitations. First, we argued that approach

and inhibition behavioral systems may explain why employee affect is associated with their performance. However, this was only theorized but not tested empirically. Thus, further research should examine these psychological processes. Second, the causal directions of the relationships we proposed can only be theoretically inferred, due to our use of a survey design. While we did assess our dependent variable at a later time than the independent variable, it is possible that enduring task performance results in leaders responding in particular ways to their followers (e.g., leaders might act more supportively towards those who are usually better performers). As such, the relationships we observed could hypothetically run in the opposite direction to that proposed. Common-method variance could also threaten the effects estimated in the relationship between leader IER and follower affect (Podsakoff et al., 2012), because both variables were assessed at the same time from the follower perspective. Thus, future research using experimental or longitudinal designs is needed in order to empirically demonstrate the causal effect of leader IER. Diary designs examining daily or weekly changes might be especially informative, as IER, affect, and performance are all likely to vary dynamically over time. Building on research in the leader-member relations area, a further area of interest could be to study the effects of followers' judgments of leaders' use of IER towards them *relative to* others in their work group, rather than just studying absolute use of IER (Yu, Matta, & Cornfield, 2018).

In this paper we aimed to understand the effects of interpersonal emotion regulation in leader-follower relationships, showing that this affective behavior could be relevant for task performance. We trust that future research and practice will follow and expand on the knowledge developed here.

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Table 1. *Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliabilities*

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Leader-follower interaction frequency	4.05	1.13	-					
2. Follower task performance	5.19	1.24	.23**	**(.87)**				
3. Follower positive affect	3.66	0.88	.33**	.20*	**(.81)**			
4. Follower negative affect	3.14	0.81	-.25**	-0.09	-.40**	**(.68)**		
5. Leader affect-improving regulation	3.35	1.15	.46**	0.05	.53**	-.31**	**(.95)**	
6. Leader affect-worsening regulation	1.95	1.11	-.34**	0.05	-.56**	.36**	-.63**	**(.91)**

Note. $N = 157$. Reliabilities are displayed in parentheses on the diagonal. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

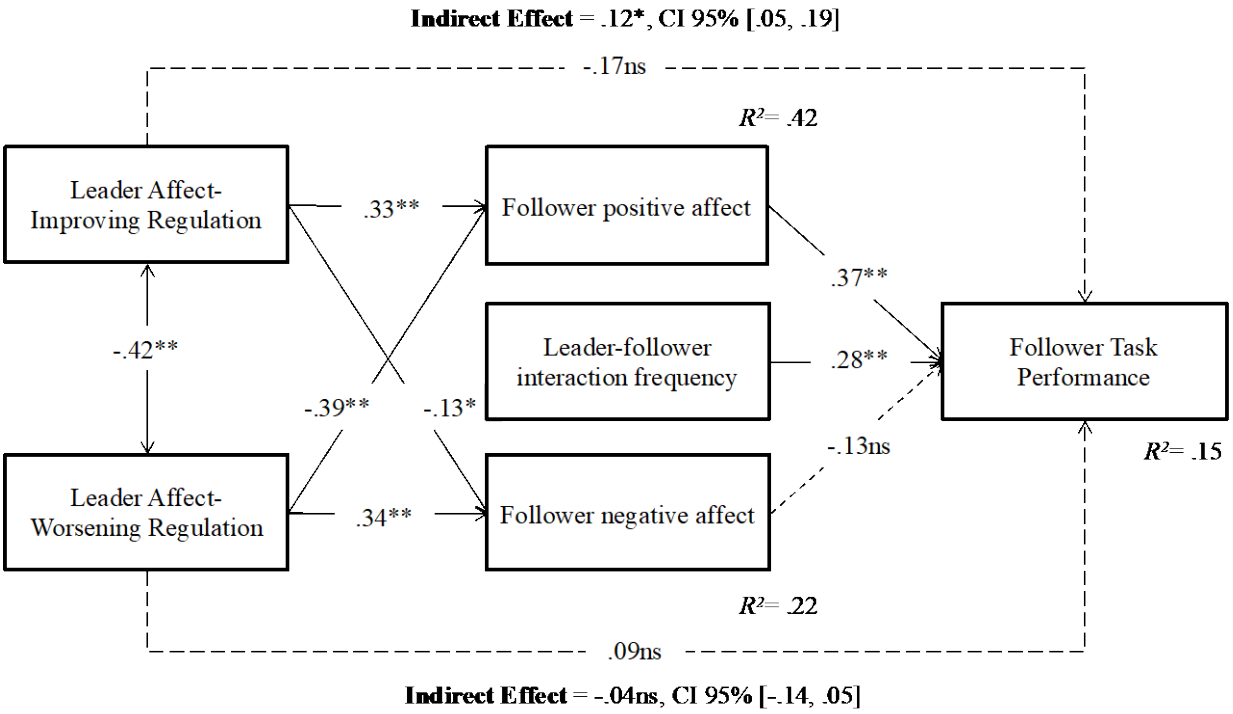

Figure 1. Path Analyses for Leader Interpersonal Emotion Regulation, Follower Affect and Follower Task Performance