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ORIGINAL PAPER

Mixed Feelings About Supervisors: The Effect of LMX Ambivalence on Supervisor-Directed Behaviors

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Abstract

Integrating norms of reciprocity, affect theory of social exchange, and ambivalence literature, we investigated how leader-member exchange (LMX) ambivalence influences employees' interpersonal behaviors toward supervisors. Study 1, with a time-lagged field method, revealed that LMX ambivalence was positively related to *both* employee-rated supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors and that such relationships were mediated by emotional ambivalence toward supervisors. We also confirmed the amplification effects of workplace gossip about supervisors (WGS). Specifically, while receiving more positive WGS (PWGS) or less negative WGS (NWGS) could strengthen the positive relationship between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping behaviors, receiving less PWGS or more NWGS would accentuate the positive effect of emotional ambivalence on supervisor-directed deviant behaviors. Study 2 replicated our results with a scenario-based method and offered evidence for the mediating effect of emotional ambivalence toward supervisors. Study 3 included supervisor-rated helping and deviant behavior and a subjective measure of emotional ambivalence and again confirmed the mediating role of emotional ambivalence. Our findings extend knowledge of the interpersonal consequences of LMX ambivalence.

Keywords LMX ambivalence · Emotional ambivalence · Workplace gossip · Helping behavior · Deviant behavior

Introduction

Ambivalence is more of a norm than an exception in organizations (Rothman et al., 2017). However, relationship scientists pointed out that while the literature on positive and negative workplace relationships has proliferated, studies on ambivalent workplace relationships are slow to "arrive" (Methot et al., 2017, p. 1790). Lee et al. (2019) recently established a valuable starting point to examine ambivalence within the context of the LMX relationship to advance the understanding of this phenomenon. Indeed, LMX relationships, due to power imbalance and role conflicts, are particularly prone to triggering ambivalent perceptions (see Lee et al., 2019). However, prior research often explored LMX relationships from a univalent perspective, assuming that such relationships exist on a continuum ranging from negative (low-) to positive (high-) quality (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Lee et al. (2019) challenged this assumption from an ambivalent perspective and introduced the concept of LMX ambivalence. They defined LMX ambivalence as the coexisting positive (i.e., high-quality) and negative (i.e., high-quality) perceptions regarding LMX relationships. To date, the few existing empirical studies on LMX ambivalence have mainly examined the effects of LMX ambivalence on employees' work attitudes, such as emotional exhaustion (Kim et al., 2023) and career commitment (Dechawatanapaisal, 2020), and their behaviors, such as proactive work behaviors (Chen & Weng, 2023), task performance (Lee et al., 2019) and creativity (Lin & Du, 2023).

Lee et al. (2019) stated that supervisors might be inconsistent in treating the same employees. Thus, they should be aware of the potential interpersonal costs they might pay for inducing LMX ambivalence. In the current study, we aimed to respond to recent calls for research examining how employees experiencing LMX ambivalence would treat their supervisors (e.g., Rothman et al., 2017; Zhao & Zhou, 2021). Interpersonal helping and deviance (or harming) are two widely studied types of workplace interactions (Shao et al., 2011). Venkataramani and Dalal (2007) found that relational variables had significant incremental explanatory

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power over other traditional predictors of individuals' helping and deviant behaviors. While previous research has explored positive and negative interpersonal relationships as pivotal to individuals' helping and deviant behaviors (Melwani & Rothman, 2022), the impact of LMX ambivalence—characterized by simultaneous positive and negative views on LMX relationships—on supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors remains unknown. Supervisor-directed helping behaviors refer to employee discretionary extra-role behaviors that are intended to benefit supervisors (Dalal et al., 2009), while supervisor-directed deviant behaviors are defined as discretionary behaviors that violate important organizational norms and are intended to harm supervisors (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). These behaviors represent specific forms of interpersonal facilitation and mistreatment directed at supervisors, respectively, which are possible predictors of their well-being and leadership effectiveness (Gauglitz et al., 2022; Zou et al., 2015). In addition, several empirical studies have found that interpersonal helping and harming behaviors are largely independent constructs (Cropanzano et al., 2017a; Dalal et al., 2009) and might be positively related rather than antithetical. Building on previous findings that ambivalent coworker relationships can simultaneously trigger positive and negative reciprocity norms (Melwani & Rothman, 2022), we conjecture that LMX ambivalence might also lead employees to engage in supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors. By doing so, we also aimed to provide a theoretical rationale for how and why these seemingly contradictory interpersonal behaviors may co-occur.

Concerning the mechanism linking workplace relationships to interpersonal behaviors, researchers have consistently emphasized the pivotal roles of emotions (Cropanzano et al., 2017b; Melwani & Rothman, 2022). Specifically, Hareli and Rafaeli (2008) stated that interpersonal interactions can elicit specific emotional responses that color how individuals evaluate their interaction partners. Across a chain of interpersonal interactions, these emotional responses would aggregate to summarize whether specific relationships are evaluated as positive, negative, or ambivalent. Methot et al. (2017) also argued that established relationships set the affective tones that individuals experience, which then influence future interactions. While positive/negative relationships have a positive/negative affective tone (Cropanzano et al., 2017b), Methot et al. (2017) proposed that ambivalent relationships are characterized by coactivated feelings of positivity and negativity toward the relational partners. They also assumed that emotional ambivalence—'the simultaneous experience of both negative and positive emotions' (Fong, 2006, p. 1016)—might function as the potential mechanism by which ambivalent workplace relationships yield individual or dyadic outcomes (Methot et al., 2017). Melwani and Rothman (2022) have demonstrated that ambivalent relationships with coworkers are likely to generate feelings of emotional ambivalence. Thus, we proposed that emotional ambivalence better describes how employees experiencing LMX ambivalence feel about their leaders than positive or negative emotions alone.

According to the affect theory of social exchange (ATSE; Lawler, 2001), we further postulate that LMX ambivalence would trigger emotional ambivalence towards supervisors by simultaneously inducing gratitude and anger. The ATSE proposes that exchange outcomes—the quality of LMX relationships—are constructed as having differing emotional effects. Gratitude is a positive moral emotion that occurs in response to help from others (McCullough et al., 2001), whereas anger is a negative moral emotion that occurs in response to others' harm or moral violations (Ford et al., 2018b). Because global positive and negative emotions have no specific targets and are more diffuse than target-directed gratitude and anger (Barsade & Gibson, 2007), supportive or unsupportive treatment from positive or negative LMX relationships should have stronger effects on supervisor-directed gratitude or anger than on global positive or negative emotions. Thus, we speculate that when employees have both positive and negative perceptions of their LMX relationships, they experience emotional ambivalence toward their supervisors (i.e., gratitude and anger concurrently). Furthermore, the ATSE proposes that specific positive emotions engendered by successful social exchanges could increase the solidarity effect on dyadic exchange relationships, and specific negative emotions could decrease the solidarity effects (Lawler, 2001). As two foundational moral emotions, employees' gratitude and anger may elicit powerful behavioral tendencies in interpersonal relationships that would promote reward for receiving supportive treatments (Ford et al., 2018a) and retribution for unfavorable treatment, respectively (Li et al., 2021). Notably, Oh and Tong (2023) argued that situations that elicit both gratitude and negative emotions (e.g., guilt, anger, and disappointment) would simultaneously activate the above conflicting behavioral tendencies. Thus, we argued that the emotional ambivalence (i.e., gratitude and anger) engendered by LMX ambivalence might promote employees to engage in both positive supervisor-directed helping *and* negative deviant behaviors.

In addition, according to the ambivalence amplification effect (Katz & Glass, 1979), when individuals experience ambivalent emotions, they tend to pay attention to the ambivalent target and actively gather information about it (Kachadourian et al., 2005). By obtaining information that makes them feel more positive or negative about the ambivalent object, they could reduce the discomfort and internal tension caused by emotional ambivalence (Bell & Esses, 2002). In the workplace, supervisors and coworkers constitute the immediate social environment for employees and are

considered to be the primary sources from which employees gather information (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). One of the most common methods of information gathering in the workplace is related to receiving gossip from coworkers or supervisors (Bai et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2022). Particularly, prior studies have found that employees are keenly interested in gathering information about their supervisors, making supervisors a potential target of workplace gossip (WG) (Zhong et al., 2022). WG about supervisors (WGS) refers to informational and evaluative (e.g., positive or negative) communication from one employee (i.e., the gossiper) to one or more employees (i.e., the gossip recipient) about the absent supervisor (i.e., the target; Brady et al., 2017). WG about supervisors (WGS) can be categorized as either positive (PWGS) or negative (NWGS; Brady et al., 2017). Scholars have noted that the direction of amplification is determined by situational factors (Chen & Treviño, 2023; Katz & Glass, 1979), specifically, the valence of new information about the ambivalent target (Rothman et al., 2017). Thus, we speculate that receiving more PWGS might prime the positive component of an ambivalent emotion (Kachadourian et al., 2005) and make employees generate stronger positive responses towards supervisors, resulting in more supervisor-directed helping. In contrast, the negative information provided by NWGS would exacerbate the negative feelings that comprise the negative component of an ambivalent emotion and make employees generate more negative responses towards the target (Vadera & Pratt, 2013), resulting in more supervisor-directed deviant behaviors.

Overall, we seek to make four critical contributions to the current literature. Firstly, our study extends the existing research by suggesting that LMX ambivalence could not only influence employees' work attitudes (Dechawatanapaisal, 2020; Kim et al., 2023) and their performance (Chen & Weng, 2023; Lee et al., 2019), but also affect their interpersonal reactions toward supervisors, such as helping behavior and deviant behavior. Secondly, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of employee (un)ethical behavior (e.g., helping and deviant behaviors) by identifying interpersonal helping and deviant behaviors as relatively independent constructs (Dalal et al., 2009) and providing additional evidence to the previous research (Melwani & Rothman, 2022; Tang et al., 2020) that employees might perform both helping and deviant behaviors concurrently. Thirdly, drawing upon ATSE, we identify the mediating role of emotional ambivalence toward supervisors, further echoing the call to explore the triggers and outcomes of emotional ambivalence in organizations (Chang & Raver, 2020), and advancing our knowledge of the importance of affect in LMX development (Cropanzano et al., 2017b; Wang et al., 2023). Finally, we explicate a particular boundary condition (i.e., receiving WGS) that might affect the magnitude of the effects of emotional ambivalence. Doing so answers the question of when ambivalence would lead to amplified responses (Bell & Esses, 2002; Chen & Treviño, 2023), and it also extends the literature on gossip by shifting the focus from the gossiper and gossip target to the gossip recipients (Zhu et al., 2022).

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

The Effects of LMX Ambivalence on Helping and Deviant Behaviors Toward Supervisors

Relationships with supervisors or coworkers are a vital part of an employee's social environment in the workplace (Melwani & Rothman, 2022; Methot et al., 2017). Mutual relationships evolve via interdependent, bidirectional exchanges based on the reciprocity norms that informally guide social interactions between parties (Cropanzano et al., 2017a). The original exchanges generate future obligations because, to maintain balanced exchange relationships, one has to respond to the other party's treatment in a similar way. Methot et al. (2017) stated that established relationships would influence future interactions. High-quality LMX relationships are often characterized as those with a high frequency of interaction, open communication, professional respect, liking, and mutual trust (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Helping behaviors are directed toward particular recipients based on the extent to which individuals feel obligated to reciprocate favorable treatments (Liao et al., 2023). Therefore, when employees judge their LMX relationships as high-quality, they are more likely to go beyond their formal job descriptions and provide extra benefits for supervisors via supervisor-directed helping (Zou et al., 2015). Low-quality LMX relationships, in contrast, are marked by a lack of interpersonal interaction, role expectation, mutual respect, and resource exchange (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Employees in such relationships cannot enjoy the same privileges as those in high-quality relationships (Schuh et al., 2018). Consequently, they might perceive their supervisors as less interactionally fair leaders and poor exchange partners (Quade et al., 2020) and, to maintain balance within the negative reciprocity relationships, behave in a way that threatens the well-being of supervisors, committing supervisor-directed deviance (Gauglitz et al., 2022).

The current study focused on less-well-understood ambivalent LMX relationships, which are also commonly observed in organizations (Chen & Weng, 2023; Lee et al., 2019). Employees are often motivated to resolve the "sense of disequilibrium, confusion, apprehension, and loss of control" that ambivalence creates (Ashforth et al., 2014, p. 1460). Therefore, ambivalence can stimulate short-term variations in a particular relationship (Methot et al., 2017).

Employees in ambivalent relationships may employ temporal splitting responses (Ashforth et al., 2014; Methot et al., 2017), in which they "alternate between love and hate by viewing the relationship target totally positively today, but totally negatively tomorrow" (Pratt & Doucet, 2000, p. 219). Previous research has shown that interpersonal helping and harming behaviors are largely independent constructs (Cropanzano et al., 2017a) and may be positively related rather than antithetical (Dalal et al., 2009). Such a splitting defense mechanism opens the possibility that helping and deviant behaviors might co-occur towards the same ambivalent target (e.g., supervisor). Rothman et al. (2017) have already suggested that the combination of 'moving towards' and 'moving against' may also be an interpersonal response to ambivalence, reflecting a particular attachment type.

Furthermore, according to the conceptualization of ambivalence (Thompson et al., 1995), the positive and negative components of an ambivalent relationship must be similar in magnitude and have some intensity. Therefore, based on prior findings that positive relationships elicit positive reciprocity norms, such as helping behaviors, and negative relationships elicit negative reciprocity norms, such as harming behavior, Melwani and Rothman (2022) argued that simultaneous positivity and negativity in ambivalent coworker relationships can elicit both positive and negative reciprocity norms. In this paper, we argue that the same phenomenon may occur in the context of LMX. Employees experiencing LMX ambivalence would be motivated to respond to both positive and negative reciprocity norms by fulfilling both, i.e., engaging in both supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors. In summary, we propose that:

Hypothesis 1 LMX ambivalence is positively associated with supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors.

The Mediating Effects of Emotional Ambivalence Toward Supervisors

The affect theory of social exchange (ATSE) extends the social exchange theory by bringing relatively neglected affect-related constructs (i.e., emotion and sentiment) into the social exchange tradition (Lawler, 2001; Lawler et al., 2008) and states how emotions engendered by social exchange processes or outcomes would promote or inhibit solidarity in relations. The ATSE assumes social exchange will evoke positive or negative global feelings (Lawler & Thye, 1999; Lawler, 2001). When social exchanges occur successfully, individuals will experience an emotional uplift; when exchanges occur unsuccessfully, individuals will experience an emotional hassle (Lawler, 2001). Tse and Troth (2013) argued that high-quality LMX relationships are interlinked with positive emotional experiences, whereas low-quality LMX relationships lead to global negative emotions. However, these feelings are global responses to the outcomes of interactions (i.e., outcome dependent; Weiner, 1985), only essentially involving "feeling good" or "feeling bad," and have ambiguous sources (i.e., attribution independent).

The ATSE (Lawler, 2001) further postulated that the global emotions generated by social exchange would trigger a cognitive effort to identify the sources of such global emotions. More specific and object-directed emotions might result from an attribution process (i.e., attribution-dependent). Due to the power imbalance and resource dependence in LMX relationships with supervisors (Lee et al., 2019), employees tend to regard their supervisors as sources of emotional uplift and hassles (Tse & Troth, 2013). Moral theories of emotion have suggested that individuals' gratitude and anger arise in response to attributions that their well-being has been enhanced or damaged by another individual whose behaviors have upheld or violated specific standards (Haidt, 2003; McCullough et al., 2001). Specifically, moral psychologists have conceptualized morality as a moral dyad consisting of an agent responsible for helping or harming and a recipient who experiences such effects (Gray et al., 2012). Moreover, interpersonal care and justice were considered as two fundamental moral principles (Li et al., 2021). If an agent acts on a recipient in a way that breaches these moral principles, this would result in anger toward the agent (Ford et al., 2018a; Li et al., 2021); conversely, if an agent acts on a recipient in a helpful or supportive way, this would result in gratitude towards the agent (Kim et al., 2018; McCullough et al., 2001). In the current study, the recipient in the supervisor-employee dyad is the employee, whereas the agent is the supervisor. When employees perceive their supervisors as helpful, respectful, caring, and fair, this constitutes a moral disposition on the part of their supervisors that benefits them (Ford et al., 2018b). High-quality LMX relationships with supervisors are based on solid socioemotional exchanges (Liden & Maslyn, 1998), and such relationships are, therefore, likely to lead employees to process information about their supervisors in favorable ways and attribute supportive treatment to supervisors' benevolence and facilitate gratitude toward supervisors (Liao et al., 2023). Conversely, in a low-quality LMX context, the failure of supervisors to care for and value employees would likely cause harm, leading to a sense of moral violation (Ford et al., 2018b) and anger toward supervisors (Tse & Troth, 2013).

The ATSE (Lawler, 2001) noted that the attribution process could induce emotional ambivalence in some contexts. Specifically, conditions in which ambivalent emotions were induced were all associated with the co-occurrence of conflicting appraisals (Ashforth et al., 2014; Chang & Raver, 2020). Given that individuals' gratitude involves positive appraisals of both their benefactors and the outcomes that benefactors induce (McCullough et al., 2001), Oh and

Tong (2023) argued that mixed variants of gratitude (e.g., gratitude-disappointment, gratitude-guilt, and gratitude-anger) might occur in situations where individuals' negative appraisals of either their benefactors or the associated outcomes are simultaneously activated. In the current study, we propose that a unique situation in which employees simultaneously hold positive (high-quality) and negative (low-quality) cognitions about their LMX relationships would elicit both positive- and negative-valenced appraisals and discrete emotions. In such a situation, the negative perceptions of LMX relationships would result in negative appraisals of supervisors that align with anger (Ford et al., 2018a). However, given that employees in this situation also receive supportive treatment and sometimes hold positive LMX relationship cognitions, positive appraisals that align with gratitude would remain activated, resulting in emotional ambivalence experiences.

Finally, according to ATSE, interpersonal emotions could serve adaptive functions to guide individuals' future behaviors (Tse & Troth, 2013). The positive emotions engendered by social exchanges could increase the solidarity effect on dyadic exchange relations, and negative emotions decrease solidarity effects (Lawler, 2001). When employees experience gratitude toward supervisors, supervisor-directed helping represents a behavioral manifestation of solidarity, as engaging in these behaviors could provide extra benefits for supervisors to maintain high-quality LMX relationships (Liao et al., 2023). However, anger directed toward supervisors might reduce employees' intentions to develop positive connections with supervisors, thereby enhancing their tendencies to engage in deviant behaviors (Gauglitz et al., 2022). In Cropanzano et al.'s (2017a) review, they also emphasized the role of affect in homeomorphic reciprocity maintenance. In other words, hedonically (negative) positive behaviors could produce (negative) positive emotions, resulting in hedonically (negative) positive reciprocating responses. Critically, because both positive and negative emotions toward supervisors are elicited by LMX ambivalence, reciprocating actions might occur in both positive and negative directions, leading to both positive supervisor-directed helping and negative supervisor-directed deviant behaviors. Therefore, we put forward:

Hypothesis 2 Emotional ambivalence toward supervisors mediates the positive relationships between LMX ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors.

The Amplification Effect of Receiving Working Gossip About Supervisors

Previous research has shown that individuals may polarize their reactions towards ambivalent targets, such as minor groups, disabled subordinates, and marriage partners (Bell & Esses, 2002; Kachadourian et al., 2005; Vadera & Pratt, 2013). The concept of ambivalent feelings or emotions towards specific individuals or groups is central to Bell and Esses's (2002) ambivalence-induced response amplification hypothesis. Response amplification occurs when ambivalent individuals respond in either an extremely positive or negative direction to reduce emotional tension (Chen & Treviño, 2023; Kachadourian et al., 2005). Individuals who do not hold emotional ambivalence towards a specific individual or group do not display response amplification but maintain consistent behaviors across situations (Bell & Esses, 2002). Notably, Katz and Glass (1979) proposed a three-step process for interactions between individuals and their ambivalent targets (e.g., supervisors) that may result in amplified responses towards the targets: there is other available positive or negative information about the targets; the information amplifies one of the individuals' ambivalent emotions; and the individuals; the amplified emotions guide individuals to respond to targets in an overly positive or negative way.

In the workplace, one indirect way of obtaining information is through receiving workplace gossip (WG) (Bai et al., 2020). In this study, we focused on receiving WG about supervisors (WGS) and explored its amplification effect on employees who experience emotional ambivalence towards their supervisors. WGS can be categorized as either positive (PWGS) or negative (NWGS; Brady et al., 2017). PWGS refers to positively evaluating supervisors, such as praising their work skills and defending their actions (Ellwardt et al., 2012). PWGS should convey positive social information regarding their supervisors' characteristics, performance, and behaviors and tell gossip recipients that supervisors are reliable partners for social exchange (Brady et al., 2017). After collecting and processing such information from PWGS, gossip recipients might build cognition-based trust in supervisors (Ellwardt et al., 2012). In contrast, typical NWGS usually involves making false allegations, ridiculing supervisors' work mistakes, and sharing unflattering stories about them (Brady et al., 2017). Unkind evaluations of supervisors usually accompany the NWGS and are offensive and aversive (Zhong et al., 2022). The negative information provided by NWGS might damage the supervisors' reputation and undermine their authority (Ellwardt et al., 2012), which further would erode favorable perceptions of their reliability and create negative impressions in gossip recipients' minds.

According to the ambivalence amplification effect (Katz & Glass, 1979), whether ambivalent individuals display an extraordinary positive or negative response to the target depends on the nature of the information collected about the target (Rothman et al., 2017). Thus, the positive information about supervisors provided by PWGS may be consistent with emotionally ambivalent employees' positive

feelings toward supervisors (Vadera & Pratt, 2013), which would make the positive components of their ambivalence (the positive emotions employees have towards supervisors, e.g., gratitude) more accessible and salient (Chen & Treviño, 2023). Consequently, changed emotions towards supervisors (from ambivalent to positive) would encourage employees to engage in more amplified solidarity behaviors (i.e., supervisor-directed helping). In contrast, the negative cues about supervisors gained from NWGS are likely to prime and make more salient the negative feelings that comprise the negative components of an ambivalent emotion (in our case, anger) (Ashforth et al., 2014). Thus, employees who experience such negative emotions would react to supervisors by engaging in highly negative behaviors against their supervisor (i.e., supervisor-directed deviant behaviors). In addition, Rothman et al. (2017) also point out that in interpersonal interactions, response amplification could be manifested in two types of polarized responses toward ambivalence: "moving toward" (i.e., helping) and "moving against" (i.e., harming). Accordingly, we proposed that:

Hypothesis 3 Receiving WGS moderates the positive relationship between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping, such that the positive relationship is stronger when receiving (a) more PWGS or (b) less NWGS.

Hypothesis 4 Receiving WGS moderates the positive relationship between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed deviant behaviors, such that the positive relationship is stronger when receiving (a) less PWGS or (b) more NWGS.

Study 1 Method

Participants and Procedure

In Study 1, we collected three-wave data from diverse industries in China. To promote broader participation, we informed all participants of the academic purpose of our research and the anonymity of their responses. To match the three-wave data, we assigned each participant in the current study a unique identification number before distributing study surveys. At Time1, we recruited 470 participants to complete measures of LMX ambivalence and control variables. We obtain 414 valid responses (response rate = 88.085%). Two weeks later, at Time 2, these 414 participants from Time 1 were asked to rate their gratitude and anger toward supervisors and the frequency of receiving WGS, and 377 participants returned their usable responses (response rate = 91.063%). Time 3 survey measuring supervisor-directed helping and deviant behavior was distributed 2 weeks after Time 2 to 377 participants who had provided usable responses in Time 2, and we obtained 314 valid responses (response rate = 83.289%).

In the final sample, 152 were female (48.408%). The mean of age and dyadic tenure were 31.210 years (SD = 7.096) and 3.300 years (SD = 2.378), respectively. Among them, 80.892% held a bachelor's degree or above.

Measures

Unless otherwise specified, we rated all measures using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

LMX ambivalence

LMX ambivalence was measured with the seven-item scale developed by Lee et al. (2019). Sample items included, "I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think my manager understands my problems and needs, while at other times I do not." The Cronbach's alpha (α) for the scale was 0.902.

Emotional ambivalence

We calculated the scores of the emotional ambivalence toward supervisors based on a previously validated and commonly accepted operationalization of emotional ambivalence (Chang & Raver, 2020; Wang et al., 2023). Using this operationalization, Liu et al. (2021) calculated emotional ambivalence from individuals' guilt (negative emotion) and their pride (positive emotion). In the current study, emotional ambivalence toward the supervisor was computed from gratitude and anger. We firstly measured gratitude with a three-item scale (e.g., "appreciative," "grateful," and "thankful") developed by Emmons and McCullough (2003) and anger with a three-item scale (e.g., "angry," "aggravated," and "resentful") adapted by Liao et al. (2023). The Cronbach's alpha in this study was 0.720 for gratitude and 0.869 for anger. We then calculated the mean value of gratitude (anger) as the PA (NA) score. Finally, we used a unique formula suggested by Thompson et al. (1995) to produce an emotional ambivalence score. Thompson et al. (1995) stated that "ambivalence equals similarity of components plus intensity of components" (p. 369). Thus, emotional ambivalence could be mathematically represented by this formula as the intensity of emotion components [(PA + NA)/2] was corrected by the dissimilarity in opposing emotions (|PA − NA|; Wang et al., 2023).

$$Emotional\ ambivalence = (PA + NA)/2 - |PA - NA|$$

WGS

Receiving WGS from coworkers was measured with ten items developed by Brady et al. (2017). Based on previous research on gossip recipients (Zhu et al., 2022), employees were asked to assess how often they heard coworkers talk about supervisors. A sample item for PWGS included, "At work, my coworkers compliment the absent supervisor's actions while talking to another work colleague." A sample item for NWGS was "At work, my coworkers question the absent supervisor's abilities while talking to another work colleague." The Cronbach's alpha was 0.887 for PWGS and 0.816 for NWGS.

Supervisor-Directed Helping Behavior

Supervisor-directed helping behavior was measured with six items developed by Dalal et al. (2009). Sample items included "Tried to be available to my supervisor" ($\alpha = 0.800$).

Supervisor-Directed Deviant Behavior

We measured supervisor-directed deviant behavior using a ten-item scale developed by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007). A sample item was "Acted rudely toward my supervisor" ($\alpha = 0.919$).

Control Variables

We controlled for employee demographics (i.e., gender, age, educational level, and dyadic tenure) because they are related to employee perceptions of LMX ambivalence (Chen & Weng, 2023; Han, 2020) and supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Peng et al., 2020). Additionally, consistent with prior research (Chen & Weng, 2023; Lee et al., 2019), we also controlled for LMX quality to determine the independent effects of LMX ambivalence on participants' emotional and behavioral outcomes beyond LMX quality. We assessed LMX quality with a seven-item scale developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). A sample item was "I feel that my supervisor understands my problem and needs" ($\alpha = 0.869$). Moreover, prior studies noted that employees with high collectivism and power distance tend to comply with authority and develop positive associations with their supervisor, which implicitly forces them to engage in more supervisor-directed helping rather than deviant behaviors (Park et al., 2019). Thus, we also controlled for employee power distance orientation. Power distance orientation was measured using a six-item scale from Dorfman and Howell (1988). A sample item included "Supervisor should make most decision without consulting subordinates" ($\alpha = 0.892$).

Results

Harman's Single-Factor Test

The results showed that the largest factor explained 15.430% of the total variance, which was less than the 50% benchmark, indicating that the common method variance (CMV) of the measures was not worthy of attention.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics and correlation of our key variables are presented in Table 1.

Construct Validity

As shown in Table 2, the results of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) confirmed that the eight-factor model presented an acceptable fit with the data and was superior to another alternative model, which demonstrated a satisfactory discriminant validity of our variables.

Hypothesis Testing

As shown in Table 3, the significant positive relationships between LMX ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.361$ $p < 0.001$, M_2) and between LMX ambivalence and supervisor-directed deviant behaviors ($\beta = 0.171$, $p < 0.001$, M_8) lend support for Hypothesis 1 (Fig. 1).

LMX ambivalence was positively related to emotional ambivalence ($\beta = 0.290$, $p < 0.001$, M_{14}). Emotional ambivalence positively predicted supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.299$, $p < 0.001$, M_3) and supervisor-directed deviant behavior ($\beta = 0.240$, $p < 0.001$, M_9). After inputting emotional ambivalence, the effects of LMX ambivalence on supervisor-directed helping and deviant behavior decreased to 0.300 ($p < 0.001$, M_4) and 0.111 (ns, M_{10}), respectively, while the positive correlations between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.210$, $p < 0.001$, M_4) and deviant behavior ($\beta = 0.207$, $p < 0.001$, M_{10}) remained significant. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported. In addition, the bootstrapping analysis in PROCESS (using 5000 bootstrap samples) revealed that the indirect effects of LMX ambivalence on supervisor-directed helping and deviant behavior through emotional ambivalence were 0.054 (95% CI [0.019, 0.100]) and 0.055 (95% CI [0.017, 0.114]), respectively. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was further confirmed.

The interaction between emotional ambivalence and receiving PWGS was positively correlated to supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.176$, $p < 0.001$, M_5) but negatively correlated to supervisor-directed deviant behavior

Table 1 Means, standard deviations and correlations for Study 1

Variable	*M*	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender	1.480	0.501	–										
2. Age	31.210	7.096	−0.126*	–									
3. Education	2.820	0.614	0.001	−0.210***	–								
4. Dyadic tenure	3.300	2.378	−0.134*	0.331***	0.028	–							
5. Power distance orientation	3.174	0.952	−0.051	0.108	−0.010	0.035	–						
6. LMX quality	3.298	0.904	−0.031	−0.097	−0.014	−0.199***	−0.013	–					
7. LMX ambivalence	3.387	0.971	−0.091	−0.142*	−0.062	−0.078	−0.015	0.062	–				
8. Emotional ambivalence	1.522	1.487	−0.216***	−0.071	−0.079	−0.048	0.007	0.078	0.325***	–			
9. PWGS	3.003	1.009	0.071	0.030	0.088	−0.039	−0.024	−0.069	−0.003	0.076	–		
10. NWGS	2.780	0.860	−0.020	0.013	0.006	−0.022	−0.002	−0.101	0.171**	−0.050	−0.070	–	
11. Supervisor-directed helping	2.963	0.857	−0.222***	−0.026	−0.147**	−0.015	0.017	0.228***	0.397***	0.360***	−0.159**	0.014	–
12. Supervisor-directed deviant behavior	2.137	0.893	−0.205***	0.054	−0.072	0.035	0.010	−0.080	0.181***	0.267***	−0.015	0.090	0.304***

PWGS positive gossip about supervisors, *NWGS* negative gossip about supervisors

$N = 314$

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

($\beta = -0.252$, $p < 0.001$, M_{11}). Simple slope tests showed that the relationship between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping was more positive when receiving more PWGS ($\beta_{simple} = 0.334$, $p < 0.001$) rather than low ($\beta_{simple} = 0.040$, ns; see Fig. 2). Figure 3 indicated that the relationship between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed deviant behavior was stronger for employees receiving less PWGS ($\beta_{simple} = 0.359$, $p < 0.001$) than those receiving more PWGS ($\beta_{simple} = -0.081$, ns). Hence, Hypothesis 3(a) and Hypothesis 4(a) were supported. Moreover, the interaction between emotional ambivalence and receiving NWGS was negatively related to supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = -0.222$, $p < 0.001$, M_6) but positively correlated to supervisor-directed deviant behavior ($\beta = 0.144$, $p < 0.01$, M_{12}). We also plotted the interaction between emotional ambivalence and receiving NWGS. As shown in Fig. 4, emotional ambivalence was more positively related to supervisor-directed helping behavior when employees received less NWGS ($\beta_{simple} = 0.306$, $p < 0.001$) rather than more ($\beta_{simple} = 0.010$, ns). Figure 5 showed that the relationship between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed deviant behavior was stronger for employees receiving more NWGS ($\beta_{simple} = 0.259$, $p < 0.001$) than those receiving less NWGS ($\beta_{simple} = 0.057$, ns). Therefore, Hypothesis 3(b) and Hypothesis 4(b) were confirmed.

Study 2 Method

Participants

To enhance our findings' internal validity and compare the effects of low LMX ambivalence (i.e., positive or negative LMX) and high LMX ambivalence, we recruited 400 working adults in China to participate in a scenario experiment in exchange for approximately 0.4 dollars. We removed 84 participants who provided incomplete data or failed the attention check questions (i.e., "For this item, please choose 'strongly agree'"), retaining a final sample of 308 participants (average age = 29.350 years, SD = 6.432; 43.200% female; 85.714% with a bachelors' degree or higher; average dyadic tenure = 2.960 years, SD = 2.344).

Procedure and Experimental Design

The experimental conditions in the current study were manipulated using three written scenarios describing participants' low LMX ambivalence (i.e., LLA-positivity (LLA-P) and LLA-negativity (LLA-N)) and high LMX ambivalence (HLA) with a hypothetical supervisor (*Li Hua*), respectively. When manipulating LLA-P and LLA-N, we adopted a scenario design established in prior research (for more details, see Radulovic et al., 2019),

Table 2 Confirmatory factor analysis and model comparison for Study 1

Model	Descriptions	χ^2	*df*	χ^2/df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Model 1	Nine factors: LMX ambivalence, gratitude, anger, supervisor-directed helping, supervisor-directed deviant behavior, PWGS, NWGS, LMX quality and power distance orientation	1751.432	1238	1.415	0.937	0.932	0.937	0.036
Model 2	Eight factors: LMX ambivalence and power distance orientation were combined into one factor	2795.953	1246	2.244	0.811	0.797	0.809	0.063
Model 3	Seven factors: LMX ambivalence and power distance orientation were combined into one factor; PWGS and NWGS were combined into one factor	3610.633	1253	2.882	0.712	0.693	0.710	0.078
Model 4	Six factors: LMX ambivalence, power distance orientation and anger were combined into one factor; PWGS and NWGS were combined into one factor	4070.959	1259	3.233	0.657	0.635	0.654	0.084
Model 5	Five factors: LMX ambivalence, power distance orientation and anger were combined into one factor; gratitude, PWGS and NWGS were combined into one factor	4247.538	1264	3.360	0.635	0.615	0.633	0.087
Model 6	Four factors: LMX ambivalence, power distance orientation, anger and supervisor-directed helping were combined into one factor; gratitude, PWGS and NWGS were combined into one factor	4618.757	1268	3.643	0.590	0.568	0.587	0.092
Model 7	Three factors: LMX ambivalence, power distance orientation, anger, supervisor-directed helping and supervisor-directed deviant behavior were combined into one factor; gratitude, PWGS and NWGS were combined into one factor	5742.052	1271	4.518	0.453	0.426	0.449	0.106
Model 8	Two factors: LMX ambivalence, power distance orientation, anger, supervisor-directed helping, supervisor-directed deviant behavior and LMX quality were combined into one factor; gratitude, PWGS and NWGS were combined into one factor	6935.073	1273	5.448	0.307	0.274	0.303	0.119
Model 9	One factor: LMX ambivalence, gratitude, anger, supervisor-directed helping, supervisor-directed deviant behavior, PWGS, NWGS, LMX quality and power distance orientation were combined into one factor	7411.990	1274	5.818	0.249	0.213	0.244	0.124

PWGS positive gossip about supervisors, *NWGS* negative gossip about supervisors

$N = 314$

which draws on the four dimensions of LMX (e.g., contribution, affect, professional respect, and loyalty) in LMX-MDM scale (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). For example, in the *LLA-P* condition, the description stated: "You could perceive that Li Hua seems to trust you and rely on you in difficult situations." In the *LLA-N* condition, the description stated: "You could perceive that Li Hua does not seem to trust you nor rely on you in difficult situations." In the *HLA* condition, participants read as follows: "At times, you perceive that Li Hua seems to trust you and rely on you, and you sometimes perceive that Li Hua does not seem to trust you nor rely on you in difficult situations."

Participants were randomly assigned across the three conditions, averaging 105 participants per condition. Following the assigned condition, respondents answered the manipulation check question about their perceptions of LMX ambivalence, completed measures assessing supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors, and reported their power distance orientation and demographics.

Measures

Except for the demographic variables, all variables are measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

LMX Ambivalence

We measured LMX ambivalence using the Lee et al. (2019) scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.919$).

Emotional Ambivalence

Participants' emotional ambivalence toward Li Hua was measured in the same way as in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.882$ for gratitude; $\alpha = 0.798$ for anger).

Table 3 Hierarchical regression analysis for Study 1

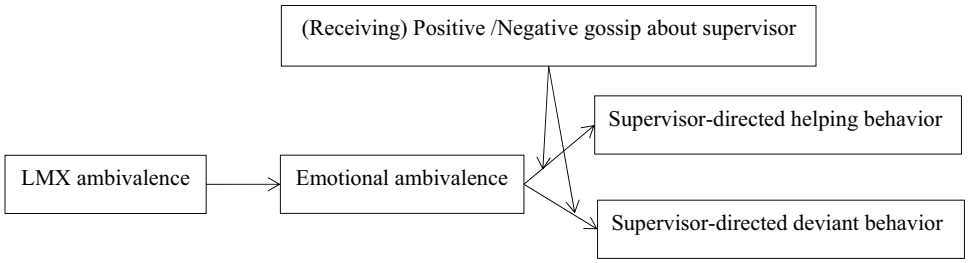
Variable	Supervisor-directed helping						Supervisor-directed deviant behavior						Emotional ambivalence	
	M_1	M_2	M_3	M_4	M_5	M_6	M_7	M_8	M_9	M_{10}	M_{11}	M_{12}	M_{13}	M_{14}
Control variables														
Gender	−0.221***	−0.180***	−0.152**	−0.138**	−0.127*	−0.161**	−0.208***	−0.189**	−0.153**	−0.148**	−0.166**	−0.141*	−0.231***	−0.198***
Age	−0.078	−0.020	−0.046	−0.007	−0.034	−0.037	0.008	0.036	0.034	0.048	0.038	0.026	−0.106	−0.059
Education	−0.161**	−0.127*	−0.131*	−0.112*	−0.134**	−0.115*	0.071	−0.055*	−0.047	−0.040	−0.015	−0.058*	−0.100	−0.072
Dyadic tenure	0.029	0.040	0.038	0.044	0.030	0.042	−0.011	−0.006	−0.004	−0.002	−0.010	0.000	−0.031	−0.022
Power distance orientation	0.015	0.016	0.013	0.014	0.011	0.018	−0.003	−0.002	−0.005	−0.004	−0.009	−0.008	0.007	0.008
LMX quality	0.218***	0.205***	0.202***	0.196***	0.175***	0.211***	−0.089	−0.095	−0.102	−0.104	−0.083	−0.095	0.053	0.043
Independent variable														
LMX ambivalence		0.361***		0.300***				0.171***		0.111				0.290***
Mediator														
Emotional ambivalence		0.299***	0.210***	0.324***	0.275***			0.240***	0.207***	0.232***	0.262***			
Moderator														
PWGS					−0.108*						−0.084			
NWGS						0.058						0.084		
Interaction														
Emotional ambivalence × PWGS			0.176***						−0.252***					
Emotional ambivalence × NWGS				−0.222***						0.144**				
R^2	0.124	0.249	0.207	0.286	0.257	0.258	0.055	0.083	0.109	0.119	0.168	0.137	0.071	0.152
F	7.267	14.484	11.445	15.280	11.683	11.727	2.972	3.951	5.322	5.164	6.811	5.344	3.914	7.810

PWGS positive gossip about supervisors, *NWGS* negative gossip about supervisors

$N = 314$

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Fig. 1 Hypothesized model



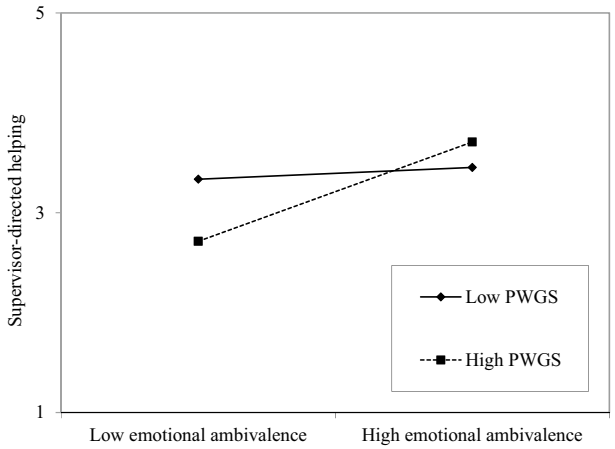


Fig. 2 Moderating effect of PWGS on the relationship between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping. PWGS = positive gossip about supervisors

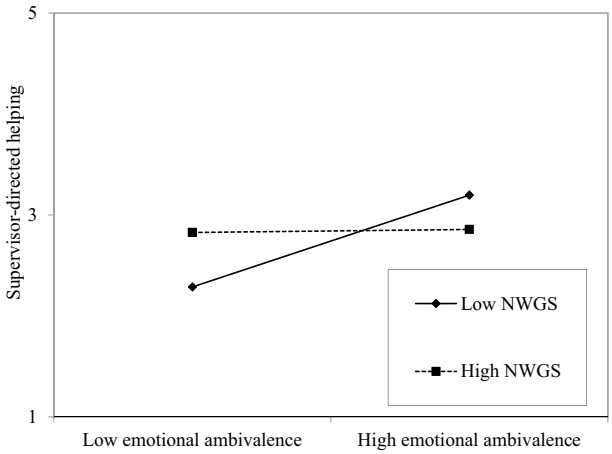


Fig. 4 Moderating effect of NWGS on the relationship between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping. NWGS = negative gossip about supervisors

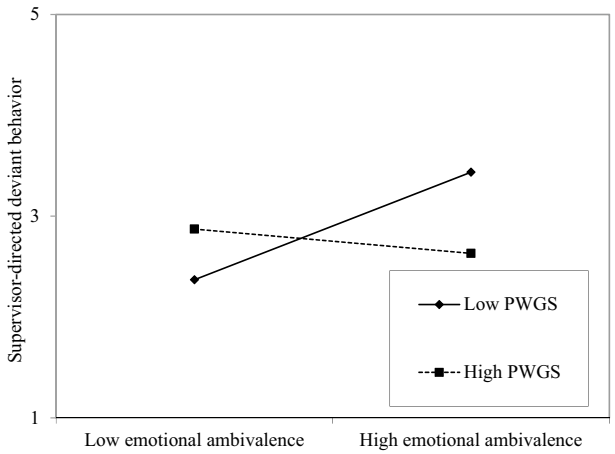


Fig. 3 Moderating effect of PWGS on the relationship between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed deviant behavior. PWGS = positive gossip about supervisors

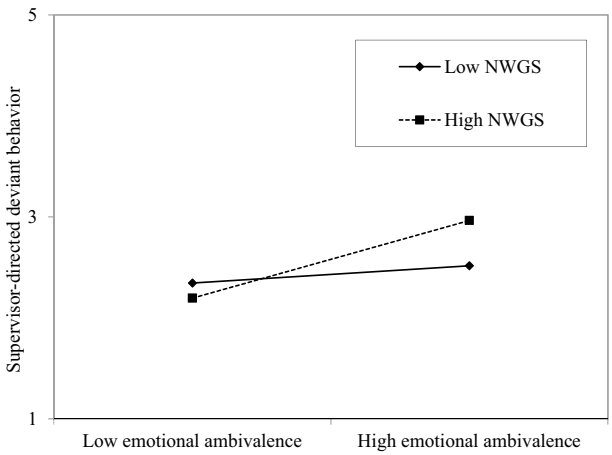


Fig. 5 Moderating effect of NWGS on the relationship between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed deviant behavior. NWGS = negative gossip about supervisors

Supervisor-Directed Helping

We measured supervisor-directed helping using Dalal et al.'s (2009) six-item scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.876$).

Supervisor-Directed Deviant Behavior

We measured supervisor-directed deviant behavior using Mitchell and Ambrose's (2007) scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.930$).

Control Variables

Participants' demographics (e.g., gender and age), power distance orientation, and LMX quality were controlled as in Study 1. We measured power distance orientation using Dorfman and Howell's (1988) scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.893$). We measured LMX quality using Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) seven-item scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.928$).

Results

Manipulation Checks

We first utilized the measured LMX ambivalence as a manipulation check in our experiment. Participants in the HLA condition ($M = 4.254$, SD = 0.290) rated their LMX ambivalence significantly higher than those in LLA-P ($M = 3.480$, SD = 0.852) and LLA-N conditions ($M = 3.279$, SD = 1.036, $F\,(2, 305) = 45.403$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, our manipulation was successful. In addition, we also used the LMX measure to assess differences in LMX across the three conditions. Participants in the LLA-P condition reported higher perceived LMX relationship quality ($M = 3.653$, SD = 0.697) than those in the LLA-N condition ($M = 2.551$, SD = 0.963), and the difference was significant ($t\,(198) = 9.286$, $p < 0.001$). Participants in the HLA condition ($M = 3.610$, SD = 0.804) rated their LMX relationships as high quality as those in the LLA-P condition ($M = 3.653$, SD = 0.697, $t\,(207) = 0.419$, ns), but significantly higher than those in the LLA-N condition ($M = 2.551$, SD = 0.963, $t\,(205) = 8.610$, $p < 0.001$).

Hypotheses Testing

As displayed in Table 4, the positive relationships between LMX ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.119$, $p < 0.05$, M_2) and deviant behaviors ($\beta = 0.154$, $p < 0.05$, M_6) were significant. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was confirmed. Hypothesis 2 proposed that emotional ambivalence mediated the positive relationships between LMX ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors. As seen in Table 4, the regression coefficient of LMX ambivalence on emotional ambivalence was 0.372 ($p < 0.001$, M_{10}). Emotional ambivalence positively predicted supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.156$, $p < 0.01$, M_3) and supervisor-directed deviant behavior ($\beta = 0.357$, $p < 0.001$, M_7). The significant coefficients of LMX ambivalence for supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.070$, ns, M_4) and deviant behaviors ($\beta = 0.024$, ns, M_8) were no longer significant after including emotional ambivalence in the regression model, while the effects of emotional ambivalence on supervisor-directed helping behaviors ($\beta = 0.133$, $p < 0.05$, M_4) and deviant behaviors ($\beta = 0.350$, $p < 0.05$, M_8) remained significant. These findings indicated that emotional ambivalence fully mediated the relationships between LMX ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors. Thus, our Hypothesis 2 was confirmed. Furthermore, the results of the bootstrapping analysis (using 5000 bootstrap samples) revealed that the indirect effects of LMX ambivalence on supervisor-directed helping behaviors and deviant behaviors through emotional ambivalence were 0.049 (95% CI [0.005,

Table 4 Hierarchical regression analysis for Study 2

Variable	Supervisor-directed helping				Supervisor-directed deviant behavior				Emotional ambivalence	
	M_1	M_2	M_3	M_4	M_5	M_6	M_7	M_8	M_9	M_{10}
Control variables										
Gender	−0.030	−0.043	−0.031	−0.038	−0.017	−0.034	−0.019	−0.021	0.005	−0.036
Age	−0.102	−0.122*	−0.081	−0.096	−0.121*	−0.148*	−0.075	−0.080	−0.129*	−0.193***
Education	−0.045	−0.057	−0.038	−0.046	−0.119*	−0.134*	−0.103*	−0.106*	−0.043	−0.080
Dyadic tenure	0.110*	0.124*	0.114*	0.122*	0.081	0.099	0.092	0.094	−0.031	0.012
Power distance orientation	0.133*	0.121*	0.109*	0.105*	0.152*	0.135*	0.096	0.095	0.156*	0.116*
LMX quality	0.491***	0.442***	0.468***	0.443***	−0.072	−0.136*	−0.126*	−0.135*	0.150**	−0.003
Independent variable										
LMX ambivalence		0.119*		0.070		0.154*		0.024		0.372***
Mediator										
Emotional ambivalence		0.156**	0.133*			0.357***	0.350*			
R^2	0.261	0.273	0.284	0.287	0.068	0.087	0.187	0.187	0.066	0.177
F	17.736	16.061	16.982	15.061	3.649	4.075	9.858	8.620	3.539	9.188

$N = 308$

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

0.094]) and 0.150 (95% CI [0.090, 0.212]), respectively, providing empirical support for our Hypothesis 2.

Relative Direct and Indirect Effects

While the continuous measure allows us to account for the strength of LMX ambivalence (Melwani & Rothman, 2022), the categorical measures allow us to compare the direct and indirect effects of positive, negative, as well as ambivalent LMX relationships on supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors (Hayes & Preacher, 2014; Lyubykh et al., 2022). Using Hayes and Preacher's (2014) method, we specified a multicategorical predictor. Specifically, we transformed independent variables (LLA-P and LLA-N) into two dummy-code variables, with HLA as the reference category (Melwani & Rothman, 2022). Then, we compared the effects of three independent variables. As shown in Table 5, we found that participants in the HLA condition perform more supervisor-directed helping behavior when compared to those in the LLA-N conditions (*contrast estimate* = −0.199, $p < 0.01$, M_2), but less than those in LLA-P conditions (*contrast estimate* = 0.175, $p < 0.01$, M_2). Also, participants in the HLA condition perform more supervisor-directed deviant behavior when compared to those in LLA-P conditions (*contrast estimate* = −0.325, $p < 0.001$, M_5), but less than those in the LLA-N conditions (*contrast estimate* = 0.262, $p < 0.001$, M_5).

In addition, we found that participants in the HLA condition experienced more emotional ambivalence than those in LLA-P (*contrast estimate* = −0.470, $p < 0.001$; M_8) and LLA-N conditions (*contrast estimate* = −0.327, $p < 0.001$, M_8). Emotional ambivalence was positively related to both supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.156$, $p < 0.01$, M_3) and deviant behavior ($\beta = 0.357$, $p < 0.001$, M_6). The results of bootstrapping analyses showed that relative to the LLA-P condition, the indirect effects of HLA condition on supervisor-directed helping (*Effect* = −0.207, SE = 0.058, 95% CI = [−0.325, −0.098]) and deviant behavior (*Effect* = −0.319, SE = 0.081, 95% CI = [−0.489, −0.170]) via emotional ambivalence were all negative and significant. Likewise, relative to the LLA-N condition, the indirect effects of the HLA condition on supervisor-directed helping (*Effect* = −0.144, SE = 0.046, 95% CI = [−0.238, −0.062]) and deviant behavior (*Effect* = −0.222, SE = 0.065, 95% CI = [−0.362, −0.110]) were also negative and significant.

Study 3 Method

Study 3 extended the prior two studies in two ways. First, the use of self-report data may be justifiable because participants are the most qualified to evaluate the frequency with which they implement helping and deviant behaviors (Liao et al., 2023; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), mainly because such behaviors are discretionary and often covert. However, some scholars have noted that self-reports of supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors may be affected by social desirability (Peng et al., 2020), which might inflate or attenuate correlations between our study variables. Therefore, whereas previous Study 1 and Study 2 asked

Table 5 Relative direct and indirect effects of LMX conditions (Study 2)

Variable	Supervisor-directed helping behavior			Supervisor-directed deviant behavior			Emotional ambivalence	
	M_1	M_2	M_3	M_4	M_5	M_6	M_7	M_8
Control variables								
Gender	−0.030	−0.044	−0.031	−0.017	−0.006	−0.019	0.005	−0.081
Age	−0.102	−0.097	−0.081	−0.121	−0.140*	−0.075	−0.129*	−0.229***
Education	−0.045	−0.067	−0.038	−0.119*	−0.088	−0.103*	−0.043	−0.073
Dyadic tenure	0.110*	0.118*	0.114*	0.081	0.070	0.092	−0.031	−0.011
Power distance orientation	0.133*	0.138*	0.109*	0.152*	0.162**	0.096	0.156*	0.298***
LMX quality	0.491***	0.341***	0.468***	−0.072	0.154**	−0.126*	0.150**	0.134*
Independent variable								
D1 (HLA vs. LLA-P)	0.175**			−0.325***			−0.470***	
D1 (HLA vs. LLA-N)	−0.199**			0.262***			−0.327***	
Mediator								
Emotional ambivalence		0.156**			0.357***			
R^2	0.261	0.342	0.284	0.068	0.272	0.187	0.066	0.193
F	17.736	19.392	16.982	3.649	13.963	9.858	3.539	8.937

D1, dummy-codded, 0 = HLA/LLA-N, 1 = LLA-P

D2, dummy-codded, 0 = HLA/LLA-P, 1 = LLA-N

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

participants to self-report their supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors, Study 3 measured these items with their supervisors' ratings, thus mitigating the potential CMV. Second, the two previous studies calculated participants' emotional ambivalence using Thompson et al.'s (1995) formula. However, Liu et al. (2021) highlighted that a limitation of this formula is that it treats the positive and negative emotions equally without considering their qualitative differences. Fong (2006) also stated that subject measures of emotional ambivalence are distinct from the objective measure based on Thompson et al.'s (1995) formula because "they tap directly into the amount of conflict or ambivalence experienced by participants, as opposed to simply identifying coactivation of opposing emotions" (p. 1021). Thus, Study 3 assessed employees' emotional ambivalence more directly.

Participants and Procedure

To mitigate the risk of CMV, we conducted data collection in two waves with a 2-week interval. At Time 1, 330 employees were recruited to provide their demographic information and to rate their LMX quality, power distance orientation, and LMX ambivalence. We obtained 295 valid samples with a response rate of 89.394%. At Time 2, we invited each of the 295 employees' supervisors to report demographic information and their subordinates' behaviors (i.e., supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors) and employees to rate their emotional ambivalence toward supervisors. We received usable data from 263 supervisors to 271 employees, yielding an 89.153% response rate for supervisors and 91.864% for employees. After data matching, we received 253 matched supervisor and employee responses. Each supervisor and employee were compensated with 3 RMB and 5 RMB, respectively, per survey.

Of the 253 supervisors, 47.036% were female, 72.727% held a bachelor's degree, and their average age was 35.630 years (SD = 7.312). Of the 253 employees, the average age was 28.970 years (SD = 6.073), and 50.198% were female. A total of 70.051% obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. The average dyadic tenure with their supervisors was 3.220 years (SD = 2.338).

Measures

A five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = "*strongly disagree*" to 5 = "*strongly agree*") was applied for all of our measures except the demographics.

LMX ambivalence ($\alpha = 0.873$), supervisor-directed helping ($\alpha = 0.803$), and supervisor-directed deviant behavior ($\alpha = 0.930$) were assessed with the same measures used in Study 1. We also included the same control variables as in our Study 1 (LMX quality, $\alpha = 0.856$; power distance orientation, $\alpha = 0.844$).

Following Fong (2006) and Liu et al. (2021), we measured emotional ambivalence by asking participants the extent to which they were feeling "a mix of gratitude and anger towards their supervisors."

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 6 provides the descriptive statistics and correlation of our key variables.

Construct Validity

The CFA results in Table 7 indicated that the hypothesized five-factor model provided the best fit for our data, thus demonstrating the distinctiveness of these five variables. In addition, the CFA results revealed that the fit indices in the five-factor model did not differ from those of the measurement model with an unmeasured latent common factor (ΔTLI = 0.026, ΔCFI = 0.028, ΔRMSEA = 0.010), which suggested that CMV of our measure was minimal.

Hypothesis Testing

The results of hierarchical regression analysis in Table 8 showed that LMX ambivalence was significantly positively related to supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.340$, $p < 0.001$, M_2) and supervisor-directed deviant behaviors ($\beta = 0.332$, $p < 0.001$, M_6), thus supporting Hypothesis 1.

Additionally, the results showed that emotional ambivalence was positively related to supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.242$, $p < 0.001$, M_3) and supervisor-directed deviant behaviors ($\beta = 0.192$, $p < 0.05$, M_7). When emotional ambivalence was included in the models, LMX ambivalence remained positively related to supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.298$, $p < 0.001$, M_4) as well as supervisor-directed behaviors ($\beta = 0.302$, $p < 0.001$, M_8), and the positive relationships between emotional ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping ($\beta = 0.186$, $p < 0.01$, M_4) and supervisor-directed deviant behaviors ($\beta = 0.135$, $p < 0.05$, M_8) were also significant. This initial evidence supported our Hypothesis 2. Furthermore, the results of the bootstrapping analysis (using 5000 bootstrap samples) suggested that emotional ambivalence significantly mediated the relationships between LMX ambivalence and supervisor-directed helping behaviors (indirect effect = 0.031, 95% CI [0.006, 0.067]) and supervisor-directed deviant behaviors (indirect effect = 0.031, 95% CI [0.003, 0.072]). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was confirmed.

Table 6 Means, standard deviations and correlations for Study 3

Variable	*M*	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	1.500	0.501	–									
2. Age	28.970	6.073	−0.002	–								
3. Education	2.830	0.625	0.026	−0.103	–							
4. Dyadic tenure	3.220	2.338	−0.174**	0.455***	0.127*	–						
5. Power distance orientation	2.617	0.846	0.117*	0.048	0.048	0.016	–					
6. LMX quality	3.684	0.775	−0.185**	0.222***	−0.143*	0.166**	−0.299***	–				
7. LMX ambivalence	3.407	0.882	−0.271***	−0.247***	−0.139*	−0.125*	−0.233***	0.013	–			
8. Emotional ambivalence	3.250	1.245	−0.128*	0.058	−0.047	0.002	0.075	0.094	0.188**	–		
9. Supervisor-directed helping	3.472	0.659	−0.045	0.174**	−0.108	0.053	0.118	0.160*	0.227***	0.278***	–	
10. Supervisor-directed deviant behavior	2.164	0.908	−0.212***	−0.093	−0.027	0.010	0.162*	−0.195**	0.325***	0.207***	0.204***	–

$N = 253$

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

General Discussion

Study 1 revealed that LMX ambivalence elicits emotional ambivalence, which, in turn, leads to higher levels of both supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors. Furthermore, we confirmed the amplification effect of receiving WGS on emotional ambivalence and consequent behavior responses. Study 2 replicates the mediating results of Study 1 and reveals the underlying mechanism as emotional ambivalence. Study 3 included supervisor-rated helping and deviant behavior and a subjective measure of emotional ambivalence and again confirmed the mediating role of emotional ambivalence.

Theoretical Implications

Firstly, given that research on LMX ambivalence is still in its infancy (Han, 2020), this study contributes to the scarce literature by investigating the emotional and behavioral consequences of LMX ambivalence, thus broadening and deepening our knowledge about this phenomenon. Methot et al.'s (2017) review suggested that previous studies on workplace ambivalent relationships mainly emphasize the individual level outcomes (e.g., reduced proactive work behaviors and work performance; Chen & Weng, 2023; Lee et al., 2019) and overlooked dyadic outcomes. By investigating supervisor-directed helping and supervisor-directed deviant behavior in this work, we also address Zhao and Zhou's (2021) call to explore the influence of LMX ambivalence on supervisors. Moreover, our findings are consistent with prior studies highlighting the "double-edged sword" effect of LMX ambivalence (Lin & Du, 2023).

Secondly, our findings broaden knowledge of the interpersonal and emotional antecedents of helping and deviant behaviors. Consistent with prior studies (Melwani & Rothman, 2022; Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007), the positive correlation between helping and deviant behaviors suggests that it is better to conceptualize these two behaviors as relatively independent constructs rather than as opposite poles of the same construct. Previous studies have found a positive relationship between individual helping and harming (i.e., deviant) behaviors. For example, literature at the person level of analysis has found that individual helping and harming (i.e., deviant) behaviors may occur together or sequentially. Drawing on moral licensing theory, Klotz and Bolino (2013) suggested that engaging in morally praiseworthy behaviors (e.g., helping) might help employees accumulate moral credits that grant them moral license to engage in subsequent morally questionable behaviors (e.g., deviance), thereby balancing both

Table 7 Confirmatory factor analysis and model comparison for Study 3

Model	Descriptions	χ^2	*df*	χ^2/df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Model 1	Five factors: LMX ambivalence, supervisor-directed helping, supervisor-directed deviant behavior, LMX quality and power distance orientation	290.867	142	2.048	0.927	0.910	0.926	0.064
Model 2	Four factors: LMX ambivalence and LMX quality were combined into one factor	541.980	146	3.712	0.804	0.768	0.802	0.104
Model 3	Three factors: LMX ambivalence and LMX quality were combined into one factor; power distance orientation and supervisor-directed helping were combined into one factor	698.001	149	4.685	0.728	0.685	0.725	0.121
Model 4	Two factors: LMX ambivalence, LMX quality and supervisor-directed deviant behaviors were combined into one factor; power distance orientation and supervisor-directed helping were combined into one factor	873.477	151	5.785	0.642	0.591	0.638	0.138
Model 5	One factor: LMX ambivalence, supervisor-directed helping, supervisor-directed deviant behavior, LMX quality and power distance orientation were combined into one factor	1332.790	152	8.768	0.415	0.335	0.409	0.176
Model 6	Common method factor model: LMX ambivalence, supervisor-directed helping, supervisor-directed deviant behavior, LMX quality, power distance orientation and an unmeasured latent common method factor	214.772	123	1.746	0.955	0.936	0.954	0.054

$N = 253$

Table 8 Hierarchical regression analysis for Study 3

Variable	Supervisor-directed helping				Supervisor-directed deviant behavior				Emotional ambivalence	
	M_1	M_2	M_3	M_4	M_5	M_6	M_7	M_8	M_9	M_{10}
Control variables										
Gender	−0.038	0.051	−0.006	0.065	−0.256***	−0.169**	−0.230***	−0.159**	−0.134	−0.075
Age	0.138	0.214**	0.125	0.194**	−0.082	−0.008	−0.093	−0.023	0.056	0.106
Education	−0.072	−0.022	−0.067	−0.024	−0.069	−0.020	−0.065	−0.021	−0.021	0.012
Dyadic tenure	−0.038	−0.026	−0.023	−0.016	0.043	0.055	0.055	0.063	−0.063	−0.054
Power distance orientation	0.170**	0.239***	0.141*	0.209***	0.139*	0.206***	0.116	0.184**	0.120	0.166*
LMX quality	0.169*	0.190**	0.145*	0.169**	−0.200**	−0.179**	−0.219***	−0.195**	0.100	0.114
Independent variable										
LMX ambivalence		0.340***		0.298***		0.332***		0.302***		0.226***
Mediator										
Emotional ambivalence		0.242***	0.186**			0.192**	0.135*			
R^2	0.079	0.172	0.135	0.204	0.126	0.214	0.161	0.231	0.040	0.081
F	3.503	7.256	5.465	7.793	5.887	9.536	6.708	9.153	1.694	3.067

$N = 253$

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

good and bad behaviors to achieve a moral equilibrium (Tang et al., 2020). At the dyadic level of analysis, Venkataramani and Dalal (2007) argued that interaction with another individual not only increases demands on individuals to provide assistance, leading to interpersonal helping in the dyad, but also exposes individuals to interpersonal conflict, leading to interpersonally directed deviant behaviors. In addition, Melwani and Rothman (2022) suggested that studying ambivalent workplace relationships can provide a novel window into the relational antecedents that lead employees to engage in *both* helping and harming behaviors. Our study examined the relational antecedents of these two behaviors and showed how and when LMX ambivalence elicits both supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors. Furthermore, our study answers the call to integrate social exchange and affective perspectives (Lawler, 2001) by confirming that helping and deviant behaviors are affect-driven (Dalal et al., 2009).

Thirdly, with a few exceptions, extant work on LMX development and maintenance has paid scant attention to the roles of emotions (Cropanzano et al., 2017b; Liao et al., 2023). Our work helps to reignite attention to the positive

and negative sides of emotional ambivalence at the workplace (Tang et al., 2020), especially in the context of the LMX relationship. Specifically, our work tried to answer the call for investigating interpersonal triggers of employees' emotional ambivalence (Chang & Raver, 2020) and the call for exploring interpersonal behavioral consequences following those mixed emotions (Ashforth et al., 2014). Moreover, while prior ambivalence research has provided extensive evidence of the positive or negative effects of ambivalence (Chen & Weng, 2023), empirical studies on contextual moderators and boundary conditions that either weaken or strengthen the impact of ambivalence remain relatively scant (Lee et al., 2019; Rothman et al., 2017). Based on the ambivalence amplification theory (Katz & Glass, 1979), our study indicates that ambivalence is not positive or negative; its influence depends on the surrounding cues that amplify one side of ambivalent emotion.

Finally, by examining the amplifying effects of receiving WGS, we make several contributions to the literature on WG. The present study could help shift the focus in the WG literature from the target or gossiper to the recipient (Zhu et al., 2022). Our work also enriched the understanding of whether receiving WG is harmful or beneficial for the recipients. In addition, as for the gossip valence, fewer studies have distinguished and differentially investigated PWG and NWG (Brady et al., 2017). In the current study, we have distinguished NWG—the topic of most gossip studies to date (Kakarika et al., 2023)—from PWG, which has received relatively minor concern. As for the gossip target, we echo the call to explore the effects of down-top WG (about supervisors; Brady et al., 2017) and demonstrate that receiving target-specific information (e.g., positive evaluations about supervisors from PWGS) would influence individual emotions toward this target (i.e., supervisors).

Practical Implications

Firstly, our research revealed the "double-sword" effects of LMX ambivalence. LMX ambivalence is much more beneficial and functional compared to negative LMX relationships (i.e., LLA-N). Thus, supervisors could infuse positivity (i.e., increase interaction with subordinates and provide support) into negative relationships (Melwani & Rothman, 2022), which might transform the negative LMX relationships into ambivalent ones, bringing some benefits at work. However, we do not mean supervisors should actively develop more ambivalent LMX relationships with their employees within organizations, as positive LMX (i.e., LLA-P) still substantially affects supervisor-directed helping more than LMX ambivalence. We mainly want to give supervisors a fresh perspective on the paradoxical nature of LMX relationships (Han, 2020; Lee et al., 2019). We suggest that supervisors need to take measures to ameliorate the potential adverse effects of LMX ambivalence. For example, organizations should conduct leadership training programs that encourage behavioral consistency and increase service orientation (Chen & Weng, 2023).

Secondly, supervisors should guide employees on how to cope with emotional ambivalence experience effectively, and employees also need to acknowledge that ambivalent experiences are commonplace in organizations, not trapped in them (Dechawatanapaisal, 2020). As emotional ambivalence is a mixed emotional state that comprises both positive and negative emotions (Rothman et al., 2017), emotion management training would be beneficial for emotionally ambivalent employees to recognize and manage negative emotions to resolve ambivalence (Wang et al., 2023). In addition, our findings confirm that environmental cues might amplify one kind of emotion, thus guiding the decisions and actions of emotionally ambivalent employees accordingly (Katz & Glass, 1979). Therefore, supervisors should create an ethical climate, which could signal emotionally ambivalent employees that ethical behaviors are expected (Chen & Treviño, 2023) and then stimulate them to engage in more ethical organizational behaviors (i.e., helping).

Finally, supervisors should take necessary steps to inhibit the breeding of NWGS, the first of which is to ascertain better why employees engage in NWGS. As revealed by existing research on NWGS, employees may transmit gossip to fulfill some needs (e.g., information exchange, power restoration, and emotion venturing) (Brady et al., 2017). Thus, devising alternative mechanisms (e.g., optimizing formal communication mechanisms) to satisfy those needs may discourage employees' NWGS (Zhong et al., 2022). In addition, supervisors could set explicit organizational norms for acceptable behaviors and create ethical corporate cultures in which NWGS is not tolerated. They also could remind employees that their WG may elicit reprisals from the gossip target and the low-morality perceptions from the gossip recipient (Kakarika et al., 2023). Thus, they should avoid arbitrarily spreading NWG about others. We also do not encourage supervisors to motivate their employees to engage in PWG; instead, they should be neutral to PWG and try to deflate employee inflated expectations if PWGS spreads in the workplace.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our study, as with any other research, has its strengths and weaknesses. Firstly, although the scenario-based experiment in Study 2 can enhance our confidence in the hypothesized causality, it also suffers from some limitations (see Lonati et al., 2018). Specifically, lack of realism and low generalizability have been identified as significant criticisms of scenario-based experiments (Epitropaki et al., 2020). Future studies should use non-traditional stimulus

materials (e.g., video or audio clips rather than written texts; Aguinis & Bradley, 2014) to show participants' LMX relationships, which "can enhance the psychological realism and the immersion in hypothetical experimental environments" (Lonati et al., 2018, p. 22). Furthermore, given that the hypothetical scenarios in our Study 2 have no real-world consequences, participants' self-reported measures (e.g., supervisor-directed helping and deviant behaviors) are particularly prone to cheap talk, demand effects, and social desirability bias (Lonati et al., 2018), leading to unrealistic results. Future research could use field experiments to examine whether our findings can be replicated when capturing these actual supervisor-directed behaviors.

Secondly, we invite future researchers to explore other variables that tilt the effects of emotional ambivalence toward either the positive or negative side. For example, rumination might amplify the adverse effects of emotional ambivalence, as constantly mulling over negative thoughts makes the negative component of ambivalent emotion available to be primed (Bell & Esses, 2002; Lee et al., 2019).

Thirdly, while this research shows that emotionally ambivalent employees would move toward and against the source of ambivalence simultaneously, it might be exciting and essential to further explore whether employees might move away from the source of their ambivalence (e.g., leader avoidance; Rothman et al., 2017). Moreover, future studies could investigate the effects of LMX ambivalence on "displaced" deviance directed toward their organizations or coworkers.

Finally, this research was carried out in the Chinese context, which has collectivistic and high-power-distance cultures, raising concerns about the replicability and generalizability of our conclusions. Although we controlled for individual power distance orientation, further investigation of LMX ambivalence in samples recruited from other cultural backgrounds is still needed to add precision to our knowledge of this phenomenon.

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Standards All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000(5).

Research Involviong Human and Animal Participants No animal studies were carried out by the authors for this study.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all patients (employees) for being included in the study.

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