Leader Interpersonal Emotion Regulation and Follower Performance

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Corresponding Author:	Cristian Vasquez The University of Manchester Manchester, Lancashire UNITED KINGDOM	
Corresponding Author Secondary Information:		
Corresponding Author's Institution:	The University of Manchester	
Corresponding Author's Secondary Institution:		
First Author:	Cristian A. Vasquez	
First Author Secondary Information:		
Order of Authors:	Cristian A. Vasquez	
	Karen Niven, PhD	
	Hector P. Madrid, PhD	
	Author Note	
Order of Authors Secondary Information:		
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Abstract:	<p>Interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) refers to the actions of influencing other people's feelings. Drawing on this construct and emotions-as-social-information theory, we argue that leader IER to improve or worsen followers' feelings would be related to followers affect and thereby to their performance. Results of a multisource survey study supported a mediation model in which leaders' attempts to improve their followers' feelings enhancing followers' task performance via the followers' experience of positive affect. In contrast, leaders' use of affect-worsening actions was associated with the experience of followers' negative affect, but not related to task performance. These findings contribute by expanding knowledge on the affective underpinnings of the leader-follower relationship and informing the development of leadership interventions aimed to foster employee performance.</p>	
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Running head: LEADER EMOTION REGULATION AND FOLLOWER PERFORMANCE

Leader Interpersonal Emotion Regulation and Follower Performance

Cristian A. Vasquez

University of Manchester, UK

Karen Niven

University of Manchester, UK

Hector P. Madrid

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

Author Note

Cristian A. Vasquez and Karen Niven, Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, UK. Hector P. Madrid, School of Management, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Cristian Vasquez, Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, Booth Street East, Manchester M13 9SS, United Kingdom. Email: cristian.vasquez@manchester.ac.uk

Leader Interpersonal Emotion Regulation and Follower Performance

Abstract

Interpersonal emotion regulation refers to the actions of influencing other people's feelings. We apply this construct to the context of leadership, to determine whether leader interpersonal emotion regulation may explain followers' performance. Drawing on emotions-as-social-information theory, we argue that leader strategies to improve or worsen followers' feelings would be related to followers affect and thereby to their performance. We tested these proposals using a multisource field study involving 31 leaders and 157 followers. Results from multilevel modelling supported a mediation model in which leaders' attempts to improve their followers' feelings enhancing followers' task performance via the followers' experience of positive affect. In contrast, leaders' use of affect-worsening actions was associated with the experience of followers' negative affect, but not related to task performance. These findings contribute by expanding knowledge on the affective underpinnings of the leader-follower relationship and informing the development of leadership interventions aimed to foster employee performance.

Keywords:

interpersonal emotion regulation, affect, task performance, leadership

Leader Interpersonal Emotion Regulation and Follower Performance

Interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) refers to the deliberate and controlled actions by which a person initiates, maintains or changes the occurrence, intensity or timespan of others' affect, and involves the use of strategies to improve or worsen followers' feelings (Niven, Totterdell, & Holman, 2009). This behavior has been viewed as relevant to the dynamics of the workplace, with studies suggesting that IER is a process that has effects on relationship quality and individuals' well-being (Troth, Lawrence, & Jordan, 2017).

Here, we apply the notion of IER to the leadership context, with the aim of examining whether leaders can alter their followers' emotions in order to elicit desired performance effects. While there have been some attempts to study leaders' use of IER, these have mostly been within the context of laboratory settings and those studies in the field have only captured attempts to improve followers' feelings (Little, Gooty, & Williams, 2016). Thus, the effects of both affect-improving and affect-worsening IER on followers' feelings and core aspects of their task performance are still scantily examined in the organizational psychology research. Drawing on the theory of emotion-as-social-information (Van Kleef, 2009), we examined whether leader affect-improving and -worsening IER would lead to positive and negative followers' affect, and if this in turn leads to follower performance. Thus, we contribute to the literature on leadership and IER by expanding the knowledge on leaders' influential behaviors, and explicitly demonstrating the role that IER can have in followers' affect and their performance.

Theoretical Development

According to Niven, Totterdell and Holman (2009), the process of regulating others' emotions is expressed in two sets of behaviors. Affect-improving IER involves provoking

positive feelings in interaction partners (e.g., enthusiasm, inspiration), whereas affect-worsening IER elicits negative affect in others (e.g., worry, nervousness).

Adopting emotion-as-social-information (EASI; Van Kleef, 2009) framework, the relationship between IER and affect can be explained due to the expression of affect communicate to others the agent's goals, attitudes, and intentions, which are captured by the targets' cognitive inferences. Based on this, supportive evidence indicates that leaders' displays of emotion can influence followers' behavior and performance (Koning & Van Kleef, 2015). Thus, we propose that IER may involve similar processes, such that, when a leader uses affect-improving IER (e.g. demonstrating interest in followers' problems) followers could infer that the leader is concerned about their well-being, which ought to elicit positive affective reactions. Conversely, when a leader uses affect-worsening IER behaviors, such as criticizing, followers are likely to infer a lack of care about the relationship, resulting in negative affective reactions. Additional support for our proposals can be found in the observed effects of leadership relative to the affective experience of followers. Favorable leader behaviors, such as those involved in supportive and transformational leadership, are related to followers' positive experiences, for example, engagement (Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011). In contrast, unfavorable leadership behavior, for instance abusive leadership, leads to followers' negative states such as frustration, strain or exhaustion (Skakon, Nielsen, Borg, & Guzman, 2010). Based the above, we derived the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Leader affect-improving IER will be positively related to follower positive affect.

Hypothesis 2: Leader affect-worsening IER will be positively related to follower negative affect.

Our second proposal is that leader IER influences followers' performance through its association with follower affect. Theory on motivational underpinnings of affect bring insights into this claim, by describing two general motivational systems underlying the relationship between affect and behavior, namely, Behavioral Approach System (BAS) and Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) (Carver, Avivi, & Laurenceau, 2008). BAS is associated with positive affect, such that when individuals feels positive feelings, they increase their effort and dedication to reward-seeking behaviors. Thus, followers' positive emotional experiences give them more energy and lead them to expect more positive outcomes, which may lead them to perform better in their tasks. In contrast, BIS involves the experience of negative affect, which is associated to the presence of threats in the environment and has been linked to the tendency to avoid and withdraw from the contextual situation. Thus, individuals may reduce their performance, because they are likely disengaged from the tasks given the adverse affective state experienced. Importantly, some studies have reported positive effects of negative emotions on performance, depending on boundary conditions, such as individual's sense of control and social support (George & Zhou, 2007). However, the continuous interactions involving the experience of negative affect and the imbalance of power between leaders and their followers may lead to impaired cognition and behavior of followers, especially when is the leader the source of followers' negative affect (Skakon, Nielsen, Borg, & Guzman, 2010). Thus, drawing on the above, we propose two mediational processes, stating that follower affect is the medium by which leader IER is related to follower performance:

Hypothesis 3: Follower positive affect will mediate the positive relationship between leader affect-improving IER and task performance.

Hypothesis 4: Follower negative affect will mediate the negative relationship between leader affect-worsening IER and task performance.

Method

Procedure

We conducted a multisource survey study with a retail organization in Chile. Employees responded to a survey providing ratings of their leader's IER and their own affect. In an independent survey, leaders provided ratings of each of their followers' performance. 157 employees nested in 31 leaders took part of the study. On average, supervisors were associated with 5.06 (SD = 1.41) followers. Participants were 72% male, average age was 31.2 years (SD = 8.62), and mean job tenure was 3.6 years (SD = 5.27). Job roles were 48.4% selling agents, 10.8% administrative, 5.1% technical, 8.3% professional staff, 4.6% manager and 12.7% others.

Measures

Leader IER was measured using 13-items adapted from Niven et al. (2011). Followers indicated the extent to which their leader uses strategies to improve the way they feel, e.g., "discusses team members' positive characteristics" ($\alpha = .95$) or worsen the way they feel, e.g., "talks about team members' shortcomings" ($\alpha = .91$), on a 5-point scale (*not at all – a great extent*). Followers' affect was measured with a 6-items scale of Warr, Bindl, Parker, & Inceoglu (2014), which asked followers to rate the extent to which they experience an array of feelings on a response scale of 1: *never* – 5: *always/almost always*. Items were "enthusiastic", "joyful" and "inspired" for positive affect ($\alpha = .81$), and "worried", "anxious" and "tense" for negative affect ($\alpha = .68$). Followers also reported interaction frequency with their leaders with the single item "how frequently do you interact with your leader?" (1: *almost never* – 5: *everyday*), for use as a control in subsequent analyses. Finally, we use Oldham & Cummings (1996) three-item scale to

measure individual task performance in terms of effort, quality, and quantity (1: *little/low* – 7: *much/high*; $\alpha = .86$).

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis showed acceptable goodness-of-fit for a five-factor model defined by leader improving and worsening IER, follower positive and negative affect, and follower task performance, $\chi^2 = 343.59$, $df(199)$, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .94¹. Means, standard deviations, correlations and reliabilities are summarized in Table 1.

We tested our hypotheses using multilevel structural equation modelling with *MPlus*, because employees were nested in their respective leaders. In support of Hypotheses 1 and 2, results showed a positive association between leaders' affect-improving IER and follower positive affect, $b = .33$, $SE = .06$, $p < .01$, and a positive association between leaders' affect-worsening IER and follower negative affect, $b = .34$, $SE = .07$, $p < .01$. Also, results of mediation analysis showed a positive indirect effect between leaders' affect-improving IER, follower positive affect and task performance, Monte Carlo CI 95% [.06, .19], supporting Hypotheses 3. Finally, mediation analyses revealed a non-significant direct effect between the mediator and

¹ Goodness-of-fit of this five-factor solution was significantly better than two alternatives three-factor solutions. The first model loaded measures of task performance in one factor, improving and worsening IER in another factor, and positive and negative affect in another single factor, $\Delta\chi^2(7) = 418.83$, $p < .01$. The second model loaded measures of task performance in one factor, affect-improving IER and positive affect in another factor, and affect-worsening IER and negative affect in another single factor, $\Delta\chi^2(7) = 214.24$, $p < .01$.

task performance, $b = -.13$, $p > .05$, such that a mediation process was not likely. As a result, hypothesis 4 was not supported.²

[INSERT TABLES 1 AND 2 AND FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

Discussion

Our findings indicate that leader IER has a proximal effect on followers' affect and a more distal influence on followers' task performance. Leader affect-improving IER was positively related to followers' positive affect, which in turn was positively related to their task performance. Conversely, leader affect-worsening IER was positively related to followers' unpleasant feelings. However, we did not find a significant relationship between followers' negative affect and their task performance. Drawing on EASI, the relationship between leader IER and followers' affect is likely due to the latter's inferences about the intentions of leaders about their well-being and motivation, such that affect-improving would involve authentic interest, whereas the opposite applies to affect-worsening. Regarding the associations of followers' affect with their performance, they are explained by the motivational meaning embedded in the affective experience. As such, positive affect entails approach motivation, which increases the likelihood of making things happen. However, the case of negative affect seems to involve more complexity. Although negative feelings involve avoidance tendencies, they might also adopt an approach meaning depending on the context (Carver, Avivi, &

² Supplementary analysis revealed that leader affect-worsening IER exerts a significant negative indirect effect on follower performance via follower positive affect, Monte Carlo CI 95% [-0.23, -.07]. This result will be discussed in the discussion section. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested this analysis.

Laurenceau, 2008). The requirement for social interaction might play a role here, such as negative feelings could lead to better performance when interdependence among employees is needed, but no relationship between these variables is likely when the request for interdependence is absent (Madrid, Totterdell, Niven, & Vasquez, 2018). Thus, further research examining possible boundary conditions for the effect of negative affect on follower performance is still needed. Alternatively, as suggested by the supplementary analysis conducted, it may be the case that leaders' affect-worsening IER exerts an effect on follower performance reducing the experience of positive affect, which suggests greater complexity in the model outlined.

Our research contributes to apply this form of affective behavior to the work context, by developing a theoretical rationale based on the integration of IER with emotions-as-social-information theory. Also, we contribute to the literature by providing evidence that leaders influence follower performance via the pathway of follower affect. In practical terms, our findings have implications for developing leadership interventions aimed to foster employee performance. Because leaders' IER has the potential to influence followers' affect and behavior, practitioners should consider training programs addressing IER. For example, leaders could be informed about the benefits of generating positive affect in their followers and specific ways in which they can do so.

Despite its strengths, such as the use of multisource data and multilevel analysis based on dozens of leader-follower dyads, the current research also has some limitations. Causal directions of the relationships we proposed can only be theoretically inferred, such that leaders' performance appraisals might predict followers' ratings of affect and leader IER. This might be explained due to biases in the perceptions of followers, because more positive assessment of

their task performance by leaders might conduct to an increased experience of either positive or negative affect and positive or negative perceptions of leaders' behavior. Furthermore, common-method variance could threaten the effects estimated in the relationship between leader IER and follower affect. Moreover, the lack of effect on the relationship between negative feelings and performance might be due to the limited reliability of the negative affect measure. These measurement issues might imply that individuals are assessing specific negative emotions in a different way, which may affect the estimation of the relationship between negative affect and performance. Also, we only adopted in theoretical fashion the proposals of EASI and approach/avoidance motivation, but they were not tested in the study. Finally, the study was conducted in a single organization, which may limit the external validity of the results observed. Thus, further research should address the above issues to determine if the findings of this study are robust and generalizable.

To sum up, in this research note we aimed to understand the effects of interpersonal emotion regulation in leader-follower relationships, showing that this affective behavior could be relevant for employee affect and task performance. We trust that future research and practice will follow and expand on the knowledge developed here.

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Figure 1. Path Analyses for Leader Interpersonal Emotion Regulation, Follower Affect and Follower Task Performance

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliabilities

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Leader-follower interaction frequency	4.05	1.13	-					
2. Follower task performance	5.19	1.24	.23**	(.87)				
3. Follower positive affect	3.66	0.88	.33**	.20*	(.81)			
4. Follower negative affect	3.14	0.81	-.25**	-0.09	-.40**	(.68)		
5. Leader affect-improving regulation	3.35	1.15	.46**	0.05	.53**	-.31**	(.95)	
6. Leader affect-worsening regulation	1.95	1.11	-.34**	0.05	-.56**	.36**	-.63**	(.91)

Note. *N* = 157. Reliabilities are displayed in parentheses on the diagonal. * *p* <.05. ** *p* <.01.

Table 2. *Multilevel Analysis for Leader IER, Follower Affect, and Follower Task Performance*

Variable	Positive Affect	Negative Affect	Task Performance
<i>Intercept</i>	3.40 (.62)**	3.24 (.23)**	0.67 (15.73)
Leader-follower interaction frequency			.28 (.07)**
Leader affect-improving regulation	.33 (.06)**	-.13 (.06)**	-.17 (.11)
Leader affect-worsening regulation	-.39 (.04)**	.34 (.07)**	.09 (.15)
Follower positive affect			.37 (.09)**
Follower negative affect			-.13 (.15)
<i>R</i> ² Model	.42**	.22*	.15*
<i>Indirect effect</i> (Monte Carlo = 20000) [CI 95%]	[.06, .19]*	[-.15, .05]	

Note. *N* = 45. Unstandardized estimates. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01