

Personal Need for Structure as a Boundary Condition for the Relationship of Humor in Leadership with LMX and Affective Commitment

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This study's primary purpose is to investigate the relationship between humor in leadership and followers' affective commitment mediated by leader-member exchange (LMX). It further examines the moderating effect of the need for structure among the followers in the context of humor in leadership. Data was collected from 292 employees of the transport companies of Lahore through the questionnaire survey method. The survey items were adapted from previous research and convenience sampling. This type of sampling technique is chosen for time-saving and budget constraints. The findings reveal that the need for structure moderates the relationship between humor in leadership and LMX. This study shows that LMX mediates the association between leaders' humor and affective organizational commitment. The need for structure is moderating this relationship. Thus, this research has found the predicted indirect effects of humor on affective commitment. This study contributes to leadership research, and more specifically, it focuses on followers' reactions to leadership behavior. The followers' reactions to humor in leadership have been investigated based on their level of need for structure. Practically it is helpful to understand the boundaries of status-leveling actions. This study is the first one that empirically investigates the moderated mediation model of humor in leadership, LMX, the personal need for structure, and affective commitment in the collectivistic culture of Pakistan.

Keywords: *humor in leadership, LMX, personal need for structure, affective commitment.*

Humor in leadership is an intentional behavior adopted by the leader to deemphasize hierarchical structures (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) and reduce tensions and conflicts among the followers in the organization (Westwood & Johnston, 2013). Humor is an event shared by

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one individual to another to amuse the target person to whom this act is intentional. Researchers have observed numerous advantages of humor in organizations. For example, it can minimize conflicts and tensions and can help create a positive organizational culture. In addition, it can make sense of social equality between leaders and followers, leading to a positive relationship. It is also believed to be setting the trend to reduce status differences among organizational hierarchies (Pundt & Venz, 2017).

In this study, we will choose Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) as a mediator because it depicts the quality of the relationship between leader and follower, which is developed through the series of positive interactions between them (Van Breukelen et al., 2006) that may be impacted by humor in leadership. Thus, in the present study, LMX will intervene between humor in leadership and followers' affective organizational commitment.

An inter-individual differing propensity to order the environment coherently to avoid ambiguous situations is considered a personal need for structure (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993). People with an excessive need for structures have a powerful inclination towards workplace hierarchy and perform better in structured tasks (Friesen et al., 2014; Rietzschel et al., 2014a) and are not very creative (Rietzschel et al., 2014b). Thus, react positively to task-oriented leadership and close monitoring (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). On the other hand, people with an inflated need for structure are very rigid and are more conscientious (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993). Avoiding uncertainty is a behavioral aspect that depicts the preference for clear structures, rules, and order (Sully de Luque & Javidan, 2004).

In the previous research, the positive impacts of humor in leadership have been highlighted most of the time. Still, they have ignored the conditions where the humor in leadership has detrimental and null effects on desirable outcomes (Westwood & Johnston, 2013). Friesen et al. (2014) suggested that followers' attitudes differ toward structure and hierarchy. Some may appreciate hierarchies and structures, while others prefer status leveling and informal communications. This study introduces the need for structure as a moderator to evaluate: Would humor in leadership positively impact the followers favoring hierarchical structures and formal communications in their organizational environment?

This study examines the relationship between humor in leadership and follower's organizational affective commitment mediated by LMX. We attempt to test the moderating effect of the need for structure among the followers in the context of humor in leadership. . Recently, research has recognized the need for exploring boundary conditions (Kim et al., 2016). This study will develop the relational process model initiated by humor (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Like previous research, LMX is conceptualized as a relational medium to analyze the relationship between independent and dependent variables. The outcome variables like commitment play an important role in assessing the success of status leveling initiatives, e.g., humor. They aim to create a pleasant work environment for the well-being of the employees.

The present study will contribute to leadership research, and more specifically, it will focus on followers' reactions to leadership behavior. For example, the followers' responses to humor in leadership will be investigated based on their level of need for structure. Thus, it will help understand the boundaries of status-leveling actions.

Literature and Hypotheses Development

Humor in Leadership and LMX

A distinct social behavior in which playful leaders intentionally form verbal or non-verbal activity to please their followers (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012; Cooper, 2008). Generally, the research indicates the advantages of a leader's humor. There is a positive relationship between humor in leadership and the quality of LMX, employee attitude, well-being, and performance (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). Having humor in leadership decreases status dissimilarities and

formulates an effective relationship between leaders and followers. It promotes informal communication and decreases the perception of dissimilarities (Cooper, 2008). A positive sense of humor allows the employees to face disappointments more effectively and helps to reduce tensions at the workplace. Enhanced team cohesion occurs due to positive humor, which ultimately reduces social distance between team members. A sense of humor among supervisors helps to create a favorable workgroup environment and improves their relationship with their subordinates. Hence, the use of humor by the supervisor leads to improved work performance, coherence in workgroups, and reduced burnout and stress at work (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012).

Among management and psychology researchers, humor at work has received greater attention (Cann et al., 2009). Humor used by supervisors resulted in psychological empowerment (Gkorezis et al., 2011) and affective organizational commitment of their followers. LMX focuses on the separate bilateral distinct relationships between the supervisors and their followers. The presence of humor develops a positive association between leaders and their followers (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). Karakowsky et al. (2020) suggested that humor in leadership can influence subordinates' feedback-seeking behavior through its impact on affect-based and cognition-based trust of subordinates in the leader. According to Gkorezis et al. (2014), LMX is the separate social dyadic exchange between supervisors and subordinates that is described as mutual trust, respect, and commitment.

The concept of LMX says that leaders formulate a unique relationship with their assistants. High-quality associations are explained based on trust, honor, and mutual responsibilities (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). According to Van Breukelen et al. (2006), LMX formulates work-related interaction between supervisors and subordinates. The relational process model of humor proposes that LMX mediates between the leaders' humor and followers' commitment. The relational process depends on followers' evaluation regarding the humor sent by the leader (Bauer & Green, 1996). To fulfill the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, LMX imparts positive identity-relevant information and energy to employees (Graves & Luciano, 2013). Followers may elucidate the humor of the supervisor as a relational offer for retaining high-quality leader and follower relationships (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015).

Followers appreciate the humorous joke, even if it tends to fail (Cann & Jordan, 2016). High-quality LMX provides the followers an opportunity to negotiate so-called distinctive deals, giving them a chance to craft their jobs (Sonnentag & Pundt, 2016). A positive association lies between humor in leadership and LMX (Wisse & Rietzschel, 2014). In a longitudinal study over six weeks, a positive relationship was found between social humor and LMX (Pundt & Herrmann, 2015). However, recent research is uncertain about the general viability of the suggested unlimited impact of leaders' humor on LMX. Robert et al. (2016) did not discover any confirmation for the relational process launched by humor. Liu et al. (2019) proposed the indirect positive effect of leader affiliative humor on employee voice through LMX and later through Organizational Identification. On the other hand, leader's aggressive humor showed an indirect negative effect on employee voice through LMX and afterward through Organizational identification.

Lay epistemic theory by Kruglanski (1990) suggests that a characteristic variable that catches the employees' outlook towards structures is considered as a personal need for structure. In organizations, employees who are inclined towards hierarchies and structure are actually in high need of structure (Friesen et al., 2014). On the other hand, employees who are in low need of structure are more likely to be impacted by humor in leadership (Cooper, 2008). Friesen et al. (2014) suggested that hierarchies offer structures and in the case of less structured forms of social organizations, they fulfill the core motivational needs for order. That is why, psychologically, the need for structure and hierarchy is attractive to those people

who lack control. Hence, people who have a strong need for structure have a strong inclination toward organizational hierarchies. By considering these theoretical arguments, we propose that followers with a high need for structure react less positively to humor in leadership.

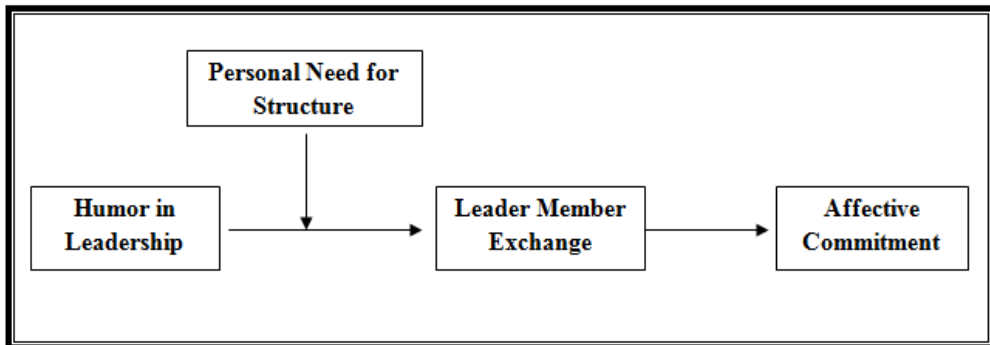
Hypothesis 1: The followers' need for structure moderates the positive relationship between the humor in leadership and LMX such that this association is stronger if the need for structure is low.

Affective Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment indicates how much the organization is to the followers and also shows the desire of the followers to remain in the organization. And affective organizational commitment is an emotional desire of an employee to be in their organization (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2001; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). In this study, LMX has been chosen as the mediator because it shows the quality of the relationship between leader and follower on an individual basis that is formed through a series of affirmative interchanges, and it may be impacted by humor in leadership (Van Breukelen et al., 2006). Therefore, this study shall propose an indirect positive relationship between humor in leadership and affective organizational commitment mediated via LMX. Also, we shall expect the follower's need for structure to moderate this indirect effect.

Hypothesis 2: The indirect relationship between humor in leadership and followers' affective organizational commitment via LMX is moderated by followers' need for structure, such that this indirect association is stronger for followers low in need for structure.

Figure 1
The Research Model



Methodology

Research Design and Sampling

A survey questionnaire technique was used to get responses from the transport sector employees of Lahore, Pakistan. The reason for selecting the transport sector is that minimal research has previously been done in this sector. The items for the questionnaire were adapted from different scholars. The anonymity of the survey was ensured to respondents. Questionnaires were being hand-delivered to the respondents to get their responses. All the

variables of this study were measured at the individual level. Data was collected from 292 employees of Transport companies of Lahore by convenience sampling. This type of sampling technique is chosen for timesaving and budget constraints. This study was cross-sectional. The purpose of the research and the detail of variables were provided in the questionnaire for the respondents. The questionnaires were collected from the respondents on the same day. The data collected in this study was at one point in time. There was no second visit to take observations. After the collection of data analysis was performed.

Measures

Humor in leadership was measured by using five items scale of Avolio et al. (1999). An example item is “the leader makes us laugh at ourselves when we are too serious.” The need for structure was evaluated by using Neuberg and Newsom’s (1993) 12-item scale. For example, “I become uncomfortable when the rules in a situation are not clear.” LMX was measured using Graen and Uhl-Bien’s (1995) seven-item scale. An example of a sample item is “how well does your leader recognize your potential.” And the affective commitment was assessed by using Meyer and Herscovitch’s (2001) 8- item scale. An example item is “remaining a member of this organization is important to me.” Participants indicated their agreement to these items on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Analysis and Result

After collection, the data was analyzed by using SPSS (version 20.0) software. Reliability, correlation, and moderated mediation Model 7 of Hayes (2017) analysis was conducted.

Table 1
Reliability Analysis

Variables	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1. Humor in Leadership	5	0.788
2. Leader Member Exchange	7	0.849
3. Personal Need for Structure	12	0.711
4. Affective Commitment	8	0.878

The internal consistency of the variables was estimated through reliability analysis. The reliability analysis results of the variables are interpreted based on the existing pre-defined significant value of Cronbach's alpha (Bolarinwa, 2015). The reliability co-officients (in Table 1) of humor in leadership (0.788), the personal need for structure (0.711), LMX (0.849), and affective commitment (0.878) have good reliability. That is, the measurements for all study variables are reliable.

Results of the correlation matrix (in Table 2) showed that humor in leadership is not significantly correlated with affective commitment as the value of p is greater than 0.01. There lies a significant association between humor in leadership and LMX ($p < 0.01$). LMX is significantly associated to Affective Commitment ($r = 0.291$, $p < 0.01$). The moderator, i.r personal need for structure, significantly and positively correlates with affective commitment ($p < 0.01$).

Table 2
Pearson Correlation (n = 292)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Humor in Leadership	1			
2. Leader-Member Exchange	.400**	1		
3. Personal Need for Structure	.175**	.254**	1	
4. Affective Commitment	0.009	.291**	.379**	1

Moderated mediation analyses (Model 7 as described in PROCESS) with bootstrap methods (Hayes, 2017) were performed to test the hypotheses. This tool has got various benefits. Firstly, within one tool, it provides testing of moderation hypothesis and corresponding moderated mediation hypothesis. Secondly, a moderated mediation helps identify the moderation stages and describes the direct and indirect effects. Thirdly it permits a direct test of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015).

The result of the study shows that *hypothesis 1 is supported* because the interaction values: LLCI (-0.3674) and ULCI (-0.0213) of humor in leadership and personal need for structure have negative values. When both the values have the same signs, it means that moderation is taking place. Thus, the personal need for structure moderates the significant relation between humor in leadership and LMX ($r = 0.4517$ and $p = 0.0648$). The value of p is less than 0.1. That's why the relationship is significant.

The R^2 value of model 1 (in Table 3) predicts that the interaction of humor in leadership and personal need for structure explains 20.41% variance in LMX, and the model shows to be significant ($p < 0.1$). Results showed that the personal need for structure has a significant positive relationship with LMX ($\beta = 0.8488$, $t = 2.8274$, $p = 0.005$).

The interaction effect of humor in leadership and personal need for structure on LMX has shown significant results ($\beta = -0.1944$, $t = -1.8536$, $p = 0.064$). The negative value of $\beta = -0.1944$ represents a negative relationship between humor in leadership and personal need for structure. With the increase in humor in leadership, the personal need for structure decreases. It means that not all employees prefer humor in leadership and do not acknowledge status levelling initiatives. Thus, their need for structure is stronger because they prefer structures and hierarchies (Friesen et al., 2014).

The R^2 value of model 2 (in Table 3) predicts that the interaction of humor in leadership and LMX explains 9.84% variance in affective commitment, and the model shows to be significant ($p < 0.1$). LMX has a significant positive association with Affective Organizational Commitment ($\beta = 0.3234$, $t = -5.6135$, $p = 0.00$). The interaction effect of humor in leadership and LMX has shown significant results ($\beta = -0.1128$, $t = -2.0953$, $p = 0.037$). Thus, mediation is taking place, and *hypothesis 2 is supported*.

The indirect effect of humor in leadership on Affective commitment is positive (effect = 0.1460), which means that with the increase in humor in leadership, the affective commitment also increases with the decrease in the personal need for structure. The Index of Moderated Mediation for hypothesis 2 is significant because the values of both Boot LLCI (-0.1227) and Boot ULCI (-0.0100) have the same negative signs.

Table 3
Results for Hypotheses 1 & 2

Moderation Mediation Analyses						
MODEL 7						
Y = Affective commitment = AC						
X = Humor in Leadership = HL						
M = Leader Member Exchange = LMX						
W = Personal Need for Structure = PNS						
Outcome:	LMX					
Model 1:	Summary					
	R	R-Sq	P			
	.4517	.2041	.0000			
Model						
	Coeff	SE	t	P	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	-.2867	1.0352	-.2770	.7820	-1.9950	1.4215
HC	1.0161	.3668	2.7702	.0060	.4108	1.6214
PNS	.8488	.3002	2.8274	.0050	.3534	1.3442
Int_1	-.1944	.1049	-1.8536	.0648	-.3674	-.0213
Product terms key:						
Int_1 : HL * PNS						
Outcome:	AC					
Model 2:	Summary					
	R	R-Sq	P			
	.3137	.0984	.0000			
Model						
	Coeff	SE	t	P	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	3.0955	.2068	14.9715	.0000	2.7543	3.4367
LMX	.3234	.0576	5.6135	.0000	.2284	.4185
HL	-.1128	.0538	-2.0953	.0370	-.2016	-.0240
DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y						
The direct effect of X on Y						
	Effect	SE	t	P	LLCI	ULCI
	-.1128	.0538	-2.0953	.0370	-.2016	-.0240
Conditional Indirect Effects of X on Y:						
Indirect Effect: HL → LMX → AC						
PNS	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI		
2.9054	.1460	.0335	.0998	.2104		
3.3906	.1155	.0253	.0801	.1645		
3.8758	.0850	.0273	.0454	.1362		
INDEX OF MODERATED MEDIATION:						
	Index	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI		
LMX	-.0629	.0352	-.1227	-.0100		
Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in the output: 90						
Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals: 1000						

Discussion

This study examines the relationship between supervisors' humor and subordinates' affective organizational commitment, and LMX mediates this relationship. In addition, the personal need for structure has been introduced as a moderator to evaluate employees' reactions towards humor in leadership based on their level of personal need for structure. The survey data collected from the transport sector employees are used to investigate the relationship of hypothesized statements empirically.

We found that the subordinates' requirement for the need for structure moderates the relationship between the leaders' humor and LMX. In predicting LMX, a significant interaction has been found between humor in leadership and the personal need for structure ($p < 0.1$). In this study, an affirmative significant linear association has been found between supervisors' humor and LMX. It means that hierarchical differences and perceptions of dissimilarities decrease between leaders and followers. This positive relationship is mitigated by the personal need for structure. So that with the less requirement for structure, the supervisors' humor and LMX are strongly related, but with the high need for the structure, they are less strongly related. The finding of this relationship is persistent with the research by Pundt and Venz (2017).

The study's findings show that the indirect effect of humor in leadership on affective commitment is positive (effect = 0.1460). It means that with the increase in supervisors' humor, the affective organizational commitment increases via LMX. Previous research in the South Asian context has found that LMX increases perceived organizational support, organizational embeddedness, job satisfaction, job performance and decreases turnover intention (Sadiq & Qadeer, 2017). Thus the positive consequences of LMX for effective commitment are not surprising. In our study, the relationship between humor in leadership and LMX gets stronger when the requirement for the personal need for structure decreases. Hence, the predicted indirect effect of the LMX between humor in leadership and affective commitment has been supported and is in line with the previous research in this context and also matches the findings of Pundt and Venz (2017).

Limitations and Directions

This study contains some limitations. Firstly, it targets the limited population of transport sector employees, limiting the generalizability of results to other industries. Secondly, The time frame of the study conducted was cross-sectional due to limited resources and time. Furthermore, in this study, the data was collected at one point in time. Therefore, it limits the ability to draw causal inferences from the data. Thirdly, the results may be only true to Eastern countries with collectivistic cultures and may not be the same in Western individualistic countries. In other words, the culture may significantly affect the results of this study.

Future researchers may replicate this study in other sectors or industries to generalize the study's findings in all sectors. In the future longitudinal study should be employed to evaluate the variables of the study better. This study describes only one outcome variable, i.e., affective commitment. In the future, other organizational behavior variables like job performance, burnout, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, and organizational cynicism can also be studied as outcome variables.

Practical Implication

This study is of value for humor theory because the relational process induced by humor in leader-follower relationships has been investigated. Exploring humor in such relationships increases the understanding of boundary conditions. This study contributes to leadership

research, and more specifically, it focuses on followers' reactions to leadership behavior. The followers' responses to humor in leadership were investigated based on their level of need for structure. Practically it is helpful to understand the boundaries of status leveling actions.

Conclusion

Previously the research has mostly focused on the advantages of humor in leadership. LMX mediates the association between leaders' humor and followers' affective commitment. The personal need for structure is a critical boundary condition in this process, i.e., it buffered the mediation path. With more humor in leadership, the followers experience a high quality of leader member exchange that increases the affective feeling for the organization. However, the need for structure slows this transformation and improves it in the case of lower requirements for structures.

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