



Authoritarian-Benevolent Leadership and Employee Behaviors: An Examination of the Role of LMX Ambivalence

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Abstract

According to social information processing theory and conservation of resource theory, we examine whether and how authoritarian-benevolent leadership influences employees' proactive work behaviors (PWBs) and unethical pro-organizational behaviors (UPBs). Study 1, a survey of 351 participants, revealed that authoritarian-benevolent leadership was positively related to LMX ambivalence, and that LMX ambivalence was negatively related to employees' PWBs as well as UPBs. Further, the results showed that LMX ambivalence mediated the relationship between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and employees' PWBs as well as UPBs. We also found that dialectical thinking negatively moderated the effect of authoritarian-benevolent leadership on employee LMX ambivalence. Study 2, using manipulations in the form of scenarios, examined the mediating effect of LMX ambivalence linking authoritarian-benevolent leadership with employees' PWBs and UPBs. We discussed the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

Keywords Authoritarian-benevolent leadership · LMX ambivalence · Dialectical thinking · Proactive work behaviors · Unethical pro-organizational behaviors

Introduction

Ambidextrous leadership, integrating two contradictory and complementary leadership styles according to the requirements of specific situations, is currently receiving growing attention in research (Gerlach et al., 2020, 2021). Hou and Peng (2019) identified authoritarian-benevolent leadership as a particular form of ambidextrous leadership embedded in Chinese culture. More specifically, Shaw et al. (2020) define the authoritarian-benevolent leadership as the use of two complementary leadership behaviors, authority and benevolence, in a coordinated manner across situations. Authoritarian leadership refers to the controlling behavior of a leader who emphasizes absolute authority over subordinates, which requires unquestionable obedience and the fulfillment of tasks. Benevolent leadership, on the other hand, exhibits individualized and holistic concern about followers' personal welfare (both work and non-work related) (Farh &

Cheng, 2000). There is now a body of evidence suggesting that authoritarian leadership and benevolent leadership are individually likely to induce opposite effects on followers' attitudes and behaviors (Chen et al., 2014). Recent studies have begun to explore the effects of the coexistence of authoritarian leadership and benevolent leadership on employee behaviors (Shaw et al., 2020).

This research contributes to this stream of literature by examining the influence of authoritarian-benevolent leadership on two types of employee behaviors: proactive work behaviors (PWBs) and unethical pro-organizational behaviors (UPBs). PWBs are defined as "self-initiated and future-oriented actions that aim to change and improve the current situation of oneself" (Parker et al., 2006, p. 636), while UPBs are defined as actions that are intended to promote the effective operation of the organization or its members but in doing so breach core social values, norms, laws, or standards of proper conducts (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). This study focuses on both PWBs and UPBs for several reasons. First, both types of behaviors have important effects on the functioning of organizations. Employees' PWBs could introduce new procedures and alternative ways to enhance work effectiveness, and are generally viewed as pro-organizational (Belschak & Hartog, 2010). Employee UPBs are

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“pro-organizational” yet “unethical” (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Given the pro-organizational nature of UPBs, such behavior may appear to benefit the organization in the short term (Castille et al., 2018). In the long run, however, UPBs can hurt or even destroy an organization by compromising the public trust, ruining the organization’s reputation, or leading organizations into lawsuits or bankruptcy (Hosain, 2019). Second, while the general assumption is that certain factors could lead employees to exhibit more positive behaviors and less negative behaviors, prior research (Parker et al., 2010; Umphress & Bingham, 2011) has stated that a high quality of LMX relationship could encourage employees to perform both PWBs and UPBs to reciprocate positive treatment. Therefore, in order to have a comprehensive understanding about authoritarian-benevolent leadership, it is necessary to assess its effects on both positive and negative employee behaviors.

Second, drawing on social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we further contribute to the stream of authoritarian-benevolent leadership research by examining the mediating role of LMX ambivalence, defined as the coexistence of positive (i.e., high quality) and negative (i.e., low quality) cognitions regarding the leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship (Lee et al., 2019). Prior LMX research has examined this relationship from a one-dimensional perspective using a continuum ranging from low to high exchange quality (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) suggested that authoritarian-benevolent leadership might make employees experience ambivalence toward LMX based on the following logic. Given their higher levels of status, direct involvement and interactions with employees (Wang et al., 2018), leaders are one of the vital sources from which employees gather information and social cues (Peng et al., 2019). Social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) explains that the social context shapes employees’ attitudes and behaviors by bring salient information to their attention and the social context influences employees’ beliefs and understanding of what is acceptable and desirable (Rofcanin et al., 2017). Prior studies have also shown that employees tend to look to leaders for cues to identify signals for appropriate behaviors (Lin et al., 2021). As an example, authoritarian leadership behaviors might send a signal to employees that they would be punished for not following their leaders’ rules in accomplishing the tasks, and that any work behaviors outside of the job description would not be recognized, respected or appreciated (Chen et al., 2014). On the other hand, a benevolent leader might send salient social cues to employees that speaking up and expressing their thoughts regarding work improvement are to be encouraged (Nazir et al., 2021). Thus, authoritarian-benevolent leadership is likely to increase role ambiguity or convey inconsistent role

information, due to the requirements put upon employees to regularly change their workplace behaviors from compliance without dissent (under authoritarian leadership) to proactive repayment (under benevolent leadership). Ambiguous and inconsistent role expectations, in turn, have been linked to perceptions of LMX ambivalence (Han, 2020). In addition, social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) states that, individuals construct attitudes not only as a result of the informational social influences, but also by cognitively evaluating the dimensions of the environmental context. The strict controlling behaviors (*li-wei* behaviors) exercised by authoritarian leaders convey social information that leaders hold higher hierarchical positions over subordinates, which enhances employees’ psychological-distance perceptions (Nazir et al., 2021). However, benevolent leadership normally sends positive signals by showing *shi-en* behaviors (favor grating) in work and non-work domains, which results in perceptions of high LMX (Zhang et al., 2015). Thus, under authoritarian-benevolent leadership, LMX relationships would be evaluated based on both coexisting positive (i.e., high quality) and negative (i.e., low quality) thoughts. As an indicator of the quality of the leader-employee relationship, LMX is considered as an “interpersonal social support resource” (Halbesleben et al., 2014). High-quality LMX is a resource pool that provides employees with more rewards, task-related resources, autonomy and support. LMX ambivalence disrupts the need for consistency in the leader-employee relationship. As a result, under authoritarian-benevolent leadership, employees might feel uncomfortable due to the resource loss. Based on conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989), employees would be less likely to engage in PWBs and UPBs as not taking these behaviors could help them conserve remaining valuable resources and avoid falling into a “loss spiral”.

Third, we extend our model of authoritarian-benevolent leadership and LMX ambivalence by identifying a key boundary condition of our presumed causal sequence. According to the social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), individuals process information about their social environment based on their characteristics. Therefore, it is likely that individuals have different interpretations of others’ behavior (Yang & Treadway, 2018). One way to conceptualize how this information is processed involves dialectical versus analytical thinking (Liu et al., 2015). Dialectical thinking has been argued to be a cognitive style that tolerates ambiguities, apparent contradictions, and inconsistencies (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Compared with the analytical thinking style of Western culture, prior studies found that East Asian cultures, e.g., China, are characterized by a preference for and a tendency to engage in dialectical thinking (Liu et al., 2015). For example, the Yin-Yang psychology in China holds that everything exists in the mystical integration of yin and yang (Zhang et al., 2015), entities that

are opposed to one another and yet also are connected in time and space as a whole (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Although cross-cultural differences in the propensity for dialectical thinking are prominent, this cognitive tendency is not limited to East Asian cultures (DeMotta et al., 2016). For example, research found that in Western cultures, higher dialectical thinking is more prevalent among older than younger individuals (DeMotta et al., 2016; Riegel, 1973). In addition, past research has shown that dialectical thinking can be reliably measured as an individual difference (Han & Bai, 2020; Hideg & Ferris, 2017). In this study, we consider dialectical thinking as an individual characteristic that is associated with tolerating and actively resolving seemingly contradictory information. Given that employees with lower (vs. higher) dialectical thinking are less amenable to and less likely to expect contradictions (DeMotta et al., 2016), they have greater difficulty processing opposing information. Therefore, under authoritarian-benevolent leadership, they are more likely to experience inconsistent cognitions toward the LMX relationships. In sum, we propose to examine one of the boundary conditions of the authoritarian-benevolent leadership-LMX ambivalence link by testing the moderating role of dialectical thinking.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Authoritarian-Benevolent Leadership and LMX Ambivalence

Social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) posits that individuals develop their cognitions, attitudes and behaviors as a function of the information or cues that are available to them, which usually originate from the immediate social environment. Specifically, the social environment has two general effects on individual cognition or attitudes (Lin et al., 2021; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). First, it provides salient social cues regarding what are acceptable and appropriate behaviors (Rofcanin et al., 2017). Second, it indirectly makes certain information more salient by shifting individual attention (Bhave et al., 2010) and provides expectations concerning their behavior. Attention (awareness) paid to the target (or figure) acts as a key step in processing information (Peng et al., 2019; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). At the workplace, given their higher status and direct involvement and interactions with employees (Wang et al., 2018), leaders are one of the vital sources from which employees gather information and social cues (Peng et al., 2019).

Han (2020) stated that role making processes are fundamental to LMX (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and that ambiguous and inconsistent role expectations might elicit perceptions of LMX ambivalence. From the role making

perspective of LMX, employees' roles in organizations are not entirely formally prescribed in the job description but develop through an informal exchange and negotiation with one's leader (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The process starts with the leader's communication of initial role expectations to a follower, and the follower reacts to these initial role demands (Han, 2020). Through a series of interpersonal interactions, the role making process results in a differentiated role and thus a differentiated LMX relationship within a workgroup (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). According to the general effects of social contexts (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and previous LMX ambivalence research (Han, 2020; Lee et al., 2019), this study proposes that authoritarian-benevolent leadership signals inconsistent role information that makes employees experience ambivalence toward LMX with their leaders. Owing to its ambidextrous nature, the combination of authoritarian and benevolent leadership prevents employees from judging accurately what is accepted behavior within the organizational context. Authoritarian leadership exerts absolute authority, demands unquestionable obedience, and obscures important information (Chen et al., 2014; Farh et al., 2006). These controlling behaviors send a signal to employees that they might be punished for not following their leaders' rules in accomplishing the tasks, and that any work behaviors outside of the job description would not be recognized, respected or appreciated (Chen et al., 2014). Benevolent leadership, on the other hand, refers to leader behaviors that provide individualized, holistic concern for employees' personal well-being (both work and non-work related). Moreover, the benevolence of a leader encourages employees to speak up and express their thoughts regarding work improvement (Nazir et al., 2021).

As agents of the organization, Zhou et al. (2016) stated that leaders could influence employees' role responsibilities by guiding employees' attention processes to expected task goals. Authoritarian leadership and benevolent leadership transmit their role expectations in distinct ways. Authoritarian leaders determine role responsibilities by emphasizing complete control and authority, setting rules, and issuing punishment and rewards (Farh et al., 2006). In response to such *li-wei* behaviors, employees demonstrate obedience and compliance. Benevolent leaders, however, tend to use friendly and compassionate actions to inspire employees' sense of responsibility and loyalty to their expected roles (Shaw et al., 2020). Therefore, authoritarian-benevolent leadership is likely to increase role ambiguity due to the requirements put upon followers to regularly change their workplace behaviors from compliance without dissent to proactive repayment (i.e., offering their constructive voice and trying innovative work methods).

As noted earlier, employees' perceptions of LMX may become ambivalent as a result of the coexistence of conflicting role expectations (Han, 2020). Under

authoritarian-benevolent leadership, employees need to adopt multiple organizational roles within the dyad. This creates opportunities for the development of LMX ambivalence as a result of the potential for conflicts to arise from the need to encompass different roles and to correspond to different expectations at different times (Ashforth et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2019). Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1 Authoritarian-benevolent leadership is positively associated with LMX ambivalence.

LMX Ambivalence and Employee Behaviors

The conservation resource of theory (Hobfoll, 1989) posits that perceptions of stress result from resource threat or loss, and individuals are motivated to retain, protect, and build valuable resources. When individuals experience resource loss or threat, they tend to protect themselves in two ways. One, to prevent the consumption of resources employee could conserve existing resources by decreasing their resource investment in order to avoid falling into a “loss spiral” (Yao et al., 2021). Second, individuals could invest their remaining resources and acquire additional resources in order to protect them against further loss or recover from resource loss (the “gain spiral”). Individuals need to weigh expected benefits and costs associated with these two alternatives when deciding whether to engage in specific behaviors. However, because research has demonstrated that resource loss weighs more than resource gain (Halbesleben et al., 2014), individuals experiencing resource loss will prefer to conserve their existing resources. As an indicator of the quality of the leader-employee relationship, LMX is considered as an “interpersonal social support resource” (Halbesleben et al., 2014). High-quality LMX is a resource pool that provides employees with more rewards, task-related resources, autonomy and support. Dechowatana-paisal (2020) proposed that LMX ambivalence disrupts the need for consistency within the leader-employee relationship, making employees feel uncomfortable due to resource loss, which motivates them to retain their existing resources by lowering their career commitment.

To continue this research stream, we assume that the ambivalent relationship between leaders and employees may interfere with the resources necessary for employees’ PWBs. Parker et al. (2010) stated that positive affect at work can stretch one’s mind, invoke feelings of energy, and promote intrinsic motivation, which can enhance the likelihood of undertaking PWBs (Zhang & Chen, 2020). LMX ambivalence disrupts the need for consistency within the relationship, leading to feelings of dissonance and discomfort (Han, 2020). These aversive feelings divert psychological and attentional resources toward coping with this

discomfort (Ashforth et al., 2014), which distracts from the energy necessary to perform PWBs (Parker et al., 2010).

A salient theme in research on ambivalence is that it increase individuals’ cognitive biases that are characterized by one-sided, narrow and extreme thoughts and attitudes (Rothman et al., 2017). In addition, psychological research has demonstrated that experiencing ambivalence produces behavioral inflexibility in a few different forms, such as an indecisiveness and resistance to change (Han, 2020; Rothman et al., 2017). Employees’ PWBs have been described as a process consisting of setting a proactive goal and striving to achieve it (Parker et al., 2010). Thus, cognitive bias and behavior inflexibility caused by LMX ambivalence prevent employees from perceiving and addressing current or future problems or opportunities to set proactive goals.

Moreover, employees who engage in PWBs might not gain additional expected benefits and additional resources. According to Pingel et al. (2019), as initiators and conductors of their proactivity, employees assume full accountability for all consequences. They might have feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty because of the unclear and unpredictable consequences of PWBs. Moreover, exhibiting PWBs may not help them win their leaders’ appreciation, but instead, PWBs might be viewed as a criticism of the way the leader manages his or her responsibilities (Fuller et al., 2015). Those who engage in PWBs are also likely to encounter resistance and negative reactions from peers (Pingel et al., 2019). Based on the above review, we speculate that when employees experience LMX ambivalence, they are less likely to take proactive actions as not taking these actions helps them conserve their remaining valuable resources and avoid falling into a “loss spiral” (Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

Hypothesis 2 LMX ambivalence is negatively related to PWBs.

With regard to the effect of LMX ambivalence on UPBs, we also expect a negative association based on the resource conservation motivation of employees. Although some researchers argue that the stress caused by resource loss (i.e., job insecurity) may motivate employees to engage in UPBs to meet their leaders’ and organizations’ expectations (Xiong et al., 2021), or to prove themselves as valuable members of the organization (Chen et al., 2021), we speculate that the risks involved outweigh the expected gains they might anticipate achieving through UPBs. Like PWBs, UPBs are initiated by employee themselves, which is neither described in one’s job description nor ordered by one’s leaders (Lee et al., 2019; Umphress et al., 2010). Thus, employees who engage in such behaviors should be responsible for their conduct and any potential negative consequences. According to Chen et al. (2021), the anxiety of being responsible for potential

consequences threatens the well-being of UPBs perpetrators and requires them to invest and risk resources in order to comply (i.e., after-sale complaints from customers). Indeed, if uncovered, UPBs can damage not only the perpetrators' careers, but also the organization's reputation and financial standing. Additionally, Umphress et al. (2010) pointed out that UPBs can lead to feelings of guilt and shame which are elicited by different appraisals and lead to different action tendencies (Tangney et al., 2007). If perpetrators reflect on the fact that their use of UPBs does not conform to social conduct standards (*"I did a bad thing"*), they will likely experience guilt, and then have to consume resource (i.e., time and energy) to engage in reparative actions such as confession and apologies (Graton & Ric, 2017). To the degree that they internalize their use of UPBs, they will experience shame as a result of their departure from an idealized self (*"I am a bad person"*). These ashamed perpetrators then would engage in exemplification behaviors to protect their self-image (Bonner et al., 2017), signaling that he or she is not so bad. Given this resource-consuming nature of UPBs, we argue that experiencing resource threats should decrease their engagement in UPBs.

According to conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the ambivalent relationship between leaders and employees serves as a source of stress to employees. When employees experience LMX ambivalence, they attempt to maintain their levels of resources and are, as a result, less likely to engage in UPBs that continue to consume these valuable resources. LMX ambivalence also lessens the links that bind employees to their workplace (Dechawatanapaisal, 2020). In this regard, employees are less likely to engage in "pro-organizational" behavior including behaviors that are unethical (UPBs). Thus, the following hypothesis is put forward:

Hypothesis 3 LMX ambivalence is negatively related to UPBs.

The Mediating Role of LMX Ambivalence

According to social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), what leaders say and do is one of the main sources from which employees gather information or cues in the workplace. Social information processing theory also notes that social information shapes an individual's behaviors by influencing their attitudes and cognitions (Rofcanin et al., 2017; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Thus, the effect of social information on employees' behavior might unfold in two processes.

In the current study, we argue that an employees' perception of LMX ambivalence under authoritarian-benevolent leadership (cognitive process) leads to a decrease in the use of resource-consuming actions (i.e., PWBs and UPBs,

coping process). In light of the social information process perspective (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), we argue that leadership behaviors provide critical and salient cues regarding what to achieve at work. In the case of authoritarian-benevolent leadership, employees receive conflicting sets of cues. Authoritarian leadership focuses on authority, control and unquestioning obedience from subordinates which results in a low-quality LMX relationship with employees, while benevolent leadership is based on holistic and individualized concern for employees' well-being in work and non-work domains resulting in higher quality LMX (Zhang et al., 2015). The contradictory cues associated with "benevolence" and "authority" sends conflicting role expectations and increase employee role ambiguity, which leads employees to experience ambivalence regarding their exchange relationship with their leaders (LMX ambivalence). The effect of this is that employees evaluate their coping resources and available options for coping with the stress associated with these conflicting social cues (Wang et al., 2021b). According to the conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), individuals are motivated to retain, protect, and build resources. LMX ambivalence consumes individual resources and, in order to prevent further consumption of resources, employees are less likely to engage in resource-consuming behaviors (i.e., PWBs and UPBs). These arguments lead us to propose a mediation hypotheses wherein authoritarian-benevolent leadership hinders employee uses of PWBs as well as UPBs through the LMX ambivalence.

Hypothesis 4 LMX ambivalence mediates the negative relationship between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and PWBs.

Hypothesis 5 LMX ambivalence mediates the negative relationship between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and UPBs.

The Moderating Role of Dialectical Thinking

According to social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), individual characteristics exert important effects on one's ability to process and interpret information and social cues. One such individual characteristic is one's ability to think dialectically. Dialectical thinking concerns individuals' information processing style (i.e., how information is collected, interpreted, and used). Specifically, it refers to the ability to tolerate apparently contradictory beliefs (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Peng and Nisbett (1999) identified three principles of dialectical thinking: the principle of contradiction, the principle of change, and the principle of holism. Based on these three principles, we think that employees with higher dialectical thinking will have a more comprehensive understanding of authoritarian-benevolent

leadership. First, the principle of contradiction holds that everything in reality contains opposite elements that exist simultaneously (Hideg et al., 2017), e.g., good and bad, strong and weak. Therefore, employees higher on dialectical thinking are more likely to understand the combination of different leadership styles and understand that one leader could simultaneously exert both authoritarian leadership and benevolent leadership. Second, the principle of change states that the world is in flux and is constantly changing (Liu et al., 2015). According to Chinese folk beliefs, existence is not static but dynamic and changeable (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). This suggests that higher dialectical thinkers realize that any single leadership style cannot satisfy different environmental needs at the same time. They understand that their leaders select and switch leadership behaviors of “authority” and “benevolence” according to the requirements of different situations. Third, the principle of holism, the essence of dialectical thinking, asserts that nothing exists in isolation, but that everything is connected (Yama & Zakaria, 2019). Employees with higher dialectical thinking view authoritarian leadership and benevolent leadership as being interconnected. Specifically, when authoritarian leadership is coupled with holistic and individual caring behaviors, it will reduce the negative perceptions of authoritarian leadership (Cheng et al., 2004; Gu et al., 2020). Additionally, when benevolent leaders exert absolute authority and control at the same time, employees with higher dialectical thinking will view this behavior as a response to a demanding task requiring high standards (Shaw et al., 2020). Taken together, for employees with higher dialectical thinking, authoritarian-benevolent leadership is more in line with the unity of opposites, balance, and mutual conversion, which is called the “Yin-Yang balance”. Given that dialectical thinking helps employees understand and integrate the seemingly incompatible components of authoritarian-benevolent leadership as a whole, we further speculate that employees with lower dialectical thinking are less likely to be able to process inconsistent role information from their authoritarian-benevolent leaders, which makes them more susceptible to experience LMX ambivalence with their leaders. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 6 Employees’ dialectical thinking moderates the relationship between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and LMX ambivalence, such that the relationship is stronger for employees with low dialectical thinking.

Method (Study 1)

Sample and Procedure

We collected data from employees working in different organizations in Beijing, Shanxi, Shanghai, and 9 other cities in China. Participants were from a variety of sectors, including information technology, energy, educational services, food, retail trade, construction, chemical, and health care. Before we administered the surveys, all participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation and were assured that their responses would be treated confidentially and only be used for research and feedback purposes. We conducted our survey during three time periods, each two weeks apart. This time lag was chosen to reduce common method bias. In the first-wave (T1), participants were invited to report the authoritarian-benevolent leadership of their direct leader and their own demographics. Two weeks later (T2), participants were asked to indicate their dialectical thinking and LMX ambivalence. At time 3 (2 weeks later), participants reported their use of PWBs and UPBs. In order to match their responses from the three waves, participants were requested to provide their last 4 digits of an 11-digit mobile phone number as well as their age.

We received 685 responses at T1, 512 at T2, and 426 at T3. After matching responses at T1 and T2, we obtained a matched sample of 426 participants. However, of the 426 matched questionnaires, 351 were found to be valid after data-cleaning and initial response analysis.¹ Among the final sample, 220 (62.68%) were male. With regard to age, 2.85% of respondents were more than 45 years old, 32.48% were 35–44 years old, 53.28% were 25–34 years old, and 11.94% were 24 years of age or younger. As for education level, 9.69% had received a senior high education, 48.72% had a bachelor’s degree, and 36.75% respondents had a master

¹ Date cleaning in Study 1: Based on prior studies (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007), the data-cleaning procedures included missing value analysis and an assessment of normality of distribution. During cleaning, we removed cases from the dataset when a questionnaire contained significant missing values (i.e., more than 10% of the total scale items) with noticeable patterns. We also followed the recommendations of Chambers et al. (1983) in testing the usefulness of cases which we contributed significantly to the skewness and kurtosis-related characteristics of each item that may affect the normality of the survey data distribution. In addition, we performed the initial analysis by examining and excluding those conflicting responses to relevant scale items. Following prior studies (Roxas & Coetzer, 2012), we checked for non-response bias in our data collection by examining the characteristics (i.e., gender, age, educational level, and tenure) of early and late participants in each of the three survey waves (initial and two follow-ups). The non-response analysis showed that later respondents were more similar to non-respondents; thus, non-response bias in our sample is not deemed to be a major concern.

degree. About 57.68% of participants had an organizational tenure of at least of 1.5 years, and 72.42% had tenure with their direct leaders of at least of 1 year, which suggests that these participants had enough experience with their leaders to comment on constructs such as authoritarian-benevolent leadership and LMX ambivalence.

Measures

We measured all items apart from demographic variables on 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

Authoritarian-Benevolent Leadership

We adapted Cheng et al.'s (2000) 15-item scale by using its 5-item authoritarian leadership scale and 5-item benevolent leadership scale to measure the leaders' authority and benevolence, respectively. Sample items included the following: "My supervisor always has the last say in meetings" (authoritarian leadership; the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .821), "My supervisor takes very thoughtful care of subordinates who have spent a long time with him/her" (benevolent leadership; the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .842). Based on prior research (Zacher & Rosing, 2015), we measured the authoritarian-benevolent leadership by multiplying the mean value of authoritarian leadership with the mean value of benevolent leadership.

LMX Ambivalence

We assessed LMX ambivalence with seven-items developed by Lee et al. (2019). Sample items included: "I have conflicting thoughts: sometimes I think that my working relationship with my manager is very good, while at other times I don't." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .781.

Dialectical Thinking

We measured dialectical thinking with the 13-item scale developed by Spencer-Rodgers et al. (2015). A sample item was "When I hear two sides of an argument, I often agree with both." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .825.

PWBs

We employed eight items adapted from Parker et al. (2006) to evaluate PWBs. A sample includes "Not taking unnecessary time off work". The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .816.

UPBs

UPBs were evaluated with six items developed by Umphress et al. (2010). A sample item was "If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good". The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .793.

Control Variables

Previous research has noted that employee gender, age, educational level, tenure, dyadic tenure, and employment position might be related to the focal relationships we examining (Han, 2020; Zhang & Chen, 2020), so we controlled for these variables. We also controlled for LMX quality using seven items adapted from Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) to evaluate LMX quality (Cronbach's alpha = .834).

Results

Harman's One-Factor Test

Harman's one-factor test produced results showing that the first factor only accounted for 26.33% of the total variance, which is much less than the 50% benchmark to judge whether the common method bias was a serious concern in the current study (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986).

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. As shown in Table 1, Authoritarian-benevolent leadership was positively related to employees' LMX ambivalence ($r = .269, p < .01$). LMX ambivalence was negatively related to the use of PWBs ($r = -.207, p < .001$) and UPBs ($r = -.254, p < .001$). These findings provided initial support for our hypothesized relationships.

Construct Validity

The results of confirmatory factor analysis in Table 2 indicate that the seven-factor measurement model fit the data better ($\chi^2 = 1757.301, df = 798, \chi^2/df = 2.202, IFI = .878, TLI = .869, CFI = .877, RMSEA = .059$), compared to any model that combined these latent factors into a model with fewer factors.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 3 presents the results of hierarchical regression analysis. As Table 3 shows, authoritarian-benevolent leadership was positively related to LMX ambivalence ($\beta = .012$,

Table 1 Means, standard deviations and correlations for Study 1

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Gender	1.370	0.484	–										
Age	2.270	0.695	0.076	–									
Education	2.490	0.736	0.001	0.018	–								
Position	1.783	0.837	– 0.169***	0.085	0.279***	–							
Organizational tenure	7.300	5.338	0.052	0.319***	– 0.028	– 0.011	–						
Dyadic tenure	5.290	6.444	– 0.094	– 0.010	– 0.154***	– 0.113*	0.051	–					
LMX quality	3.862	0.648	– 0.011	– 0.026	0.002	0.019	0.013	0.226***	–				
Authoritarian-benevolent leadership	13.305	3.794	0.139**	0.005	– 0.003	– 0.119*	0.028	– 0.070	0.008	–			
Dialectical thinking	3.367	0.944	– 0.075	– 0.082	0.059	0.167**	– 0.127*	– 0.024	– 0.054	– 0.367***	–		
LMX ambivalence	3.216	0.716	0.049	0.042	0.031	– 0.074	0.066	– 0.134*	– 0.112*	0.269**	– 0.277***	–	
PWBs	3.424	0.754	– 0.065	– 0.088	0.027	0.152**	– 0.099	– 0.018	– 0.024	– 0.335***	0.325***	– 0.207***	–
UPBs	3.515	0.874	0.054	0.002	0.103	0.056	– 0.024	– 0.108*	0.026	– 0.410***	0.252***	– 0.254***	0.312*

N=351

PWBs Proactive Work Behaviors, UPBs Unethical Pro-organizational Behaviors

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

Table 2 Confirmatory factor analysis and model comparison for Study 1

Model test	Descriptions	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Model 1	Seven factors: authoritarian leadership, benevolent leadership, LMX ambivalence, LMX quality, dialectical thinking, PWBs and UPBs	1757.301	798	2.202	0.878	0.869	0.877	0.059
Model 2	Six factors: authoritarian leadership and benevolent leadership were combined into one factor	2452.044	804	3.050	0.791	0.774	0.789	0.077
Model 3	Five factors: authoritarian leadership and benevolent leadership were combined into one factor; dialectical thinking and PWBs were combined into one factor	3071.065	809	3.796	0.713	0.692	0.711	0.089
Model 4	Four factors: authoritarian leadership and benevolent leadership, and LMX ambivalence were combined into one factor; dialectical thinking and PWBs were combined into one factor	3278.882	813	4.033	0.660	0.687	0.666	0.093
Model 5	Three factors: authoritarian leadership, benevolent leadership, and LMX ambivalence were combined into one factor; dialectical thinking, LMX quality and PWBs were combined into one factor	3825.382	816	4.688	0.617	0.594	0.615	0.103
Model 6	Two factors: authoritarian leadership, benevolent leadership, and LMX ambivalence were combined into one factor; dialectical thinking, LMX quality, PWBs and UPBs were combined into one factor	4269.141	818	5.219	0.561	0.536	0.559	0.110
Model 7	One factor: authoritarian leadership, benevolent leadership, LMX ambivalence, LMX quality, dialectical thinking, PWBs and UPBs were combined into one factor	4707.394	819	5.748	0.506	0.477	0.503	0.116

$N=351$

PWBs Proactive Work Behaviors, UPBs Unethical Pro-organizational Behaviors

$p < .05$, M_{10}). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. LMX ambivalence was negatively related to employee PWBs ($\beta = -.243$, $p < .001$, M_3) and UPBs ($\beta = -.381$, $p < .001$, M_7). Thus, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were supported, suggesting that LMX ambivalence has effects beyond those of LMX quality. In Model 4, the results show that LMX ambivalence significantly and negatively affected employees' PWBs ($\beta = -.132$, $p < .01$, M_4), while the direct effect of authoritarian-benevolent leadership on PWBs decreased ($\beta = -.091$, $p < .05$, M_4). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported. Similarly, in Model 8, after placing authoritarian leadership, benevolent leadership, and authoritarian-benevolent leadership and LMX ambivalence in the regression model, the results show that LMX ambivalence significantly and negatively affected employees' UPBs ($\beta = -.250$, $p < .001$, M_8), while the direct effect of authoritarian-benevolent leadership on UPBs decreased ($\beta = -.140$, $p < .001$, M_8). Thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported. The results of bootstrapping analyses in the PROCESS indicated that a 95% confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effects of authoritarian-benevolent leadership on employee PWBs through LMX ambivalence did not include zero [Effect = $-.006$, SE = $.003$, 95% CI ($-.014$, $-.001$)], supporting Hypothesis 4. The indirect effects of authoritarian-benevolent leadership on employee UPBs through LMX ambivalence was $-.013$ [SE = $.005$, 95% CI ($-.022$, $-.004$)] and significant. Thus, Hypothesis 5 was confirmed.

The results for the interaction term between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and dialectical thinking were

significant ($\beta = -.097$, $p < .01$, M_{11}) for LMX ambivalence. Thus, Hypothesis 6 received support. Also, the results of simple slope tests (in Fig. 1) showed that the relationship between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and LMX ambivalence was more positive among employees with lower levels ($\beta_{\text{simple}} = .044$, $p < .001$) rather than high levels ($\beta_{\text{simple}} = -.005$, $p > .05$) of dialectical thinking.

Method (Study 2)

Though the results of Study 1 showed a significant relationship between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and LMX ambivalence, we cannot conclude that authoritarian-benevolent leadership could cause LMX ambivalence. Using a scenario-based experiment, Study 2 aims to establish the casual relationship between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and LMX ambivalence and test the mediating effect of LMX ambivalence in relationships between authoritarian-benevolent leadership with PWBs and UPBs. Testing the hypotheses with field and experimental studies provides more rigorous evidence supporting the proposed causal relationship.

Sample

The participants in this study were 264 Chinese employees who were randomly assigned to four leadership conditions in terms of authoritarian leadership behavior (no authoritarian

Table 3 Hierarchical regression analysis for Study 1

Variable	PWBs			UPBs			LMX ambivalence				
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11
Gender	−0.055	0.022	−0.048	0.019	−0.096	−0.008	−0.086	−0.012	0.026	−0.016	−0.004
Age	−0.102	−0.087	−0.096	−0.083	0.009	0.027	0.019	0.036	0.026	0.033	0.021
Education	−0.021	−0.021	−0.007	−0.014	0.003	−0.001	0.021	0.011	0.054	0.050	0.038
Position	0.119*	0.068	0.101*	0.062	0.150**	0.087	0.122**	0.075	−0.074	−0.050	−0.039
Organizational tenure	−0.012	−0.014	−0.009	−0.012*	−0.013	−0.015**	−0.009	−0.013	0.010	0.009	0.003
Dyadic tenure	−0.002	−0.005	−0.006	−0.002	−0.005	−0.006	−0.011	−0.009	−0.015*	0.012*	−0.012
LMX quality	0.267***	0.158***	0.259***	0.144*	0.397***	0.304***	0.384***	0.277***	−0.033	−0.106	−0.140
Authoritarian leadership		0.213		0.236		0.316*		0.360**		0.175	0.239
Benevolent leadership		−0.046		−0.025		0.093		0.135		0.165	0.209
Authoritarian-benevolent leadership		−0.093*		−0.091*		−0.145***		−0.140***		0.012*	−0.036
LMX ambivalence			−0.243***	−0.132**			−0.381***	−0.250***			−0.116*
Dialectical thinking											−0.097**
Authoritarian-benevolent leadership×dialectical thinking											
R ²	0.086	0.312	0.138	0.327	0.126	0.387	0.227	0.427	0.034	0.115	0.161
F	4.487	15.080	6.674	14.575	6.920	20.945	12.260	22.398	1.722	4.299	5.267

 $N = 351$ *PWBs* Proactive Work Behaviors, *UPBs* Unethical Pro-organizational Behaviors* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

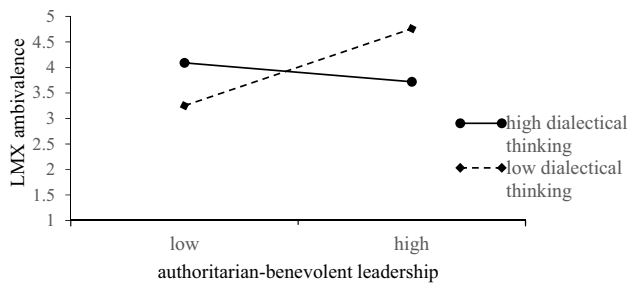


Fig. 1 Moderating effect of dialectical thinking on the relationship between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and LMX ambivalence (Study 1)

leadership behavior vs. authoritarian leadership behavior) and benevolent leadership behaviors (no benevolent leadership behavior vs. benevolent leadership behavior) in exchange for ¥5. However, 54 were dropped due to providing incomplete data or incorrectly answer a simple attention check item (“For this item, please click answer 2”), leaving a final sample of 210 participants. Among them, 55.37% were male, and 37.41% had a bachelor’s degree. With regard to age, 5.40% were less than 25 years old, 53.44% were between 25 and 34 years old, 29.34% were between 35 and 44 years old, and 11.82% were more than 45 years old. Participants reported an average of 6.29 years ($SD=7.430$) of experience with their current organization, and 4.24 years with their direct leaders ($SD=3.54$). With regard to employment position, 73.63% participants were ordinary employees.

Design and Procedure

A link to the questionnaire was sent to their e-mail addresses on WeChat. Participants first read the study instructions and indicated their consent. Then, they were asked to read the scenario and carefully think about what they would do if they actually experienced the described leadership condition (see Appendix A). After reading this scenario, these participants were asked to complete a survey containing the manipulation checks of leadership, LMX ambivalence, PWBs, UPBs and the control variables (i.e., LMX quality and demographic variables).

Measures

We used 5-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) for all substantive variables in this study.

Manipulation Checks

We assessed whether our manipulations of leadership were successfully using the same scale (Cheng et al., 2000) as

used in Study 1. The items were slightly adapted to reference the specific line manager (“Li Wang”) used in the scenario. The authoritarian leadership showed an excellent reliability, $\alpha=.836$. The reliability of benevolent leadership was also very good, $\alpha=.821$.

LMX Ambivalence

We measured employees’ LMX ambivalence with the seven-item scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha=.818$).

PWBs

Participants rated the extent to which they would act as stated using Parker et al. (2006) eight-item scale of PWBs as in Study 1 ($\alpha=.763$).

UPBs

UPBs were assessed with Umphress et al. (2010) 6-item scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha=.823$).

Control Variables

Employee gender, age, educational level, tenure, dyadic tenure, and employment position were controlled for in our data analysis. We also controlled for LMX quality using the same seven-item scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha=.819$).

Results

Manipulation Checks

The ANOVA showed that ratings of authoritarian leadership differed significantly among the leadership conditions [$F(3, 210)=16.154, p<.001$], ratings of benevolent leadership also differed significantly among the conditions [$F(3, 210)=5.435, p<.001$]. Employees assigned to the authoritarian-benevolent leadership condition rated higher perceptions of leader authority ($M=3.520, SD=.938$) than those in the benevolent leadership condition [$M=2.777, SD=.301, F(1, 108)=33.565, p<.001$]. Employees assigned to the authoritarian-benevolent leadership condition also rated higher perceptions of leader benevolence ($M=4.148, SD=.562$) than those in the authoritarian leadership condition [$M=2.705, SD=.696, F(1, 108)=8.607, p<.05$]. Our manipulations were thus successful.

Hypotheses Testing

Table 4 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables in this study.

Table 4 Means, standard deviations and correlations for Study 2

Variable	M	SD	4	5	6	7
Authoritarian leadership condition	–	–	– 0.046	– 0.062	– 0.111	– 0.131***
Benevolent leadership condition	–	–	0.005	0.049	0.041	0.114*
Authoritarian-benevolent leadership condition	–	–	– 0.208***	0.295***	– 0.322***	– 0.295***
LMX quality	3.565	0.916	–	– 0.316*	0.277***	0.230***
LMX ambivalence	3.356	0.904		–	– 0.312***	– 0.369***
PWBs	3.784	0.897			–	0.270*
UPBs	3.265	0.983				–

PWBs Proactive Work Behaviors, UPBs Unethical Pro-organizational Behaviors

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

Table 5 presents the results of hierarchical regression analysis. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, authoritarian-benevolent leadership was positively related to LMX ambivalence (M_{10} , $\beta = .049$, $p < .001$). Models 3 and 7 report that LMX ambivalence is negatively related to PWBs and UPBs ($\beta = -.225$, $p < .001$, and $\beta = -.358$, $p < .001$, respectively), thereby supporting Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3.

The direct effect between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and PWBs was decreased when LMX ambivalence was entered into the analysis (M_4 , $\beta = -.051$, $p < .001$), therefore supporting Hypothesis 4. Similarly, the direct effect between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and UPBs was decreased when LMX ambivalence was entered into the analysis (M_8 , $\beta = -.057$, $p < .001$), which supports Hypothesis 5. The indirect effects between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and employee PWBs as well as UPBs remain negative (indirect effect = $-.007$, 95% CI [$-.016$, $-.001$]; indirect effect = $-.014$, 95% CI [$-.026$, $-.005$], respectively). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 and Hypothesis 5 are confirmed.

General Discussion

In line with the proposed hypotheses, the findings of both Study 1 and Study 2 show that authoritarian-benevolent leadership is positively associated with LMX ambivalence, and LMX ambivalence is negatively associated with PWBs and UPBs. Moreover, we provide evidence suggesting that LMX ambivalence mediates the relationships between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and both employees PWBs and UPBs. Our findings in Study 1 also provide evidence in support of Hypothesis 6, demonstrating that dialectical thinking weakens the association between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and LMX ambivalence.

Theoretical Implications

Our research makes several contributions to the literature. First, our research enhances the comprehensive understanding of the role of authoritarian-benevolent leadership in the development of employees' job attitudes and work outcomes. To date, authoritarian-benevolent leadership has been found to improve employees' positive job attitudes and work outcomes (Hou & Peng, 2019), but few studies have investigated the dark side of authoritarian-benevolent leadership (Hou et al., 2019; Shaw et al., 2020). In the current study, drawing on the social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the inconsistent role information caused by the contradictory "benevolent" and "authority" leadership behaviors led employees to experience ambivalence toward their exchange relationship with leaders, which in turn deterred them from engaging in PWBs and UPBs. In addition, Shaw et al. (2020) found that the authoritarian-benevolent style of ambidextrous leadership was positively related to employees UPBs because of employees' moral disengagement. This study revealed alternate possibilities and found that authoritarian-benevolent leadership was negatively associated with employees UPBs through LMX ambivalence, which provides a more complete picture of the relationship between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and employee UPBs.

Second, the current findings advance LMX ambivalence research, which is still in its infancy, having received little empirical attention (Han, 2020; Lee et al., 2019). LMX researchers often examined this relationship from one-dimensional perspective using a continuum from low to high exchange quality (Dulebohn et al., 2012), but we extend the literature by exploring the coexistence of positive and negative cognitions regarding LMX relationship (LMX ambivalence). In doing so, we add new insights into how LMX ambivalence mediates the link between

Table 5 Hierarchical regression analysis for Study 2

Variable	PWBs			UPBs			LMX ambivalence			
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10
Gender	−0.054	−0.154	−0.069	−0.152	−0.157	−0.268	−0.181	−0.265	0.068	−0.012
Age	0.031	0.042	0.020	0.034	−0.099	−0.088	−0.116	−0.103	0.047	0.054
Education	0.119	0.109	0.101	0.098	0.137	0.127	0.110	0.108	0.076	0.070
Position	−0.061*	−0.036	−0.046	−0.029	−0.045	−0.022	−0.021**	−0.010	−0.064	−0.046
Organizational tenure	0.093	0.075	0.091	0.075	0.086	0.068	0.082	0.069	0.009	−0.004
Dyadic tenure	0.199	0.122	0.149	0.098	0.161	0.064	0.080	0.021	0.225	0.160
LMX quality	0.237***	0.163***	0.169***	0.128*	0.208***	0.121*	0.100***	0.056	0.302	0.541
Authoritarian leadership		−0.342		−0.308*		−0.344*		−0.282*		−0.232
Benevolent leadership		0.086		0.064		0.246		0.206		0.146
Authoritarian-benevolent leadership		−0.058***		−0.051***		−0.070***		−0.057***		0.049***
LMX ambivalence			−0.225***	−0.147**			−0.358***	−0.269***		
R ²	0.098	0.204	0.148	0.224	0.079	0.198	0.175	0.248	0.115	0.182
F	4.298	7.061	3.831	7.199	3.421	6.786	7.342	8.211	5.180	6.103

PWBs Proactive Work Behaviors, UPBs Unethical Pro-organizational Behaviors

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

authoritarian-benevolent leadership and PWBs as well as UPBs. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study explicitly examining the antecedents of LMX ambivalence. In response to the need to further elucidate the nature of LMX ambivalence (Han, 2020); we identify authoritarian-benevolent leadership as an antecedent of employees' LMX ambivalence. In addition, we replicated Liu et al.'s study (2021) and demonstrated that the effect of LMX ambivalence on PWBs would be independent of LMX quality.

Third, our research contributes to the literature on dialectical thinking in the Chinese context. Currently, nearly all of the research on Chinese dialectical thinking was conducted in the social psychology literature (Chen et al., 2014). Following Bai et al.'s (2015) research, we introduce dialectical thinking into the management literature by examining its role in relation to authoritarian-benevolent leadership and LMX ambivalence.

Fourth, the present study also contributes to the literature on employee behavior, both positive behaviors (PWBs) and potentially negative behaviors (UPBs). Based on social information processing (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and conservation of resource theories (Hobfoll, 1989), we demonstrated that when faced with conflicting information cues from their leaders and to prevent further consumption of resources, employees are less likely to engage in PWBs or UPBs. Moreover, due to their pro-organizational characteristic, UPBs have been overlooked by organizations and scholars (Chen et al., 2016). To the best of our knowledge, the present research is the first to test the causality between LMX ambivalence and UPBs.

Practical Implications

Our findings also offer important practical implications. First, although our study reveals a negative relationship between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and employees' use of UPBs, we also found the potential dark side of authoritarian-benevolent leadership. It increases LMX ambivalence which demotivates employees from engaging in positive pro-organizational behaviors (i.e., PWBs). We want to emphasize that we are by no means discouraging authoritarian-benevolent leadership, which is indeed beneficial in organizations (Hou & Peng, 2019). Instead, our findings suggest that leaders should be mindful that an authoritarian-benevolent style of ambidextrous leadership is not seen as absolute because employees may receive inconsistent role information from their contradictory leadership behaviors, thereby experience ambivalence toward their LMX relationships, which discourages PWBs. Steps should be taken to mitigate the detrimental outcomes of authoritarian-benevolent leadership. For instance, organizations should focus on selecting leaders who have a demonstrated capacity to switch between *li-wei* (awe-inspiring) behaviors and *shi-en*

(favor granting) behaviors effectively. Training courses can be used to support leaders' development of authoritarian and benevolent behaviors. Moreover, one mitigating strategy to limit or eliminate the negative effects of authoritarian-benevolent leadership is for leaders to exhibit moral leadership behaviors in order to change employee attributions about authoritarian behaviors. Specifically, when leaders display superior personal virtues such as integrity, self-discipline and selflessness, employees are more likely to understand the style of authoritarian-benevolent leadership and believe that benevolent leaders who exhibit authoritarian behaviors are doing so with the intention of aiding their subordinates and organization (Gu et al., 2020). To the degree this happens, employees' incongruent evaluations toward their LMX relationships should be reduced, resulting in lower levels of LMX ambivalence.

Second, it is important for leaders pay attention to issues such as the extent to which employees experience inconsistent cognitions regarding their LMX relationships. Leaders should be aware that LMX ambivalence is a common experience in the workplace (Han, 2020; Lee et al., 2019). Lee et al. (2019) stated that behavioral consistency is one way that leaders can reduce the potential for ambivalence. Thus, we encourage leaders to examine their leadership behaviors regularly, and communicate the objectives associated with any switching of leadership behaviors to make sure that they do not place inconsistent information, mixed instructions or competing demands on their employees. Organizations also should provide more opportunities for leaders and employees to share their thoughts, attitudes, and role expectations, which are important to promote relational identification (Wang et al., 2021b). In addition, organizations should enhance the quality of LMX relationships and supplement the valuable resources consumed by LMX ambivalence. For example, leaders could ensure the provision of organizational support and foster opportunities for PWBs in order to buffer the negative effects of LMX ambivalence.

Third, the results of the moderating effect of dialectical thinking suggest that leaders should pay attention to their employees' individual dialectical orientations. Therefore, it seems that a dialectical mindset as a selection criterion may be appropriate when choosing employees, particularly for organizations placing a high value on ambidextrous leadership. Han and Bai (2020) stated that dialectical thinking can be trained in both leaders and employees. Given that cognitive style is influenced by culture and ideology (Peng & Nisbett, 1999), organizations could align their organizational values around the three principles of dialectical thinking and encourage their employees to think dialectically (Bai et al., 2015). For example, organizations should tolerate and encourage different voices and opinions in group discussions and be open to seemingly contradictory solutions (the principle of contradiction). Organizations should encourage

employees to think situationally, formulate more flexible coping strategies under changing or complex circumstances (the principle of change). Finally, organizations should help employees collect additional information and use a wide range of perspectives to capture the entirety of a problem (the principle of holism).

Finally, organizations should invest more in organizational policies and practices that encourage PWBs and prevent UPBs. Due to its highly risky and uncertain nature, PWBs require more resource expenditure (Parker et al., 2010). Prior research has demonstrated that managers' reactions to employees' PWBs have important implications (Fuller et al., 2015). Thus, organizations should increase the amount of resources available (i.e., time, training and job security) for employees exerting PWBs, and give those employees credit for taking proactive actions that benefit the organization. Regarding UPBs, managers should help employees realize the unethical nature of such behaviors, and help employees engage in ethical and proper conduct that benefits the organization and coworkers. On one hand, a clear disciplinary system that shows tolerance for unethical behavior could cultivate an ethical climate that signals to employees that UPBs are not wanted or encouraged in the organization.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The present study has several limitations. First, we have to take note of the relatively high correlation between LMX ambivalence and authoritarian leadership ($r = .139, p < .01$) as well as benevolent leadership ($r = .194, p < .001$) in Study 1. One reason for this may be that the data used in this research were gathered from the same source, in this case, employees. However, the results analysis showed that CMV did not seem to influence our results and the regression results in Table 3 did not find that authoritarian leadership or benevolent leadership had a significant effect on LMX ambivalence. Moreover, in Study 2, when we manipulated authoritarian leadership and benevolent leadership, the correlations between LMX ambivalence and authoritarian leadership as well as benevolent leadership were low and insignificant. Based on prior research (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010; Parker & Collins, 2010; Zhang & Chen, 2020), PWBs in our research were measured through employees' ratings. To minimize the common method bias, future research also should replicate our study using others' ratings of PWBs. Similarly, as self-report measures could capture a broader range of unethical behaviors (Umphress et al., 2010); UPBs in current study were measured through employees' ratings. Moreover, our study did not measure actual employees' UPBs, but rather the employees' intentions to perform UPBs. To reduce common method variance and social desirability biases, future research should

consider assessing actual occurrence of employees' UPBs using supervisor or peer-derived ratings.

Second, other potential mechanisms with different theoretical approaches should be explored. Future research should incorporate other constructs (psychological uncertainty; organization-based self-esteem) that may mediate the authoritarian-benevolent leadership-PWBs/UPBs linkage. Moreover, leaders may show different degrees of authority and benevolence (Shaw et al., 2020), which might lead to changes in employees' perceptions toward LMX ambivalence. In addition, Fischer et al. (2021) stated that experimental designs using hypothetical vignettes are prone to demand effects and social desirability, especially when combined with manipulation checks. We encourage future experimental to replicate our findings with a more ecologically valid design.

Finally, other plausible factors may play moderating roles in the relationship between authoritarian-benevolent leadership and LMX ambivalence, such as other thinking styles and personality. Zhongyong thinking is similar to the connotation of dialectical thinking, but is more composed of holistic thinking and changing (Wei et al., 2020). Regarding to the role of personality, Han (2020) stated that employee personality traits (i.e., openness and extraversion) may foster ambivalence regarding the LMX relationships. Similarly, Wang et al. (2019) also found that the big five personality traits and core self-evaluations affect employees' leadership ratings. For example, they hypothesized that employee neuroticism would be negatively associated with positive leadership ratings and positively associated with negative leadership ratings.

Appendix A

Experiment Manipulations

In the scenarios presented, we described a liner manager or direct supervisor named Mr. Li Wang. Participants were presented with a scenario in which they were asked to imagine they were a member of a fictional company (Da Dong) and have been working there for several years. The following scenario represents a description of this line manager or direct supervisor-Li Wang-with whom participants have been working starting from their first day on the job.

In the *authoritarian leadership condition*, participants were asked to imagine that they had experienced first-hand the following situation (scenario):

Li Wang is a line manager who focuses on absolute authority and strict control over employees. He requests employees' unconditional and unquestioned obedience. He asks employees to obey his instructions

completely, and punishes employees for not following his rules in accomplishing work tasks. He does not trust subordinates' work competencies, seldom empowers employees, and determines all decisions in the organization whether they are important or not. He sets high performance standards and often emphasizes that his group must have the best performance of all the units in the organization.

In the *benevolent leadership condition*, the description of Li Wang describes his behaviors in ways consistent with the benevolent leadership behaviors outlined by Cheng et al. (2000). Participants in this condition read the following:

Li Wang is a line manager who expresses individualized, holistic concern for the need of employees' personal well-being (both work and non-work related). He treats employees as family members and devotes all his energy to taking genuine care of employees. Beyond the work domain, he also shows concern for employees' family members. He tries to understand why employees do not perform well and helps employees when they encounter arduous problems.

Manipulations of the authoritarian-benevolent leadership were based upon Shaw et al. (2020) and Hou and Peng's (2019) conceptualization and measurement of authoritarian-benevolent leadership. The authoritarian-benevolent leadership condition includes references to authoritarian leadership behaviors and benevolent leadership behaviors simultaneously. Participants in the *authoritarian-benevolent condition* read the following:

Li Wang is a line manager who establishes the authority to supervise their employees and show benevolence to them. Li Wang is a line manager who focuses on absolute authority and strict control over employees. He requests employees' unconditional and unquestioned obedience. He asks employees to obey his instructions completely, and punishes employees for not following his rules in accomplishing work tasks. He does not trust subordinates' work competencies, seldom empower employees, and determines all decisions in the organization whether they are important or not. He sets high performance standards and often emphasizes that his group must have the best performance of all the units in the organization.

In addition, Li Wang is a line manager who expresses individualized, holistic concern for the need of employees' personal well-being (both work and non-work related). He treats employees as family members and devotes all his energy to taking genuine care of employees. Beyond the work domain, he also shows concern for employees' family members. He tries to understand why employees do not perform well and

helps employees when they encounter arduous problems. He selects and coordinates his leadership behaviors according to the requirements of specific situations.

In the *no leadership condition*, the description of Li Wang does not include any references to the authoritarian leadership behaviors or the benevolent leadership behaviors outlined by Cheng et al. (2000). In addition, based on the manipulation of no leadership condition (Gerlach et al., 2020, 2021), and the low level of authoritarian-benevolent leadership stated in prior studies (Shaw et al., 2020; Xia et al., 2021), participants in this condition read the following:

Li Wang is a line manager who provides little or no guidance and care at the same time. He never exercises strict discipline over employees and rarely set standards for their performance. He does not define the job description and work methods and not provide counseling. Thus employees should decide for themselves how to solve work tasks. He also does not pay attention to his employees inside or outside the workplace. He shows indifference to employees' requests and difficulties. In one word, under the leadership of Li Wang, employees are in a *laissez-faire* work environment which lacks supervision and warmth.

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Declarations

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

Ethical Approval 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).

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

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

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