

What the Leader Said Made Me Lose Control: Leaders' Aggressive Humor and Employees' Workplace Deviance Behaviors

Jieya He^{1, a,*}, Daiheng Li^{2, b}

¹ Beijing Jiaotong University No.3 Shangyuancun, Haidian District, Beijing, China

² Beijing Jiaotong University No.3 Shangyuancun, Haidian District, Beijing, China

^awffzhjy@163.com, ^bdaihengliresearch@gmail.com

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. From the perspective of ego depletion theory, this paper deeply explores the influencing mechanism of leader's aggressive humor on employees' deviant behaviors in the workplace, as well as the mediating effect of employees' ego depletion, the moderating effect of employees' personality traits and power distance orientation in the context of Chinese organizations. Based on the field data collected from 174 employees, all of the hypotheses are supported, and we conclude by discussing implications for the research.

Introduction

Humor is defined as "the quality of action, speech or writing inspired by happiness, humor, strangeness, funniness and fun" in the Oxford dictionary. As the agent of the organization, leader's humor will pass down, and influence subordinates use humor, which could promote the adoption of funny communication behaviors within the team, and build a humorous atmosphere in the organization [1]. Therefore, there are more and more researches on the influence of leadership humor in western academic circles. However, few empirical studies have examined the potential ineffective or negative effects of leadership humor on employees' attitudes and behaviors. For example, aggressive humor, defined as "humor that teases, denigrates, criticizes, maligns, disparages, is disrespectful, is mean-spirited, intends to embarrass, or ridicules individuals or groups of individuals", which is a kind of negative leadership humor that may constitute a stressor in the workplace and trigger harmful mental health and deviant behaviors among employees [2].

We believe that ego depletion mechanism provides a reasonable explanation for the negative effects of leaders' aggressive humor. Ego depletion theory refers to the situation in which an individual's self-control ability will be exhausted after he or she takes some actions requiring input of self-control resources [3]. Studies have shown that aggressive humor will increase employees' ego depletion, thus increasing their work tension, causing employees to have deviant behaviors such as revenge and anti-production. An important insight from ego depletion theory is that individuals differ in their susceptibility to ego depleting environments [4]. We examine the moderating effect of personality traits on the association between leaders' aggressive humor and ego depletion. Power distance orientation refers to the individual's acceptance of the unequal distribution of power in the organization. Under the specific management situation in China, this paper will explore the moderating effect of employees' power distance orientation on the relationship between leaders' aggressive humor and employees' ego depletion. Fig. 1 depicts our research framework.

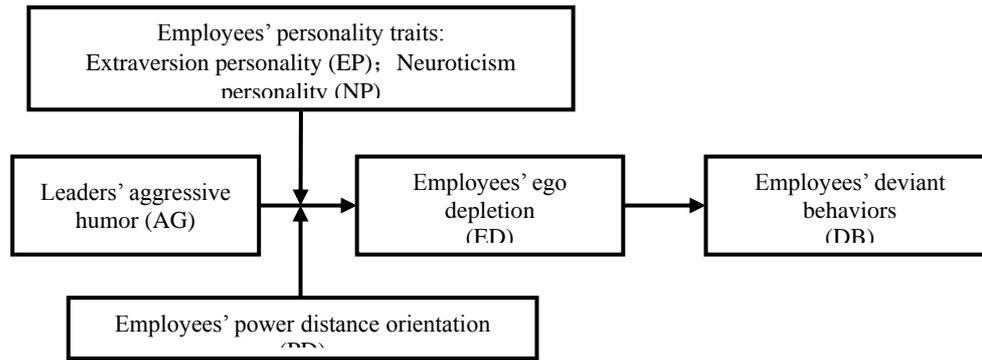


Fig. 1 Theoretical model

Theory Development and Hypotheses

Leaders' Aggressive Humor and Employees' Ego Depletion

Humor is a multi-dimensional and complex construct, and the current academic circle basically reaches the following consensus: humor contains both behavioral elements, a means of communication or activity. Leadership humor refers to the behavior initiated by the leader with the purpose of pleasing the subordinates and perceived by the subordinates, including positive humor and negative humor [5]. The leaders' aggressive humor is a kind of negative humor, which refers to the leaders' use of humor to improve his own state or behavior at the expense of others, and gain his own interests by satirizing, teasing, mocking and belittling others, making fun of their mistakes and sacrificing others. Aggressive humor can hurt others interpersonal relationships, and it represents management misconduct.

According to the theory of ego depletion, "individual self-regulation depends on limited resources, and limited resources will be exhausted due to any self-control behavior, leading to subsequent failure of self-control and regulation". In unbalanced power relationships, people with less power are more dependent on the one with more power. When employees are subjected to aggressive and aggressive humor from their leaders, they can't take "revenge" behavior because they still need to rely on their leaders in the organization. Employees have to use some of their limited resources for emotional control and adjustment of leaders, that is, to suppress their negative emotions towards leaders, which will lead to serious ego depletion of employees. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Leaders' aggressive humor relates positively to employees' ego depletion.

Employees' Ego Depletion and Deviant Behaviors in the Workplace

Workplace deviant behavior refers to voluntary behavior by an organization member that violates important organizational norms and thus threatens the well-being of the organization, its members or both [6]. These behaviors are usually divided into two dimensions: organizational level and interpersonal level. The organizational level includes sabotage, equipment destruction and theft of company property, while the interpersonal level includes gossip, bullying and verbal harassment affecting colleagues.

According to the theory of ego depletion, no matter what type of self-control activities an individual carries out, it needs to consume the energy or resources of self-control. The leaders' aggressive humor leads to ego depletion of employees, employees may adopt various negative behaviors to relieve their tension [7], and when employees in ego depletion situation will inspire negative emotions, which can reduce the information processing ability, even cause deviation behavior and the inhibitory workplace behavior and a series of adverse consequences. Empirical research shows that employees' ego depletion will lead to abnormal behaviors in the workplace, including intentional underperformance, abuse of organizational resources, disrespect and interference with colleagues. Thus, we predict that:

Hypothesis 2: Employees' ego depletion relates positively to workplace deviant behavior. Ego depletion plays an intermediary role between leaders' aggressive humor and employees' deviant behaviors in the workplace.

Moderating Effects on the Ego Depletion Mechanism

Personality trait refers to a psychological structure and mechanism that can make people's behavior tendency show a kind of persistence, stability and consistency. We believe that people with different personality traits have different self-regulation responses to leaders' aggressive humor, and therefore have different levels of ego depletion. In the big five, extroversion can best reflect the individual's positive emotions, while the negative emotions are manifested through neuroticism.

An important insight from ego depletion theory is that individuals differ in their susceptibility to ego depleting environments. We believe that employees with extroverted personality are less susceptible to the leaders' aggressive humor; because extroverted personality helps individuals develop more functional self-regulation habits and skills. On the contrary, highly neurotic employees are more likely to be influenced by the leaders' aggressive humor. Individuals who score high on neuroticism tend to have psychological stress, lack adequate self-regulation ability and are more likely to experience negative emotions such as anger, anxiety and depression [8].

Cultural differences play an important role in individual behavior in organizations. As a cultural structure, power distance orientation refers to the extent to which individuals accept the unequal distribution of power in institutions and organizations.

In an organization, employees with high power distance orientation are more likely to accept the uneven distribution of power in the organization. Employees with low power distance orientation are more concerned about the equal relationship with the leader and the leaders' treatment of themselves, and less grateful, loyal and obedient to the leader. Thus, when they face leadership of aggressive humor, there will be more intense emotions, which need to consume more of his personal resources for self-control and emotion regulation. Thus, we predict that:

Hypothesis 3a: The extroversion of individual negatively moderates the relationship between the leaders' aggressive humor and the employees' ego depletion.

Hypothesis 3b: The neuroticism of individual positively moderates the relationship between the leaders' aggressive humor and the employees' ego depletion.

Hypothesis 3c: Power distance orientation negatively moderates the relationship between the leaders' aggressive humor and the employees' ego depletion.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

We conducted this survey by Internet, and collected data of managers and employees from many enterprises in Beijing and other places. In this study, a total of 200 questionnaires were issued, and 174 questionnaires were collected, with an effective recovery rate of 87%. Among them, 60.7% are males, and 39.3% are females. This study investigated the personal information of direct leaders, among which 57.2% were male leaders and 42.8% were female leaders.

Measures

The scales used for reference in this study are mature scales in foreign countries or Chinese scales translated and revised by domestic researchers. The multi-item scale of the questionnaire adopts Likert with 7 points. Eight items translated and revised by Shi Guanfeng et al. (2017), were adapted to measure aggressive humor. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.870. Ego depletion was assessed with 5 items chosen from the scale developed by Deng et al. (2016). The Cronbach's alpha was 0.819. Fifteen items developed by Bennett and Robinson (2000), then revised by Stewart et al. (2009) were adapted to measure deviant behaviors. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.930. The scale developed by McCrae and Costa (1987) was used to measure the personality traits of employees, and 12 items were used to measure extraversion personality and neuroticism respectively. The

Cronbach's alpha was 0.904 for extroverted personality and 0.913 for neuroticism. The six-item scale developed by Dorfman and Howell (1988) was adapted to measure the power distance orientation. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.855. We controlled the gender, age, education and working years of employees, the age and gender of the leader when testing the hypotheses of this paper. Leader-member exchange relationship (LMX) is selected as the control variable. In this paper, the lmx-7 scale developed by Graen and uhl-bien (1995) is adopted, with a total of 7 topics. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.860.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We used AMOS24.0 to distinguish the validity of all variables, the leadership of aggressive humor, to build a single factor, two factors, three factors, four factors, five factors and six factor model and comparison. The results in table 1 show that the six-factor model has the best fitting effect, indicating that the six variables involved in this study have good discriminant validity.

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis

Model			RMSE A	GFI	CFI	TLI	IFI
Six-factor Model	AG; ED; EP. NP. PD. DB	1.77	0.05	0.87	0.95	0.94	0.95
Five-factor Model	AG + DB; ED; EP. NP. PD.	3.66	0.09	0.72	0.80	0.80	0.81
Four-factor Model a	AG + ED + DB. EP. NP. PD.	4.51	0.10	0.69	0.75	0.73	0.75
Four-factor Model b	AG. ED; EP + NP + PD; DB	4.63	0.10	0.68	0.74	0.72	0.74
Three-factor Model	AG + DB. ED; EP + NP + PD	4.94	0.11	0.65	0.71	0.70	0.72
Two-factor Model	AG + ED + DB. EP + NP + PD	5.51	0.14	0.60	0.64	0.63	0.65
Single-factor Model	AG + ED + EP + NP + PD + DB	6.17	0.15	0.52	0.56	0.54	0.56

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliabilities of each variable are shown in table 2. All the above results support the hypothesis in this paper, so further regression analysis can be carried out.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliabilities of major variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4	5
1. Workplace Deviance	4.5307	94462.					
2. Offensive Humor	4.6796	92546.	814.**				
3. Ego Depletion	4.6414	98855.	802.**	915.**			
4. Extroverted Personality	4.8008	84528.	- 554.**	741.**	- 685.**		
5. Neurotic Personality	4.7294	88047.	713.**	869.**	846.**	- 830.**	
6. Power Distance Orientation	4.7040	95636.	- 675.**	845.**	- 771.**	767.**	906.**

Hypothesis Testing

We used SPSS 24.0 for hierarchical regression analysis, and the main effect, mediating effect and regulating effect were tested respectively. In order to avoid multicollinearity among variables, each variable was centralized before regression. The final results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression analysis

Variable	Workplace Deviance Behaviors			Loss of self			
	M1	M2	The M3	The M4	The M5	M6	M7
Control variables							
Leads' Gender	0.053	0.027	0.049	0.010	0.001	0.008	0.011
Leaders' Age	0.002	0.094	0.020	0.067	0.069	0.062	0.067
Employees' Gender	0.118	0.063	0.099	0.060	0.051	0.063	0.060
Employees' Age	0.037	0.009	0.031	0.019	0.021	0.027	0.021
Length of Service	0.081	0.064	0.079	0.008	0.010	0.010	0.007
Employee's Education	0.166 ^{**}	0.177 ^{**}	0.163 ^{**}	0.010	0.001	0.009	0.011
LMX	0.145 [*]	0.054	0.156 [*]	0.033	0.072	0.094	0.043
The independent variables							
Aggressive humor	0.914 ^{***}		0.05	0.963 ^{***}	0.655 ^{**}	0.694 ^{***}	0.981 ^{***}
Intervening variable							
Ego Depletion		0.778 [*] * *	0.695 ^{***}				
Adjust the variable							
Extraversion					0.682 ^{**}		
Neuroticism						0.516 [*]	
Power Distance							0.637 [*]
Interactive items							
Aggressive Humor * Extroversion					0.450 ^{**}		
Aggressive Humor * Neuroticism						0.391 ^{**}	
Aggressive Humor * Power Distance							0.412 ^{**}
R ²	0.698	0.669	0.717	0.840	0.843	0.851	0.840
* R ²	0.411	0.382	0.430	0.416	0.419	0.427	0.416
F	47.590	41.617	46.160	108.160	87.424	93.452	85.638

Main Effect Testing.

M1 shows that the leadership of aggressive humor and significantly positively related to employee workplace deviance behavior (beta = 0.91, p < 0.01). Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Mediating Effect Testing.

M4 shows that the leaders' aggressive humor was significantly positive correlation with employees' ego depletion (beta = 0.96, p < 0.01). M2 shows that employees' ego depletion has a significant positive impact on employees' deviant behaviors in the workplace (beta = 0.78, p < 0.01). M3 shows that the employees' ego depletion plays an intermediary role between leaders' aggressive and employees' workplace deviance behaviors (beta = 0.69, p < 0.01), completely hypothesis 2 was supported.

Moderating Effect Testing.

M5 shows that the higher the score on extroversion, the weaker the relationship between leaders' aggressive humor and employees' ego depletion (beta = -0.45, p < 0.05). M6 shows that the higher the score of individuals' neuroticism traits, the stronger the relationship between leaders' aggressive humor and employees' ego depletion (beta = 0.39, p < 0.05). M7 show that power distance orientation negatively regulates the relationship between leaders' aggressive humor and employees' ego depletion (beta = 0.41, p < 0.05). Our findings therefore support Hypothesis 3a, 3b and 3c. In addition, we used simple slope test to prove it (Fig. 2, Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).

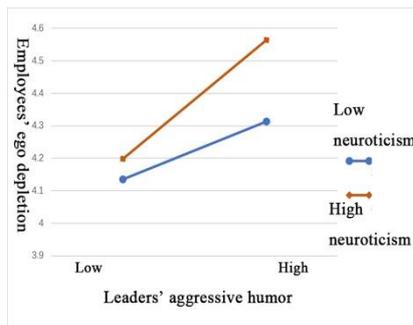


Fig. 2

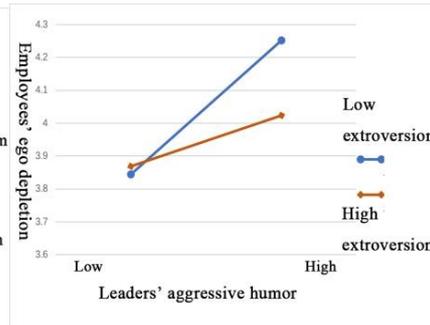


Fig. 3

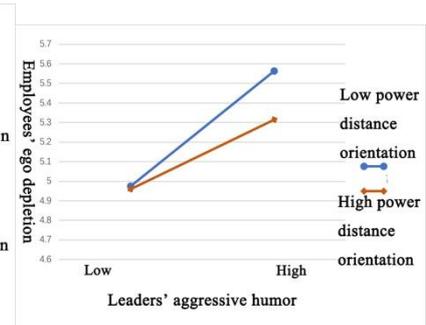


Fig. 4

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

Our investigation extends previous theorizing about ego depletion theory by studying the influence mechanism of leaders' aggressive humor on employees' deviant behaviors. We found that the employees' ego depletion plays the role of mediation between leaders' aggressive humor and employees' deviant behavior. Second, this study shows that there is a significant positive correlation between leaders' aggressive humor and employees' deviant behaviors. In China organization situation, we first highlight the aggressive leadership humorous effect, confirmed the different leadership style of humor will produce different effect. Third, further research shows that employees' high power distance orientation can reduce the effect of aggressive leadership humor on employees' ego depletion.

Practical Implications

The conclusion of this research also has some enlightenment on how to play the role of leadership humor reasonably and effectively. First, leaders should pay attention to the ways of use humor, avoid using aggressive humor, that is use humor in the form of ridicule, satire, teasing and degeneration not only can't create a good working atmosphere, but counterproductive, increase employees' ego depletion, lead to deviant behaviors, cause incalculable damage to the organization. Second, leaders should pay attention to the differences of employees' power distance orientation. For employees with low power distance orientation, aggressive leadership humor may bring bad consequences. Leaders should pay more attention to the use of humor.

Conclusion

Based on the ego depletion theory, this study explores the influence of leaders' aggressive humor on employees' deviant behaviors in the workplace, as well as their functional mechanism and boundary conditions. Specifically, the leaders' aggressive humor not only has an impact on employees' ego depletion, but also influences their deviant behaviors in the workplace. The extroversion of individuals negatively moderates the relationship, while the neuroticism plays a positive moderating role. However, employees' high power distance orientation weakens the impact of aggressive leadership humor on employees' ego depletion. In the context of Chinese organizational culture, this study illustrates the negative effects of negative leadership humor and provides a new exploration direction for future research on leadership humor.

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