

The Effect of Leader Perfectionism on Employee Deviance: An Interpersonal Relationship Perspective

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Purpose: Despite growing evidence of significant role of leader perfectionism in the workplace, few theoretical accounts have delved into intricate dynamics of interpersonal relationships impacted by leader perfectionism, nor have they explored the extent to which these interactions might stimulate employee unethical behavior. From an interpersonal relationship perspective, based on interpersonal complementarity theory, this study proposes a link between leader perfectionism and employee deviant behavior while assessing the mediating impact of supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, and the moderating influence of employee narcissism.

Methods: This study employed three-wave surveys, with 335 employees (female 55.8%, 26–35 years old 67.4%, bachelor's degree 61.5%, worked 3–10 years 67.4%, worked with their current leader 1–5 years 66.3%) across 11 enterprises in China to reduce the risk of common method bias. On this basis, MPLUS 7.4 was used to test the confirmatory factor analysis of data, and SPSS 24.0 was used to test the hypotheses.

Results: (1) Leader perfectionism has a positive effect on supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict. (2) Leader perfectionism has a significantly positive effect on employee deviant behavior via supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict. (3) Employee narcissism positively moderates the relationship between leader perfectionism and supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, and further positively moderates the indirect effect of leader perfectionism on employee deviant behavior via supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict.

Conclusion: This study reveals the mechanism of how employee deviant behavior as a opposition to leader perfectionism from an interpersonal relationship perspective, which provides theoretical and practical implications for reducing the negative impact of leader perfectionism and employee deviant behavior.

Keywords: leader perfectionism, employee narcissism, supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, employee deviant behavior, an interpersonal relationship perspective

Introduction

Leader perfectionism, a common personality trait, describes a leader who sets exceptionally high standards for employees and demands that employees meet those standards without mistakes and defects.^{1–3} Recently, given the unique effectiveness of perfectionist leaders (eg, Steve Jobs & Elon Musk), an increasing number of scholars have joined the research discussion to explore the workplace implications of perfectionist tendencies among leaders.^{4–6} However, these studies on perfectionism in leadership only focus on the stress or the resource perspective^{1–3} with a lack of exploration of the impact of leader perfectionism on employees through a supervisor-subordinate relationship interaction perspective, and the impact of employee personality traits on this process. Meanwhile, most of the research on perfectionism in leadership explores the impact of leader perfectionism on employees outputs about task performance, such as employee work engagement and creativity,^{1–3} lack of exploration of the impact of leader perfectionism on employees outputs about ethics. Thus, this study will explore the ethical impact of leader perfectionism from a supervisor-subordinate relationship interaction perspective.

The concept of leader perfectionism is a specific application of other-oriented perfectionism, as proposed by Hewitt & Flett (1991),⁷ within leader personality traits, defined as a leader's perfectionistic tendency towards employees rather than to themselves.^{1,8} In the realm of other-oriented perfectionism, exceedingly high demands placed upon others that are accompanied by dominance and excessive control may strain relationships.^{1,7,8} Concurrently, leaders with a perfectionist tendency may exhibit hostility and criticism towards employees,^{2,3} all of these characteristics are extremely likely to cause relationship conflicts with employees.^{9,10} As one of the most crucial factors from the perspective of interpersonal relationship, supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict is an important consequence of a leader's personality trait, and is highly correlated with adverse employee outcomes.^{9,11,12} Therefore, our focus is on how leader perfectionism affects supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, and thus shapes employee behavior. From an interpersonal relationship perspective, employees are often at a disadvantage in their interactions with leader, and thus are more likely to experience the negative effects of supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, and may engage in unethical behaviors as a means of retaliation.^{9,11} Specifically, we propose that this type of conflict can trigger employee deviant behavior that manifested as bad deeds targeting the organization (eg, harming the organization's image), leader (eg, publicly embarrassed a leader) or organizational members (eg, incivility and aggression). Indeed, as a typical type of unethical behavior, deviant behavior is often a natural response to offset these unmet needs, in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization.^{13,14} Theoretically, existing research on relationship conflict suggests that deviant behavior is an important outcome to respond, as employees aspire to mitigate the damage caused by supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict through avoidance, confrontation, and even actions that may harm organization and others.^{15,16} From a practical standpoint, compared to the consequences of leader perfectionism documented in previous studies (eg, team decision-making performance, employee creativity),^{1,3} employee deviant behavior is a common and costly challenge for organizations, and represents employees resistance to perfectionist leaders.^{9,13}

Furthermore, we propose that employee narcissism represents a crucial boundary condition of the perfectionist leaders' interpersonal effect. The personality trait of narcissism embodies tendencies of self-centeredness, entitlement, and arrogance.^{17–19} From the perspective of interpersonal complementarity, the lack of complementarity in dominance-submission interactions and the resonance of hostility-hostility dynamics are key triggers of relationship conflict.^{20–22} Leader perfectionism, which is positively associated with dominance and over-control,² clashes with narcissistic employees, who also harbor a strong desire for dominance and for gaining power and respect.^{23,24} Along the hostility axis, perfectionist leaders frequently exhibit critical and hostile attitudes towards employees when imperfections surface.⁸ Narcissistic employees, intolerant of criticism and often hostile to critics,^{24,25} exacerbate this supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict. Hence, we propose a moderated mediation model, in which employee narcissism serves as a moderator to influence the relationship between leader perfectionism and supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, which subsequently impacts employee deviant behavior. The theoretical model is presented in Figure 1.

Our theoretical contributions are threefold. First, we innovatively introduce an interpersonal relationship perspective to examine the effectiveness of perfectionist leaders, thereby enriching the theoretical foundation of perfectionism research. Second, our findings suggest that leader perfectionism may influence supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict and, in turn, employee deviant behavior. Existing studies primarily focus on the impact of leader perfectionism on employees outputs about task performance,^{1–3} lack of exploration of the impact of leader perfectionism on employees outputs about ethics. This observation expands the understanding of the consequences of leader perfectionism beyond

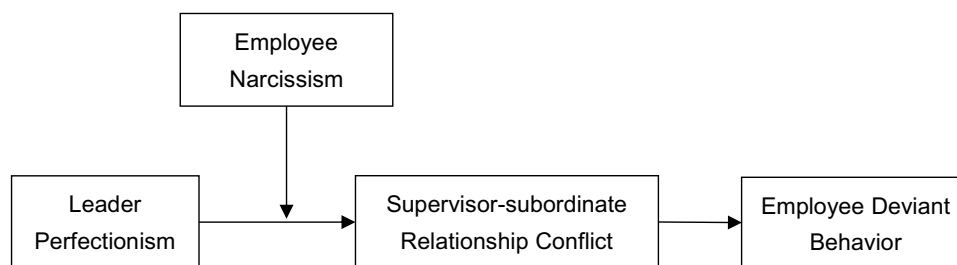


Figure 1 The Theoretical Model.

existing research. Third, we explore the moderating effect of the employee narcissism trait. Whereas, previous scholars argued that the impact of leader perfectionism on an employee depends on the employee locus of control,¹ behavior and performance,^{2,3} and we posit the employee's personality trait as a boundary condition, thereby delving into its potential moderating effect.

Theory and Hypotheses

The Mediating Effect of Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship Conflict

Supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, an important manifestation of interpersonal incompatibility, has significant ties with leader personality traits, and can lead to a range of adverse employee outcomes, including damaged career success, creativity and elevated turnover intention.^{9,12} Drawing from an interpersonal relationship perspective, we posit that leader perfectionism has a positive effect on supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, which may, in turn, provokes employee deviant behavior.

Firstly, characterized by rigid expectations and intolerance of errors and imperfections, leaders displaying perfectionism frequently struggle to sustain harmonious relationships with employees.^{2,4} These traits within leader perfectionism can incite negative emotions and resource depletion among employees,^{1,5} thus fueling conflict within the relationship. Secondly, perfectionist leaders often exhibit negative behaviors (including dominance, over-control, hostility, and destructive actions) that can readily impair the supervisor-subordinate relationship.^{7,8} Specifically, perfectionist leaders tend to exert excessive control and dominance over all aspects of employees' tasks to avert potential failure,^{2,7} thereby diminishing reduce employees' autonomy and enthusiasm for communication.⁸ Concurrently, other-oriented perfectionism is positively associated with hostility and criticism, as acceptance of others is contingent upon flawless performance.^{4,7} Thus, leaders exhibiting high levels of other-oriented perfectionism are more inclined to consistently criticize and confront employees when imperfections surface.² Notably, perfectionist leaders tend to engage in abusive behavior and management by exception if employees fail to achieve perfection,^{3,7} which can rupture the bonds of trust within the relationship and ignite conflict.^{9,10} It is important to emphasize that leader perfectionism differs from leader abusive behavior, which refers to employees perceptions of the extent to which leaders engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Although perfectionist leaders may blame employees for not meeting expectations, they do not perpetrate sustained hostility toward employees.^{1,3} Finally, leader perfectionism also inflicts a detrimental impact on the leader-member exchange, potentially disrupting interpersonal relationships.² Based on these arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Leader perfectionism has a positive effect on supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict.

Supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict is also anticipated to bear a positive impact on employee deviant behavior. Firstly, employees entangled in a relationship conflict with their leaders are more likely to experience negative emotions, and perceive diminished organizational support, consequently developing dissatisfaction with their leader and organization.^{9,11} It is also noteworthy that, as the more vulnerable party in a conflict with a leader, employees may perceive exclusion and unfairness when relationship conflicts emerge at the workplace.^{11,15} This may result in deviant behaviors including avoidance, confrontation, and even acts detrimental to the organization and others in pursuit of fairness.¹⁶ Moreover, frustration-aggression theory suggests that employees inclined to retaliate against individuals with whom they are in a relationship conflict, manifesting in deliberately wasting organizational resources, denigration of leaders, and other deviant behaviors.²⁶ Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict has a positive effect on employee deviant behavior.

H3: Leader perfectionism has significant indirect effect on employee deviant behavior via supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict.

The Moderating Mole of Employee Narcissism

Narcissistic personality traits embody tendencies of self-centeredness, entitlement, and arrogance.^{17–19} Employees with high levels of narcissism often display vanity, conceit, and traits associated with interpersonal hostility, dominance, and aggression.^{20–22} While leaders with perfectionism also tend to dominate and control employees, and criticize and attack employees when they fail to achieve perfection. It should be emphasized that both narcissism and perfectionism are associated with self-centeredness, aggression, hostility, and dominance. However, narcissists display these tendencies in order to get attention and praise from others,^{20–22} while perfectionism is the pursuit of perfection and the avoidance of imperfections.^{1,2} Interpersonal complementarity theory offers a valuable framework for examining how leader and employee traits mutually influence each other. According to this theory, the lack of complementarity of dominance-submission and the congruence in hostility-hostility dynamics are primary catalysts of relationship conflict.^{20–22} For instance, when two dominant individuals interact, it tends to result in dissatisfaction and conflict; similarly, when hostility is reciprocated, conflict can emerge or be exacerbated.⁹ Hence, drawing on the interpersonal complementarity theory, we propose that employee narcissism will amplify the positive effect of leader perfectionism on supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict.

Perfectionist leaders harbor overwhelming desire for their employees to strive for perfection.³ They tend to take control of all aspects of employees' tasks to avoid the risk of failure, and may even resort to abusive behavior to assert dominance and control over their employees.² Similarly, employees with high levels of narcissism also display a strong desire for power and dominance, and may even resort to confrontational behavior to assert their status.^{23,24} Thus, when perfectionist leaders interact with narcissistic employees at work, they are highly likely to have relationship conflict in order to gain dominance and control, and narcissistic employees, as the vulnerable party in the interaction, are more likely to perceive supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict and be negatively affected by it. Moreover, existing research suggests that leader perfectionism is associated with exceedingly high demands placed on employees, often coupled with hostility and criticism.^{1,7,8} However, employees with high levels of narcissism seek praise and approval, and are intolerant of criticism, and can respond with hostility towards critics.^{19,25} In this case, when narcissistic employees perceive hostility from their perfectionist leaders, they also inspire their own hostility toward leader, thus exacerbating supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict. Therefore, in line with the interpersonal complementarity theory,^{20–22} when perfectionist leaders' dominance encounters the narcissistic employees' dominance and perfectionist leaders' hostility meets narcissistic employees' hostility, the relationship conflict between leader and employee will likely ensue. Consequently, we hypothesize the following:

H4: Employee narcissism positively moderates the relationship between leader perfectionism and supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, such that this relationship is stronger for employees with high (vs low) narcissism.

A Moderated Mediation Model

Given that the supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict serves as a critical link between the antecedents and outcomes of perfectionist leader interpersonal relationships, we propose that the mediating effect of supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict is also moderated by employee narcissism. Specifically, we posit that employees with high levels of narcissism are more likely to have conflict with their perfectionist leader, and experience the negative effects of supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, resulting in deviant behavior. Therefore, we predict the following:

H5: Employee narcissism moderates the indirect effect of leader perfectionism on employee deviant behavior via supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, such that the indirect effect is stronger for employees with high (vs low) narcissism.

Method

Data Collection

For this study, we collected three-wave data from employees across 11 enterprises in China. Upon securing support from HR managers, we invited 500 full-time employees to participate in this research and send all surveys via WeChat (see Qin et al (2020), a recent study that used WeChat for data collection).¹³ Also, identification codes were used to match

participants' survey responses across the three waves to ensure confidentiality. We then informed all employees about the general purpose of the study, explained the survey procedures, and assured them of the confidentiality of this study. To mitigate common method variance, data were collected at three time points, each wave was separated by a month.² At Time 1, we requested 500 employee participants to rate their leader's perfectionism and provide their demographic information (ie, age, gender, education, and tenure, etc.); a total of 462 employees completed the questionnaire, yielding a 92.4% response rate. At Time 2, a month after Time 1, we asked those 462 employee respondents to rate their own narcissism and the degree of supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict. A total of 398 employees completed at Time 2 questionnaire, yielding a 86.1% response rate. At Time 3, a month after Time 2, we asked the 398 employee respondents who had completed the previous two surveys to rate their deviant behaviors. A total of 335 employees completed there-wave questionnaire, yielding a 84.1% response rate.

Ultimately, we received valid responses from 335 employees, marking a 67% response rate. Among the 335 respondents, 55.8% were females. Their ages were distributed as follows: 25 years old or younger (17.9%), 26–30 years old (33.7%), 31–35 years old (33.7%), 36–40 years old (11.0%), 41–45 years old (2.4%), and 46 years old or older (1.3%). Moreover, 10.4% had completed education up to senior middle school or below, 19.4% had a junior college education, 61.5% held a bachelor's degree, and 8.7% held a master's degree or higher. In terms of tenure, 10.7% had been employed by their current employer for less than a year, 13.4% had worked between 1 and 3 years, 34.3% had worked between 3 and 5 years, 33.1% had worked between 6 and 10 years, and 8.5% for more than 10 years. Additionally, with regard to the duration of co-working with their current leader, 12.5% had worked with their current leader for less than 1 year, 22.4% had worked with their current leader between 1 and 3 years, 43.9% for between 3 and 5 years, 18.5% for between 6 and 10 years, and 2.7% for more than 10 years.

Measure

This study adhered to Brislin's (1970) standard translation-back translation procedures to ensure the validity of all items in Chinese.²⁷ The items were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Leader Perfectionism Scale

Leader perfectionism was measured with Hewitt & Flett's (1991) 5-item scale for other-oriented perfectionism.⁸ A sample item is, "My leader indicates that the task I do must be of top-notch quality". The Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.80 in the current study.

Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship Conflict Scale

Supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict was measured using Landry's (2009) 4-item scale.²⁸ A sample item is, "I have frequent conflicts with my leader". The Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.82 in the current study.

Employee Narcissism Scale

Employee narcissism was measured using Jonason and Webster's (2010) 4-item scale.²⁹ A sample item is "I want people to envy me". The Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.90 in the current study.

Employee Deviant Behavior Scale

Employee deviant behavior was measured using Mitchell's (2007) 26-item scale.³⁰ Importantly, We used a self-reported measure of deviance because many deviant behaviors are done in private without others' knowledge and the use of self-reported deviance is relatively common in previous literatures.¹³ The sample items include "I once publicly embarrassed a leader", "I once left early without the organization's permission". The Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.93 in the current study.

Control Variables

The following demographic variables were included as control variables in all analyses: gender, education, age, and tenure. Prior studies have indicated that these factors impact employee deviant behavior.³¹ The demographic variables were classified as follows: gender (1 = male; 2 = female), age (1 = 25 years old or below; 2 = 26–30 years old; 3 = 31–35

Table 1 Confirmatory factor analysis results

Models	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Four-factor model (LP; RC; EN; EDB)	216.20	129	1.68	0.97	0.97	0.05	0.04
Three-factor model (LP+RC; EN; EDB)	709.52	132	5.38	0.82	0.79	0.14	0.14
Two-factor model (LP+RC+EN; EDB)	1476.16	134	10.99	0.57	0.51	0.17	0.15
One-factor model (LP+RC+EN+EDB)	1734.15	135	12.85	0.49	0.42	0.19	0.17

Note: N=335.

Abbreviation: LP, leader perfectionism; RC, supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict; EN, employee narcissism; EDB, employee deviant behavior.

years old; 4 = 36–40 years old; 5 = 41–45 years old; 6 = 46 years old or above), education (1 = senior middle school or below; 2 = junior college; 3 = bachelor's degree; 4 = master's degree or higher), tenure (1 = less than 1 year; 2 = 1–2 years; 3 = 3–5 years; 4 = 6–10 years; 5 = more than 10 years) and the time spent working with current leader (1 = less than 1 year; 2 = 1–2 years; 3 = 3–5 years; 4 = 6–10 years; 5 = more than 10 years).

Results

Common Method Variance Analysis

Harman's single-factor method was used to test for common method variance. The results revealed that the explanatory power of the first factor was 28.25%, less than the critical value 40%.³² This outcome indicates that common method variance was not a significant issue in this study, and the research conclusions were not adversely affected.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

For confirmatory factor analysis, this study employed MPLUS 7.4. The large number of parameters in the model, due to the extensive measurement items, can lead to an increase in standard errors.³³ To address this issue, researchers may consider packaging some of the variables to emphasize their differentiation rather than their intrinsic correlation. In this study, we utilized the random packing method to consolidate the 26 measures of employee deviance into five packages. As shown in Table 1, the fit of the four-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 1.68$, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.04) met the standard and was superior to the alternative models.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

SPSS 24.0 was used to test the descriptive statistics and to conduct a correlation analysis. As depicted in Table 2, leader perfectionism is positively correlated with both supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$) and employee deviant behavior ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), while supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict is positively correlated with employee deviant behavior ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	-	-	1							
2. Age	2.5	1.06	-0.16**	1						
3. Education	2.95	0.51	0.04	0.10	1					
4. Tenure	3.15	1.1	-0.13*	0.76**	0.07	1				
5. Co-working time	2.76	0.98	-0.13*	0.68**	0.03	0.84**	1			
6. LP	3.79	0.75	-0.06	0.12*	0.09	0.11	0.08	1		
7. RC	1.97	0.57	0.07	-0.08	-0.04	-0.06	-0.15**	0.25**	1	
8. EN	3.51	1.09	-0.02	-0.10	-0.01	-0.06	-0.06	0.01	0.21**	1
9. EDB	1.86	0.52	-0.01	-0.11	-0.04	-0.14*	-0.12*	0.28**	0.55**	0.21**

Notes: N=335; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Abbreviation: M, means; SD, standard deviation; LP, leader perfectionism; RC, supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict; EN, employee narcissism; EDB, employee deviant behavior.

Testing Mediating Effects

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted and the Macro Program Process with SPSS 24 was employed to examine the mediating effects. As demonstrated in Models 2 and 6 of Table 3, leader perfectionism had a significantly positive effect on both supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict ($\beta = 0.20, p < 0.001$) and employee deviant behavior ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.001$). Therefore, H1 was supported. As shown in Model 7 of Table 3, supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict had a significantly positive effect on employee deviant behavior ($\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001$). Therefore, H2 was supported. As shown in Model 8 of Table 3, after adding both leader perfectionism and supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, the positive effect of leader perfectionism on employee deviant behavior became weakened but remained significant ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$). Furthermore, the macro program Process Model#4, developed by Hayes, was used to perform the Bootstrap test. On the basis of the 20,000 Bootstrap samples randomly selected by repeated random sampling, leader perfectionism had a significant, indirect effect on employee deviant behavior via supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict (Indirect effect = 0.09, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.16]). Therefore, H3 was supported.

Testing Moderating Effects

We conducted the Macro Program Process Model#7 with SPSS 24 to examine the moderating effects. As shown in Model 4 of Table 3, the interaction term (leader perfectionism \times employee narcissism) had a significantly positive effect on supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.01$). Thus, H4 was supported. To better interpret the moderating effect of employee narcissism, we defined employees' high and low narcissism as one standard deviation above and below the mean. As shown in Figure 2, leader perfectionism did not have a significantly positive impact on supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict for employees with low narcissism ($\beta = 0.06, p > 0.05$), but leader perfectionism had a significantly positive impact on supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict for employees with high narcissism ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$).

In addition, as shown in Table 4, the indirect effect of leader perfectionism on employee deviant behavior via supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict for employees with low narcissism was not significant (indirect effect = 0.03, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.12]), but the indirect effect of leader perfectionism on employee deviant behavior via supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict for employees with high narcissism was significant (indirect effect = 0.17, 95% CI [0.10, 0.24]), and the difference between the two indirect effects was significant (indirect effect = 0.10, 95% CI [0.05, 0.16]). Thus H5 was supported.

Table 3 Multiple linear regression analyses results

Variables	Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship Conflict				Employee Deviant Behavior			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Gender	0.06	0.08	0.09	0.08	-0.03	-0.01	-0.06	-0.05
Age	-0.02	-0.03	-0.10	-0.02	-0.01	-0.02	0.01	-0.00
Education	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.01	-0.03	-0.05	-0.05	-0.06
Tenure	0.11	0.11	0.10	0.09	-0.06	-0.07	-0.12**	-0.12**
Co-working time	-0.17**	-0.17**	-0.17**	-0.15	-0.01	-0.01	0.09	0.08
LP		0.20***	0.19***	-0.25		0.21***		0.12**
RC							0.52***	0.48***
EN			0.11***	-0.41*				
LP*EN				0.13**				
R ²	0.04	0.10	0.14	0.17	0.02	0.11	0.33	0.35
ΔR^2		0.04	0.11	0.03		0.09	0.31	0.33
F	2.55	6.20***	7.80***	8.34**	1.41	6.66***	26.83***	25.61***

Notes: N=335; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

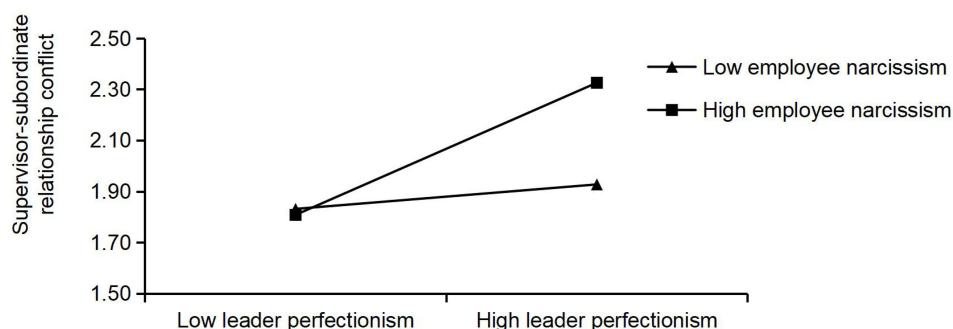


Figure 2 The Moderating Effect of Employee Narcissism.

Discussion

Given the fierce competition in today's business environment, managers need to go beyond customers' expectations, and to achieve standards that are insurmountable for competitors to achieve sustainable competitive advantage, perfectionist leaders are attracting increased attention from management scholars and practitioners.¹ Although growing evidence of significant role of leader perfectionism in the workplace,¹⁻³ few theoretical accounts have delved into intricate dynamics of interpersonal relationships impacted by leader perfectionism, nor have they explored the extent to which these interactions might stimulate employee deviance and opposition. To better understand the interpersonal effects of leaders with perfectionism on employees, this study investigates a link between leader perfectionism and employee deviant behavior while assessing the mediating impact of supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict from an interpersonal relationship perspective. Meanwhile, this study bases on interpersonal complementarity theory further hypothesizes that employee narcissism enhances this kind of supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict and thus promotes employee deviant behavior. Through the data analysis of 335 employee three-wave questionnaires across 11 enterprises in China, the research hypothesis is fully supported. The research findings based on Chinese samples not only provides theoretical and practical implications for reducing the negative impact of leader perfectionism, and further enriches the discussion on the influence of leader perfectionism in Eastern culture.

Theoretical Implications

Our study makes three theoretical contributions. First, our study enriches the theoretical perspective of leader perfectionism by introducing an interpersonal relationship perspective. In recent years, scholars have discussed the influences of leader perfectionism on employees' work states and behaviors. However, these studies only focus on the stress and resource from leader perfectionism,^{1,2} ignoring perfectionist leaders' interpersonal influences. Indeed, leaders with a perfectionist tendency may exhibit hostility and criticism towards employees,^{2,3} all of these characteristics are extremely likely to cause relationship conflicts with employees.^{9,10} As one of the most crucial factors from the perspective of interpersonal relationship, supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict is an important consequence of a leader's personality trait, and is highly correlated with adverse employee outcomes.^{9,11,34} Thus, we expand upon the previous research on leader perfectionism by examining the mechanisms of effects of leader

Table 4 Results of the analysis of moderating effects with mediation

Leader perfectionism Supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict Employee deviant behavior			
Employee narcissism	Indirect effects	95%CI	
High (+SD)	0.17	0.10	0.24
Low (-SD)	0.03	-0.05	0.12
Difference	0.10	0.05	0.16

perfectionism at the interpersonal level, namely through examining the facilitation of leader perfectionism on supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict.

Second, our study extends recent theoretical explanations of perfectionist leader on ethics. Whereas, prior work has focused on the impact of leader perfectionism on employees outputs about task performance, such as employee work engagement and creativity,¹⁻³ we take a different approach from an ethical perspective. We focus on how employees react and resist leader perfectionism through engaging in deviant behavior which is a typical type of unethical behavior, and violates organizational norms, in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization.^{13,14} Indeed, it is hard for us to imagine that a leader who strives for perfectionism may lead employees to engage in unethical behavior. Our study thus adds nuanced understanding about the ethical consequences of leader perfectionism, indicating that leader perfectionism not only has negative impact on employee work states, but also arouses employee deviant behavior.

Third, our study supplements the boundary condition of leader perfectionism by discussing the moderating effect of employee narcissism. Previous research on perfectionism in leadership mostly argues that the influence of leader perfectionism on employees depends on employee feedback-seeking behavior,³ task performance,² and internal (external) locus of control.¹ However, few scholars have focused on employee personality traits. Indeed, from the perspective of interpersonal complementarity, the lack of complementarity in personality traits are key triggers of relationship conflict and thus affects the state and behavior of both parties.²⁰⁻²² Our study introduces a personality trait—narcissism as a boundary condition, and explores its positive moderating effect on perfectionist leaders' interpersonal influences, which further underscores that the effectiveness of perfectionist leaders depends on both their own and their employees' personality traits.

Forth, our study extends the employee deviant behavior literature by exploring the effect of leader perfectionism. Since leader characteristics are regarded as an important antecedent that affects employee outputs, more and more studies have explored the relationship between leader characteristics and employee deviant behavior. However, the existing empirical research mainly discussed the role of leader styles and behaviors (eg, ethical leadership, servant leadership, abusive supervision) in promoting or inhibiting employee deviant behavior,^{35,36} and pays insufficient attention to leader traits. Considering that leader traits have an important impact on employee psychology and state, and thus affect employee deviant behavior,¹³ based on the perspective of leader traits, our study points out that leader perfectionism is an important antecedent affecting employee deviant behavior. Through empirical research, our study demonstrates that leader perfectionism leads to employee supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict, which increases employee deviant behavior, while employee narcissism reinforces this indirect effect. Our study fills the lack of research on the impact of leader traits on employee deviant behavior and enriches the research on the influence of leader perfectionism on employee deviant behavior.

Practical Implications

First, our results suggest that leader perfectionism generally leads to supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict. Therefore, organizations should reduce the negative effects of leader perfectionism. For example, organizations can encourage inter-team communication and build a harmonious and relaxed organizational atmosphere to help leaders know employees' work progress, and provide guidance, support and task adjustment for employees in a timely manner, thus reducing the likelihood of conflict. Meanwhile, this organizational atmosphere can not only help employees gain confidence and emotional resources in team communication to ensure that they are not exhausted by leaders' perfectionist demands,¹ but also provide a condition for employees to actively communicate instead of antagonizing their perfectionist leaders, so as to reduce supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict.

Second, given that leader perfectionism can provoke employee deviant behavior, which violates organizational norms, in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization.^{13,14} We suggest that perfectionist leaders must be aware that their perfectionist demands may lead employees to deviate, which in turn undermines their pursuit of perfectionism. Therefore, leader should mitigate dominance, hostility, and criticism,¹ particularly for those with narcissism, try their best to increase their pleasant interaction with employees, provide positive feedback and encouragement to defuse employee resentment and hostility, and thus avoid employee deviant behavior. In addition, as the negative effects of

leader perfectionism can be amplified by employee narcissism, leaders must learn to improve adaptability to different personalities in the workplace and select employees that best suit their supervisory and personality styles.⁸

Third, our study also provides practical implications for employees. In the face of perfectionist leaders, employees should realize that the standards are too high and keep confidence in their work. For example, we suggest that employees report their work progress to leaders in a timely fashion and make feedback seeking to help leaders adjust their standards.³ Meanwhile, employees should be cognitively consistent with perfectionist leaders and understand that the “domination” and “criticism” of perfectionist leaders are not for oppression or hostility, but for the pursuit of better work performance. By actively cooperating with leaders to prevent relationship conflicts and ultimately avoid deviant behaviors.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

First, our study designed a multi-source and multi-phase survey to avoid common method variance, but it did not provide robust causal inferences. Future studies could incorporate experimental research methods to further build on our research. Second, our study only examines the positive influence of leader perfectionism on supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict and employee deviant behavior from the interpersonal relationship perspective. Future studies could explore how employee perfectionism affects leaders or coworkers. Third, our research explores the boundary effect of the employee narcissism personality trait. We speculate that other employee personality traits also affect the effectiveness of perfectionist leaders, particularly those that play an interactive role with leader perfectionism. For example, employee self-oriented perfectionism may interact with leader other-oriented perfectionism and influence each other. Finally, our study only focuses solely on leader other-oriented perfectionism. Whether leader self-oriented perfectionism motivates employees to perform better through role modeling is also an intriguing research direction.

Conclusion

This study explores a moderated mediation model of leader perfectionism and employee deviant behavior. The study found that leader perfectionism had a significantly positive effect on employee deviant behavior via supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict and employee narcissism can positively moderate this mediated relationship. This study explores the functional mechanism and boundary conditions of leader perfectionism on employee deviant behavior, and provides practical implications for leader and employee.

Data Sharing Statement

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical Statements

Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of Yangtze University. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki. In order to ensure the validity and representativeness of the data, our study randomly selected anonymous employees to participate in the survey and used oral consent informed. Oral informed consent was approved by the ethics committee, and obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Author Contributions

All authors made a significant contribution to the work reported, whether that is in the conception, study design, execution, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation, or in all these areas; took part in drafting, revising or critically reviewing the article; gave final approval of the version to be published; have agreed on the journal to which the article has been submitted; and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Disclosure

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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