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A Psychological Contract Perspective on How and When Employees' Promotive Voice Enhances Promotability

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A Psychological Contract Perspective on How and When Employees' Promotive Voice

Enhances Promotability

Abstract

While promotive voice is conventionally considered a favorable work behavior to the organization, whether engaging in promotive voice will help employees move up the career ladder is inconclusive across a handful of studies. Drawing on a psychological contract perspective, this study aims to understand why and when employees' promotive voice can contribute to supervisor-rated employees' promotability. We propose that employees' engagement in promotive voice will strengthen supervisor-sponsored balanced psychological contract with the employees and thus employees' promotability, and these effects will be stronger when the employees and supervisors have higher versus lower quality of leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship. Results of a three-wave field study with 281 employees and their 59 supervisors supported our hypotheses. We conclude by discussing the important implications of these findings for theory and practice.

Keywords: promotive voice; LMX; supervisors' balanced psychological contract; employee promotability

Practitioner Notes:

(1) What is currently known about the subject matter?

- Employees' promotive voice benefits team and firm performance as well as supervisors' well-being and personal growth.
- Promotive voice has also been perceived as constructive and found to enhance voicing employees' performance appraisals.
- However, the impact of promotive voice on voicing employees' promotability and long-term career success is less clear.
- Among the few studies, inconsistent relationships have been found and whether promotive voice helps employees advance in their careers is still a puzzle.

(2) What our paper adds to this?

- We seek to unpack why and when employees' promotive voice will (or will not) advance their promotability in the eyes of their supervisors.
- We find that promotive voice can enhance supervisor-rated promotability via strengthening supervisor-sponsored balanced psychological contract with the voicing employees, but only for employees who have better quality of leader-member exchange relationship.
- We also find that promotive voice does not help strengthen the supervisor-sponsored relational psychological contract for employees, which did not contribute to supervisor-rated promotability either.

(3) The implications of study findings for practitioners

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- To employees, promotive voice, albeit under a better leader-member exchange relationship with their supervisor, can be used as a strategy for employees to strengthen supervisor-sponsored balanced psychological contract and thus get ahead.
- To managers, promotive voice helps managers become more aware of employees' values and gives employees a chance to highlight their contributions to the organization's growth.
- While managers can be prone to sponsor their balanced psychological contract to employees having better relationships with them and offering promotive voice, managers should be aware of potential bias by only paying attention to the voice from employees closer to them.

Promotive voice and employees' promotability

Promotive voice, defined as employees' expressions of ideas, suggestions, or alternative approaches for improving processes or practices at work (Liang et al., 2012; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), has been found to contribute positively not only to the team (Li et al., 2017) and firm performance (Detert et al., 2013), but also supervisors' well-being and personal growth (Sessions et al., 2020). Based on these research findings, one may expect promotive voice to help employees get ahead at work and achieve long-term career success. As indicated by Chamberlin et al. (2017, p. 12), "Organizations thrive on the ideas and suggestions of their employees, and a commonly held view is that employees need to speak up to be seen as active contributors and to advance their careers."

Nevertheless, only a few studies have examined whether promotive voice, or even voice in general, is associated with career outcomes and the findings from these studies offer no clear conclusion (Bashshur & Oc, 2015). Seibert et al. (2001) found that proactive voice, which conceptually involves promotive voice, was negatively related to salary progression and promotion over two years when other proactive behaviors (e.g., innovation) were considered. Huang and colleagues (2018) found that promotive voice was positively correlated with promotability, but this positive association was not observed after controlling for other variables such as employees' past performance. Whether promotive voice helps employees advance in their careers is still a puzzle.

We seek to unpack *why and when* employees' promotive voice will (or will not) advance their careers. Because employees' career advancement in the organization often depends on evaluations by their supervisors (e.g., Thacker & Wayne, 1995), we focus on supervisor-rated employee promotability or supervisors' subjective assessments that

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employees possess the “capacities and willingness to effectively perform at higher job levels” (De Pater et al., 2009, p. 298) as the career outcome. Supervisors' subjective promotability assessments are “markers of actual promotions and career success” (Gentry et al., 2012, p. 97) and are an essential indicator of actual employee promotability (e.g., Jawahar & Ferris, 2011).

Drawing on a psychological contract perspective, we propose that promotive voice may enhance employee promotability via strengthening a supervisor-sponsored balanced psychological contract (BPC). Psychological contract is an implicit agreement in the reciprocal exchange of mutual obligations, or reciprocal promises between the employee and the organization (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). As supervisors represent the organization and are often regarded as central agents for developing and managing the psychological contract with individual employees (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008; Rousseau, 1989), supervisors “can themselves personally perceive a psychological contract with employees and respond accordingly” (Rousseau, 1989, p. 126). In our study, we define supervisor-sponsored BPC as a type of reciprocal promise that stresses a balance of supervisors' obligations to provide employees skill training opportunities and resources to help them develop career competencies in return for employees' contributions and commitment to the organization's performance and competitive advantages (Rousseau, 2000). Engaging in promotive voice indicates that employees are going above and beyond meeting performance obligations (e.g., Liang et al., 2012; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998) and may trigger supervisors' reciprocal response by strengthening their sponsored BPC with

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voicing employees, thus giving those employees developmental opportunities for promotability.

Moreover, as supervisors may hold qualitatively different social exchange relationships with their employees (leader-member exchange or LMX; Dulebohn et al., 2012), the quality of LMX between supervisors and employees may impact supervisors' assessment of employees' promotive voice and their sponsored BPC. As higher-quality LMX is characterized by "a high degree of mutual trust, respect, and obligation" (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 227), supervisors are more likely to appreciate high LMX employees' promotive voice and reciprocate their proactiveness with a sponsored BPC. However, the lack of mutual trust and respect may prevent supervisors from understanding or appreciating low LMX employees' promotive voice, making them less likely to reciprocate employees' proactive attempts through forming a BPC. Figure 1 presents our research model.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Our study contributes to three research areas. First, our study identifies how and when promotive voice can contribute to employee promotability by offering a fine-tuned psychological contract lens (i.e., supervisor-sponsored BPC) and examining LMX as a boundary condition. Researchers have yet to consider the functions of voice in shaping how supervisors perceive their psychological contract with these voicing employees and sponsor their career advancement (e.g., Huang et al., 2018). Our study thus helps reveal the implications of voice for employees' career prospects.

Second, by focusing on supervisor-sponsored BPC as a mechanism in responding to employee promotive voice, our study extends the research on psychological contract by

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investigating it from a supervisor-sponsored perspective. Since the existing studies have exclusively focused on employees' perceptions of psychological contract (e.g., Chen et al., 2008; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000), the formation of psychological contract with individual employees from a supervisor's perspective has not been well understood. Our study enriches this research by indicating what employees can do and when they can shape supervisor-sponsored psychological contract.

Third, our study also extends the existing promotability literature. Jawahar and Ferris (2011) posited that "promotion decisions represent an area of scientific inquiry that is limited and incomplete in our understanding of antecedents and processes" (p. 251). To date, studies on employee promotability have mainly examined how employees' job performance or impression management tactics enhance their promotability in the eyes of their supervisors (e.g., Jawahar & Ferris, 2011; Long et al., 2015). Our study offers a supervisor-sponsored psychological contract angle to understand how employees can achieve higher promotability.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Employees' promotive voice and promotability: The mediating role of supervisor-sponsored BPC

The concept of psychological contract is rooted in the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and illustrates the reciprocal exchange of obligations between employees and their employing organization (Rousseau, 1995). Supervisors represent employing organizations and interact with employees to exchange and maintain a reciprocation of valued resources (e.g., Henderson et al., 2008) because they are gatekeepers who assess employees' contributions and decide whether to facilitate or withhold employees' access to resources and

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growth opportunities (e.g., Epitropaki et al., 2021; Kiazad et al., 2020). As such, supervisors can develop a psychological contract at the dyadic level with employees (Tekleab & Taylor, 2003) and manage the mutual obligations, terms, and exchange agreements between them (Rousseau, 1989, 1995).

We argue that supervisor-sponsored psychological contract is key to understanding the impact of employee voice on promotability. Supervisor-sponsored psychological contracts arise from a sensemaking process based on supervisors' interactions with employees (Rousseau, 1995). For example, a supervisor cognitively evaluates employees' commitment and contributions to decide whether the employees have fulfilled their obligation to the organization and then decides whether to offer or deliver the organization's promises. Since promotive voice carries messages that focus on helpful improvement-oriented ideas or solutions and signals employees' investments in the long-term success of the supervisor, team, and organization (e.g., Qin et al., 2014), it can elicit positive reciprocating responses from the supervisor such as recognizing voicing employees as valuable contributors who deserve future career advancement.

Of particular interest to us is supervisor-sponsored BPC, which combines the dynamic, open-ended nature of the relational psychological contract with the specific, performance-reward contingencies of the transactional psychological contract (Hui et al., 2004; Rousseau, 1995). While relational psychological contract refers to a long-term, open-ended arrangement based upon mutual loyalty and only loosely conditioned on performance (Hui et al., 2004; Morrison & Robinson, 1997), transactional psychological contract refers to short-term, economic exchanges of rewards for performance contributions. A supervisor-

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sponsored BPC aims to strike a balance and stresses that employees are expected to give their commitment and effort to the organization, and in exchange, supervisors are expected to invest in employees' career competencies, such as providing skill training and career development opportunities. To trigger supervisors' obligatory responses, employees are expected to demonstrate their contributions that help the organization stay competitive and effective (Rousseau, 2000), such as making voice to improve the effectiveness of the team, organization, and supervisors.

We theorize supervisor-sponsored BPC as a mediating mechanism between promotive voice and enhanced promotability because employees' promotive voice could elicit a balanced rather than relational or transactional psychological contract from their supervisors. By engaging in promotive voice, employees provide solutions to improve work situations and demonstrate their ability to think about the future to help their supervisor and the organization (e.g., Li et al., 2017; Qin et al., 2014; Sessions et al., 2020). As a result, supervisors may evaluate employees' promotive voice as evidence of their competence and contribution to the organization's growth and feel obligated to provide resources and opportunities to these voicing employees to help them learn, develop, and perform even better and facilitate their personal growth. By contrast, since promotive voice is an extra-role behavior that is not part of an employee's job requirement (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), it is irrelevant to transactional psychological contract that only considers well-defined "tangible exchanges that are economic in focus" (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008, p. 22). Given that promotive voice, by nature, is a challenging behavior that aims to change the status quo, but not an affiliative behavior that aims to facilitate interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Van Dyne &

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LePine, 1998), it could bring negative implications in interactions with supervisors and is not a natural approach to building relational psychological contract, the type of psychological contract that emphasizes loyalty and social support.

In turn, when a strong supervisor-sponsored BPC exists, supervisors are more likely to provide their employees with career support, skill training, and challenging tasks that are valued both within and outside the organization. These can enhance the employee's potential for promotion by equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and experiences needed for a higher-level position (de Pater et al., 2009). Having a stronger sponsored BPC will also lead supervisors to see "the favorability of an employee's advancement prospects" (Greenhaus et al., 1990, p. 69) because supervisors are more likely to notice the employee's performance and contribution and appreciate their merits and potential for taking challenges and future advancement. We thus propose:

Hypothesis 1: The relationship between employees' promotive voice and supervisor-rated promotability is mediated by a supervisor-sponsored balanced psychological contract with the voicing employees.

The moderating effect of LMX

Because the reciprocal obligatory exchanges between employees and supervisors will depend on the quality of their relationship (or LMX; Blau, 1964; Dulebohn et al., 2012), we expect that the quality of the LMX relationship can moderate the impact of employees' promotive voice on supervisor-sponsored BPC. Specifically, when employees experience higher-quality LMX, they enjoy greater trust, respect, and support from their supervisors (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Thus, employees will likely get more attention from their

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supervisors and have more opportunities to elaborate on their thoughts. The increased attention and opportunity for elaboration not only helps supervisors comprehend the rationale behind employees' promotive voice, but also heightens supervisors' awareness of employees' devotion to improving work processes. In contrast, since employees with lower-quality LMX relationships are less trusted by their supervisors, their promotive voice may be less valued and the intentions of their voice may even be doubted by their supervisors. Supervisors are less likely to interpret promotive voice from low-LMX employees as aiming for organizational improvement or to appreciate their attempt to challenge the status quo (e.g., Parker et al., 2019). Therefore, it is difficult for these employees' promotive voice to be well received, and it is less likely to obligate supervisors to sponsor a balanced psychological contract by expressing promotive voice. In line with our reasoning, Whiting and colleagues (2012) reported that voice was more likely to be rated positively (i.e., higher in prosocial motivation and constructiveness) when the voicer was perceived as trustworthy.

In addition, employees with higher-quality LMX relationships share mutual understanding with their supervisors and have more knowledge about their supervisors' goals, challenges, and problems (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). As such, employees in high-LMX relationships are better equipped to offer constructive suggestions and solutions that are truly valued and desired by their supervisors (Henderson et al., 2008). We thus expect that a high-quality LMX relationship will help employees deliver much-needed information to their supervisors via promotive voice and make their voice more apt and to the point when addressing supervisors' challenges. This is likely to enhance supervisors' appreciation for employees' promotive voice, and, by extension, reinforce supervisor-sponsored BPC with the

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voicing employees. In contrast, those having lower-quality LMX relationships with their supervisors have less knowledge about their supervisors' goals and pressures (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Without this information, employees' promotive voice, though well-intentioned, may not carry the ideas and solutions supervisors are looking for and thus cause misunderstanding and unintended consequences. They also know less about their supervisors' expectations such as the kind of information their supervisors need and the timing for solving particular problems, and are thus less effective in presenting the right content via their promotive voice at the right time. As a result, their promotive voice is less likely to be appreciated by supervisors or receive the sponsored balanced psychological contract in return. We propose:

Hypothesis 2: LMX relationship quality moderates the positive association between employees' promotive voice and supervisor-sponsored balanced psychological contract, such that the relationship is stronger when LMX relationship quality is higher and weaker when LMX relationship quality is lower.

Integrating the arguments above, we propose the following conditional indirect hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: LMX moderates the indirect relationship between employees' promotive voice and promotability via supervisor-sponsored balanced psychological contract, such that this indirect positive relationship is stronger when employees' perception of LMX with their supervisors is higher and weaker when LMX relationship quality is lower.

Method

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Data used in our study were obtained from surveys filled out by matched supervisors and their subordinates in 59 companies in China through the research team's connection. These companies are in different industries, including retail, hotel, insurance, bank, and education to enhance the generalizability of the results. Research assistants were trained to use a pre-designed data collection process protocol. Our research assistants visited these companies and collected data with the help of human resource professionals in these companies. Six subordinates (about half of the members of the team) of each supervisor were randomly selected by research assistants to participate in the study. Originally, we contacted 396 subordinates with their 66 supervisors. Both supervisors and subordinates were assured the confidentiality of their responses. A coding system known to the research assistants and HR professionals only was used to match supervisors and their subordinates.

We collected data from matched supervisor-subordinate surveys at three-time points with a one-month interval between each. At Time 1, subordinates were asked to report LMX quality. Supervisors were asked to report their demographics and evaluate the six randomly chosen subordinates' job performance and promotive voice as well as their balanced (BPC) and relational (RPC) psychological contracts with these subordinates. At Time 2, supervisors were asked to evaluate their BPC and RPC with each subordinate again and perceived impression management motive of each subordinate as controls. At Time 3, supervisors were asked to rate the promotability of each subordinate.

Because our goal is to understand the impact of employees' promotive voice in shaping supervisor-sponsored BPC and thus employees' promotability in the eyes of supervisors, we asked supervisors to report perceived employees' promotive voice,

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supervisor-sponsored psychological contracts, and employees' promotability to capture the whole process from supervisors' perspective. We asked employees to report LMX, the moderator, for three reasons. First, as supervisors had reported other variables at Time 1, we wanted to avoid asking them to report LMX with each employee to reduce their burden. Second, we also wanted to avoid introducing a greater common method bias if both promotive voice and LMX were assessed by supervisors at Time 1. Third, as LMX is a relational concept that reflects the relationship quality of each employee-supervisor pair, it is reasonable to ask employees to report their LMX with the supervisor. All research assistants were instructed to record sample characteristics and the data collection. The record suggested that all research assistants followed the steps described in the data collection protocol.

Of the 396 matched surveys distributed, 310 subordinates and their 59 matched supervisors were returned, which resulted in an effective response rate of 78% for subordinates and 89% for supervisors. After looking into the data and excluding surveys that failed attention check or had too many missing values, we kept 281 matched supervisor-subordinate surveys in our final sample. Among the employees, 47% were male, the average age was 26.59 years (*S.D.* = 4.16), the average job tenure was 3.68 years (*S.D.* = 3.26), and their average year of education was 15.43 (*S.D.* = 1.26). Employees' dyadic tenure with the supervisor was 2.17 years on average (*S.D.* = 1.96). Among the supervisors, 73% were male, average age was 35.24 years (*S.D.* = 6.15), average job tenure was 9.89 years (*S.D.* = 6.44), and their average years of education was 15.84 (*S.D.* = 0.80). They had an average of 6.25 years in the supervisory position.

Measures

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All measures were translated from English in Chinese and back-translated to English by a panel of bilingual experts. Any inconsistencies were discussed and resolved. Unless otherwise noted, a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) was used to measure participants' responses.

Promotive voice (Time 1). A five-item scale developed by Liang et al. (2012) was completed by supervisors. Sample items include "this employee proactively develops and makes suggestions for issues that may influence the unit" and "this employee proactively voices out constructive suggestions that help the unit reach its goals." Cronbach's alpha was .80.

LMX (Time 1). Subordinates were asked to rate the quality of the relationship with their supervisors using a 7-item scale developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). Example items include "I think my working relationship with supervisor is effective" and "My supervisor understands my problems and needs." Cronbach's alpha was .78.

Supervisor-sponsored BPC (Time 1 and Time 2). Supervisors were asked to rate their BPC for each subordinate at both Time 1 and Time 2 (BPC1 and BPC2). Although Dabos and Rousseau (2004) had used two items to measure research directors' BPC with scientists under their leadership, we decided to use six items developed by Hui et al. (2004) to cover the meaning of BPC more thoroughly. The selection of the six items was guided by Rousseau's (2000) conceptualization of BPC in her development of psychological contract inventory. Specifically, Rousseau posited that BPC has three dimensions, that is, external employability, internal advancement, and dynamic performance. Her definition is also applicable to both employees' and employers' perspectives. We used her definitions from

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employers' perspective to select and adapt supervisor-sponsored BPC items from Hui et al. (2004). Items for external employability include "I promise to help employees develop externally marketable skills," and "I promise job assignments that enhance employees' marketability." Items for internal advancement are "I promise skills development that increases this employee's value to the firm," and "I promise opportunities for promotion to employees." Items for dynamic performance are "I set ever more difficult and challenging performance goals for this employee," and "I support this employee to attain the highest possible levels of performance." The Cronbach's alpha of the six items altogether was .70 for Time 1 and .66 for Time 2.

Employee promotability (Time 3). Supervisors were asked to assess each subordinate's promotability using a three-item scale developed by Thacker and Wayne (1995). Sample items include "I believe that this employee will have a successful career in this organization" and "If I had to select a successor for my position, it would be this subordinate." Cronbach's alpha was .72.

Control variables. Subordinates' demographic variables, including age, gender, job tenure, and education, were controlled for in all analyses because these variables have been shown to impact promotability ratings (e.g., Harris et al., 2006). We also controlled for supervisor-rated job performance using the 3-item scale developed by Farh and associates (1991) to measure subordinates' job performance. This scale allowed us to focus on the task side of job performance, such as quality of work, work efficiency, and work performance. Sample items include "This employee completes assigned tasks on time" and "This employee produces accurate, error-free work outcomes." Cronbach's alpha was .70.

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In addition, we controlled for supervisor-sponsored relational psychological contract (RPC) assessed at both Time 1 and Time 2 (RPC1 and RPC2) to show the uniqueness of BPC as the intervening mechanism. We considered supervisor-sponsored RPC because it involves a long-term commitment, which could influence supervisors' evaluation of employee promotability. Similarly, we rely on Rousseau's (2000) definitions of RPC and selected six items from Hui et al. (2004). Rousseau posited that RPC has two dimensions, loyalty and stability. Again, we use her definitions from the employer's perspective to select items. Items for loyalty include "I am responsive to this employee's concerns and well-being," "I show concern for this employee's personal welfare," and "I show concern for this employee's long-term well being." Items for stability include "I promise steady employment to this employee," "I promise stable benefits to this employee's family," and "I promise wages and benefits this employee can count on." The Cronbach's alpha was .70 for Time 1 and .65 for Time 2.

Finally, we included supervisor's perceived impression management motives of employees' promotive voice (i.e., supervisor-assessed IM) as an additional mediator in our analysis. Supervisor-assessed IM can evoke an attribution process that influences supervisors' responses toward employees' extra-role behavior such as voice (e.g., Bolino, 1999). To examine our proposed intervening mechanism from a psychological contract angle, we sought to control supervisor-assessed IM for an attribution process that could affect supervisors' responses to employee promotive behavior and their judgment of promotability. We used a 4-item scale adapted from Allen and Rush (1998) to measure the extent to which supervisors perceive subordinates' offering work-related suggestions as driven by the

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impression management motivation. Example items are "desire to 'show off' expertise" and "desire to seek spotlight." Cronbach's alpha was .70.

Confirmatory factor analyses

We compared the hypothesized 7-factor model (i.e., promotive voice, supervisor-sponsored BPC at Time 2, supervisor-sponsored RPC at Time 2, promotability, LMX, job performance, and supervisor-assessed IM) to a series of nested 6-factor models. We used full items for all latent variables. As we measured them using a Likert-type scale, we treated responses on all items as ordinal categorical data (Muthén & Kaplan, 1985) and used the WLSMV (Weighted Least Squares Means and Variance Adjusted) estimator in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) to analyze polychoric correlations among the items. This approach has been used in prior studies (e.g., Wu et al., 2018). The results of these comparisons are shown in Table 1. Fit indices indicated that our hypothesized 7-factor model fit the data adequately ($\text{WLSMV-}\chi^2 = 918.05$, $df = 506$; RMSEA = .049, 90% Confidence interval = .048 to .059; CFI = .89; TLI = .88). The alternative models showed significantly worse fit than the hypothesized model, as seen from the chi-square difference tests.

Results

Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among all variables. We used a design-based modeling approach to estimate models for hypothesis testing. The approach "takes the multilevel data or dependency into account by adjusting for parameter estimate standard errors based on the sampling design" (Wu & Kwok, 2012, p. 17), and has been used in previous studies (e.g., Wu et al., 2016) when mechanisms at a single level (i.e., employee level) are examined.

Insert Table 1 and 2 about here

We firstly estimated a model (Model 1) in which we used Time 1 promotive voice to predict Time 2 supervisor-sponsored BPC/RPC, which then predicted Time 3 promotability. Age, gender, education, tenure, job performance, Time 1 supervisor-sponsored BPC/RPC were used to predict the Time 2 psychological contract variables and Time 3 promotability. We also included supervisor-assessed IM at Time 2 as an additional mediator linking promotive voice and promotability. This model fits the data well ($\chi^2 = 8.07$, $df = 7$; RMSEA = .02; SRMR = .03; CFI = .99, TLI = .98).

We found that Time 1 promotive voice was positively related to supervisor-sponsored BPC ($B = .15$, $p < .05$), but not supervisor-sponsored RPC ($B = .06$, $p = .35$) and supervisor-assessed IM ($B = .16$, $p = .12$) measure at Time 2. In turn, only Time 2 supervisor-sponsored BPC was positively related to Time 3 promotability ($B = .30$, $p < .01$). Moreover, the 95% confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effect of Time 1 promotive voice on Time 3 promotability via Time 2 supervisor-sponsored BPC excluded zero (indirect effect = .04, 95% CI [.005; .11]). Hypothesis 1 was supported.

We then estimated a model (Model 2) by adding an interaction between promotive voice and LMX on Time 2 supervisor-sponsored BPC and RPC as well as Time 2 supervisor-assessed IM. This model fits well ($\chi^2 = 7.79$, $df = 7$; RMSEA = .02; SRMR = .03; CFI = .99, TLI = .99). As shown in Table 3, only the interaction effect between promotive voice and LMX on Time 2 supervisor-sponsored BPC ($B = .13$, $p < .05$) was significant. As depicted in Figure 2, promotive voice was only positively related to Time 2 supervisor-sponsored BPC when LMX was higher (simple slope = .21, $p < .05$) but not lower (simple slope = .05, p

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= .48), supporting Hypothesis 2. The indirect effect of Time 1 promotive voice on Time 3 promotability via Time 2 supervisor-sponsored BPC was significant at high levels of LMX (indirect effect = .06, $p < 0.05$, 95% bias-corrected confidence interval = [.01, .12]) but insignificant at low levels of LMX (indirect effect = .01, $p = .49$, 95% bias-corrected confidence interval = [-.03, .05]), supporting Hypothesis 3.

Insert Table 3 and Figure 2 about here

We also added and tested an interaction effect between promotive voice and LMX on promotability, which was insignificant ($B = .20$, $p = .07$). We estimated an alternative model by excluding all controls in our model and obtained virtually identical results.

Discussion

Based on a psychological contract perspective, we developed and tested a model that examines why and when employees' promotive voice enhances their potential to "get ahead" in their career, that is, to receive favorable promotability evaluations from their supervisors. Supporting our hypotheses, results showed that employees' promotive voice was positively related to supervisor-sponsored BPC and thus increased employees' promotion potential in the eyes of their supervisors. However, this mediation process was only significant when employees had high-quality LMX relationships with their supervisors.

Theoretical implications

We first contribute to the voice literature by proposing that the supervisor-sponsored psychological contract with employees was the underlying mechanism for exchanges involving employees' offering of promotive voice and supervisors' reciprocal evaluation of their promotability. Specifically, we found that supervisor-sponsored BPC played a crucial

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role in this social exchange process, but neither supervisor-sponsored RPC nor supervisor-evaluated impression management motives served as an alternative mechanism. Moreover, our results indicated that employees' promotive voice could strengthen supervisor-sponsored BPC and thus led to higher promotability only when they had higher-quality LMX relationships with their supervisors, which is consistent with Huang et al.'s (2018) claim that "LMX serves as a salient boundary condition that reflects the relational context for voice behavior" (p. 1115). Therefore, our study not only shows that employees' promotive voice can aid employees' promotability but also explains why and when such an effect can take place.

Broadly speaking, by bringing a psychological contract lens, our study highlights the implications of promotive voice for the social exchange relationships between employees and their supervisors and adds to the understanding of how supervisors respond to employees' voice. While voice researchers have examined supervisors' cognitive map of whether to recognize and reward voicing employees (e.g., Chamberlin et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2018), they have mainly considered how supervisors evaluate the utility of the voice content (e.g., constructiveness and motives; Huang et al. 2018; Whiting et al., 2012), the possibility of implementation (Burris et al., 2017), and the voicer's manners (e.g., directness, politeness and credibility; Lam et al., 2019). Researchers have yet to consider the functions of voice in shaping how supervisors perceive their BPC with voicing employees. Our study thus expands the investigation on supervisors' reactions to employees' voice.

Second, we contribute to the literature on psychological contracts by investigating psychological contracts from a supervisor-sponsored perspective. Most studies in this realm

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have focused on employees' perceived psychological contract with the organization or the employer and how it influenced employees' attitudes and behaviors towards the organization (e.g., Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Hui et al., 2004; Mai et al., 2016). Supervisor-sponsored psychological contract with employees has been recommended to be a unique angle to study the employee-employer or leader-member social exchange relationship (e.g., Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). For example, Tekleab and Talyor (2003) suggested that "a comprehensive and valid understanding of the employment relationship is unlikely to develop until researchers begin to give similar consideration to the perceptions and reactions of the other party in this relationship, the organization and its representing agents" (p. 586). Our study examines psychological contract from a supervisor-sponsored perspective (e.g., Dabos, & Rousseau, 2004; Lester et al., 2002) by zooming into supervisor-sponsored BPC with employees and identifying employees' proactivity (i.e., promotive voice) as an antecedent.

Third, the current study also contributes to the research regarding supervisors' evaluations of employees' promotability. Adopting a performance appraisal perspective or an impression management perspective, prior research has shown the impact of employees' job performance (e.g., Jawahar & Ferris, 2011) or impression management tactics (e.g., Long et al., 2015) on the supervisor's evaluations. Unlike these two perspectives, our study offers a psychological contract perspective to explain how employees' actions (i.e., promotive voice) can affect supervisors' evaluations of employees' promotability. Controlling for employees' job performance and impression management motive, our findings supported this new angle and suggested that supervisors' evaluations of employees' promotability are more than an

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exchange with what employees have achieved within their job duties or supervisors' personal feelings and attitudes toward the employees. By identifying a new perspective to understand supervisors' evaluations on employees' promotability, our study suggests that psychological contract held by the supervisors can be critical to their evaluations of employees' promotability. Moreover, we found that it is supervisor-sponsored BPC but not RPC that predicted supervisors' evaluations of employees' promotability, revealing the unique effect of BPC and its emphasis on both employees' performance contributions to the company and supervisors' obligation to develop employees' career competencies in shaping supervisors' evaluations.

Practical Implications

The results of this study provide useful implications for managerial practices. From an employee's perspective, our study suggests that promotive voice can be used as a strategy for getting ahead but only for employees who have high quality LMX with supervisors. As such, while employees can make promotive voice to showcase their contributions to the organization's growth, they need to know when to exhibit such proactivity. Consistent with a recent review of the importance of social and relational considerations for making one's proactivity acceptable and appreciated (Cai et al., 2019), our findings advice that employees should take into account their LMX relationship quality with supervisors before making promotive voice.

In the meantime, our study suggests that employees can proactively strengthen supervisor-sponsored BPC. Unlike RPC which rewards loyalty by providing lifetime employment, BPC is most pragmatic (e.g., Rousseau, 2000, 2004) and offers flexibility in the

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types of exchange desired by today's employees and organizations. As employees increasingly pursue boundaryless careers in today's rapidly-changing business environment and care more for their career progression (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2014), a means that can provide mutual benefits and serve as a key ingredient for both organizational and employee success becomes critical. Our findings provide insights regarding when employees speak up with promotive voice to invest in the company's success, they can expect their supervisors' obligatory support and investment in their career success internally and externally through sponsored BPC.

Finally, as our findings showed that supervisors established a sponsored BPC with employees who made promotive voice while having better relationships with them, supervisors need to avoid the potential bias of only paying attention to voicing employees who are closer to them. To encourage employees to make constructive voice and to better utilize such proactivity from employees, supervisors should not be biased in soliciting suggestions based on their relationships with employees. Employees' hesitance to express promotive voice has too often been caused by the uncertain impacts of voice on their career consequences (e.g., Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison, 2014), and supervisors can play a role in alleviating their concerns. To achieve this, supervisors can actively solicit promotive voices from subordinates instead of relying on promotive voices from those who are closer to them. Also, they need to make sure to grant resources to proactive employees for their constructive input, especially employees who are not close to them, which would help protect fairness, diversity, and inclusion of employee voice.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

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The present study has many strengths that address common method and common source bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012), including a sample from different organizations with a multi-source and multi-wave design. Nonetheless, it also has limitations that present opportunities for future research.

First, there are ways to improve our research design. We had supervisors evaluate employees' promotability. We suggest that future researchers expand our findings by assessing employees' actual promotion and external employability with a longitudinal design to better understand relevant career outcomes. In addition, while we used time-lag design and measured supervisor-sponsored psychological contract at both Time 1 and Time 2, we did not measure all variables at each time point, which prevent us to fully depict the potential dynamics among our research constructs.

Second, as we sought to unpack the relationships between promotive voice and promotability from the lens of supervisor-sponsored psychological contract, we did not include prohibitive voice and other extra-role behavior, such as helping, in our study. Doing so would be helpful to rule out potential effects of other positive behaviors in shaping supervisor-sponsored psychological contract and employee outcomes.

Third, in this study, we only focused on individual-level LMX and did not examine the role of LMX in a team context. Future research could collect data from the whole team to examine relative LMX (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000) and LMX differentiation (Liden et al., 2006) as potential moderators and explore their cross-level impacts on the linkage of employees' promotive voice and supervisor-rated employee promotability in a team context. While we only consider individual-level LMX as a relational boundary condition, we suggest

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future research rule out that supervisors' evaluation of employees' voice contents can also be an important factor affecting how supervisors respond to employees' promotive voice. It would also be valuable to examine promotive or prohibitive voices from employee suggestion programs in which these behaviors are documented as organizational written records.

Finally, our data were collected from China whose culture values interpersonal relationships. While we believe our theory-driven study was not only applicable to the Chinese context, we encourage future researchers to examine the effects of culture on the focal questions. A promising direction is determining how a supervisor's cultural values impact the voice-promotability link. For example, characteristics such as traditional Chinese values could be examined to determine whether and how they influence supervisors' attitudes toward employees' voices. Especially in the promotion contexts, supervisors who hold solid traditional values may expect employees to show respect to and obey the leader rather than speak up in exchange for personal benefits (Leung et al., 2011). In addition, supervisors with different values may have preferences about which type of psychological contract (relational vs. balanced) they seek to develop with employees.

Conclusion

From a psychological contract perspective, our research addresses the link between employees' promotive voice and promotability. On the consequence side of voice, researchers' primary impetus has been to identify the characteristics of the voice content and their impacts on managerial reactions to voice (e.g., Liu et al., 2019). By integrating psychological contract with promotive voice, our results showed that promotive voice could help employees in high-quality LMX relationships get ahead in their careers through

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enhancing a supervisor-sponsored balanced psychological contract. Our findings provide important insights into why employees are sometimes, but not always, rewarded for speaking up and the context in which promotive voice can be a tool for career advancement.

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Table 1. Comparison of Measurement Model

Models	χ^2	<i>df</i>	Δ WLSMV-χ^2
M0: Hypothesized 7-factor model	918.05	506	-
M1: 6-factor model (combining supervisor-sponsored BPC and RPC)	990.49	512	64.37**
M2: 6-factor model (combining voice + supervisor-sponsored BPC)	987.92	512	57.85**
M3: 6-factor model (combining voice + supervisor-sponsored RPC)	1072.59	512	90.05**
M4: 6-factor model (combining voice + promotability)	984.16	512	56.00**
M5: 6-factor model (combining LMX + supervisor-sponsored BPC)	1253.20	512	142.40**
M6: 6-factor model (combining LMX + supervisor-sponsored RPC)	1106.87	512	91.08**

Note: $N = 281$. ** $p < .01$, two-tailed tests.

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 Age	26.59	4.16												
2 Gender	0.53	0.50	.01											
3 Education	2.59	0.70	.07	.05										
4 Dyadic tenure	2.17	1.96	.68**	.11	-.02									
5 Job performance	3.91	0.64	.08	-.03	.06	.03								
6 Supervisor-assessed IM	3.52	0.74	-.14*	-.13*	.15*	-.15**	.12*							
7 Promotive voice	3.75	0.66	.06	-.08	.05	-.07	.58**	.18**						
8 LMX	3.69	0.63	.06	-.04	.06	.08	.22**	.02	.26**					
9 Supervisor-sponsored BPC (Time 1)	3.89	0.58	.07	-.12*	.19*	.05	.42*	.23**	.48**	.30**				
10 Supervisor-sponsored RPC (Time 1)	3.64	0.67	-.07	-.02	-.03	-.01	.18*	.13*	.13*	-.03	.28**			
11 Supervisor-sponsored BPC (Time 2)	3.81	0.55	-.00	-.15*	.05	-.04	.45**	.24**	.49**	.25**	.61**	.24**		
12 Supervisor-sponsored RPC (Time 2)	3.74	0.63	.04	-.09	.01	.03	.26**	.10	.25**	.26**	.38**	.63**	.37**	
13 Promotability	3.61	0.72	.17**	-.05	.22**	.04	.47**	.20**	.43*	.12**	.38**	.11	.43**	.19**

Note: $N = 281$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, two-tailed tests.

Table 3. Unstandardized Coefficients of Path Models

	Supervisor-sponsored BPC (Time 2)		Supervisor-assessed IM (Time 2)		Supervisor-sponsored RPC (Time 2)		Promotability (Time 3)	
Variables	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.
<i>Control variables</i>								
Age	-.01	.01	-.02	.01	.01	.01	.03**	.01
Gender	-.08	.05	-.18*	.08	-.05	.06	.02	.06
Education	.04	.04	.16	.09	-.02	.04	.17**	.05
Dyadic tenure	-.01	.02	-.02	.03	-.01	.01	-.01	.02
Job performance	.13	.07	.04	.08	.02	.05	.29**	.08
Supervisor-assessed IM							.08	.05
Supervisor-sponsored BPC (Time 1)	.40**	.06			.12	.09		
Supervisor-sponsored RPC (Time 1)	.06	.04			.57**	.06		
<i>Independent variable</i>								
Promotive voice	.13*	.07	.17	.10	.02	.06	.15*	.07
<i>Mediator</i>								
Supervisor-sponsored BPC (Time 2)							.31**	.07
Supervisor-sponsored RPC (Time 2)							-.01	.06
<i>Moderator</i>								
LMX	.04	.05	-.05	.07	.21**	.04	-.05	.06
Promotive voice*LMX	.13*	.06	.07	.12	.13	.07		
R ²	.46**		.10*		.51**		.35***	

Note: N = 281. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors of the corresponding parameter estimation. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, two-tailed tests.

Figure 1. Hypothesized Model

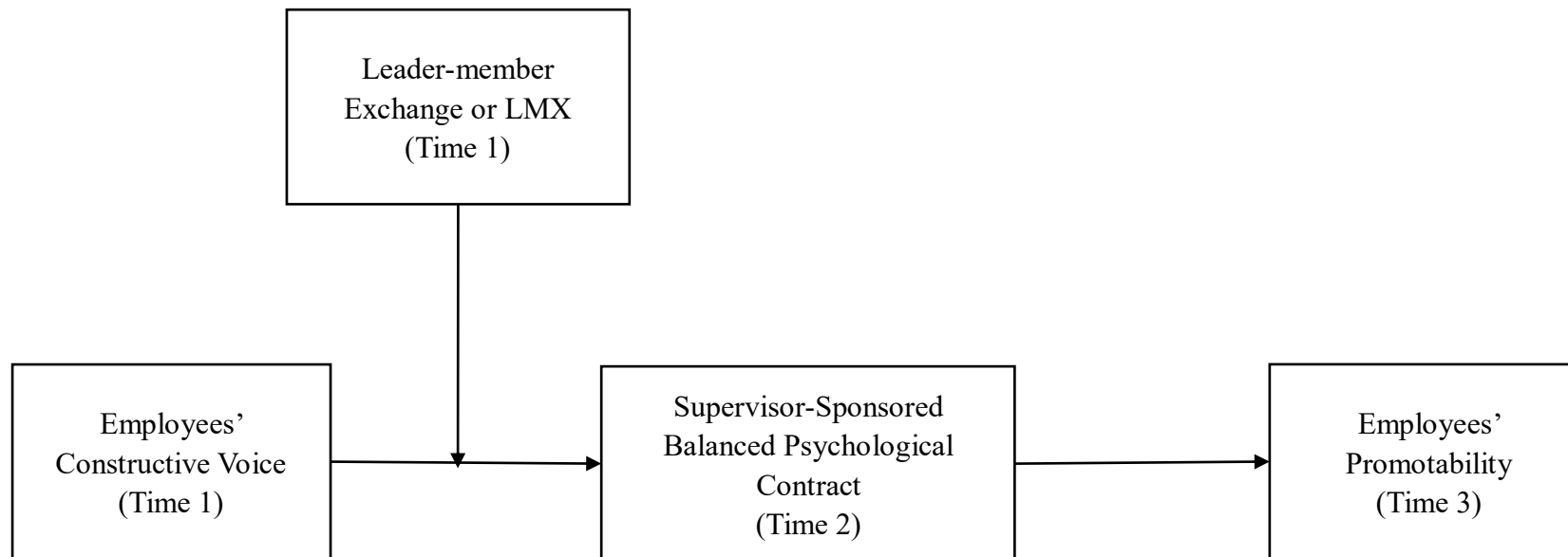


Figure 2. The Interaction of Employees' Promotive Voice and LMX on Supervisor-Sponsored BPC

