



The double-edged sword effects of differential leadership on deviant behavior

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Abstract

Since the beginning of 2020, coronavirus disease has broken out globally, large-scale work and production have stopped, causing employees to experience emotional exhaustion, and home offices have greatly exacerbated employees' deviant behavior. Leadership practices can actively influence employees' workplace behaviors and can prevent employees' passiveness and drain on their mental health. Based on the perspective of attribution theory, this article explores the influence of differential leadership on emotional exhaustion and deviant behavior in internal/external control employees. This survey's subjects were employees working in Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai. Using the Questionnaire Star, the online platform of the Marketing Research Office of Peking University, and "snowball" methods, 357 questionnaires were collected. This study found that care and communication have no significant effect on deviance. Promotion & rewards significantly reduced interpersonal deviance but had no significant effect on organizational deviance. Tolerance & trust significantly improved interpersonal deviance but had no significant effect on organizational deviance. Employees with a high locus of control (internal control) could more easily control their emotions and reduce interpersonal deviance than employees with a low locus of control (external control) but this had no moderating effect on organizational deviance. The research shows that leaders should regularly care for and encourage each employee within their department, guide employees to recognize the organizational environment, establish an "insider" team, improve work efficiency, and incentivize "outsider" efforts. Subsequent studies can observe and capture employees' emotions and subconscious behaviors through interviews and experiments to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Keywords Differential leadership · Emotional exhaustion · Deviant behavior · Locus of control

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale work and production halts have made employees' emotionally exhausted, and home offices have greatly exacerbated employees' deviant behavior. As a bridge between enterprises and

employees, leaders can actively intervene in employees' deviant behaviors in advance and to a large extent avoid employee passiveness and mental drain. In recent years, based on the characteristics of Chinese local culture and the organizational situation, scholars at home and abroad have found that a differential leadership style in combination with Chinese culture is a common way of interaction between superiors and subordinates in an organization. In enterprises and institutions, differential leaders will allocate resources or interests according to their relationship with their subordinates and provide generous rewards, more resources or promotion opportunities for "insiders", causing employees to implement deviant behavior.

Deviant behavior refers to employees' intentional violation of organizational norms in the workplace against other colleagues or within the organization based on selfish or altruistic motives. Deviant behavior is a conscious and purposeful subjective behavior that has both negative

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and positive effects on organizational performance and organization members (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Factors affecting employees' deviant behavior include gender differences at the individual level, individual characteristics, individual cognition (Bordia et al., 2017) and other factors but are also closely related to leadership style.

As a kind of leadership style that can influence the psychological state and organizational atmosphere of organizational members, differential leadership is an interpersonal communication mode that is individualized and varies according to the affinity and distance between others and oneself. Leadership theory is considered to be different from leader-member exchange, which is rooted in Chinese cultural background and values (D. Y. Jiang, Zheng, B. X., 2014). Leader-member exchange is a two-way exchange of roles and obligations between leaders and employees. In leader-member exchange, subordinates' rewards are essentially based on mutual benefit and role norms (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2020). In addition, differential leadership emphasizes that leaders subconsciously or consciously categorize employees into different types and treat them differently depending on how close or distant their "relationship" is (Fei, 1948). Insiders and subordinates will receive more protection and care from leaders in their lives and work and will have more opportunities for promotion and network resources. Such differentiated treatment is bound to induce emotional fluctuations and deviant workplace behaviors from employees (Schmid et al., 2018). Although the existing literature on leadership has discussed a positive relationship with the deviant behavior of difference, we believe that the "insider", due to receiving more positive acknowledgment and resources, is more willing to take the initiative to contribute their own energy to the development of organizations and return leadership "preference". It is harder for those who are considered "outsiders" to obtain preference; past research has yet to explain this.

When facing differential leadership, different types of employees have different mental states and behaviors due to their various personality traits. Rotter proposed that locus of control is an important, stable personality trait of an individual. Locus of control is considered the level at which an individual thinks he or she is in control of the outcome of an event (Rotter, 1966). Individuals with more internal control types believe that the outcome of the event is closely related to their own efforts, while individuals with more external control types believe that efforts are useless, and external forces such as luck, contacts (leader appreciation) and social background are the main factors that affect the outcome of the event (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Therefore, will insiders be proud of being favorited or grateful? Will outsiders resent and complain or be aggressive?

Based on the abovementioned research impetus, the purpose of this study is to analyze the influence mechanism between differential leadership (caring & communication, promotion & rewarding, tolerance & trust), emotional exhaustion, and deviant behavior (interpersonal deviance, organizational deviance). Discussion about emotional exhaustion intervenes between differential leadership and deviant behavior. Moreover, insights about locus of control moderating between emotional exhaustion and deviant behavior and external/internal control employees alleviating the influence of differential leadership on workplace deviant behavior through emotional exhaustion are discussed.

The contributions of this study lie in the following: from the perspective of attribution, we investigate leadership style differences that affect deviant behavior; this study expands the research scope of deviant behavior, guiding the staff to acknowledge different leadership styles and reduce deviant workplace behavior. Second, using the employees of internal and external control as the breakthrough point, this article discusses the impact of different forms of differential leadership on employees' psychology and behavior. Third, this paper attempts to expand the existing research on differential leadership and explores the double-sided nature of differential leadership. On the one hand, leaders who implement differential leadership may cause "insider" employees to experience psychological superiority, and "outsider" employees may feel a sense of organizational injustice. On the other hand, differential leadership will also encourage "insiders" to work harder and repay leaders, and "outsiders" become willing to undertake extra affairs. Therefore, this paper extends differential leadership to the organizational level, which provides theoretical guidance for organizations to find the balance point of the leader-employee relationship.

This paper is organized as follows: in Sect. 1, we give a brief introduction to the research background and research questions. Section 2 presents a literature review and hypothesis development, Sect. 3 presents the research methods, and Sect. 4 explains the statistical analysis of this study. Finally, the last part of this study presents the research conclusions, management implications and research limitations (Rasool et al., 2020, 2021).

Literature review and hypothesis development

The impact of differential leadership on deviant behavior

Fei Xiaotong first proposed in China in 1948 that in the process of interpersonal interaction, the subconscious or conscious interaction mode should be adopted according to

the distance of the relationship (Fei, 1948). Zheng suggests that loyalty, relationships and talent are the main factors that influence leaders to judge outsiders and their own employees (Zheng, 1995). Leaders usually judge whether subordinates are “their own” or “outsiders” according to their “distance of relationship”, “loyalty level” and “talent size” and then adopt different treatment methods for different subordinates. Among them, two types of employees can become leaders’ confidants. One type has some kind of social relationship with leaders (friends, relatives, classmates, etc.), and the other type shares personal traits or talents with their superior. (Hebles et al., 2020). Cheng et al. collected data of 173 pairs of employees and supervisors and found through data analysis that management behavior is affected by subjective relationship intimacy. Zheng Boxun et al. conducted an investigation on corporate executives and found that objective relationships affect management behavior, and private communication between employees and leaders affects leaders’ evaluation of employees’ closeness, but objective social ties have no predictive effect (Xu et al., 2002). Jiang Dingyu and Zhang Yuanzhen define differential leadership as follows: under the influence of the rule of man organizational atmosphere, leaders will have completely different leadership styles when treating different subordinates and often give more favoritism to their preferred subordinates (D. Y. Jiang, Zhang, W. Z., 2010). Jiang Dingyu and Zhang Wanzhen developed the Differential Leadership Scale, which consists of 14 items in 3 dimensions (D. Y. Jiang, Zhang, W. Z., 2010). The three dimensions are as follows: caring & communication (leaders have a biased style of care, support and communicating decision-making), promotion & rewarding (leaders give their “insiders” more education, training opportunities, benefits, or salary increases), tolerance & trust (leaders go easy on “insiders”, giving them important tasks and more resources).

Bennett J and Robinson S L are integrators of the research on deviant behavior. They claim that destructive deviant behavior refers to the behavior that members of an organization intentionally violate or counter important organizational norms against other members or against the organization itself and bring damage to the interests of other members or even the whole organization. According to Bennett J and Robinson S L, destructive deviant behaviors are divided into two dimensions, namely, interpersonal deviant behaviors and organizational deviant behaviors, and the scale of deviant behaviors consists of 19 items (Bennett & Robinson, 2000).

Previous empirical studies have found that leader-member exchanges significantly reduce the probability of counterproductive behaviors among employees. If employees perceive more care and support from leaders, their beneficial behaviors to the organization will increase. When

leaders have more interactions with their preferred employees, the relationship between the two parties will become more harmonious through communication and interaction. Even leaders will be attentive and caring to subordinates of “insiders”, similar to parents (Rhodes et al., 2021). Friendly leadership is bound to have a low deterrent force. However, “outsider” subordinates are not recognized nor praised by the organization and its leaders, so employees feel isolated from communication and interaction and harbor a sense of injustice; it also entices employees to engage in workplace misconduct. Therefore, leaders’ bias in care and communication will lessen the social distance between leaders and employees, leading to leaders being trapped in a “human relationship”, and it becomes difficult for them to make an objective and fair evaluation of employees. When employees arrive late for work display absenteeism, take early leave and other behaviors, it weakens the effectiveness of leaders’ formal control and informal control means, breaks the balance of the control system, and leads to an increase in employees’ deviant behaviors (Warren & Laufer, 2009; Zhao et al., 2019).

In organizations, leaders have formal powers such as resource allocation and performance evaluation, which exert social control on employees. Once the balance of social control between leaders and employees is broken, the chances of employees engaging in deviant behaviors greatly increases (Mishra & Novakowski, 2016). In daily work, leaders tend to enhance the relative control of resources by establishing their own core team, cultivating loyal and competent personnel, taking care of “insiders”, and providing more important positions, promotion opportunities, awards and raises to “insiders”. When employees need to obtain resources that are controlled by the leader and cannot be replaced, they will become resource dependent on the leader (Farmer & Aguinis, 2005). However, the biased behavior of leaders in regard to substantive rewards and the actual allocation of resources will cause employees to have a sense of relative deprivation and motivate employees to implement negative workplace behaviors such as counterproductive behavior, deviant behavior and avoidance behavior after the comparison between expected gains and reality (Mishra & Meadows, 2018; Mishra & Novakowski, 2016).

Leaders give “insiders” more opportunities to play important roles in formal and informal structures at work and often reward or punish their preferred employees with little or no punishment (Kaluza et al., 2021). Influenced by the Confucian tradition, Chinese people advocate “benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness”. They believe that individuals subconsciously treat others differently according to their close and distant relationship with others and that there are obvious differences in attitudes and tolerance of mistakes toward individuals in different circles,

for example, leaders treat subordinates who are “insiders” with more leniency when they make mistakes at work, however, when employees who make mistakes are “outsiders”, or those who are not close to the leader, the leader often seriously investigates and will not tolerate minor mistakes made by “outsiders”. This behavior of tolerance and trust is a negative leadership behavior. Differential treatment of leaders can easily lead to psychological resistance and disgust of employees and even vent their dissatisfaction through acts such as slacking off work, stealing office supplies from the company and speaking ill of leaders behind their backs (Raza et al., 2021).

H1: Differential leadership is positively correlated with deviant behavior.

H1a: Caring and communication are positively correlated with interpersonal deviant behavior.

H1b: Caring and communication are positively correlated with organizational deviant behavior.

H1c: Promotion and rewarding are positively correlated with interpersonal deviant behaviors.

H1d: Promotion and rewarding are positively correlated with organizational deviant behaviors.

H1e: Tolerance and trust are positively correlated with interpersonal deviant behaviors.

H1f: Tolerance and trust are positively correlated with organizational deviant behavior.

Mediation effect of emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is at the core of job burnout. It is a psychological state in which the excessive consumption of individual emotional resources leads to mental exhaustion, inner depression and loss of energy. Previous literature has found that the factors affecting the emotional exhaustion of employees are mainly divided into three categories: first, work and role characteristics: role conflict, role ambiguity, role load, work-family conflict and so on (Brookings et al., 1985); the second category is the, individual characteristics: character traits, competence, emotional intelligence, etc. (Nicolas et al., 2019; Xi et al., 2019); the third is the organizational characteristics: leadership style, team atmosphere, working status, working environment, etc. (Brienza & Bobocel, 2017). The results of emotional exhaustion of employees are mainly manifested as fatigue, insomnia, headache, extreme anxiety, disengagement from the group, resignation intention, counterproductive behavior, etc. (Maslach, 2012).

The quality of the employees’ work environment, the number of work tasks, the length of the working hours, and the difficulty of the work content are important indicators of emotional exhaustion in the workplace. Current global

factors influenced by the new coronavirus outbreak, enterprise executives to keep factories and workers idle and frequent job-hopping, grass-roots staff unemployment makes enterprise, leadership, a crisis of trust relationship between the staff, the leader is an important bridge between enterprises and employees, when employees fully supported by leaders in the organization, with positive emotions, work motivation and self-efficacy levels (Leiter & Maslach, 2016; Maslach, 2011), In contrast, when employees are under differential leadership in the organization, employees with emotional exhaustion find it difficult to work efficiently. A negative work attitude leads to low productivity late arrival, leaving early, ridiculing leaders, and even resignation (Maslach et al., 2001).

Attribution theory proposes that when individuals face negative stimuli, they will stimulate corresponding emotions through their own attribution process (Hareli & Weiner, 2002). Due to the surge of health, economic, employment and other pressures caused by COVID-19, employees must balance the different demands placed on them from leaders, colleagues and families. When leaders are obviously biased in terms of care, communication, promotion, reward, tolerance and trust, employees will experience emotional exhaustion through hurtful attribution and take further actions to self-repair, to the organization’s property, the organization’s interpersonal environment and the organization’s members to vent, revenge, etc. (Douglas et al., 2008; Martinko et al., 2013).

H2: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between differential leadership and deviant behavior.

H2a: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between caring and communication and interpersonal deviant behavior.

H2b: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between caring and communication and deviant organizational behavior.

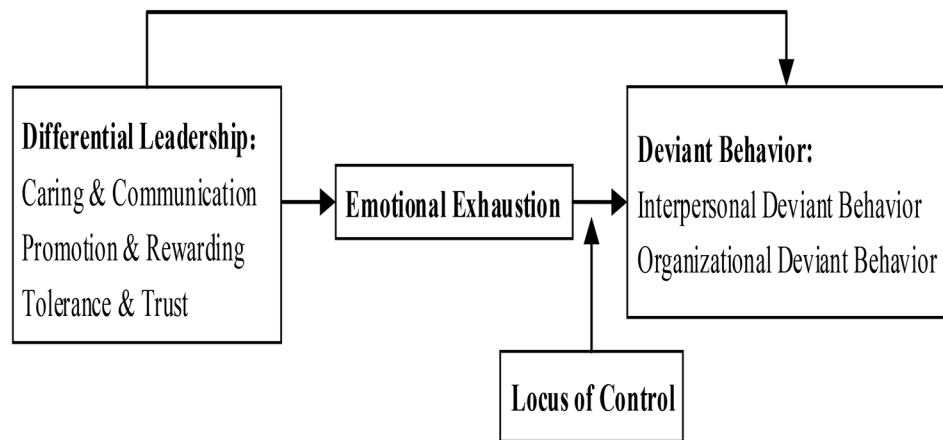
H2c: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between promotion and rewarding and interpersonal deviant behavior.

H2d: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between promotion and rewarding and organizational deviant behavior.

H2e: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between tolerance and trust and interpersonal deviant behavior.

H2f: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between tolerance and trust and organizational deviant behavior.

Fig. 1 Theoretical model



Moderation effect of Locus of Control

Locus of control is the degree to which an individual believes that he or she can influence the course of an event to obtain the desired outcome (Rotter, 1966). Individuals with an internal control personality believe that if they work hard enough, they can definitely influence the final outcome of an event. The externally controlling personality, on the other hand, believes that the outcome of an event often depends on luck, chance, social context or other external forces (Brivio et al., 2021).

Due to the different values of individuals, the attributional choices of internal control and external control are different. When employees are impacted by unprecedented large-scale public health emergencies and treated differently within the organization, they will attribute their emotional exhaustion to their own reasons and try their best to control the influence of their emotional and psychological pressure on their behavior. External control employees are more likely to attribute economic pressure and emotional exhaustion to external factors such as the organizational environment, leaders, colleagues and the macroeconomic situation, amplifying negative emotions and generating hostility toward the outside world, thus resulting in retaliation against the surrounding environment, destruction of organizational resources, and resentment and abuse of leaders. Individuals with higher control points can better exclude external interference and have a lower possibility of impulsive behaviors. Even in the case of job burnout, they can face it with a positive attitude (Martin et al., 2007); In contrast, individuals with low control points are more likely to be impacted by the external environment, making them prone to impulsive behavior, and to vent their dissatisfaction through the implementation of negative behavior in the workplace (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2020). Therefore, the intensity of emotional exhaustion on the deviant behavior of employees at different control points is different.

H3: Locus of control has a negative moderation effect between emotional exhaustion and deviant behavior.

H3a: Locus of control has a negative moderation effect between emotional exhaustion and interpersonal deviant behavior.

H3b: Locus of control has a negative moderation effect between emotional exhaustion and organizational deviant behavior.

In the process of individual interaction with the environment, external stimuli affects individual development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), in other words, the negative emotions of employees in the workplace are the product of the interaction between individuals and the working environment. When different types of employees face a differential leadership style (environmental stimulation), their behaviors are quite different due to their different personality traits. Therefore, this study believes that employees who are immersed in leadership discrimination for a long time will lead to emotional exhaustion producing deviant behaviors that are detrimental to the interests of the organization and members. As a stable personal trait, locus of control can moderate the mediation effect of emotional exhaustion. In other words, compared with external control employees, internal control employees can alleviate the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on deviant workplace behavior under differential leadership.

H4: Locus of control has a negative moderating effect on emotional exhaustion between differential leadership and deviant behavior.

H4a: Compared with external control employees (low control points), internal control employees (high control points) can alleviate the influence of differential leadership on interpersonal deviant behavior through emotional exhaustion.

H4b: Compared with external control employees (low control points), internal control employees (high control points) can alleviate the influence of differential leadership

on organizational deviant behavior through emotional exhaustion.

Based on the above analysis, the theoretical model of this paper is established, as shown in Fig. 1.

Research Methodology

Research Approach

Influenced by the epidemic, this study used an online questionnaire survey analysis approach to collect and obtain data. We used this approach for three main reasons: first, the influence of leaders on employees is subtle and significant, so it is reasonable to measure employees' feelings and feedback on leadership behaviors through self-reported questionnaires. Second, the analysis results of a large sample questionnaire can effectively test the scientific nature and universality of the research hypothesis (Zhou et al., 2021). Finally, using the Questionnaire Star, marketing research platform of Beijing University and "snowball" type three ways, we can easily access a large number of reliable samples.

Variable's measurements

The questionnaire design of this study includes five parts and sixty items: The Differential Leadership Scale (14 items), the Emotional Failure Scale (6 items), the Deviant Behavior Scale (19 items), the Locus of Control Scale (16 items), and the basic information of the respondents (5 items). Except for basic information, all the scales adopted the Likert 5 scoring method. A pilot test of 150 participants with similar demographics as the final sample was performed to test the value of the questionnaire. After making some minor corrections, it was confirmed that all the items were well understood and that the respondents had successfully completed the questionnaires.

Differential leadership: The three-dimensional scale developed by Jiang Dingyu and Zhang Wanzhen (D. Y. Jiang, Zhang, W. Z., 2010) was adopted, and the specific questions included 14 items, such as "more questions about the poor and the warm". Items 1–5 measured caring & communication, 6–10 measured promotion & rewarding, and 11–14 measured tolerance & trust. **Emotional exhaustion:** A scale developed by Maslach and Jackson (Maslach et al., 2012), asks specific questions including 6 items: "My work wears me out"; "Working with people all day is truly stressful and tiring for me." **Deviant behavior:** A scale developed by Bennett and Robinson was used (Bennett & Robinson, 2000), the specific items include: "An employee publicly humiliated others at work"; "An employee intentionally

destroys the working environment" and 19 other questions. Items 1–7 measured interpersonal deviant behavior, and 8–19 measured organizational deviant behavior. **Locus of control:** Scale prepared by Spector (Spector et al., 2002), these specific questions include: "Your job performance is entirely up to you"; 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13 and 16 of the 16 items are reverse scoring. Take the mean as the critical point. Employees who exceed the mean are identified as internal controls, while those below the mean are identified as external controls.

Research Sample

To ensure the validity, authenticity and reliability of the information obtained from the survey, a number of control measures were taken to strictly control each link in the survey process. First, in the initial guidance of the questionnaire, the respondents were informed of the academic purpose of the survey and promised that all the data would only be used for academic research and that the answers would be strictly anonymous and confidential, thus eliminating their concerns. Second, this research used the Questionnaire Star, Marketing Research Platform of Beijing University and a "snowball" type three-way questionnaire in which researchers "snowball" refers to contact China (Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai) institutions, state-owned enterprises, private enterprises in accordance with the requirements of the research object. Please fill out after its own assistance to other colleagues continues to friends or other organizations is completed. Third, there was a set answer time control that required each question be no less than 3 s, we calculated the time spent answering the whole questionnaire, and eliminated the questionnaires that were not carefully filled in. A total of 357 questionnaires were collected in this survey. A total of 301 valid questionnaires, including 181 males and 120 females, were obtained after excluding invalid samples, such as answers that were too short, incomplete and continuous.

The empirical analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis

The alphas coefficients of the seven subscales were as follows: caring & communication scale (0.854), promotion & rewarding scale (0.923), tolerance & trust scale (0.869), emotional exhaustion scale (0.914), interpersonal destructive deviance scale (0.931), organizational destructive deviance scale (0.922), locus of control scale (0.967); fit degree of seven factor model is best ($\chi^2/df = 1.09$, RMSEA = 0.039, CFI = 0.961, IFI = 0.958, SRMR = 0.035); AVE values are

Table 1 Standardization results of path coefficient

Effect	Estimate	S.E.	P
CC→IDB	0.034	0.054	0.139
PR→IDB	-0.335	0.069	0.000
TT→IDB	0.377	0.077	0.000
CC→ODB	0.062	0.050	0.142
PR→ODB	-0.007	0.040	0.112
TT→ODB	0.039	0.032	0.103
CC→EE	0.332	0.044	0.000
PR→EE	0.316	0.052	0.000
TT→EE	0.587	0.041	0.000
EE→IDB	0.204	0.066	0.000
EE→ODB	0.215	0.059	0.000
CC→EE→IDB	0.017	0.037	0.109
PR→EE→IDB	-0.211	0.044	0.000
TT→EE→IDB	0.135	0.052	0.000
CC→EE→ODB	0.019	0.022	0.132
PR→EE→ODB	-0.011	0.045	0.115
TT→EE→ODB	0.014	0.058	0.121

Note: CC = caring & communication, PR = promotion & rewarding, TT = tolerance & trust, EE = emotional exhaustion, IDB = interpersonal deviant behavior, ODB = organizational deviant behavior

all greater than 0.5, and the combined reliability CR is all greater than 0.7, indicating good convergence validity.

Common method deviation test

Although this study uses a multiregional and multisource questionnaire design, it still belongs to cross-sectional data in essence, and there may be potential common method deviations. Therefore, in this study, the single factor method was used to test the common method deviation. The results of single factor analysis showed that after nonrotating exploratory factor analysis of the entries of all variables, the total variance interpretation of the factors with characteristic roots greater than 1 was 39%, of which the variance interpretation of the first principal component was 28%, less than 50% and less than half of the total variance interpretation. This shows that the common method deviation of this study is not serious.

Descriptive statistical analysis

Based on the descriptive statistical analysis results of SPSS 25.0, caring and communication, promotion and rewards, tolerance and trust were positively correlated with emotional exhaustion, and emotional exhaustion was positively correlated with interpersonal deviant behavior and organizational deviant behavior.

Hypothesis test

Test of Main Effect and Mediation Effect

Using MPLUS 7.0 software, the mediation test of Bootstrap method showed (Table 1) that the direct effect of favoritism in caring & communication on interpersonal deviant behavior was 0.034 ($P > 0.10$), on organizational deviant behavior was 0.062 ($P > 0.10$), H1a, H1b rejected; The direct effect of favoritism on promotions and rewarding on interpersonal deviant behavior is -0.335 ($P = 0.000$), on organizational deviant behavior was -0.007 ($P > 0.10$), H1c, H1d rejected; The direct effect of favoritism on tolerance and trust on interpersonal deviant behavior was 0.377 ($P = 0.000$), and on organizational deviant behavior was 0.039 ($P > 0.10$), H1e accepted, H1f rejected.

The total effect test results: Caring and communication had no significant effect on interpersonal and organizational deviant behavior, promotion and rewards, tolerance and trust had no significant effect on organizational deviant behavior. The total effect of promotion and rewarding on interpersonal deviant behavior was -0.271 ($P < 0.01$), the 95% confidence interval was [-0.5658–0.1258], tolerance and trust on interpersonal deviant behavior was 0.231 ($P < 0.01$), and the 95% confidence interval was [0.6357 0.0958].

The indirect effect of caring and communication had no significant effect on interpersonal and organizational deviant behavior through emotional exhaustion. The indirect effect of promotion and rewards on interpersonal deviant behavior through emotional exhaustion was -0.211 ($P < 0.01$), and the 95% confidence interval is [-0.5036 –0.1358] but had no significant effect on organizational deviant behavior through emotional exhaustion. The indirect effect of tolerance and trust on interpersonal deviant behavior through emotional exhaustion was 0.135 ($P < 0.05$), and the 95% confidence interval was [0.3357 0.0939] but it had no significant effect on organizational deviant behavior through emotional exhaustion; therefore, H2a, H2b, H2d, H2f are rejected, and H2c and H2e are accepted.

Test of Moderation Effect

Demographic variables were included in the M1 model, locus of control and emotional exhaustion were included in the M2 model, and interaction terms between locus of control and emotional exhaustion were included in the M3 model. Table 2; Fig. 2 show that the locus of control has a significant moderation effect on emotional exhaustion, interpersonal deviant behavior ($\Delta R^2 = 0.012$, $p < 0.01$) and has a negative moderation effect on emotional exhaustion and interpersonal deviant behavior ($\beta = -0.329$, $P < 0.001$); indicating that the influence of emotional exhaustion on the

Table 2 Test results of moderation effect

Variables	Interpersonal deviant behavior			Organizational deviant behavior		
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Gender	-0.016	-0.028	-0.036	-0.053	-0.097	-0.101
Age	-0.012	-0.004	-0.015	-0.003	0.019	0.022
Education	-0.003	-0.067	-0.063	-0.101	-0.169	-0.168
Income	-0.040	-0.023	-0.014	0.042	0.110	0.107
Industry	0.021	-0.004	-0.014	-0.064	-0.081	-0.084
EE		0.427***	0.318***		0.421***	0.396***
LOC		-0.132*	-0.164*		-0.011	-0.014
EE*LOC			-0.329***			-0.023
R ²	0.104	0.119	0.136	0.004	0.113	0.117
F	0.198	4.886***	5.063***	0.304	4.726***	4.551***
ΔR ²	0.007	0.115***	0.012**	0.007	0.117***	0.006
ΔF	0.089	16.913***	5.076**	0.064	17.872***	1.516

Note: * means p < 0.05, ** means p < 0.01, *** means p < 0.001, EE = emotional exhaustion, LOC = locus of control

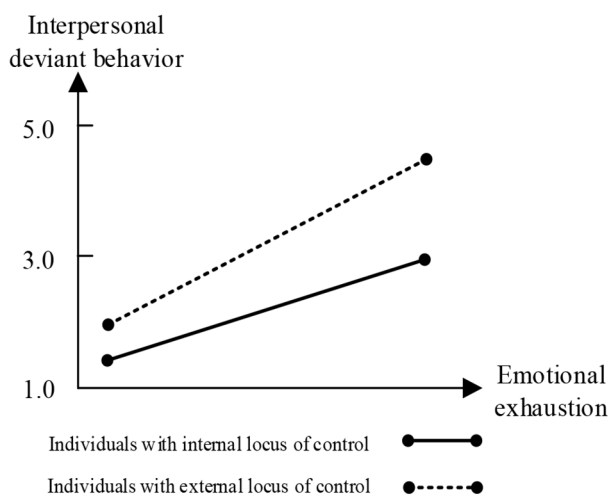


Fig. 2 The moderation effect of locus of control on emotional exhaustion and interpersonal deviant behavior

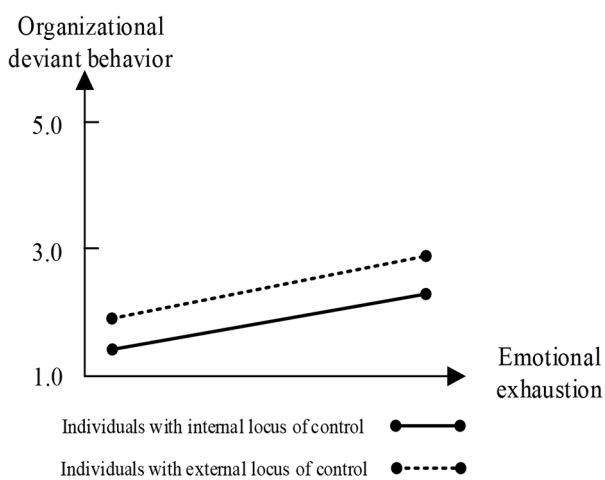


Fig. 3 The moderation effect of locus of control on emotional exhaustion and organizational deviant behavior

Table 3 Test results of moderated mediation effect

Variables	Differential leadership(X)→Emotional exhaustion(M)→Interpersonal deviant behavior(Y)				
	Stage		Effect		
	Stage 1	Stage 2	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
	M→X	Y→M	Y→X	YM*MX	YX+YM*MX
Internal control	0.286***	0.14	0.31***	0.112**	0.32***
External control	0.435***	0.308**	0.37***	0.298***	0.41***
Differences	-0.149*	-0.168*	-0.06	-0.186**	-0.09
	Differential leadership(X)→Emotional exhaustion(M)→Organizational deviant behavior(Y)				
	Stage		Effect		
Internal control	0.286***	0.215**	0.13**	0.061**	0.238**
External control	0.435***	0.315**	0.19**	0.103**	0.323**
Differences	-0.149**	-0.100	-0.06	-0.042	-0.085

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

interpersonal deviant behavior of employees with internal control is significantly lower than that of employees with external control, and H3a is accepted.

Demographic variables were included in the M4 model, locus of control and emotional exhaustion were included in the M5 model, and the interaction term between locus of control and emotional exhaustion was included in the M6 model. As seen from Table 2; Fig. 3, the moderation effect of locus of control on the relationship between emotional exhaustion and organizational deviant behavior was not significant. In the M6 model, the regression coefficient of EE *LOC ($\beta = -0.023$, n.s), indicates that the control point had no regulating effect on emotional exhaustion and organizational deviant behavior, and H3b rejects this notion.

Test of Moderated Mediation Effect

Using the moderated mediation effect test developed by Edwards and Lambert (Edwards & Lambert, 2007), to verify the impact of differential leadership on emotional exhaustion, emotional exhaustion on interpersonal deviant behavior and organizational deviant behavior, the direct effect is the role of differential leadership on interpersonal deviant behavior and organizational deviant behavior, and the indirect effect is the first two stages multiplied.

Whether interpersonal deviant behavior or organizational deviant behavior, the influence of differential leadership on emotional exhaustion of employees with internal control is significantly different from that of employees with external control ($\Delta r = -0.149$, $p < 0.01$, the 95% confidence interval is $[-0.4215 - 0.0062]$, as shown in Table 3). Differential leadership had a greater influence on external controlled employees; the mediation effect of emotional exhaustion on interpersonal deviant behavior was moderated by locus of control ($\Delta r = -0.186$, $p < 0.01$, the 95% confidence interval is $[-0.5215 - 0.0962]$). Moreover, the moderation effect of locus of control is greater for external controlled employees, so H4a was accepted. Emotional exhaustion had a significant mediation effect on both internal and external control employees' differential leadership and organizational deviant behavior, but there is no significant difference between them ($\Delta r = -0.042$, n.s. the 95% confidence interval is $[-0.1547 1.2231]$). Therefore, locus of control has no significant moderation effect on the mediation effect of emotional exhaustion on the relationship between differential leadership and organizational deviant behavior, so H4b was rejected.

Conclusions and discussions

Research conclusions

Based on attribution theory, this study explains the influence mechanism of differential leadership and emotional exhaustion on deviant behavior and further explores the specific moderation effect of locus of control on different mechanisms of deviant behavior:

First, we focused on the direct relationship between differential leadership (caring & communication, promotion & rewarding, and tolerance & trust) and deviant behavior (interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance). The results demonstrate that leaders' favoritism in caring and communication has no significant influence on interpersonal and organizational deviant behavior (H1a, H1b was rejected). The empirical result of this study shows that leaders' favoritism in care, communication, promotion, reward,

tolerance and trust is bound to cause emotional exhaustion of employees. However, influenced by personal ability, economic pressure, personality characteristics, employment situation, the international pandemic situation and other factors, employees will adopt different ways to deal with favoritism behaviors. In a subsequent interview with some subjects, we found that leaders who take care of differences in communication and make "insiders" pay more emotional value, while "outsiders" do not think it necessary to pay extra emotional costs. Therefore, although the difference in caring for communication causes negative emotions among employees, it will not cause them to implement negative behaviors (Rhodes et al., 2021).

Leaders' favoritism in promotion and rewards had a significant negative effect on interpersonal deviant behavior but had no significant effect on organizational deviant behavior (H1c, H1d rejected). Contrary to conventional ideas, differential leadership in promotions and rewards leads to obvious negative emotions of employees, but less deviant behaviors are carried out in the workplace, which is due to the partial internal control employees think the promotion and rewards rely on their own ability, institutional system, performance level rather than interpersonal relations, while the external control employees think working hard is useless, instead focusing on maintaining social relations as essential for promotion and salary increases. "Insiders" work harder to return the leader's preference, "outsiders" hope to become "insiders". Therefore, most employees will not engage in organizational workplace deviance while paying more attention to maintaining interpersonal relationships, actively working overtime, and completing extra work tasks to obtain more resources and opportunities.

Leaders' favoritism in tolerance and trust has a significant positive effect on interpersonal deviant behavior (H1e accepted) but no significant influence on organizational deviant behavior (H1f rejected). Previous studies have shown that differential leadership can easily lead to psychological resistance of employees and even cause employees to speak ill of leaders to vent their dissatisfaction (Raza et al., 2021). Differences in tolerance and trust severely affect employee emotions: "insiders" are often entrusted with an important work task in a leadership role, in both formal and informal structures, which produces psychological superiority, discrimination against "outsiders", and even division from cliques. In the face of unequal punishment, "outsiders" believe that leaders are unfair and even touch on organizational principles. They speak ill of leaders and report and petition for justice (Kaluza et al., 2021). However, influenced by personal ability, economic pressure, character traits, the international epidemic situation and other factors, employee dissatisfaction will not cease by implementing organizational deviant behavior.

Second, emotional exhaustion had no mediation effect between caring and communication and interpersonal deviant behavior and organizational deviant behavior (H2a, H2b was rejected); emotional exhaustion had a mediation effect between promotion and rewarding and interpersonal deviant behavior (H2c accepted) but had no significant mediation effect on organizational deviant behavior (H2d was rejected); emotional exhaustion had a mediation effect between tolerance & trust and interpersonal deviant behavior (H2e is accepted) but had no significant mediation effect on organizational deviant behavior (H2f was rejected). Prior studies also support the findings from our research (Liu et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2020, 2021). According to the empirical results of this study, interpersonal deviant behavior is a workplace behavior driven by emotional exhaustion. This idea is consistent with the conclusion by Douglas (Douglas et al., 2008). Therefore, the findings in this study enrich the relevant research on deviant workplace behavior from the perspective of attribution theory.

Furthermore, in this study, we explored the different feedback of emotional reactions and workplace behavior of employees with external/internal control when facing differential leadership. We found that locus of control had a two-stage moderated mediation effect on interpersonal deviant behavior but had no such effect on organizational deviant behavior. That is, internal-control employees were better able than external-control employees to control their interpersonal deviant behavior in the face of emotional exhaustion (H3a is accepted), and the mediation effect of emotional exhaustion on interpersonal deviant behavior was moderated by the locus of control (H4a is accepted). However, the moderation effect of the locus of control on the relationship between emotional exhaustion and organizational deviant behavior (H3b was rejected) was not significant in the mediation effect of emotional exhaustion (H4b rejected). Neither “insiders” nor “outsiders” will engage in organizational deviant behavior such as being late for work, leaving early and leaving the office to express their emotions when faced with pressures such as age, family responsibilities and their employment situation. Therefore, even if internal-control/external-control employees fall into emotional exhaustion, they rarely exhibit deviant organizational behavior (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2020).

Theoretical contributions

This study, from the perspective of attribution, investigated the influence of different leadership styles on the mechanism of deviant behavior, from leading discriminatory behavior observation psychological and behavioral response to the staff, to expand the research scope of deviant behavior, to guide the staff with effective leadership styles and reduce

workplace deviant behavior has a certain meaning of management practice.

Existing literature studies the influence of differential leadership on employees' emotions related to work and work behaviors mainly examine the significant effect of differential leadership on improving employees' self-efficacy, aggravating employees' work-family conflicts, influencing turnover intentions, and reducing deviant innovation behaviors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale work and production halts have caused employees' emotional exhaustion, and the working mode of the home office causes leaders to actively increase their interaction with employees. Based on the perspective of attribution theory, this paper explores how employees of internal and external attribution choose different deviant behaviors in the face of different forms of differential leadership and whether they implement deviant behaviors to cope with differentiated leadership styles. It expands the research scope of deviant behavior, guiding the staff to adopt a different leadership style and reducing deviant workplace behavior.

This study verifies that the different leadership styles of deviant behavior in different latitudes of six different interactions, further exemplifies that tolerance trust is not necessarily a positive, on the one hand, it becomes easy to cause dissatisfaction with the “outsiders”, which causes disharmonious work relations, while on the other hand inequities of tolerance trust behavior can also lead to “insider” employees gaining a sense of psychological superiority, being favored and arrogantly defying the norm, and can even cause cliques in private. At the same time, the moderated mediation effect of differential leadership on deviant workplace behavior through emotional exhaustion was also discussed. The differential leadership problem is extended to the organizational level, which provides theoretical guidance for organizations to find the balance point of the leader-employee relationship.

Management implications

As the world is affected by COVID-19, grassroots employees are facing pressure on health, economy and work. Leaders, as the link between enterprises and employees, frequently have differential workplace leadership, which leads to the absence of organizational coping measures and the asymmetric contribution of employees' psychological resources, resulting in negative emotions and leading to deviant workplace behaviors. Implementing ways to relieve the negative emotions and negative behaviors of employees is an urgent problem for organizations. This study provides the following management recommendations for organizations from the perspective of attribution:

Equal performance opportunities are given to employees, and the rewards and punishments established by the organization are respected. Leaders can appropriately deepen the relationship with employees through care and communication, but they should control social distance, distinguish between public and private, and maintain deterrence at work. In terms of staff promotion and reward, we should pay attention to the cultivation of a staff members working ability and provide opportunities and resources to those who demonstrate good work. In daily work, I pay close attention to the life, mood and family changes of my subordinates so that my subordinates can feel the humanistic care of the organization. When dealing with employees' work mistakes, organizational principles and institutional punishment standards should be clearly defined, and subordinates who make mistakes should be treated equally according to the standards. The more "preference" there is, the more "strictness" can be achieved to effectively maintain organizational harmony.

Pay attention to the mental health of employees and guide them to correctly judge the attribution of deviant behavior. In organizations, external control employees are extroverted and brave, while internal control employees are introverted and stable and good at introspection. Leaders should regularly care for and encourage each employee within their jurisdiction, guide employees to recognize the organizational environment, understand the leadership style, objectively judge their own abilities, and learn to put themselves in others' shoes. Regarding employee work mistakes, do not ignore employees. Instead, help employees find the cause of the error, encourage employees to understand the true meaning of different leadership styles. In order to establish an "insiders" team, cultivate loyalty to a right-hand man, improve work efficiency and incentivize "outsiders" efforts, rather than increase the subordinate's extra emotional consumption.

Research Limitations

Employees with an internal control personality can still self-reflect and avoid deviant workplace behavior when facing pressure from the macro situation and internal stimulation of the organization. Follow-up studies can further focus on the interaction between objective factors such as organizational mechanisms and team atmosphere and subjective factors such as personality characteristics and personality traits on deviant workplace behaviors. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study only adopted the self-assessment method for data collection. Subsequent studies can observe and capture employees' emotions and subconscious behaviors through interviews and experiments to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03845-x>.

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Data Availability The dataset that is analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Tianjin University.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all enrolled participants included in the study.

Conflict of interest All authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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