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Servant Leadership and Employee Gratitude: The Moderating Role of Employee Narcissism

Lynda Jiwen Song

Full Professor
Management Department
Leeds University Business School
University of Leeds, Leeds, U.K.
Email: L.Song@leeds.ac.uk
Tel: (44)0-113-343-3182

Dan Ni

Assistant Professor
School of Business
Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China
Email: nidan@mail.sysu.edu.cn
Tel: (86)13001265955

Jinlong Zhu

Associate Professor
Business School
Renmin University of China, Beijing, China
Email: zhujinlong@rmbs.ruc.edu.cn
Tel: (86)10-8250-0498

Xiaoming Zheng

Full Professor
Department of Leadership and Organization Management
School of Economics and Management
Tsinghua University, Beijing, China
Email: zhengxm@sem.tsinghua.edu.cn
Tel: (86)10-6278-9789

Li Zhu

Research Assistant Professor
National School of Development
Peking University, Beijing, China
Email: paperlizhu@nsd.pku.edu.cn
Tel: (86)10-6275-6628

Note: The first four authors contributed equally to this paper.

Correspondence concerning this article can be addressed to: Dr. Dan Ni, School of Business, Sun Yat-sen University, Haizhu District, Guangzhou, 510275, China. Tel: (86)13001265955. Email: nidan@mail.sysu.edu.cn and Dr. Jinlong Zhu, Business School, Renmin University of China,

Haidian District, Beijing, 100872, China. Tel: (86)10-8250-0498. Email: zhujinlong@rmbs.ruc.edu.cn

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Servant Leadership and Employee Gratitude: The Moderating Role of Employee Narcissism

Abstract

In this paper, we develop novel theoretical insights regarding employees' reactions to servant leadership. Drawing on social exchange theory and the servant leadership literature, we propose that the needs–supplies fit between servant leaders and narcissistic employees can urge narcissistic employees to feel more grateful in response to servant leadership. In turn, employee gratitude is positively associated with organizational citizenship behavior and negatively associated with workplace deviance. We test our model across two studies, including a two-wave field survey study of 344 employees and their 80 leaders (Study 1) and a scenario-based experimental study of 100 participants (Study 2). The findings support our theoretical model that, at a higher (versus lower) level of employee narcissism, servant leadership enhances organizational citizenship behavior and reduces workplace deviance through enhanced employee gratitude. We discuss our contributions to the servant leadership literature and present practical implications for organizations.

Keywords: servant leadership, narcissism, gratitude, organizational citizenship behavior, workplace deviance

Introduction

Although it was largely overlooked by academics for 30 years after being proposed by Greenleaf (1970), in the past two decades researchers have shown growing interest in servant leadership. Servant leadership is based on the notion of putting followers first (Greenleaf, 1970) and includes a specific focus on satisfying followers' personal needs and helping them to develop and prosper. Scholarly work has demonstrated the beneficial effects of servant leadership on a wide array of work outcomes, including employees' realizing their potential and success (Eva et al., 2019; Parris & Peachey, 2013). Research has shown that servant leadership increases job satisfaction (Chan & Mak, 2014), work engagement (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; van Dierendonck et al., 2014), and organizational citizenship behavior (Walumbwa et al., 2010), as well as reducing deviant behavior (Iqbal et al., 2021; Neubert et al., 2021; Paesen et al., 2019).

A deeper investigation of servant leadership research suggests, however, that the current understanding of the effectiveness of servant leadership is limited in two ways. First, knowledge of the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between servant leadership and its distal consequences is inadequate, as most research has focused on the mechanisms of employee self-perceptions (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2021; Iqbal et al., 2021; Walumbwa et al., 2010) or positive attitudes (e.g., Iqbal et al., 2021; Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2015; Walumbwa et al., 2010). Notably, the research has overlooked the role of *affective* experiences in response to favorable initiating action from leaders. Affective experience is assumed to be crucial in social exchanges. According to social exchange theory, affective experiences play a role in shaping one's perceptions and interpretations during the exchange processes (Lawler & Thye, 1999; Lawler & Yoon, 1996). From this perspective, employees' affective experiences should be emphasized in understanding the influence of servant leadership.

Second, and more importantly, although reciprocity is considered universal, not all individuals value, to the same degree, a favor provided by others (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Fisher et al., 1982). Indeed, research has provided strong evidence to support the existence of individual differences in social exchange processes (Parker, 1998; Rousseau & Schalk, 2000; Shore & Coyle-Shapiro, 2003). This is especially the case for servant leadership, given that such leaders are motivated to first *serve* others and then become a leader (Greenleaf, 1977), distinguishing this leadership style from traditional styles (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). The word *servant* has connotations that include “passivity and indecisiveness and, even more, letting go of power” (van Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1251). Further, employees who have different preferences interpret or accept servant leadership as a favor in different ways (Sun et al., 2019). Thus, it is worth investigating the kinds of employees who, when they are the beneficiaries of servant leadership, are spurred into exhibiting desirable extra-role behaviors and avoiding detrimental behaviors.

In particular, employee narcissism is most relevant to focus on as it reflects employees’ preferences to be unique and special (Millon, 1981), and servant leadership alone can satisfy this desire, which creates a needs–supplies fit situation, a match between employees’ needs and the supplies provided by leaders (Edwards, 2008). Although research on narcissism remains equivocal regarding its relationship with employee behaviors (e.g., citizenship behaviors and counterproductive work behaviors; Grijalva & Newman, 2015; Judge, LePine et al., 2006), it is reasonable to expect a desirable reaction to servant leadership from those narcissistic employees. This is because narcissistic employees are self-centered and have an inflated sense of self-worth (Back et al., 2013; Campbell & Foster, 2007; Foster & Brennan, 2010); the beneficial features of servant leadership provided by leaders satisfy those employees’ needs. Unfortunately, despite the

relevance of employee narcissism and servant leadership, few studies have examined how narcissistic employees respond to a servant leader. We believe that an examination of these potentially differing responses can offer a more complete account of the effectiveness of servant leadership, and provide practitioners with specific guidelines regarding the influence of servant leadership at work.

In this research, we draw on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976) and the servant leadership literature (Liden et al., 2014; Liden et al., 2008) to explain the mechanisms of and boundary conditions of the relationship of servant leadership with two representative outcome variables: *organizational citizenship behavior* (OCB) and *workplace deviance*. OCB is defined as a discretionary behavior that helps others with an organizationally relevant task or problem (Podsakoff et al., 1990) and *workplace deviance* as “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both” (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p. 556). We focus on these two distal outcomes because they are typically discretionary behaviors that represent beneficial and destructive features, respectively (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Farh et al., 2004). We expect that servant leadership stimulates employees to generate *gratitude*—“a feeling of appreciation in response to an experience that is beneficial to, but not attributable to, the self” (Fehr et al., 2017, p. 363)—toward their leaders. Given the rule of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976), a grateful psychological state as a moral emotion (Ford et al., 2018; McCullough et al., 2001) will elicit OCB and decrease workplace deviance in return.

According to social exchange theory, personal characteristics affect a person’s reactions in the social exchange processes (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). The extent to which servant leadership as a favor provided by leaders is valued or devalued depends on employees’

narcissism, characterized by an inflated sense of self-worth and self-centeredness (Back et al., 2013; Campbell & Foster, 2007; Foster & Brennan, 2010). We focus on this aspect of personality because narcissism reflects one's desire for psychological entitlement, attention, and praise. Employees higher in narcissism are sensitive to those demonstrations that can verify their positive images and attention from others. Given that servant leaders selflessly serve employees, have a genuine concern for their growth and success, satisfy their work needs, and always put employees first (Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011), such demonstrations cater more to the preferences of employees high in narcissism, as they allow them a sense of high self-importance and superiority. Hence, employees higher in narcissism would be more likely to value servant leadership. In other words, there is a needs–supplies fit (Edwards, 2008; Edwards et al., 1998) between servant leaders and narcissistic employees. We propose that, when employee narcissism is higher, servant leadership is associated with a higher level of gratitude and, in turn, employee behavioral outcomes. The theoretical model is summarized in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Our study offers important contributions to the servant leadership literature. First, we adopt a contingency view to introduce employee narcissism as a boundary condition for the effects of servant leadership. The norm of reciprocity is a widely accepted principle (Gouldner, 1960), but the degree to which people's reactions to the actor's favors varies. Given the inconsistent conclusions on the relationship between servant leadership and employee extra-role and negative behaviors (e.g., Iqbal et al., 2021; Palumbo, 2016; Sun et al., 2019; Uymaz & Arslan, 2022; van Dierendonck, 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2010), our investigation enables us to more accurately indicate when servant leadership is more likely to produce positive vs. negative employee outcomes. Second, we identify gratitude toward a servant leader as the core

mechanism in the relationship between servant leadership and employee behavior. In doing so, we provide more evidence of the core mechanism, such that a favor typically results in reciprocal reactions, and emphasize the affective experiences in social exchanges. Third, we advance narcissism research by demonstrating the role of narcissism as a catalyst in the effects of servant leadership. Although research has found mixed results for the influence of narcissism in one's own behaviors (Grijalva & Newman, 2015; Judge, LePine et al., 2006), we know little about how narcissistic employees react to their servant leaders. This is problematic since narcissists are prevalent in the workplace (Grijalva & Newman, 2015) and people's traits have been theorized to influence the functions of leader behavior (Sun et al., 2019). Our study highlights the fit in the preferences of narcissistic employees and servant leadership, which enriches our knowledge of the role of employee narcissism in servant leadership effectiveness.

Theory and Hypotheses

Servant Leadership and Employee Gratitude

Based on social exchange theory (Lawler & Thye, 1999; Lawler & Yoon, 1996), we argue that servant leadership influences the extent to which employees build on a particular affect toward their leaders. Given its altruistic orientation (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), servant leadership behavior is expected to enhance employee gratitude. In particular, employees' feelings of gratitude may be evoked by their perceptions of the leaders' special consideration as selfless and unconditional (Sun et al., 2019).

Servant leaders place the interests of employees before their own self-interest, care about obstacles and difficulties faced by employees, and help them to overcome those challenges. Accordingly, servant leadership may enhance employee gratitude (Sun et al., 2019), as, from the perspective of employees, receiving resources and support from their leaders represents high-

quality social exchanges (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976) and can make individuals feel grateful to those leaders (Peng et al., 2018). Moreover, servant leadership emphasizes valuing employees' desires and the concern for employees' needs. A servant leader invests time and energy to understand employees' needs and subsequently strives to satisfy them (Zhang et al., 2012), thereby ensuring that employees benefit from the leader–employee relationship. Employees whose needs are satisfied will be more grateful to their leaders than will employees with unsatisfied needs. In essence, a servant leader encourages employees to seek personal development (Ehrhart, 2004), places a primary emphasis on their growth, and serves them (Greenleaf, 1977). Employees, in turn, enjoy considerable attention from leaders in the course of their personal growth and development. According to social exchange theory, individuals experience gratitude after receiving a tangible or intangible benefit from a benefactor (McCullough et al., 2001). We thus argue that these demonstrations of servant leadership would be positively associated with employee gratitude.

Hypothesis 1. Servant leadership is positively related to employee gratitude.

Moderating Role of Employee Narcissism

In response to certain initiating actions, the recipient, often an employee, may feel grateful (Eisenberger et al., 1987; Gergen, 1969; Gouldner, 1960). It is important, however, to take into consideration that employees differ in valuing a favor (Clark & Mills, 1979; Murstein et al., 1977). Recipient characteristics are associated with differential sensitivity to a favor (Fisher et al., 1982). Indeed, the fit perspective highlights that leadership would exert a stronger effect on employees' reactions when it fits employees' needs (Barrick et al., 2013; Edwards, 2008; Edwards et al., 1998). In this study, servant leadership fits narcissistic employees' typical psychological needs and thus we propose that employees with higher (versus lower) narcissism are more likely to feel grateful toward the leader if they receive a high level of servant

leadership. Narcissism is characterized by a tendency to believe that one is special, unique, deserving, and better than others (Millon, 1981). Employees higher in narcissism are sensitive to a leader's treatment; they prefer to adopt a dominant role at work and to strive for superiority and opportunities to be the center of attention (Miller et al., 2011). As stated earlier, servant leadership prioritizes providing need-based support for employees, puts employees first, and involves abilities, skills, and knowledge to help employees to succeed (Liden et al., 2014). Servant leaders also give employees sufficient latitude to express their wants and needs (Greenleaf, 1970; Liden et al., 2014), without the involvement of control and coercion. As such, employees have freedom and empowerment to handle difficult situations.

Narcissistic employees' natural proclivity is to see themselves as unique (Nevicka et al., 2011), to be concerned with being the center of attention (Brown et al., 2009), and to believe that they are capable of maintaining control over aspects of work. As such, the demonstrations embedded in servant leadership can largely satisfy narcissistic employees' unique preferences and desires. This is because servant leadership helps such employees to convince that they are receiving special attention from the leader and their sphere of influence has been expanded. Stated another way, if an employee is narcissistic, he or she tends to perceive servant leadership in a more positive manner and, thus, have a stronger feeling of gratitude. Empirically, prior research has documented that leadership brings about more desirable outcomes when leader supplies and employee needs reach a fit (Lambert et al., 2012; Tepper et al., 2018). Thereby, we expect that this needs-supplies fit (Edwards, 2008; Edwards et al., 1998) between servant leaders and narcissistic employees can lead to employees' stronger grateful feelings in return.

Conversely, employees lower in narcissism are less concerned about privileges and special treatment, such as attention, approval, power, and control (Chatterjee & Pollock, 2017;

Goncalo et al., 2010; Krizan & Herlache, 2018; Nevicka et al., 2011). Instead, they are low in grandiosity (Brown et al., 2009; Burton et al., 2017) and fixation on the self (Brown et al., 2009). As such, although servant leaders try to fulfill employees' personal needs, emphasize employee empowerment, and prioritize satisfying employees' needs (Christensen-Salem et al., 2021; Greenleaf, 1970; Page & Wong, 2000), employees with low narcissism have low aspirations or needs for such privileges and special treatment. Overall, servant leaders are less needed to instill self-efficacy in employees low in narcissism. As a result, there is less of a needs–supplies fit (Edwards, 2008; Edwards et al., 1998) between servant leaders and nonnarcissistic employees.

Based on the above discussion, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2. Employee narcissism moderates the relationship between servant leadership and employee gratitude, such that the positive relationship between servant leadership and employee gratitude is stronger when employee narcissism is higher rather than lower.

Effects of Gratitude on OCB and Workplace Deviance

Gratitude toward leaders also influences employee work behaviors. We expect that gratitude is positively related to OCB and negatively related to workplace deviance. Gratitude as a moral emotion increases one's awareness of the benefits of another person's moral action and enhances one's motivation and likelihood to engage in increased moral behaviors and fewer immoral behaviors (McCullough et al., 2001). When employees feel grateful toward a leader, they may consider the leader to be representative of the team and the organization and develop a deeper bond with the organization and their coworkers, as well as refrain from deviant organizational behaviors (Eisenberger et al., 2010; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). As such, grateful experiences make employees inclined to perceive themselves as beneficiaries of a servant leader's actions and, subsequently, to engage more in OCB (Sun et al., 2019) and to be less inclined to find a reason to become deviant in the workplace (DeWall et al., 2012).

When experiencing high gratitude, employees are sensitive to the emotions, thoughts, and actions that underlie the positive contributions of the servant behaviors provided by leaders. Hence, employees turn away from self-interest and, instead, consider others' interests and benefits to the organization. Their desire to reciprocate positive contributions is antithetical to the desire to benefit, rather than to go against or harm, the interests of the organization and others (DeWall et al., 2012). Research has shown that gratitude is positively related to OCB (Sun et al., 2019) but negatively related to aggression and deviance (Qin et al., 2020). Based on Hypothesis 1 and the discussion above, we propose that:

Hypothesis 3a. Employee gratitude mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee OCB.

Hypothesis 3b. Employee gratitude mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee workplace deviance.

Integrative Model

We hypothesize that servant leadership is positively related to employee gratitude and that gratitude serves as a mediator between servant leadership and employee behavioral reactions. Further, we propose that employee narcissism as a boundary condition influences the effect of servant leadership on employee gratitude. In sum, we argue for a moderated mediation model such that servant leadership is positively related to employee OCB and negatively related to employee workplace deviance via increasing gratitude, and that employee narcissism strengthens the indirect influences of servant leadership on employee behavioral reactions. Taken together, we expect that:

Hypothesis 4a. Employee narcissism moderates the effect of servant leadership on employee OCB via employee gratitude, such that the indirect effect is stronger when employee narcissism is higher rather than lower.

Hypothesis 4b. Employee narcissism moderates the effect of servant leadership on employee workplace deviance via employee gratitude, such that the indirect effect is stronger when employee narcissism is higher rather than lower.

Overview of Studies

To examine our model, we conducted a two-wave field study and a scenario-based experiment. We first tested our model using a two-wave, time-lagged design in China (Study 1). To establish the causal inferences of the relationships of interest and to verify that the effects were not culture specific, we conducted a scenario-based experiment using a sample from the United States via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; Study 2).

Study 1 Methods

Sample and Procedure

We collected data from a solar technology and manufacturing company located in China. We invited 520 employees and their 103 leaders to participate in this study. Our final sample included 344 employees and their 80 leaders. Among those employees, 43.90% of participants were female, 81.69% had obtained a bachelor's degree or above, mean age was 32.66 years ($SD = 4.85$), and mean tenure in their current organization was 4.89 years ($SD = 4.60$). The data collection occurred in two waves. At Time 1, a manager of the company explained the purpose and importance of the research. Participants then completed an online questionnaire. Employees provided demographic information and reported servant leadership and narcissism. At Time 2 (one month after the initial survey), participants were asked to complete another online questionnaire. Employees assessed their levels of gratitude, and leaders rated employee OCB and workplace deviance. We used the one-month time lag for reasons of feasibility. Before designing this study, we discussed with the manager of the company the possible intervals between each survey and this decision was the result of joint consultation. Most prior survey research on servant leadership has also adopted one-month intervals (e.g., Bauer et al., 2019; Rofcanin et al., 2021; Tuan, 2016).

Measures

The English scales were translated into Chinese following Brislin's (1980) translation and back-translation procedure. Unless otherwise noted, participants rated measures using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Servant Leadership

Following prior research on servant leadership (Liden et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2019; van Dierendonck et al., 2014), we adopted the seven-item scale (Liden et al., 2014; $\alpha = .90$) to rate servant leadership. A sample item is "My manager puts my best interests ahead of his/her own." Servant leadership was rated by employees rather than leaders or peers because this construct has socially desirable characteristics and leaders' ratings may be vulnerable to social desirability bias (Tischler et al., 2016). Peer ratings reflect other members' perceptions of servant leadership but are not necessarily equal to the focal employee's perception and there are large differences in the perceptions of servant leadership among employees. Notably, it is the perceptions of the employees rather than the leaders that play an influential role in employees' outcomes.

Employee Narcissism

Following Giacomin and Jordan (2014), we used three items ($\alpha = .84$) adapted from the scale of Ames et al. (2006), answered on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very slightly, 5 = extremely). The instruction was "Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements. Generally, ..." Items included "I like to be the center of attention," "I am more capable than other people," and "I am an extraordinary person." To examine the validity of the three-item measure of narcissism, we collected data from 556 full-time employees in an energy company in China. The mean of our three-item measure was highly correlated ($r = .80, p$

< .001) with the mean of the 16-item measure of narcissism developed and validated by Ames et al., implying that the three-item scale of narcissism had acceptable convergent validity.¹

Employee Gratitude

We used DeSteno et al.'s (2010) three-item scale to measure gratitude of employees ($\alpha = .96$). A sample item is "I am grateful toward my manager."

Employee OCB²

Because the length of the survey for leaders needed to be short, we used three items ($\alpha = .90$) of Podsakoff et al.'s (1990) five-item scale to measure employee OCB. The items were "[Name of employee] helps others who have heavy workloads," "[Name of employee] willingly helps others who have work-related problems," and "[Name of employee] is always ready to lend a helping hand to those around him/her." These three items were selected as they had higher factor loadings. This approach has been widely used in prior research (Griffin et al., 2007; Runyan et al., 2019). More importantly, based on the interview with the HR manager, we learned that the other two items ("helps others who have been absent" and "helps orient new people even though it is not required") were less context-relevant because absence and new staff entry were infrequent during the given time. Participants reported the level of workplace deviance on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always).

Employee Workplace Deviance

We measured workplace deviance using six items developed by Bennett and Robinson (2000; $\alpha = .69$). In keeping with OCB, these six items were selected because of their higher

¹ The employee demographics were as follows: 70.10% of participants were male, 43.20% had obtained a bachelor's degree or above, mean age was 26.96 years ($SD = 5.15$), and mean tenure in their current organization was 2.07 years ($SD = 1.91$).

² We used the short-version scale to measure outcomes because a leader probably has multiple subordinates. If a leader rates each subordinate using the full items, such a long survey can lead to their burnout owing to its time-consuming and demanding features (Hektner et al., 2007; Myin-Germeys et al., 2009). Given this consideration, many studies have adopted the short versions of scales to reduce participants' fatigue (e.g., Liden et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2019; Tierney & Farmer, 2011; Williams & Anderson, 1991).

factor loadings and relevance in the research context. Although deviance has been conceptualized as having organizational and interpersonal dimensions, the two dimensions are very highly correlated (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Lee & Allen, 2002); thus, we followed previous research (e.g., Judge, Scott et al., 2006) in using the overall values of deviance. For organizational deviance, a sample item is “[Name of employee] puts little effort into work.” For interpersonal deviance, a sample item is “[Name of employee] makes fun of someone at work.” Participants reported the level of workplace deviance on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always).

Control Variables

We controlled for sex, age, education, and organizational tenure because these basic demographics have been found to correlate with deviance behaviors (e.g., Berry et al., 2007; Shoss et al., 2015). Analytic results remain constant with and without control variables.

Analytic Strategy

Because our study utilized a nested design (employee data nested within each team), we employed the “CLUSTER” and “Type = Complex” syntaxes in *Mplus* 8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2018) to test our hypotheses. We centered the independent variable, moderator, and control variables by grand means³ (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998). To test the mediation effect, we conducted a Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications to generate a confidence interval (CI) around each indirect effect (Preacher et al., 2010; Selig & Preacher, 2008). We conducted a

³ If we used the group-mean centering with adding the group means of narcissism and servant leadership in the analysis, we reached a consistent conclusion. Servant leadership was positively related to gratitude ($\gamma = .55, SE = .09, p < .001$), and gratitude was positively related to OCB ($\gamma = .19, SE = .07, p = .004$) and negatively related to workplace deviance ($\gamma = -.09, SE = .03, p = .002$). Narcissism significantly moderated the relationship between servant leadership and gratitude ($\gamma = .17, SE = .08, p = .038$). This study reported the results of the grand-mean centering in the main analysis because the grand-mean centering releases freedom while addressing the nesting issue. Thus, it adopts the strategy of parsimony. Second, according to McNeish et al. (2017), the results with grand-mean centering are robust if ICC of variables is smaller than .30. Given that the ICCs of servant leadership, gratitude and narcissism were smaller than .30, the grand-mean centering is appropriate in our study.

simple slope analysis (Preacher et al., 2006) to test the moderation effect. To examine the moderated mediation effect, we tested the indirect effect of servant leadership on the outcomes via gratitude at higher (+1 *SD*) and lower levels (-1 *SD*) of employee narcissism, using a Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications (Bauer et al., 2006; Preacher et al., 2010). Finally, we computed values of pseudo- R^2 (Hofmann et al., 2000) as estimates of effect sizes to assess the amount of variance in mediators and outcomes explained by the whole model.

Study 1 Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables in Study 1. The multilevel CFA showed that the hypothesized five-factor model [$\chi^2(398) = 795.95, p < .001$; CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .05, SRMR_{within} = .06, SRMR_{between} = .07] fit the data well. This model fit the data significantly better than did the four-factor model (i.e., OCB and workplace deviance as a factor) [$\chi^2(406) = 1121.08, p < .001$; CFI = .86, TLI = .84, RMSEA = .07, SRMR_{within} = .08, SRMR_{between} = .11], the three-factor model (i.e., gratitude and servant leadership as a factor; OCB and workplace deviance as a factor) [$\chi^2(412) = 2287.63, p < .001$; CFI = .62, TLI = .58, RMSEA = .12, SRMR_{within} = .10, SRMR_{between} = .12], the two-factor model (i.e., gratitude, narcissism, and servant leadership as a factor; OCB and workplace deviance as a factor) [$\chi^2(416) = 2778.66, p < .001$; CFI = .53, TLI = .47, RMSEA = .13, SRMR_{within} = .12, SRMR_{between} = .14], and the one-factor model (i.e., all variables as a factor) [$\chi^2(418) = 3603.73, p < .001$; CFI = .36, TLI = .29, RMSEA = .15, SRMR_{within} = .15, SRMR_{between} = .16].

[Insert Table 1 about here]

We tested model fit by comparing different models. The results showed that the partially mediated model (adding the links from servant leadership, narcissism, and the interaction term to the outcomes based on the Figure 1 model) is a saturated model with perfect model fit. The fully

mediated model shown in Figure 1 did not fit the data well [$\chi^2(6) = 17.83, p = .007$; CFI = .93, TLI = .73, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .02]. Thus, we used this partially mediated model in the formal analyses.

The path analysis (see Table 2) showed that servant leadership was positively related to gratitude ($\gamma = .60, SE = .06, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 proposed that employee narcissism moderates the relationship between servant leadership and gratitude. The results showed that the interaction term was significant ($\gamma = .15, SE = .06, p = .006$). Figure 2 provides a plot of this interaction effect on gratitude at the conditional values of employee narcissism (1 *SD* above and below the mean). The simple slope analysis (Preacher et al., 2006) indicated that the positive relationship between servant leadership and gratitude was significant at higher levels (1 *SD* above the mean) of employee narcissism (simple slope = .71, $SE = .08, p < .001$) but was reduced at lower levels (1 *SD* below the mean) of employee narcissism (simple slope = .48, $SE = .07, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2.

[Insert Table 2 and Figure 2 about here]

In support of Hypothesis 3a, the indirect effect of servant leadership on OCB through gratitude was .10 (95% CI = [.022, .192]). Our results also indicated that the indirect effect of servant leadership on workplace deviance through gratitude was $-.04$ (95% CI = $[-.084, -.006]$), which supports Hypothesis 3b. In addition, the results indicated that employee narcissism significantly moderated the indirect effect of servant leadership on employee OCB via gratitude. That is, the indirect effect was significant under a high level of employee narcissism (indirect effect = .12, 95% CI = [.026, .278]) but was reduced under a low level of employee narcissism (indirect effect = .08, 95% CI = [.011, .125]). The difference in these indirect effects was .04 (95% CI = [.004, .099]). Thus, Hypothesis 4a was supported.

We also found that employee narcissism significantly moderated the indirect effect of servant leadership on employee deviance via gratitude (Hypothesis 4b). That is, the indirect effect was significant under a high level of employee narcissism ($\gamma = -.05$, 95% CI = [-.117, -.007]) but was reduced under a low level of employee narcissism ($\gamma = -.03$, 95% CI = [-.056, -.003]). The difference in these indirect effects was significant ($\gamma = -.02$, 95% CI = [-.040, -.001]). Thus, Hypothesis 4b was supported. Study 1 provided support to our hypotheses using time-lagged field survey data. However, as the independent variable (i.e., servant leadership) was measured and not manipulated, we were unable to establish the causality of these relationships. To address this limitation, we conducted an experiment to replicate the main findings of Study 1.

Study 2 Methods

Participants and Design

In Study 2, we conducted a scenario-based experiment to test the core relationships (i.e., servant leadership on gratitude and the moderation effect of narcissism) of the model. To ensure an acceptable sample size, we employed the G*Power software (Cunningham & McCrum-Gardner, 2007). We employed a medium effect size (.35) and .80 power. As a result, G*Power highlighted total 94 samples as a requirement of our setting. Hence, we recruited 100 full-time employees via Amazon's MTurk for 1 USD each in compensation. We posted a link to our online experiment and informed participants that they should use a computer to input their responses. Of the participants, 59% were male. Participants had a mean age of 39.40 years ($SD = 10.31$), 50% had obtained a bachelor's degree or above ($SD = 1.02$), and they had a mean tenure of 7.95 years ($SD = 5.71$) in their current company. Participants came from different industries, including services (66%), manufacturing (13%), and others (21%). First, we asked participants to rate the levels of dispositional gratitude and narcissism. Participants were then randomly

assigned to one of two conditions (high servant leadership condition, $N = 51$; low servant leadership condition, $N = 49$). Participants read a scenario of servant leadership manipulation (see Appendix), used in Wu et al. (2021). The manipulation of servant leadership was designed by following the methods from previous experimental research on servant leadership (e.g., Eva et al., 2021; Heine et al., 2023; Van Dierendonck et al., 2014). After reading the scenario, they rated servant leadership and gratitude toward the leader in the scenario.

Measures

Servant Leadership

As in Study 1, we used a seven-item scale (Liden et al., 2014) to measure servant leadership ($\alpha = .96$). Participants responded to the items using a five-point Likert scale (1 = not true at all, 5 = very true). The instructions stated, “Recall the description of Pat in the above situation and answer the following questions. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements based on how Pat has behaved at work.” A sample item is “My manager puts my best interests ahead of his/her own.”

Employee Narcissism

We measured trait narcissism ($\alpha = .92$) using 16 items from Ames et al.’s (2006) scale. The instruction was “Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements. Generally, ...” A sample item is “I like to be the center of attention.” The narcissistic response was coded 1, and the nonnarcissistic response was coded 0. Participants responded to the items using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Employee Gratitude

As in Study 1, we adopted DeSteno et al.’s (2010) three-item scale to measure gratitude ($\alpha = .91$ and $.99$ for trait gratitude and state gratitude, respectively). Before the intervention,

participants reported their trait gratitude. The instruction was “Please indicate your agreement with each of the following statements. Generally, ...” After the intervention, they reported their state gratitude. The instruction was “Please indicate your agreement with each of the following statements at this moment, based on how Pat has performed at work.” A sample item is “I am grateful toward my manager.” Participants responded to the items using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Study 2 Results

Manipulation Check

A *t*-test revealed that participants in the high servant leadership condition ($n = 51$; $M = 4.38$, $SD = .62$) rated their leaders’ servant leadership higher than did those in the low servant leadership condition ($n = 49$; $M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.01$; $t(98) = 13.62$, $p < .001$; Cohen’s $d = 2.71$). The results of ANOVA indicated that our manipulation was successful ($F = 185.45$, $p < .001$).

Hypotheses Testing

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables in Study 2. Table 4 displays the means and standard deviations for the two groups before and after the servant leadership intervention. The overall effects of the intervention were tested with repeated-measures ANOVA, with the outcome—gratitude—measured before (T1) and after the intervention (T2). The results revealed significant effects for Group \times Time (high servant leadership/low servant leadership \times repeated measures) on gratitude (Hotelling’s trace $F = 120.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .55$). Thus, the servant leadership intervention was effective, as the changes in gratitude from T1 to T2 were significantly higher in the high servant leadership group than in the low servant leadership group (Significant group \times Time effects). We also conducted a linear regression in which servant leadership condition, dispositional gratitude and narcissism are

entered as predictors of state gratitude. The results showed that servant leadership condition significantly predicted state gratitude ($B = 2.54, SE = .19, p < .001$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. We further tested the moderation effect by using the PROCESS macro for SPSS, specifying Model 1 with 5,000 resamples (Hayes, 2013). The results showed that, after controlling for T1 gratitude, the interaction term of servant leadership and employee narcissism on gratitude was significant ($B = 2.38, SE = .55, p < .001$). Figure 3 provides a plot of this interaction effect on employee gratitude at the conditional values of employee narcissism. The conditional effect of servant leadership on gratitude was significant at higher levels (1 *SD* above the mean) of employee narcissism ($effect = 3.32, SE = .25, p < .001$); the above conditional effect became weaker at lower levels (1 *SD* below the mean) of employee narcissism ($effect = 1.80, SE = .24, p < .001$). Overall, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

[Insert Tables 3 and 4 and Figure 3 about here]

Discussion

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes important theoretical contributions to servant leadership research and the narcissism literature. First, although prior research has focused on the benefits of servant leadership, we identified a boundary condition of its effects on employee OCB and deviance by introducing employee narcissism into the model. Such a contingency view helps us to gain a more accurate understanding of why servant leadership sometimes loses its powerful predictions. The norm of reciprocity seems to be a universally accepted principle (Gouldner, 1960), but the extent of individuals' reactions to initiating favors from others varies. Our investigation of when servant leadership plays a more crucial role in employees' reactions by focusing on one recipient characteristic (narcissism) provides a nuanced understanding of servant leadership.

Although a body of research confirms the benefits of servant leadership for enhancing (reducing) employees' discretionary positive (negative) behaviors, several studies have yielded conflicting findings (Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2015; Paesen et al., 2019; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017). Our study, by emphasizing the role of employee narcissism, addresses these mixed findings and highlights that the beneficial functions of leadership may be weakened under some conditions. This investigation advances the current dialogue of the boundary conditions of servant leadership effects. For example, Wu et al. (2021) explore the interactive effect of servant leadership and follower self-interest on follower serving self-efficacy and serving behaviors. Our research takes another important but unexamined characteristic (i.e., employee narcissism) into consideration and confirms that a fit between servant leadership and narcissistic employees helps employees to experience more gratitude and behave more positively.

Some research has focused on the negative connotations of the word *servant*. For instance, Kessler (2019) indicates that considering the leader as a servant becomes a tool for the abuse of power. In response, we emphasize that the beneficial functions of servant leadership may disappear or become reduced for some employees. Specifically, our findings showed that, for narcissistic employees, servant leadership was more likely related to employee gratitude and, in turn, enhanced employee OCB and reduced workplace deviance; for employees with a lower level of narcissism, the effects of servant leadership on gratitude and behaviors were weakened.

Second, we expand the nomological network of servant leadership by integrating employee gratitude as the core mechanism that links servant leadership and employee workplace behaviors. The rule of reciprocity has been verified in prior research on servant leadership (Madison & Eva, 2019; Stein & Min, 2019; Zou et al., 2015), but the role of affective experiences in the social exchange process has received little attention. Social exchange theory,

however, explicitly emphasizes that affective reactions play a crucial role in the social exchange processes (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Fisher et al., 1982), and the findings of our study are consistent with this theory. Although research (Sun et al., 2019) has examined the effect of servant leadership on employee daily gratitude, our study goes beyond this focus to emphasize the role of beneficiaries' characteristics (narcissism) in reaction to servant leadership and to capture the long-term effects of servant leadership.

Third, this study contributes to the narcissism literature because we shed light on the fit between narcissistic employees and servant leaders. To date, research has verified the mixed effects of narcissism in the workplace. For example, studies have found that narcissism is negatively related to counterproductive workplace behavior and the supervisor ratings of employee interpersonal performance and integrity but also that narcissism is significantly positively correlated with taking charge and self-ratings of leadership (Judge, LePine et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2020). Despite these research efforts, little is known about the functions of narcissism in influencing employees' reactions to specific leadership styles. Our study addresses this issue by offering evidence that servant leadership is more likely to trigger employees' gratitude and more OCB and less deviance as a reciprocal outcome for those employees with a higher (versus lower) level of narcissism. By doing so, we highlight the fit perspective such that an intuitively beneficial leadership does not necessarily lead to expected results for some employees; instead, for those who have preferences for arrogance, grandiosity, and superiority (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin, 1980; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; i.e., higher narcissism), servant leadership plays a stronger role in inducing better outcomes.

Practical Implications

Our findings reinforce the notion that servant leadership plays a critical role in increasing employee state gratitude and OCB while discouraging workplace deviance. Thus, we encourage managers to actively foster servant leader behaviors geared toward facilitating employees to attain their full potential and satisfy their needs. In addition, to achieve the goal of enhancing employee OCB and reducing deviant behaviors, managers could design and implement appropriate human resource management practices that affect leader behaviors. For example, managers can introduce leadership courses to help leaders to learn more about the demonstrations of servant leadership in the workplace.

Managers need to pay attention to narcissism as related to the influence of servant leadership. That is, they cannot overemphasize servant leadership effectiveness without any considerations of employee narcissism. Managers are encouraged to notice levels of narcissism when they interact with employees. If employees are self-centered and egocentric, leaders should provide more demonstrations of servant leadership to induce more gratitude from such employees. Overall, leaders could benefit from deploying servant leader behaviors in a more strategic manner. In the assignment of personnel, organizations should consider the fit between employee characteristics and leader behaviors. When employees are eager to have superiority and privilege, it makes sense to provide a servant leader for these employees.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our research has limitations that suggest future directions. Although this study focused on the moderating role of employee narcissism, other unexamined traits of employees may play a unique role in influencing employees' reactions to servant leadership. This is a promising direction, as research highlights that a prototypical fit between leaders and employees is expected

to result in more desirable outcomes (Junker & Van Dick, 2014). In addition, team climate and the relationship with the leader may play an important role in employees' psychological and behavioral reactions to servant leadership. We encourage future research to examine the boundary conditions in the model that we presented as a means to enhance our understanding of when servant leadership is more likely to lead to benefits versus drawbacks in the workplace.

Another limitation arises from our focus on gratitude as the explanatory mechanism. Although our results support the mediating role of gratitude, gratitude only partially mediated the effects of servant leadership on employee OCB and workplace deviance. Thus, servant leadership may relate to employee OCB and workplace deviance through other mechanisms, such as pride and need satisfaction. Future research could explore other mediators to enhance our understanding of how and why servant leadership induces employee behavioral outcomes.

In terms of methodology, our research used a sample collected in China (Study 1) and a sample from the United States (Study 2). This reduces concern about the generalizability of the findings in different cultural contexts. Nevertheless, we are still unable to draw conclusions about whether our findings are contingent on cultural context. Thus, a fruitful avenue for future research would be to validate our model in other cultural environments. In addition, although we conducted a two-wave survey with different sources in Study 1, it may be better to alleviate the concern of common method bias by testing the model with three-wave longitudinal data. Study 2 is a scenario-based experiment. We acknowledge that this approach may be limited as some participants may not engage in the scenario. In comparison, the lab experiment has the advantage of providing a controlled environment. Researchers can manipulate variables with a high degree of precision. Thus, we encourage future research to collect additional data using a lab experiment to replicate our model.

Moreover, we asked employees to rate servant leadership in two studies, while employees with specific personality traits or states probably perceive servant leadership in a different manager. Although prior research on servant leadership has mostly used employee ratings (e.g., Liden et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2019; van Dierendonck et al., 2014) and the experimental design of Study 2 also helps exclude the alternative explanations, we encourage future research to examine whether individual attributes can influence perceptions of servant leadership. It would be also valuable to explore servant leadership from the perspectives of colleagues, and to compare the underlying mechanisms and differences in the perceived effectiveness of servant leadership as seen through the eyes of the employees themselves and their colleagues. These investigations could provide further insights into the dynamics of servant leadership and its effects on various individuals within the organization.

Owing to survey length limitations, we used a three-item short form to measure narcissism in Study 1. Although evidence from an independent sample indicates that the short-version scale had acceptable validity and we used the full scale in Study 2, future research may use the full version of scales. Relatedly, we used the short-version scales to measure outcomes. As leaders need to rate multiple employees, full scales probably lead to leaders' burnout due to their time-consuming and demanding features (Hektner et al., 2007; Myin-Germeys et al., 2009). Although we followed the widely accepted approach to select the items with higher factor loadings and considered the research context, it would be promising for future research to adopt the full scales.

Additionally, the CIs of some effects seemed to just not include zero. One possible reason is the small SD of employee workplace deviance ($SD = 0.35$), which means that the range of values in workplace deviance was essentially small. However, this value is reasonable because it

is a low base-rate behavior. More importantly, we note that a Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications was adopted to generate a CI around each effect. This approach allowed us to obtain a CI based on 20,000 replications. However, we encourage scholars to replicate our results in the future. Although Study 2 manipulated the level of servant leadership to establish causality, it did not manipulate narcissism because a person's narcissism is a stable trait. However, future research can focus on state narcissism as the moderator and manipulate both servant leadership and state narcissism to provide a more convincing conclusion.

Conclusion

Based on social exchange theory and servant leadership research, we examined the mechanisms and boundary conditions of the effect of servant leadership on employee interpersonal behaviors. The findings indicated that servant leadership increased OCB and reduced workplace deviance via employee gratitude. When employees have a higher level of narcissism, the above effects of servant leadership are enhanced. We hope that our study inspires scholars to adopt the contingency perspective to examine the functions of servant leadership.

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Table 1*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables in Study 1*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Sex (T1)	0.44	0.50		-.23***	-.08	.03	-.06	-.14**	.03	-.07	.07
2. Age (T1)	32.66	4.85	-.19		-.03	.18***	-.09	-.06	-.06	.05	.01
3. Education (T1)	3.00	0.63	.05	-.12		-.07	-.19***	.03	-.10	-.03	-.04
4. Organizational tenure (T1)	4.89	4.60	.36**	.59***	-.33**		-.12*	-.09	-.08	-.04	.08
5. Servant leadership (T1)	4.09	0.71	.10	-.24*	.37***	.24*		.19***	.51***	.10	-.10
6. Employee narcissism (T1)	3.27	0.76	-.22*	.22*	.16	.46***	.57***		.09	-.05	.04
7. Employee gratitude (T2)	4.32	0.71	-.04	-.12	.65***	-.05	.84***	.26*		.21***	-.26***
8. Employee OCB (T2)	3.85	0.79	.08	-.04	.18	.21	.39***	.55***	.22*		-.52***
9. Employee workplace deviance (T2)	1.29	0.35	-.33**	.03	-.43***	-.21	-.41***	-.54***	-.27*	-.32**	

Note. Correlations above the diagonal represent within-team scores ($N = 344$). Correlations below the diagonal represent between-team (aggregated) scores ($n = 80$). Sex: 0 = male, 1 = female; education: 1 = high school education, 2 = community college, 3 = bachelor's degree, 4 = master's degree, 5 = doctorate. OCB = organizational citizenship behavior. Organizational tenure is measured in number of years. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2*Results of Multilevel Path Analyses in Study 1*

Variable	Employee gratitude		Employee OCB		Employee workplace deviance	
	γ	<i>SE</i>	γ	<i>SE</i>	γ	<i>SE</i>
Sex	.05	.07	-.01	.11	-.06	.04
Age	.00	.01	.01	.01	-.00	.00
Education	.06	.05	.06	.07	-.11***	.03
Organizational tenure	-.01	.01	.01	.01	-.00	.01
Servant leadership	.60***	.06	.08	.07	-.08*	.04
Employee narcissism	-.04	.05	.02	.06	-.01	.03
Servant leadership \times employee narcissism	.15**	.06	-.11	.05	-.04	.03
Employee gratitude			.17*	.07	-.07*	.03
<i>R</i> ²		33.00%		5.76%		10.40%

Note. $N = 344$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables in Study 2*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Servant leadership condition	0.51	0.50			
2. Employee narcissism	0.64	0.32	.01		
3. Employee trait gratitude	4.23	0.79	.15	-.10	
3. Employee state gratitude	3.37	1.61	.81***	-.05	.26*

Note. $N = 100$. High servant leadership group = 1; low servant leadership group = 0. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4*Analyses of Covariance: Means and Standard Deviations of Intervention and Control Groups at T1 and T2 in Study 2*

Measure	T	Group	n	Before intervention		After intervention		F ^a	Effect size	
				M	SD	M	SD		Interaction effect	Group effect after intervention
				<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>I</i> ^b	<i>D</i> ^c
Employee gratitude	T1–T2	HG	51	4.35	0.67	4.64	0.55	120.35***	.55	2.72
		LG	49	4.12	0.89	2.04	1.24			

Note. T1 = before intervention; T2 = after intervention; HG = high servant leadership group; LG = low servant leadership group.

^a Hotelling's trace for the MANCOVAs, which tested the interaction effects of repeated measure and group.

^b Standardized scale.

^c Effect size *d* was calculated with by $d = (M_{IG} - M_{CG})/S_{pooled}$, where $S_{pooled} = \sqrt{[(S_{IG}^2 + S_{CG}^2)/2]}$.

*** $p < .001$.

Figure 1

Hypothesized Model

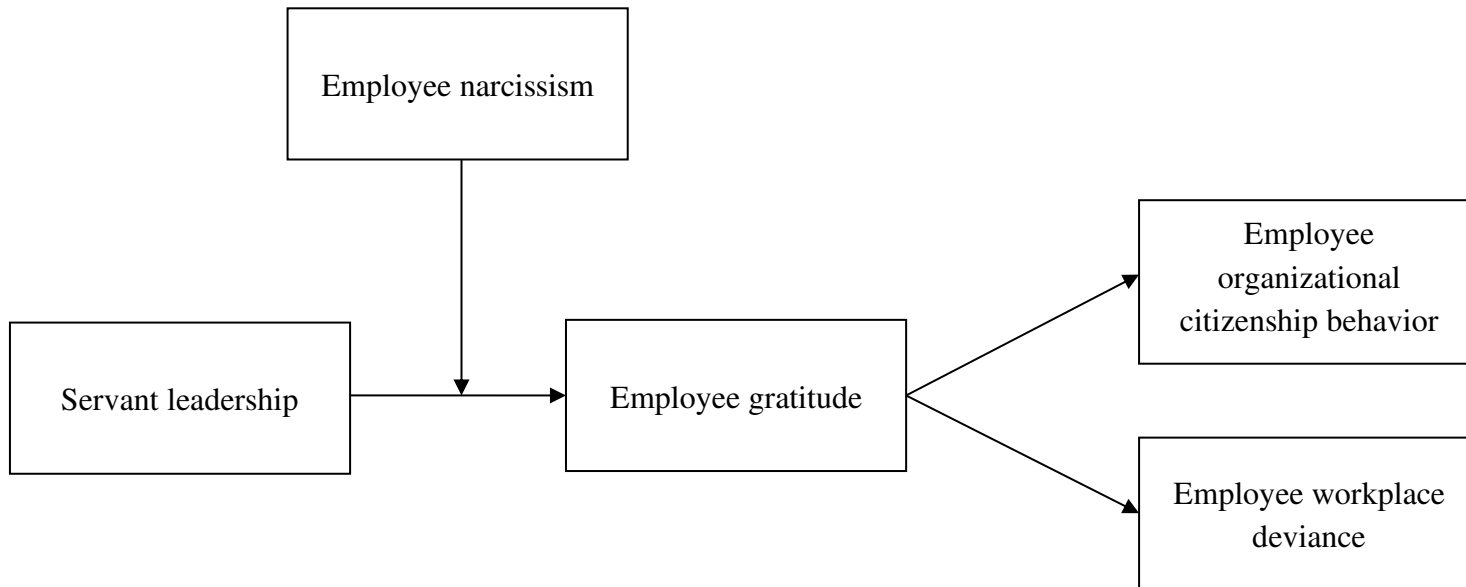


Figure 2

The Moderation Effect of Employee Narcissism on the Relationship between Servant Leadership and Employee Gratitude in Study 1

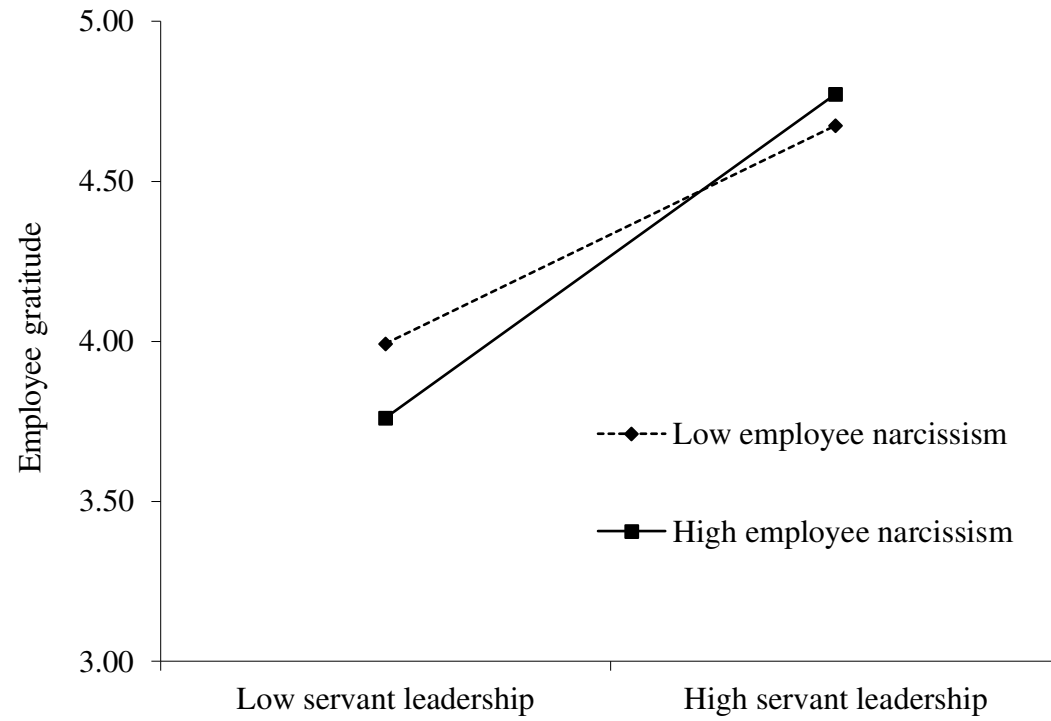
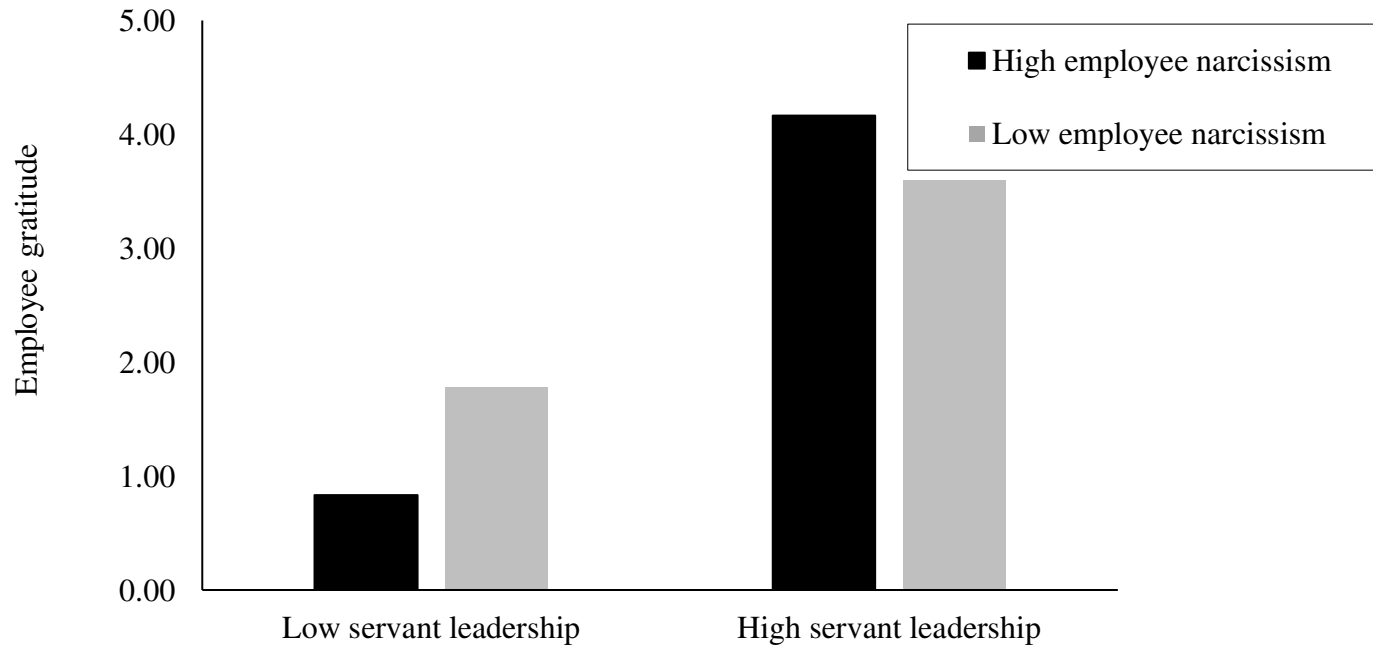


Figure 3

The Moderation Effect of Employee Narcissism on the Relationship between Servant Leadership and Employee Gratitude in Study 2



APPENDIX

High Servant Leadership Condition

In this simulation, imagine that you have been working on a consulting team for six months. The team consists of the team leader, Pat, and three team members—you, Chris, and Casey. Since you started in your position, you have experienced the following in your work environment. The father of your coworker Casey broke his arm and needed some extra help during a few weeks of recovery. Your supervisor, Pat, allowed Casey to work some flexible hours during that time. Four months ago, a new project became available, which you knew would be a good career-related experience for you, but you were on another project that better fit your current skills. You asked Pat to be moved to the new project even though it meant that you would be working more slowly until you learned the new set of skills. You were happy, but not surprised, when you were allowed to move to the new project, as that is commonly the way such requests are handled on your team. Not long after you started working on the new project, your team encountered an unexpected challenge that threatened to delay the completion date. Pat was quick to recognize that there was a problem with the project even though your team had not yet fully understood that the project had encountered a major problem. Despite the high-profile nature of the project, Pat showed confidence in the team by empowering the team to find and implement your team's solution for the problem. Again, you were not surprised, as this is what your team has come to expect from Pat. Twice during the past few months, Pat has had the opportunity to meet short-term goals by making ethically questionable decisions. In both cases, Pat clearly refused to bend any ethical rules, setting a good example for your team. Further, Pat encourages each team member to spend time volunteering for causes that give back to the community, even if those volunteer opportunities are small or unrelated to official corporate programs.

Low Servant Leadership Condition

In this simulation, imagine that you have been working on a consulting team for six months. The team consists of the team leader, Pat, and three team members—you, Chris, and Casey. Since you started in your position, you have experienced the following in your work environment. You have noticed that your supervisor, Pat, is usually fair but that decisions are made to maximize how upper management views the productivity of the team and, by extension, Pat. Sometimes this makes team members look less productive to upper management, but Pat does not believe that personal or professional concern for team members should get in the way of meeting group performance benchmarks. Four months ago, a new project became available that you knew would be a good career-related experience for you, but you were already on another project that better fit your current skills. You asked Pat to be moved to the new project, but Pat kept you on the old project because it would hurt the company if you worked more slowly as you tried to learn the skills needed for the new project. More recently, your team started to encounter a number of work-related problems that threatened to seriously delay a delivery deadline. Initially, Pat failed to recognize that something was wrong. Then, after you explained the problems and suggested some solutions, Pat refused to let you handle the situation in your own way, telling you what to do instead. As part of the solution, Pat lied to the client about what your team was delivering to them. Although this tactic did result in successfully meeting the deadline, you believe that it did not adhere to the ethics training that you regularly receive. In addition to your regular job, you would like to spend time volunteering for causes that give back to the community. However, Pat was not supportive and told you that those volunteer opportunities were small or unrelated to official corporate programs.