The impact of authoritarian leadership on ethical voice: A moderated mediation model of felt uncertainty and leader benevolence.

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Prior research has shown that a controlling style of leadership (i.e., authoritarian leadership), which asserts absolute authority and control over followers (Farh & Cheng, 2000), is effective for facilitating team performance under specific contexts (see a review by Harms et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2015). An authoritarian leadership style has been found to be widely applied in practice in various contexts including the military (Geddes et al., 2014), sport (Kellett, 2002), and companies across Eastern and Western countries (Aycan, 2006; Cheng et al., 2014; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2009; De Hoogh et al., 2015; Farh & Cheng, 2000). Employee ethical behavior has been identified as being essential for long-term organizational success (e.g., Feldman et al., 2015). Although the impact of positive leadership styles such as ethical leadership on employee ethical behavior is well-established (Huang & Paterson, 2017), little is known about how a leader behaving in a rule-bound and demanding manner influences follower intentions to conduct ethical behavior. Thus, the primary purpose of this study is to provide a framework to explain how and when authoritarian leadership influences employee ethical voice.

We draw upon uncertainty management theory (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) to explain how authoritarian leaders affect employee ethical voice. Authoritarian leaders demand that their subordinates obey their instructions without questioning (Farh & Cheng, 2000). They centralize decision-making around themselves and punish followers for disobedience of their instructions. We propose that felt uncertainty is a particularly relevant mechanism to link authoritarian leadership to follower ethical voice behavior. Authoritarian leaders deliberately maintain distance and do not reveal their true intentions to followers (Farh & Cheng, 2000). This generates a high level of uncertainty for followers in their ability to predict which behaviors will be welcomed by the leader and how they will react to proactive behavior by the follower. Also, as the relationship with an authoritarian leader is beyond the follower's ability to control, they will experience high levels of felt uncertainty. We also suggest that experiencing higher levels of felt uncertainty, as a result of interactions with an authoritarian leader, will lead to employees engaging less in ethical voice behavior. Finally, empirical evidence has shown that benevolent leadership plays an important role in offsetting the negative impact of authoritarian leadership on followers outcomes (e.g., Chan et al., 2013). We expect that leader benevolence, which focuses on showing consideration and facilitating work and non-work communication, helps followers to understand an authoritarian leader's intentions and preferences (Chan et al., 2013; Tian & Sanchez, 2017). In this situation, followers are less likely to experience felt uncertainty.

In a sample of 522 police officers and staff in an English police force, we found that authoritarian leadership was negatively related to employee ethical voice through increased levels of felt uncertainty, when the effects of a motivational-based mechanism suggested by previous studies were controlled. In addition, we found that the negative relationship between authoritarian leadership and employee ethical voice via felt uncertainty is mitigated by higher levels of benevolent leadership. By examining the impacts of authoritarian leadership, this study extends our current understanding of the relationship between leadership styles and follower ethical voice. Also, the development of an uncertainty perspective offers an additional theoretical lens to illustrate the negative impacts of authoritarian leadership on employees. This research also provides further evidence of the importance of taking into consideration the role of benevolent leadership when investigating the impacts of leader authoritarianism. For organizations, particular attention is required with regard to selection of supervisors and managers and to the occurrence of the adoption of an authoritarian leadership style by managers and supervisors within the organization.

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