

RELUCTANT TO SPEAK? THE IMPACT OF SUPERVISOR NARCISSISM ON EMPLOYEE PROHIBITIVE VOICE

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We constructed a research model based on the social cognitive and social exchange theories to investigate the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee prohibitive voice. We focused on the mediating role of employee voice efficacy and the moderating role of supervisor–subordinate guanxi. We recruited enterprise employees in China and their direct supervisors (231 supervisor–subordinate dyads) as participants, who completed a 2-wave survey. The results showed a significantly negative relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee prohibitive voice, and the relationship was mediated by employee voice efficacy. Supervisor–subordinate guanxi negatively moderated the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee voice efficacy. Thus, organizational executive staff should manage conditions to reduce the negative influence of supervisor narcissism, thereby promoting employee prohibitive voice.

Keywords: supervisor narcissism, employee voice efficacy, supervisor–subordinate guanxi, employee prohibitive voice, social cognitive theory, social exchange theory.

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As China undergoes supply-side economic structural reform, Chinese enterprises are facing increased global competition as well as higher consumer quality expectations (Mowbray, Wilkinson, & Tse, 2015). Given the increased complexity of the business climate in China, it can no longer be expected that leaders' wisdom will solve all organizational problems. Therefore, leaders' ability to mobilize employees' enthusiasm and encourage them to contribute their voices to optimize operations has become an important issue for the development and survival of Chinese organizations. However, the negative personality trait of narcissism is often associated with various aspects of leadership, such as leader emergence (Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, & Fraley, 2015) and future leadership behavior (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Narcissistic leaders usually strive for personal success and power from a self-centered perspective (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006), and want to be admired by their subordinates. Therefore, narcissistic leaders may lead in an autocratic, inconsiderate, exploitative, and self-serving manner, thereby displaying unethical, despotic leadership (Grijalva et al., 2015).

Employee voice is a multifaceted construct comprising two dimensions (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012). *Promotive voice* is employees' expression of new ideas to improve existing work practices. When employees use promotive voice to achieve desired outcomes, leaders do not blame them if they do not succeed (X. Wei, Zhang, & Chen, 2015). In contrast, *prohibitive voice* is used by employees as an expression of concern about harmful practices in the organization. Their criticism of existing or potential organizational problems means that the problems can be addressed at an early stage (Liang et al., 2012). Employees using prohibitive voice seek to avoid failure by highlighting factors that adversely impact on work processes. In comparison to promotive voice, in which employees focus on persuasion, prohibitive voice reflects a direct challenge to organizational status quo and, thus, may be more likely to lead directly or indirectly to interpersonal conflict (Chamberlin, Newton, & Lepine, 2017). Nonetheless, managers perceive prohibitive voice to be more valuable and more likely to have a positive effect on organizational success (Lin & Johnson, 2015).

With China's traditional cultural emphasis on relationism, harmonious social relationships are encouraged (Wong, Wong, & Wong, 2010), and discord and disagreement are discouraged. Therefore, in the Chinese cultural context, when lower-level employees communicate with their supervisor, prohibitive voice has a greater risk than promotive voice (Kakkar, Tangirala, Srivastava, & Kamdar, 2016). Moreover, as Chinese employees focus on organizational harmony, they are more likely than are Westerners to avoid causing interpersonal conflict that could arise from prohibitive voice (Qin, DiRenzo, Xu, & Duan, 2014). Although previous researchers have examined a broad range of employee voice, they have often overlooked prohibitive voice. Because Chinese employees are reluctant

to use prohibitive voice, a model is needed to show how various influences and factors affect employee prohibitive voice.

As supervisors are typically the target of employee voice, supervisor behavior is an important factor influencing employee voice. Researchers have explored the antecedents of employee prohibitive voice mainly from the perspective of leadership style, such as transformational (W. Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010), authentic (Hsiung, 2012), or moral (A. S.-Y. Chen & Hou, 2016). However, few researchers have addressed how supervisors' negative personality traits can affect employee voice. S.-M. Liu and Liao (2016) found that narcissistic leaders can lead in an organizational environment of interpersonal conflict, inefficient information exchange, and even adverse conditions. Employee prohibitive voice addresses these problems. Researchers have shown that employee prohibitive voice can solve potential problems, correct operational deviations, and improve management effectiveness (Janssen & Gao, 2015; Liang et al., 2012). Therefore, an examination of how leaders' negative traits, such as narcissism, impact on employee prohibitive voice would help improve understanding of the nature and function of prohibitive voice. Narcissistic leaders may ignore, or even dislike, an employee whose views are inconsistent with theirs and, thus, they are likely to threaten or pressure employees who offer opinions that differ from theirs (Grijalva et al., 2015). Such leaders may promote their employees' success to promote their own success and they may also be blamed for employees' unwarranted failures and shortcomings. Therefore, in this study we focused on how supervisor narcissism impacts on employee prohibitive voice.

We examined how supervisor narcissism affects employee prohibitive voice from the perspectives of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997) and social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976). We assessed the influence of implicit cognition on employee voice in the context of previous findings showing that the internal mechanism of leadership behavior affects employee voice. *Employee voice efficacy* is an important construct of self-cognition, whereby employees believe that they are competent in their voice role and will have a positive effect. Thus, we examined employee voice efficacy as a potential mediating mechanism linking supervisor narcissism to employee prohibitive voice. We also examined previous findings that confirmed that, in the Chinese context, supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* markedly influenced employees' organizational commitment (Wong et al., 2010) and promotion and performance (J. Liu, Hui, Lee, & Chen, 2013). *Guanxi* is a Chinese cultural concept that refers to a special relationship between two individuals (Bian, 1994). However, previous researchers have not considered whether or not supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* influences employee prohibitive voice. We therefore examined supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* as a boundary condition that moderates the indirect relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee voice efficacy in the Chinese context.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Supervisor Narcissism and Employee Prohibitive Voice

Employee voice is defined as behavior performed by employees who are committed to improving the status of the organization and who offer constructive advice, and it is a form of organizational citizenship behavior (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001). Accordingly, researchers now recognize how important it is that employee voice is voluntary, and that it can be risky and challenging. Employee promotive voice suggestions are naturally easier than prohibitive voice expressions for leaders to accept. Prohibitive voice may be seen by leaders as a challenge to their authority. This perception is particularly difficult for subordinates in the Chinese cultural setting. Most of all, narcissistic supervisors tend to be self-centered, making it difficult for them to listen to subordinates' views. Indeed, in China, employees perceived as offering dissent are likely to be punished by their supervisors, because they are viewed as disrupting organizational harmony (Qin et al., 2014).

Previous findings have shown that leaders' behavior affects employee prohibitive voice through a series of cognitive and affective processes that affect how leaders judge the effectiveness of an individual's voice (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009). In a business context, *supervisor narcissism* can manifest as arrogance, aggressiveness, and possessiveness (Owens, Wallace, & Waldman, 2015). According to *social cognitive theory* (Bandura, 1997), when employees face a narcissistic supervisor they perceive that the supervisor has inhibited their growth and devalued their worth (Lubit, 2002). Employees can also assume that the supervisor has a lack of interpersonal trust and sincerity toward them (Blair, Hoffman, & Helland, 2008). As a result, employees may lack the courage to challenge their supervisor and, instead, may choose to remain silent and comply with the supervisor to avoid risk. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Supervisor narcissism will negatively predict employee prohibitive voice.

The Mediating Role of Employee Voice Efficacy

As there are risks and uncertainties associated with prohibitive voice, it is critical that employees have an internal motivation to ensure success when using prohibitive voice. Voice efficacy is one such driving force. Employees who have high voice efficacy are more likely than those with low efficacy, to believe that as their suggestions are good for the organization, their suggestions have a higher chance than others of being adopted by the organization. Moreover, employees with low voice efficacy are less likely than those with high voice efficacy to voice opinions, because they believe that they lack the knowledge, skills, and

ability needed to make a suggestion that could benefit an organization, or they believe that the suggestion would not be adopted (X. Wei et al., 2015). Therefore, employee voice efficacy and employee prohibitive voice are closely related.

According to social cognitive theory, self-efficacy is not innate, but is gradually acquired and strengthened through verbal persuasion, psychological status, vicarious learning, and successful experience (Bandura, 1997). Van Dyne, Ang, and Botero (2003) confirmed that voice efficacy can positively influence employee prohibitive voice, and Detert and Burris (2007) found in their survey that individual voice efficacy can encourage employees to voice concerns. Detert and Burris also found that, before voicing, employees consider previous experience to evaluate their ability to control the voice process and achieve better results in specific situations. Their voice efficacy forms as they integrate their assessment of potential results, and then determine whether or not to voice. Janssen and Gao (2015) also confirmed that the main source of voice efficacy is from prior voice experience. When employees put forward a prohibitive voice suggestion to a narcissistic supervisor, they may face threats and pressure from the supervisor. In this situation, as the employees' voice efficacy would be reduced, the likelihood that they would use prohibitive voice again is decreased. The employee may eventually choose silence over prohibitive voice. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Employee voice efficacy will mediate the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee prohibitive voice.

The Moderating Role of Supervisor–Subordinate Guanxi

Some researchers believe that supervisor–subordinate guanxi is an important channel for sharing experiences and exchanging information and resources in Chinese organizations. *Supervisor–subordinate guanxi* is a personal supervisor–subordinate relationship built on mutual trust and benefit (Wong et al., 2010). Consequently, the quality of this relationship is an important factor influencing supervisors' decision making and resource allocation. When a subordinate has good guanxi with supervisors, they are more likely to consider the subordinate as an insider, who is afforded a higher level of trust and respect compared to a subordinate with whom supervisors have bad guanxi (Wang, Huang, Chu, & Wang, 2010). As employees who have good guanxi with their supervisors are more likely to speak up, guanxi is an intangible resource for these employees. Furthermore, leaders fully consider insiders' voice, and give them more resources than employees who are not insiders, such as opportunities for promotion and bonuses, and trust and encouragement (Zhang, Li, & Harris, 2015). The development of guanxi between supervisor and subordinate involves the exchange of *renqing* (social or humanized obligation, i.e., unpaid obligations to the other party) and the giving of *mianzi* (social status). We expected that

supervisor–subordinate guanxi would promote employee voice through the enhancement of employee voice efficacy.

According to *social exchange theory*, supervisors establish exchange relationships with subordinates by giving them promotions and benefits (Colquitt, Baer, Long, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2014). In response, the subordinates may feel obliged to make changes for the better, and may even strongly desire to engage in cooperative and extrarole behavior. Nevertheless, subordinates pointing out problems and offering suggestions for change may be regarded by their superiors as a challenge to their authority (McClellan, Burris, & Detert, 2013). Thus, as a conflict situation is implicit when employees use prohibitive voice, good supervisor–subordinate guanxi can moderate associated potential conflict. Further, Rosenthal and Pittinsky (2006) found that narcissistic leaders build their own audience or select certain groups as their insiders, to get subordinates' admiration and to become the focus of the spotlight. Because narcissistic supervisors tend to mix their work and personal desires, in a Chinese organization the quality of supervisor–subordinate guanxi may directly affect subordinates' voice efficacy. In other words, if subordinates have good guanxi with the supervisor, they may have more opportunities than those with bad guanxi to choose an appropriate time and place to use voice with their supervisor, who is more likely to consider that he or she is not losing face by accepting the subordinates' suggestion and to make a positive response (Burris, 2012). Even if these insider subordinates' opinions or ideas are not accepted, the supervisor would accept the idea as a minor error, and the supervisor–subordinate relationship would not be harmed. Hence, the subordinates' voice efficacy would not be reduced and future voice would not be affected. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Supervisor–subordinate guanxi will negatively moderate the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee voice efficacy, such that the relationship will be weaker when the quality of supervisor–subordinate guanxi is higher.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We tested the hypotheses using data obtained from a survey that was completed by staff at 15 small and medium manufacturing enterprises in Wuhan, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and other cities in China. We did not allow the companies' managers to participate in the investigation, and we emphasized to the respondents that the surveys were confidential. To avoid common method bias, we conducted the survey using paired supervisor–subordinate data, and we designed two surveys. Survey 1 was designed to record subordinates' gender, age, and organizational

tenure, and to measure their perception of their direct supervisor's narcissism, their own voice efficacy, and supervisor-subordinate guanxi. Survey 2 was designed to measure the employees' direct supervisor's perception of their subordinates' prohibitive voice.

Survey 1 was completed by subordinates on May 1, 2017 and Survey 2 was completed by their supervisors on June 1, 2017. Each survey form was numbered for data collection. We issued 300 survey forms to supervisors and employees, of which 263 were recovered, with a recovery rate of 87.7%. We rejected survey forms with missing or invalid data, yielding 231 paired forms. The average age of participants was 28.56 years ($SD = 7.15$) and 58.9% were men. The average organizational tenure of participants was 4.79 years ($SD = 5.81$). Participants who completed the survey immediately, and returned the completed form directly to the researcher received a small gift valued at US\$3.50.

Measures

The measurement scales that we used had been verified by previous researchers in the Chinese organizational context, with the exception of the Supervisor Narcissism Scale (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012). Survey items were translated into Chinese by doctoral students, following Brislin's (1980) translation-back-translation procedure. The response format was on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Supervisor narcissism. Supervisor narcissism was assessed using the six-item Supervisor Narcissism Scale developed by Hochwarter and Thompson (2012). Sample items are "My boss has an inflated view of him/herself" and "My boss brags about him/herself to get positive strokes from others." Cronbach's α was .83.

Employee voice efficacy. We used a three-item voice efficacy scale developed by Janssen and Gao (2015). Sample items are "I have enough skills and experience to voice my opinion" and "I am self-assured about my capabilities to voice my opinion about work activities." Cronbach's α was .79.

Supervisor-subordinate guanxi. Supervisor-subordinate guanxi was assessed using a 12-item scale developed by Y. Chen, Friedman, Yu, Fang, and Lu (2009). Sample items are "I feel easy and comfortable when I communicate with my supervisor" and "My supervisor and I always share thoughts, opinions, and feelings toward work and life." Cronbach's α was .81.

Employee prohibitive voice. We used a five-item prohibitive voice scale developed by Liang et al. (2012) to assess prohibitive voice. Sample items are "Advise other colleagues against undesirable behaviors that would hamper job performance" and "Dare to voice opinions on things that might affect efficiency in the work unit, even if that would embarrass others." Cronbach's α was .86.

Control variables. Previous results have shown that subordinates' gender (0 = female, 1 = male), age (in years), and organizational tenure (in years) may

affect voice behavior at work (Detert & Burris, 2007). Therefore, these control variables were included in the surveys.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using Mplus 7 to check the convergent and discriminant validity of the supervisor narcissism, employee voice efficacy, supervisor–subordinate guanxi, and employee prohibitive voice scales. We selected four indices: χ^2/df , root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker–Lewis index (see Table 1). The four-factor nested model was the best fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.985$; RMSEA = .066, CFI = .904, TLI = .898), compared to which the alternative three-, two-, and one-factor versions of the nested model were a significantly inferior fit. As the four variables had good discriminant validity, further analysis of their relationships could be performed.

Table 1. *Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models*

Model	Variables	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
Four factors	SN, VE, GX, PV	1.985	.066	.904	.898
Three factors	SN, VE + GX, PV	3.810	.115	.816	.803
Two factors	SN + VE + GX, PV	4.210	.122	.711	.626
One factor	SN + VE + GX + PV	5.375	.156	.541	.507

Note. SN = supervisor narcissism, VE = voice efficacy, GX = supervisor–subordinate guanxi, PV = prohibitive voice, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, CFI = comparative fit index, TLI = Tucker–Lewis index. + indicates two factors were combined into one factor.

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables are summarized in Table 2. Supervisor narcissism was negatively correlated with both employee voice efficacy and employee prohibitive voice. Further, employee voice efficacy was significantly positively related to employee prohibitive voice.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Supervisor narcissism	2.690	0.613			
2. Voice efficacy	2.918	0.769	-.182**		
3. Supervisor–subordinate guanxi	2.616	0.788	-.121	.568**	
4. Prohibitive voice	2.984	0.875	-.193**	.478**	.327**

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Hypothesis Testing

Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure, we examined whether or not employee voice efficacy mediated the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee prohibitive voice (see Table 3). First, in Model 5, supervisor narcissism had a significantly negative influence on employee prohibitive voice. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Next, in Model 2, supervisor narcissism had a significant negative influence on employee voice efficacy. Finally, in Model 7, employee voice efficacy was positively related to employee prohibitive voice. As the effect of supervisor narcissism on employee prohibitive voice became weaker but was still significant, employee voice efficacy partially mediated this effect. To further confirm this result, we tested for an indirect effect (MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, & Lockwood, 2007), using the more reliable nonparametric bootstrap method than that recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). We used Mplus 7 for statistical analysis. We used bootstrap resampling set to 5,000 times to generate a 95% confidence interval (CI). The results showed that the indirect effect was .237, and the 95% CI [0.121, 0.335] did not include zero. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

In regard to the moderating role of supervisor–subordinate guanxi, as shown in Model 3 in Table 3, the interaction term of supervisor narcissism and supervisor–subordinate guanxi significantly predicted employee voice efficacy. To explain the interactive effect clearly, we plotted two simple slopes at one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean of supervisor–subordinate guanxi (Aiken & West, 1991). The relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee voice efficacy was negative, and the relationship was weaker when supervisor–subordinate guanxi was higher (see Figure 1). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

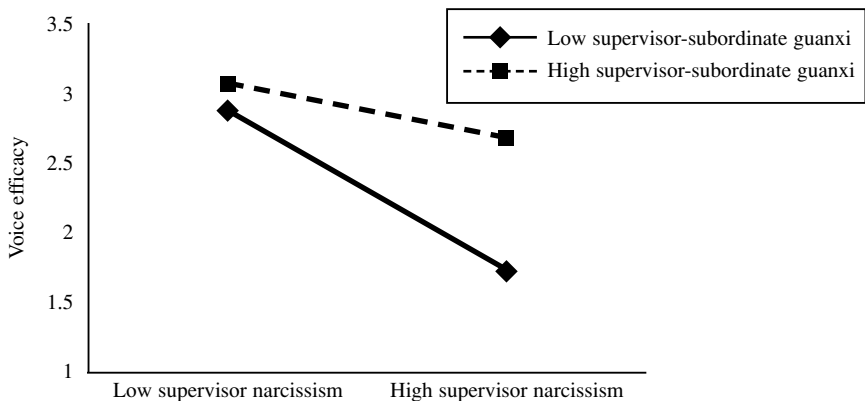


Figure 1. Interaction effect of supervisor narcissism and supervisor–subordinate guanxi on voice efficacy.

Table 3. *Regression Analysis Results*

Variables	Voice efficacy				Prohibitive voice		
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Control variables							
Gender	.031	.037	.019	.031	.035	.021	.022
Age	-.108	-.046	-.062	-.078	-.069	-.059	-.051
Tenure	.046	.029	.015	.216**	.195**	.183**	.178**
Antecedent							
Supervisor narcissism		-.387***	-.335***		-.286***		-.219***
Mediator							
Voice efficacy						.468***	.417***
Moderator							
Supervisor–subordinate guanxi			.169*				
Interaction variables:							
Supervisor narcissism ×							
Supervisor–subordinate guanxi			-.183**				
R^2	.018	.182	.307	.036	.134	.269	.297
ΔR^2		.164	.289		.098	.233	.261
ΔF		21.269***	11.312***		28.861***	59.016***	32.063***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

In this study we used social cognitive and social exchange theories to empirically examine the mediating effect of voice efficacy on the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee prohibitive voice, and the moderating effect of supervisor–subordinate guanxi on the relationship between supervisor narcissism and voice efficacy. The results showed that supervisor narcissism negatively impacted on employee prohibitive voice, voice efficacy acted as a mediating mechanism linking supervisor narcissism to employee prohibitive voice, and supervisor–subordinate guanxi negatively moderated the relationship between supervisor narcissism and employee voice efficacy, such that the relationship was weaker when supervisor–subordinate guanxi was higher.

There are several theoretical implications of the findings in this study. Our findings provided new insights into how prohibitive voice is used. Previous researchers have focused more on how leadership style influences employee prohibitive voice, with less attention given to the role of leadership traits—particularly negative traits—on employee prohibitive voice (Ra, Cha, Hyun, & Bae, 2013). We also provided insight into theories on narcissism in leaders.

We also characterized mechanisms through which supervisor narcissism impacts on employee prohibitive voice, as related to voice efficacy. Voice is an extrarole behavior in which employees take into account the costs and uncertainties that voice may induce, and thus motivation or drivers are needed

to implement voice (Kakkar et al., 2016). Voice efficacy is a driving force for improving work practices and instilling a true sense of ownership in employees, because after using voice their feelings of identity, mission, and achievement, psychologically and emotionally, eventually give them a sense of ownership (Detert & Burris, 2007). Employees with higher voice efficacy than their peers tend to have stronger faith in their organization, and believe that their voice will achieve positive results. We have advanced the theoretical study of voice efficacy.

In addition, we explored when and how supervisor narcissism affects employee voice efficacy, and revealed the boundary conditions of employee voice efficacy. In the Chinese cultural context, supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* plays an important role in employee career development, bonus allocation, and performance management (L.-Q. Wei, Liu, Chen, & Wu, 2010), and is more effective in stimulating employee motivation and extrarole behavior than are organizational rules and regulations.

There are several practical implications of our findings. First, managers and owners of organizations should acknowledge the hidden dangers of supervisor narcissism. Our results support previous findings that voice is a challenging and proactive employee behavior that can prevent crises in the workplace (Mowbray et al., 2015), and also help managers identify and respond to threats and opportunities (Kakkar et al., 2016). However, as narcissistic supervisors may inhibit employee prohibitive voice, employees may choose to comply with them to avoid risks, and, instead, continue to be silent. Thus, potential solutions to organizational issues may not be offered to the management. We suggest that managers and owners of organizations implement strategies to make supervisors more amenable to employee prohibitive voice to enhance organizational success.

Second, managers of organizations should promote employee voice efficacy, so that employees have the confidence to speak up and make good suggestions. Managers must be responsive to narcissistic supervisors' influence, which we found was negatively associated with employee voice efficacy. Otherwise, employee prohibitive voice will decrease. According to social cognitive theory, voice efficacy originates from personal factors, such as self-efficacy and self-esteem, and from work situational factors, for example, the provision by management of supportive working conditions (X. Wei et al., 2015). Therefore, to enhance employee voice efficacy, managers should encourage employees in these aspects of the work environment through various actions, such as job rotation, continuing education programs, and counseling.

Finally, in Chinese organizations, supervisors should establish good *guanxi* with their subordinates under close monitoring. Subordinates may then have more trust in their supervisors, and opportunities for employee promotion and bonuses can offer additional motivation (Zhang et al., 2015). If a subordinate and supervisor have good *guanxi*, this can also contribute to the subordinate's

voice efficacy and sense of responsibility and, in turn, may encourage the subordinate to perform useful extrarole behavior, such as using voice, to benefit the organization. However, if narcissistic supervisors build their own audience or treat certain groups as insiders (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006), this may lead to unfairness for those who are outsiders. Therefore, managers should closely monitor their staff to ensure fairness for each subordinate.

There are some limitations in this study. Although survey confidentiality was emphasized, employees may still have been concerned that managers would know their results, leading to a not totally accurate situation. The use of cross-sectional data may not fully reflect the dynamic causality of the model. Future researchers could conduct a three-stage longitudinal survey to test the dynamic mediation processes of the model. Further, in regard to the influence mechanism of supervisor narcissism and employee prohibitive voice, we validated only a partial mediating role of employee voice efficacy and a moderating role of supervisor–subordinate guanxi. Future researchers could thus examine in greater detail other factors that may affect how supervisor narcissism influences employee prohibitive voice.

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