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Does the Provocation Tactic Motivate or Demoralize Employees? The Double-Edged Sword Effect of Perceived Distrust in One' s Ability by Leadership

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Abstract

Perceived competence distrust from leadership represents a significant area within trust research. Existing scholarship generally maintains that perceived distrust from leaders adversely affects employees' self-concept. In contrast, the traditional Chinese leadership practice of 'Jijiang' (provocation-based motivation) contends that leaders' distrust can stimulate employees to manifest superior capabilities. To resolve this theoretical contradiction, the current study, grounded in self-evaluation theory and psychological reactance theory, employs experimental research and multi-source, multi-timepoint survey methodologies to examine the double-edged sword effect of perceived competence distrust from leaders on employees' self-concept and its attendant boundary conditions. Results demonstrate that when employees perceive high leadership competence, perceived competence distrust undermines work effort and performance by reducing work self-efficacy; conversely, when employees perceive low leadership competence, perceived competence distrust enhances work effort and performance by intensifying motivation to prove one' s abilities.

Full Text

Preamble

Does Distrust Motivate or Discourage Employees? The Double-Edged Sword Effect of Perceived Ability Distrust by Leaders

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Abstract

Perceived ability distrust by leaders represents an important component of trust research. Existing studies generally hold that feeling distrusted by one' s leader negatively impacts employees' self-concept. Conversely, the traditional Chinese leadership tactic "Jijiangfa" (provocation method) suggests that a leader' s expressed distrust can actually stimulate employees to demonstrate their better selves. To reconcile this apparent contradiction, the present research draws upon self-evaluation theory and psychological reactance theory, employing both experimental and multi-source, multi-timepoint survey methodologies to investigate the double-edged sword effect of perceived ability distrust by leaders on employees' self-concept and its boundary conditions. Results indicate that when employees perceive their leader as highly competent, perceived ability distrust reduces work self-efficacy, thereby diminishing work effort and performance. However, when employees perceive their leader as less competent, perceived ability distrust enhances the motivation to prove one' s abilities, leading to increased work effort and improved performance.

Keywords: perceived ability distrust by leaders, perceived leader competence, job self-efficacy, motivation to prove ability, work effort

1. Problem Introduction

Making subordinates feel trusted constitutes one of the most effective management strategies (Wang & Zhang, 2016). Whether employees feel trusted by their leader not only influences their work attitudes and performance (Lau et al., 2014; Nerstad et al., 2018) but also affects overall team and organizational effectiveness (Salamon & Robinson, 2008). Ability-based trust represents a crucial dimension of leader trust (Butler & Cantrell, 1984; Mayer et al., 1995). Perceived ability distrust refers to employees' perception that their leader does not trust their work capabilities to some degree (Lester & Brower, 2003; Mayer & Davis, 1999). Previous research suggests that perceived ability distrust undermines employees' confidence in their own abilities (Bandura, 1986; Pierce et al., 1989), reduces work motivation and performance (Lester & Brower, 2003), and consequently creates negative consequences for teams and organizations (Carter & Mossholder, 2015; Salamon & Robinson, 2008).

But does perceived ability distrust necessarily undermine employees' self-concept? Based on prior research, perceived ability distrust may indeed damage employees by reducing their self-efficacy. According to the self-assessment

tendency within self-evaluation theory, individuals select self-relevant evaluative information to adjust their self-assessment, which subsequently influences their attitudes and behaviors (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Perceived ability distrust constitutes important negative evaluative information that may adversely affect employees' self-concept (Trope, 1980). Scholars have found that when employees feel distrusted by their leader, their sense of self-worth decreases and they feel less valuable in the organization (Lau et al., 2014; Wang & Huang, 2019). Chen et al. (2020) discovered that when employees perceive trust as scarce, lower levels of felt trust correspond to lower psychological entitlement. These findings collectively suggest that perceived ability distrust undermines employees' self-concept. However, some cases indicate that perceived ability distrust may also motivate employees to prove themselves.

For instance, in Chapter 70 of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Zhuge Liang employed the "provocation method" on the veteran general Huang Zhong by expressing doubt about his abilities, claiming he was "too old to be a match for Zhang He." This provocation enraged Huang Zhong, who then fought Zhang He with exceptional bravery and achieved a great victory. Similarly, entrepreneur Shi Yuzhu skillfully applied this method by awarding "black banners" and "certificates of last place" to underperforming teams. This expression of ability distrust actually motivated employees to work harder and catch up. Why, in these cases, did perceived ability distrust not undermine employees but instead inspire them to become more diligent and perform better?

Self-enhancement tendency within self-evaluation theory and psychological reactance theory offer potential explanations. Self-evaluation theory posits that beyond the need for accurate self-assessment, individuals also possess a self-enhancement tendency to maintain a positive self-concept (Leary, 2007). When confronted with negative evaluative information, individuals may reject such information to preserve their positive self-view (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Psychological reactance theory suggests that when external negative evaluations constrain and threaten individuals' tendency to maintain a positive self-concept, they experience psychological reactance and develop motivation to restore their positive self-image (Brehm, 1966; Nurmohamed, 2020; Jin, 2010). Therefore, we can infer that employees possess a tendency to maintain a positive self-concept. When they perceive ability distrust from their leader, this negative evaluative information constrains and threatens this tendency. To eliminate this threat and maintain a positive self-concept, employees develop reactance (Jin, 2010), which stimulates their motivation to prove their abilities to the leader, leading to increased effort and better performance. However, few studies have examined the positive effects of feeling distrusted from a motivational perspective.

Thus, this research proposes that perceived ability distrust has a double-edged sword effect on employees' self-concept. On one hand, based on the self-assessment tendency in self-evaluation theory, perceived ability distrust may undermine employees by damaging their confidence in their abilities,

reducing work effort and performance. On the other hand, drawing upon self-enhancement tendency and psychological reactance theory, perceived ability distrust may also motivate employees by enhancing their desire to prove their abilities to the leader, thereby increasing work effort and improving performance. Investigating this double-edged sword effect challenges the theoretical consensus that feeling distrusted always negatively impacts employees' self-concept and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the consequences of perceived distrust.

Examining the boundary conditions of this double-edged sword effect can deepen our understanding of when the "provocation method" is applicable. According to self-evaluation theory, this effect likely depends heavily on employees' perceptions of their leader' s competence—that is, the perceived credibility of the evaluative information (Shrauger & Lund, 1975; Taylor et al., 1995). When employees perceive their leader as highly competent and authoritative in work matters, they view the leader' s evaluation as credible. In this case, the self-assessment tendency dominates, and perceived ability distrust becomes more "internalized" into employees' self-concept, undermining their confidence and reducing their desire to prove themselves to the leader. Conversely, when employees perceive their leader as less competent, they question the credibility of the leader' s evaluation. Here, the self-enhancement tendency dominates, and perceived ability distrust is less likely to be internalized or undermine employee confidence. Instead, it triggers psychological reactance that motivates employees to prove their abilities to the leader. In summary, based on self-evaluation and psychological reactance theories, this study proposes a double-edged sword effect of perceived ability distrust on employee job performance, with the theoretical model illustrated in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

1.1 Self-Evaluation Theory, Psychological Reactance Theory, and Perceived Ability Distrust

[Figure 1: see original paper] Theoretical Model

Self-evaluation theory reveals the process of self-concept formation: individuals select self-relevant evaluative information and adjust their assessments of self-ability, values, and other dimensions, which subsequently influences their attitudes and behaviors (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). In this process, both self-assessment and self-enhancement tendencies operate simultaneously (Trope, 1980). Self-assessment tendency refers to individuals' need for accurate self-evaluation (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Strube & Roemmele, 1985). When receiving negative evaluative information, they internalize valuable information (Trope, 1979, 1980), thereby downgrading their self-evaluation (Gecas, 1982). Self-enhancement tendency refers to individuals' need to maintain a positive self-concept (Leary, 2007; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). When receiving negative evaluative information, they may engage in self-serving attribution, attributing it to external causes (Gecas, 1982; Leary, 2007) or ignoring the negative evaluation altogether (Leary, 2007; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Psycho-

logical reactance theory posits that individuals desire freedom, and restrictions or threats to freedom motivate them to restore it (Brehm, 1966). As research has evolved, psychological reactance theory has been applied to explain reactance processes when individuals' positive self-concept is threatened (Gupta & Turban, 2008; Kray et al., 2001; Nurmohamed, 2020). Combining these theoretical perspectives, when individuals face negative evaluative information from an evaluator, they will lower their self-ability assessment based on self-assessment tendency if they perceive the evaluator as competent and the evaluation as accurate and credible. Conversely, if they perceive the evaluator as less competent and the evaluation' s accuracy and credibility as questionable, they will ignore the negative evaluation based on self-enhancement tendency and psychological reactance (Shrauger & Lund, 1975; Webster & Sobieszek, 1974), while activating strong motivation to restore their positive self-concept.

In this study, trust is defined as the willingness of one party to accept vulnerability in another party' s actions based on positive expectations regarding that party' s behavior and motives (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). Based on judgments of different dimensions of trustworthiness, researchers have further divided trust into distinct dimensions (Connelly et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2006), such as competence-based trust. These judgments and expectations constitute an individual' s willingness to accept risk in another' s behavior (Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011). Perceived ability distrust is defined as employees' perception that their leader does not view their work skills favorably and believes that relying on their abilities entails high risk (Ferrin et al., 2007; Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011). This construct emphasizes employees' perception that their leader is unwilling to depend on them or accept risk on their behalf (Doney et al., 1998). For example, employees may sense that their leader is reluctant to rely on their professional skills for critical tasks or to delegate important decisions and execution to them due to concerns about potential losses from employee errors. Therefore, perceived ability distrust represents negative evaluative information from the leader (Lau et al., 2014). Integrating self-evaluation and psychological reactance theories, perceived ability distrust may interact with perceived leader competence. When perceived leader competence is high, employees' self-assessment tendency dominates, leading them to internalize perceived ability distrust as negative job self-efficacy, thereby reducing effort and ultimately weakening performance. When perceived leader competence is low, employees' self-enhancement tendency dominates, and perceived ability distrust more strongly triggers psychological reactance, activating motivation to prove one's abilities, increasing work effort, and ultimately improving job performance.

1.2 The Interactive Effect of Perceived Ability Distrust and Perceived Leader Competence on Job Self-Efficacy

Job self-efficacy refers to individuals' judgment and confidence in their ability to successfully complete work-related tasks (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Perceived ability distrust constitutes an important source of negative information for self-

evaluation. When employees perceive their leader as highly competent, they believe the leader possesses sufficient expertise to evaluate their work abilities, making the evaluation accurate and authoritative (Shrauger & Lund, 1975). Employees find it difficult to distort or ignore the leader' s evaluation, and the self-assessment tendency dominates (Taylor et al., 1995). In this context, the leader' s evaluative information serves as an important basis for employees to adjust their self-concept (Trope, 1979, 1980), and perceived ability distrust leads employees to believe they lack work competence, undermining their job self-efficacy. Some studies have found that employees integrate signals of leader distrust into their self-evaluation, consequently losing work confidence (Bandura, 1986; Pierce et al., 1989). Conversely, when employees perceive their leader as less competent, they question the accuracy of the leader' s negative evaluation (Rosenberg, 1973; Webster & Sobieszek, 1974). The self-enhancement tendency dominates, leading them to ignore the leader' s negative evaluation (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), thereby weakening the effect of perceived ability distrust on job self-efficacy.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence interactively influence job self-efficacy. Specifically, the stronger the perceived leader competence, the stronger the negative effect of perceived ability distrust on employees' job self-efficacy.

1.3 Job Self-Efficacy and Work Effort

Employees with high job self-efficacy believe their abilities can achieve desired outcomes, tend to pursue more positive self-evaluations, and consequently work harder. Conversely, employees with low job self-efficacy believe they lack the ability to achieve desired outcomes and that increased effort will likely result in failure, thus reducing their work effort (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Gecas, 1982; Hepper et al., 2010; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2009). Therefore, this research posits a positive relationship between job self-efficacy and work effort.

Based on Hypothesis 1, this study proposes the following moderated mediation hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Job self-efficacy mediates the interactive effect of perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence on work effort. Specifically, the stronger the perceived leader competence, the stronger the indirect negative effect of perceived ability distrust on work effort through job self-efficacy.

1.4 The Interactive Effect of Perceived Ability Distrust and Perceived Leader Competence on Motivation to Prove Ability

Motivation to prove ability refers to the extent to which employees want to demonstrate their strong work capabilities to their leader. This motivation

reflects individuals' psychological reactance when facing negative evaluations (Nurmohamed, 2020). Perceived ability distrust represents a negative signal from the leader that constrains and threatens employees' tendency to maintain a positive self-concept. When employees perceive their leader as less competent, they view the leader' s evaluation of their abilities as lacking authority and credibility, giving them reason to ignore or reinterpret the negative evaluation (Taylor et al., 1995). The self-enhancement tendency dominates (Leary, 2007) and triggers psychological reactance and motivation to restore the constrained and threatened tendency (Brehm, 1966; Jin, 2010). In this case, perceived ability distrust stimulates employees' motivation to prove their abilities to the leader. Moreover, the weaker the perceived leader competence, the less credible the leader' s evaluation, and the more likely perceived ability distrust will motivate employees to prove their abilities. Conversely, when employees perceive their leader as highly competent, they consider the leader' s evaluation credible, and the self-assessment tendency replaces the self-enhancement tendency. Here, negative information satisfies employees' need for accurate self-evaluation without triggering psychological reactance. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence interactively influence motivation to prove ability. Specifically, the weaker the perceived leader competence, the stronger the positive effect of perceived ability distrust on motivation to prove ability.

1.5 Motivation to Prove Ability and Work Effort

Motivation to prove ability reflects employees' desire to demonstrate their work capabilities to their leader and can stimulate their attention to and investment in work, thereby enhancing work effort. Vandewalle (1997) suggests that when individuals focus on proving themselves to others, they exhibit higher work engagement. Previous research has found that the fundamental characteristic of motivation to prove ability is its focus on positive outcomes, and this focus on positive outcomes facilitates increased cognitive and emotional engagement and proactive behavior at work (Dietz et al., 2015; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Porath & Bateman, 2006). Therefore, this study proposes that motivation to prove ability promotes work effort.

Based on Hypothesis 3, this study proposes the following moderated mediation hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Motivation to prove ability mediates the interactive effect of perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence on work effort. Specifically, the weaker the perceived leader competence, the stronger the indirect positive effect of perceived ability distrust on work effort through motivation to prove ability.

1.6 Work Effort and Job Performance

Work effort reflects the amount of resources employees invest in their work (Yeo & Neal, 2004). Campbell's (1990) performance model posits that employee effort is a necessary condition for achieving performance. Work effort is considered an important predictor of job performance (Brockner et al., 1992). Previous research has demonstrated that higher levels of work effort and greater resource investment lead to better job performance (Byrne et al., 2005; Wheeler et al., 2012). Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 5: Employees' work effort is positively related to their job performance.

Based on the reasoning for Hypotheses 2 and 5, this study further proposes the following moderated chain mediation hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: Perceived leader competence moderates the indirect negative effect of perceived ability distrust on job performance through the sequential mediation of job self-efficacy and work effort. Specifically, the stronger the perceived leader competence, the stronger this indirect effect.

Based on the reasoning for Hypotheses 4 and 5, this study proposes the following moderated chain mediation hypothesis:

Hypothesis 7: Perceived leader competence moderates the indirect positive effect of perceived ability distrust on job performance through the sequential mediation of motivation to prove ability and work effort. Specifically, the weaker the perceived leader competence, the stronger this indirect effect.

1.7 Research Overview

This paper tests the proposed hypotheses through multiple studies with diverse samples, including one experimental study (Study 1) and two survey studies (Studies 2 and 3). Study 1 uses a scenario experiment to test Hypotheses 1 and 3, establishing causal relationships between the interaction of perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence and both job self-efficacy and motivation to prove ability. Studies 2 and 3 further test the overall theoretical model using multi-source, multi-timepoint survey methods to extend the external validity of the findings.

Study 1

2.1.1 Participants

Participants in Study 1 were university students who received 2 RMB for completing the experiment. A total of 164 valid questionnaires were collected (effective response rate = 86.3%). Among participants, 32.3% were male, with an average age of 21.79 years (SD = 2.62). They came from various majors, including management (51.8%), economics (17.1%), engineering (9.1%), and others

(22.0%).

2.1.2 Experimental Design and Procedure

A 2 × 2 between-subjects factorial design was employed, manipulating both perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence, resulting in four experimental conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (n = 41 per condition). The scenario materials were developed based on existing manipulation materials from prior research (Patall et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2020) and measurement scales.

At the beginning of the experiment, participants read a description of the working relationship between an employee named Wang Chen and his direct supervisor. They were instructed to imagine themselves as Wang Chen. After reading the scenario, participants recalled and described its content, then completed a questionnaire measuring job self-efficacy, motivation to prove ability, manipulation checks, and demographic variables. To ensure response quality, following prior research (Chen et al., 2020), we excluded samples with irrelevant descriptions (e.g., meaningless characters, content inconsistent with the scenario).

Manipulation of Perceived Ability Distrust. In the experimental group (perceived ability distrust condition), participants read: "During the process of completing this work task, Director Zhang expressed doubts about the abilities you demonstrated at work, believing that you do not possess the qualifications, knowledge, and skills required to execute this task. Director Zhang believes that even with more effort, you cannot do well or contribute to the advancement of this work task." In the control group (neutral condition), participants read: "During the process of completing this work task, Director Zhang understood and evaluated the progress of the work task, informed you of the knowledge and skills required to execute this task, and informed you of the upcoming work content." These manipulation materials were adapted from the perceived ability distrust scale and the felt trust manipulation materials developed by Chen et al. (2020).

Manipulation of Perceived Leader Competence. In the experimental group (high perceived leader competence condition), participants read: "You feel that Director Zhang has very strong work capabilities, rich work experience, and possesses the confidence, wisdom, knowledge, and ability to handle various problems at work." In the control group (low perceived leader competence condition), participants read: "You feel that Director Zhang' s work capabilities are not strong at all, lacks work experience, and lacks the confidence, wisdom, knowledge, and ability to handle various problems at work." These manipulation materials were adapted from the perceived competence scenario manipulation materials developed by Patall et al. (2014).

2.1.3 Measures

All scales used in this study were established English scales used in previous research. We employed the standard translation-back-translation procedure to translate the English scales into Chinese (Brislin, 1980). A 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree."

Job Self-Efficacy. We used the 3-item job self-efficacy scale developed by Spreitzer (1995). A sample item is "I am confident about my ability to do my job." Participants responded based on their immediate feelings. The Cronbach' s α coefficient for this scale was 0.83.

Motivation to Prove Ability. We adapted the scale for desire to prove others wrong developed by Nurmohamed (2020), resulting in a 4-item scale. A sample item is "I want to prove my abilities to my leader." Participants responded based on their immediate feelings. The Cronbach' s α coefficient for this scale was 0.87.

Manipulation Checks. We adapted the ability trust scale developed by Mayer and Davis (1999) to check the perceived ability distrust manipulation. This 6-item scale includes items such as "My leader does not believe I have the ability to improve our performance." Participants responded based on their immediate feelings. The Cronbach' s α coefficient was 0.96. We used the perceived competence scale developed by Fiske et al. (2002) to check the perceived leader competence manipulation. This 5-item scale includes items such as "My leader is competent." Participants responded based on their immediate feelings. The Cronbach' s α coefficient was 0.94.

2.2.1 Manipulation Checks

We conducted manipulation checks for the experiment. The perceived ability distrust experimental group scored significantly higher ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.82$) than the control group ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 0.80$), $t(162) = 10.07$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen' s $d = 1.59$. The perceived leader competence experimental group scored significantly higher ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.77$) than the control group ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.87$), $t(162) = 10.42$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen' s $d = 1.63$. Thus, the manipulations in Study 1 were successful.

2.2.2 Hypothesis Testing

Descriptive statistics and correlation results are presented in Table 1 . We used general linear regression to test Hypotheses 1 and 3, with results shown in Table 2 .

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Variables in Study 1

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Table 2 Results of General Linear Regression Analysis in Study 1

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As shown in Model 2 of Table 2, the interaction between perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence significantly influenced job self-efficacy (b = -0.44, SE = 0.22, p = 0.04). The moderation effect is illustrated in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]. When perceived leader competence was high, the perceived ability distrust experimental group (M = 3.42, SD = 0.91) reported significantly lower job self-efficacy than the control group (M = 3.82, SD = 0.70), t(80) = -2.22, p = 0.03, Cohen' s d = 0.49. When perceived leader competence was low, there was no significant difference in job self-efficacy between the experimental group (M = 3.93, SD = 0.50) and control group (M = 3.89, SD = 0.57), t(80) = 0.34, p = 0.73, Cohen' s d = 0.07. Hypothesis 1 was supported.

As shown in Model 4 of Table 2, the interaction between perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence significantly influenced motivation to prove ability (b = -0.50, SE = 0.25, p = 0.04). The moderation effect is illustrated in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]. Although the perceived ability distrust experimental group (M = 4.27, SD = 0.86) scored slightly higher than the control group (M = 4.10, SD = 0.59) when perceived leader competence was high, the difference was not significant, t(80) = 1.08, p = 0.28, Cohen' s d = 0.23, indicating that perceived ability distrust did not significantly affect motivation to prove ability under high perceived leader competence. However, when perceived leader competence was low, the experimental group (M = 4.18, SD = 0.71) scored significantly higher than the control group (M = 3.51, SD = 0.93), t(80) = 3.70, p < 0.001, Cohen' s d = 0.81. Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Study 1 provides strong causal evidence for the interactive effects of perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence on both job self-efficacy and motivation to prove ability. Although Study 1 demonstrates the internal validity of our theoretical model, its external validity needs to be extended through workplace surveys. Therefore, Study 2 tests the overall model using multi-source, multi-timepoint survey methodology.

Study 2

3.1.1 Procedure and Sample

The participants were insurance sales personnel and their immediate supervisors from a large insurance company in southern China. We invited 45 sales teams to participate, each consisting of one unique leader and approximately ten regular employees. From each team, 4-10 regular employees were randomly selected from the roster to participate. We conducted on-site surveys using paper questionnaires. Employees first completed questionnaires assessing demographics, perceived ability distrust, perceived leader competence, motivation to prove ability, job self-efficacy, and work effort. One week later, team leaders were invited to rate the job performance of participating team members. To ensure survey quality, we emphasized confidentiality and the importance of

honest responses to participants before the formal survey, with corresponding instructions included in the questionnaire.

After matching employee and leader questionnaires, we obtained 195 valid employee questionnaires (effective response rate = 85.9%) and 40 valid leader questionnaires (effective response rate = 88.9%). Among the 195 employees, 16.9% were male, with an average age of 35.50 years (SD = 6.63). Regarding education: 23.1% had below college education, 48.7% had college education, 26.2% had bachelor' s degrees, and 2.0% had master' s degrees or higher. The average tenure with their current leader was 4.38 years (SD = 6.63).

3.1.2 Measures

Perceived Ability Distrust. Consistent with Study 1 and following previous research (e.g., Ferrin et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2004; Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011), we adapted the perceived ability trust scale developed by Mayer and Davis (1999). The adapted scale contained 6 items, though one item ("My leader does not believe I have the qualifications to be competent in this job") was removed because insurance sales personnel in this company do not require qualifications. The final scale contained 5 items. The Cronbach' s α coefficient was 0.95.

Perceived Leader Competence. Consistent with Study 1, we used the perceived competence scale developed by Fiske et al. (2002). The Cronbach' s α coefficient was 0.93.

Job Self-Efficacy. Consistent with Study 1, we used Spreitzer' s (1995) job self-efficacy scale. The Cronbach' s α coefficient was 0.81.

Motivation to Prove Ability. Consistent with Study 1, we used the scale adapted from Nurmohamed (2020). The Cronbach' s α coefficient was 0.90.

Work Effort. We used the effort scale developed by Sun et al. (2013). The Cronbach' s α coefficient was 0.89.

Job Performance. We used the job performance scale developed by Morrison and Phelps (1999). The Cronbach' s α coefficient was 0.81.

Control Variables. Following prior research (Baer et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2020), we controlled for several employee demographic characteristics: gender, age, education level, and tenure with the leader, to rule out potential alternative explanations (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016).

3.2.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among control and study variables.

Table 3 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Variables in Studies 2 and 3

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3.2.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Using Mplus 8.0, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis on the study variables: perceived ability distrust, perceived leader competence, motivation to prove ability, job self-efficacy, work effort, and job performance. Results are presented in Table 4 . As shown, the hypothesized six-factor model demonstrated better fit than the five alternative five-factor models, indicating good discriminant validity among the study variables.

Table 4 Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results for Studies 2 and 3

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3.2.3 Hypothesis Testing

Given the nested data structure (team leaders rated multiple team members), we used Mplus 8.0 with "TYPE = COMPLEX; ESTIMATOR = MLR" to address non-independence issues (Wu & Kwok, 2012). This approach is appropriate for examining single-level variable relationships in non-independent data (Wu & Kwok, 2012) and has been used in similar studies (e.g., Wu et al., 2016). The model fit was adequate (^{2} = 23.99, df = 9, ^{2}/df = 2.67, CFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.04). Results are shown in Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper].

[Figure 4: see original paper] Path Analysis Results for Studies 2 and 3

Hypothesis 1 predicted that perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence interactively influence job self-efficacy. Results showed that the interaction term significantly affected job self-efficacy (b = -0.14, SE = 0.07, p = 0.04). Simple slope analysis revealed that when employees perceived high leader competence, the effect of perceived ability distrust on job self-efficacy was not significant (b = -0.11, SE = 0.08, p = 0.15). When employees perceived low leader competence, the effect was also not significant (b = 0.10, SE = 0.09, p = 0.27). However, the difference between these two conditions was significant (b = -0.21, SE = 0.10, p = 0.04). The simple effects plot is shown in Figure 5 [Figure 5: see original paper]. These results indicate that the negative effect of perceived ability distrust on job self-efficacy strengthens as perceived leader competence increases, supporting Hypothesis 1.

[Figure 5: see original paper] Moderating Effect of Perceived Leader Competence on the Relationship Between Perceived Ability Distrust and Job Self-Efficacy in Study 2

Hypothesis 3 predicted that perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence interactively influence motivation to prove ability. Results showed that the interaction term significantly affected motivation to prove ability (b = -0.27,

SE = 0.12, p = 0.02). Simple slope analysis revealed that when employees perceived high leader competence, perceived ability distrust did not significantly affect motivation to prove ability (b = -0.06, SE = 0.09, p = 0.49). When employees perceived low leader competence, perceived ability distrust had a significant positive effect on motivation to prove ability (b = 0.36, SE = 0.14, p = 0.01). The difference between these conditions was significant (b = -0.42, SE = 0.18, p = 0.02). The simple effects plot is shown in Figure 6 [Figure 6: see original paper]. Hypothesis 3 was supported.

[Figure 6: see original paper] Moderating Effect of Perceived Leader Competence on the Relationship Between Perceived Ability Distrust and Motivation to Prove Ability in Study 2

To test the moderated mediation hypotheses (Hypotheses 2 and 4), we followed Edwards and Lambert' s (2007) recommendations to calculate confidence intervals for indirect effects at one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderator. Monte Carlo simulation results (Selig & Preacher, 2008) showed that when employees perceived high leader competence, the indirect effect of perceived ability distrust on work effort through job self-efficacy included zero (b = -0.02, 95% CI = [-0.06, 0.01]) and was not significant. When employees perceived low leader competence, this indirect effect also included zero (b = 0.02, 95% CI = [-0.01, 0.05]) and was not significant. However, the difference between these indirect effects was significant (b = -0.04, 95% CI = [-0.09, -0.0007]). These results indicate that the indirect negative effect of perceived ability distrust on work effort through job self-efficacy strengthens as perceived leader competence increases, supporting Hypothesis 2.

Similarly, when employees perceived high leader competence, the indirect effect of perceived ability distrust on work effort through motivation to prove ability included zero (b = -0.03, 95% CI = [-0.14, 0.08]) and was not significant. When employees perceived low leader competence, this indirect effect was significant and positive (b = 0.16, 95% CI = [0.05, 0.29]). The difference between these indirect effects was significant (b = -0.19, 95% CI = [-0.38, -0.03]), supporting Hypothesis 4.

Hypothesis 5 predicted a positive relationship between work effort and job performance. Results showed that, after controlling for relevant variables, work effort significantly and positively affected job performance (b = 0.19, SE = 0.08, p = 0.01), supporting Hypothesis 5.

We tested the moderated chain mediation hypotheses (Hypotheses 6 and 7) using Edwards and Lambert' s (2007) method. When employees perceived high leader competence, the indirect effect of the path "perceived ability distrust → job self-efficacy → work effort → job performance" included zero (b = -0.004, 95% CI = [-0.01, 0.001]) and was not significant. When employees perceived low leader competence, this indirect effect also included zero (b = 0.003, 95% CI = [-0.002, 0.01]). However, the difference between these indirect effects was significant (b = -0.01, 95% CI = [-0.02, -0.00001]), indicating that the negative

indirect effect strengthens as perceived leader competence increases, supporting Hypothesis 6.

When employees perceived high leader competence, the indirect effect of the path "perceived ability distrust → motivation to prove ability → work effort → job performance" included zero (b = -0.002, 95% CI = [-0.03, 0.02]) and was not significant. When employees perceived low leader competence, this indirect effect was significant (b = 0.01, 95% CI = [0.004, 0.07]), and the difference between these effects was significant (b = -0.01, 95% CI = [-0.09, -0.001]), supporting Hypothesis 7.

3.2.4 Supplementary Analyses

To examine potential reverse causality, we compared the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) of the hypothesized model (perceived ability distrust → job self-efficacy/motivation to prove ability → work effort → job performance) and the reverse causality model (job performance → work effort → job self-efficacy/motivation to prove ability → perceived ability distrust), following Kline' s (2011) recommendation. This method has been widely used to test reverse causality in (chain) mediation models (e.g., Matta et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2019; Ou et al., 2014; Yam et al., 2018). Results showed that the hypothesized model (AIC = 1576.33, BIC = 1618.88) had smaller indices than the reverse causality model (AIC = 1797.09, BIC = 1839.64), suggesting the hypothesized model is superior and reverse causality is unlikely.

To further enhance the reliability and transparency of our findings, we conducted supplementary analyses without control variables, following Bernerth and Aguinis' s (2016) recommendation. Results showed that the interaction between perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence remained significant for both motivation to prove ability (b = -0.26, SE = 0.11, p = 0.02) and job self-efficacy (b = -0.14, SE = 0.07, p = 0.048). Additionally, the indirect positive effect of perceived ability distrust on job performance through motivation to prove ability and work effort weakened as perceived leader competence increased (b = -0.04, 95% CI = [-0.09, -0.002]), while the indirect negative effect through job self-efficacy and work effort strengthened (b = -0.008, 90% CI = [-0.02, -0.0007]). These results further support our conclusions.

Study 2 provides strong evidence for the overall theoretical model. However, because most variables were self-reported by employees and collected at the same time point, Study 2' s results may be susceptible to common method variance (CMV) (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Additionally, the sample was drawn from a single industry, which may limit external validity. To address these limitations, Study 3 employs a multi-industry, multi-source, multi-timepoint survey design, collecting employee self-report data at different time points to further extend the external validity of the model.

Study 3

4.1.1 Procedure and Sample

We recruited participants through the authors' alumni networks, which allowed us to obtain participants from diverse industries and enhance external validity (Qin et al., 2018). We invited 77 work teams, each consisting of one unique leader and several regular employees. All team members were invited to participate, except for a few large teams where 9 subordinates were randomly selected to avoid overburdening leaders with too many ratings. We used Wenjuanxing, an online survey platform, to administer the questionnaires. Each work team formed a WeChat group, and researchers first explained the survey purpose in the group, emphasizing that responses would be confidential and used only for academic research, then distributed the questionnaire link. The survey consisted of two waves. In Wave 1, only employee questionnaires were distributed, measuring demographics, perceived ability distrust, and perceived leader competence. One month later, Wave 2 included both employee and leader questionnaires, with employees reporting motivation to prove ability, job self-efficacy, and work effort, while leaders rated their subordinates' job performance. To enhance participation and response quality, each participant received 5 RMB for each survey.

After matching employee and leader questionnaires across both waves, we obtained 266 valid employee responses (both waves completed, effective response rate = 85.3%) and 65 valid leader responses (effective response rate = 84.4%). Among the 266 employees, 63.9% were male, with an average age of 32.77 years (SD = 7.56). Regarding education: 26.3% had below college education, 30.5% had college education, 38.7% had bachelor' s degrees, and 4.5% had master' s degrees or higher. The average tenure with their current leader was 4.04 years (SD = 3.71).

4.1.2 Measures

All study and control variable measures were identical to those in Study 2. The item deleted from the perceived ability distrust scale in Study 2 was retained in this study. Cronbach's α coefficients were 0.96 for perceived ability distrust, 0.96 for perceived leader competence, 0.89 for job self-efficacy, 0.89 for motivation to prove ability, 0.93 for work effort, and 0.92 for job performance.

4.2.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among control and study variables.

4.2.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis results are presented in Table 4. As shown, the hypothesized six-factor model demonstrated better fit than the five alternative

five-factor models, indicating good discriminant validity among the study variables.

4.2.3 Hypothesis Testing

Consistent with Study 2, we used Mplus 8.0 with "TYPE = COMPLEX; ESTIMATOR = MLR" to address data non-independence (Wu & Kwok, 2012). Model fit indices were: ^{2} = 61.56, df = 9, ^{2}/df = 6.84, CFI = 0.74, RMSEA = 0.15, SRMR = 0.05.

The interaction between perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence significantly affected job self-efficacy (b = -0.18, SE = 0.07, p = 0.01). Simple slope analysis revealed that when employees perceived high leader competence, perceived ability distrust significantly and negatively affected job self-efficacy (b = -0.23, SE = 0.05, p < 0.001). When employees perceived low leader competence, the effect was not significant (b = 0.01, SE = 0.08, p = 0.87). The difference between these conditions was significant (b = -0.24, SE = 0.09, p = 0.01). The simple effects plot is shown in Figure 7 [Figure 7: see original paper]. Hypothesis 1 was supported.

[Figure 7: see original paper] Moderating Effect of Perceived Leader Competence on the Relationship Between Perceived Ability Distrust and Job Self-Efficacy in Study 3

The interaction between perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence significantly affected motivation to prove ability (b = -0.16, SE = 0.07, p = 0.02). Simple slope analysis revealed that when employees perceived high leader competence, perceived ability distrust did not significantly affect motivation to prove ability (b = -0.11, SE = 0.08, p = 0.16). When employees perceived low leader competence, perceived ability distrust had a marginally significant positive effect on motivation to prove ability (b = 0.12, SE = 0.07, p = 0.09). The difference between these conditions was significant (b = -0.22, SE = 0.10, p = 0.02). The simple effects plot is shown in Figure 8 [Figure 8: see original paper]. Hypothesis 3 was supported.

[Figure 8: see original paper] Moderating Effect of Perceived Leader Competence on the Relationship Between Perceived Ability Distrust and Motivation to Prove Ability in Study 3

We tested Hypotheses 2 and 4 using Edwards and Lambert' s (2007) method. Monte Carlo simulation results (Selig & Preacher, 2008) showed that when employees perceived high leader competence, the indirect effect of perceived ability distrust on work effort through job self-efficacy was significant and negative (b = -0.13, 95% CI = [-0.23, -0.05]). When employees perceived low leader competence, this indirect effect included zero (b = 0.01, 95% CI = [-0.07, 0.09]) and was not significant. The difference between these indirect effects was significant (b = -0.14, 95% CI = [-0.27, -0.03]). Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Similarly, when employees perceived high leader competence, the indirect effect

of perceived ability distrust on work effort through motivation to prove ability included zero (b = -0.03, 95% CI = [-0.08, 0.01]) and was not significant. When employees perceived low leader competence, this indirect effect was significant and positive (b = 0.03, 90% CI = [0.0004, 0.07]). The difference between these indirect effects was significant (b = -0.06, 95% CI = [-0.13, -0.007]). Hypothesis 4 was supported.

After controlling for relevant variables, work effort significantly and positively affected job performance (b = 0.15, SE = 0.05, p = 0.001), supporting Hypothesis 5.

We tested Hypotheses 6 and 7 using Edwards and Lambert' s (2007) method for moderated chain mediation. When employees perceived high leader competence, the indirect effect of the path "perceived ability distrust → job self-efficacy → work effort → job performance" was significant and negative (b = -0.02, 95% CI = [-0.04, -0.01]). When employees perceived low leader competence, this indirect effect included zero (b = 0.001, 95% CI = [-0.01, 0.01]). The difference between these effects was significant (b = -0.02, 95% CI = [-0.05, -0.004]), supporting Hypothesis 6.

When employees perceived high leader competence, the indirect effect of the path "perceived ability distrust → motivation to prove ability → work effort → job performance" included zero (b = -0.004, 95% CI = [-0.01, 0.001]) and was not significant. When employees perceived low leader competence, this indirect effect was significant (b = 0.005, 90% CI = [0.00002, 0.01]), and the difference between these effects was significant (b = -0.009, 95% CI = [-0.02, -0.0008]), supporting Hypothesis 7.

4.2.4 Supplementary Analyses

Consistent with Study 2, we examined reverse causality by comparing AIC and BIC indices of the hypothesized and reverse causality models (Kline, 2011). The hypothesized model (AIC = 2174.45, BIC = 2221.04) had smaller indices than the reverse causality model (AIC = 2337.09, BIC = 2383.67), again suggesting that reverse causality is unlikely.

Consistent with Study 2, we conducted supplementary analyses without control variables (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016). Results showed that the interaction between perceived ability distrust and perceived leader competence remained significant for both motivation to prove ability (b = -0.15, SE = 0.07, p = 0.03) and job self-efficacy (b = -0.15, SE = 0.07, p = 0.03). Furthermore, the indirect positive effect of perceived ability distrust on job performance through motivation to prove ability and work effort weakened as perceived leader competence increased (b = -0.009, 95% CI = [-0.02, -0.00001]), while the indirect negative effect through job self-efficacy and work effort strengthened (b = -0.02, 90% CI = [-0.04, -0.001]). These results further support our conclusions.

5.1 Summary of Findings

Previous research generally assumes that feeling distrusted by one' s leader undermines employees' positive self-concept and has detrimental effects. The present study reveals that beyond undermining employees' positive self-concept, perceived ability distrust can also motivate employees to prove their positive self-concept. Drawing on self-evaluation and psychological reactance theories, this research examines the effects of perceived ability distrust on employees' work effort and job performance and the underlying mechanisms. Results indicate that when employees perceive their leader as highly competent, perceived ability distrust primarily reduces job self-efficacy, which in turn decreases work effort and worsens job performance. Conversely, when employees perceive their leader as less competent, perceived ability distrust enhances motivation to prove one' s abilities, which increases work effort and improves job performance.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This research makes several important theoretical contributions. First, it reveals the double-edged sword effect of perceived ability distrust on employees' self-concept, enabling a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the relationship between perceived distrust and employee self-concept. While previous research suggests that perceived distrust undermines employees and creates negative self-concepts, this study demonstrates that perceived distrust can both negatively affect employees' self-concept and motivate them to prove themselves, creating a positive self-concept. This finding challenges the mainstream view that perceived distrust always negatively impacts employee self-concept and establishes a more complete theoretical framework. Specifically, we found that when employees perceive leader evaluations as credible (i.e., high perceived leader competence), perceived ability distrust negatively affects job self-efficacy, leading to negative self-concepts—consistent with existing research (Lau et al., 2014; Wang & Huang, 2019; Chen et al., 2020). Additionally, we found that when employees perceive leader evaluations as less credible (i.e., low perceived leader competence), perceived ability distrust positively affects motivation to prove ability, stimulating positive self-concepts. This contributes to a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of perceived distrust effects.

Second, this research enriches self-evaluation theory and psychological reactance theory. Regarding self-evaluation theory, we enrich understanding of how individuals respond to negative evaluative information and the boundary conditions for these responses. Self-evaluation theory suggests that individuals either accept or ignore negative external evaluations (Leary, 2007; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Trope, 1979, 1980). By integrating self-enhancement tendency and psychological reactance theory, we demonstrate that individuals may also choose to prove themselves in response to negative evaluations, and that the perceived credibility of evaluative information serves as a boundary condition for these different response strategies. Regarding psychological reactance theory, we extend its application in organizational management research. Psychological reactance

theory explains how individuals develop motivational states to eliminate constraints and restore freedom when their freedom is threatened (Brehm, 1966). However, organizational research has primarily applied this theory to examine resistance to social categorization, such as gender or racial stereotypes (Gupta & Turban, 2008; Kray et al., 2001). This study extends the theory to trust-related research, explaining whether, when, and how employees react to distrust. This extension enhances understanding of reactance formation processes and outcomes in workplace settings. Furthermore, this research expands the literature on reactance triggers by demonstrating that beyond perceiving low expectations from others, perceiving that others are unwilling to depend on you, unwilling to accept risk on your behalf, and expecting harm to their own interests can also trigger reactance. Previous reactance research has focused primarily on how perceiving others' expectations of failure triggers reactance (Nurmohamed, 2020). The perceived ability distrust examined in this study encompasses multiple layers of meaning, including perceiving that the leader is unwilling to depend on the employee (Doney et al., 1998), unwilling to accept risk for the employee (Rousseau et al., 1998), and expects harm to their own interests (Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011). Our finding that perceived ability distrust triggers reactance when leader competence is perceived as low suggests that reactance may involve complex cognitive processing of multi-layered information, providing important new theoretical insights for future research to clarify the multiple pathways and mechanisms of reactance generation.

Third, this research extends and enriches the literature on antecedents of work effort. Leadership factors represent important influences on employee work effort. Previous research indicates that positive leader behaviors (e.g., empowerment) and positive leader-member exchange relationships provide employees with more resources, leading to greater work effort (Lu et al., 2017; Park et al., 2017). Conversely, negative leader behaviors and negative exchange relationships may lead to resource depletion and reduced work effort (Scheuer et al., 2016). This study reveals that negative leader factors can have both positive and negative effects. While negative leader factors (e.g., perceived ability distrust) may still undermine employees in some situations, they can also, under certain conditions, stimulate employees' motivation to prove their abilities and indirectly promote greater work effort. Thus, by examining the relationship between perceived ability distrust and work effort and its underlying mechanisms, this research provides a more comprehensive explanation of how negative leader factors influence employee work effort, enriching the literature on work effort antecedents and providing empirical evidence and theoretical reference for future research.

5.3 Practical Implications

This research offers two main practical implications for organizational leaders. First, leaders can use the "provocation method" in domains where they lack expertise to motivate employees. This study demonstrates that when employees

perceive their leader as less competent, perceived ability distrust motivates them to prove themselves and work hard to achieve good results. Therefore, when leaders are not proficient in a particular domain or task, using "provocation method" in that domain can effectively stimulate positive employee states. Second, leaders should demonstrate trust in employees in domains where they are proficient to avoid undermining employees through distrust. Results show that when employees perceive their leader as highly competent, perceived ability distrust undermines job self-efficacy, thereby reducing work effort and performance. Therefore, leaders should avoid expressing distrust in employees within their areas of expertise to prevent damaging employee confidence and creating negative work states.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that future research could address. First, although Studies 2 and 3 used multi-source, multi-timepoint surveys to avoid common method variance, and moderation results also suggest CMV is not a serious concern (Podsakoff et al., 2012), the fact that perceived ability distrust, job self-efficacy, and motivation to prove ability are psychological constructs that cannot easily be measured through other-report or objective indicators may inflate variable relationships. Future research could employ more time points with longer intervals, collecting all variables at each time point to obtain longitudinal panel data. Such data would not only provide more authoritative tests of causality but also examine dynamic outcomes and feedback loops resulting from changes in perceived ability distrust (Baer et al., 2015).

Second, this study examined the double-edged sword effect of perceived ability distrust from a self-evaluation perspective. Future research could explore this double-edged sword effect from additional perspectives. For example, from a social exchange perspective, perceived ability distrust might have both negative effects (e.g., reducing relationship quality between leader and employee; Gómez & Rosen, 2001) and positive effects (e.g., reducing psychological burden, as employees who are not trusted for their abilities may not need to expend resources maintaining their reputation and authority for competence in front of the leader; Baer et al., 2015; Skinner et al., 2014).

Third, other boundary conditions may influence the effects of perceived ability distrust on subordinates. For example, employees' job control may be a relevant factor. Low job control may amplify the negative effects of resource depletion (Demerouti et al., 2001). When employees have low control over their work, they lack opportunities to control and change their work, making them more likely to feel powerless when facing ability distrust, respond passively, and experience greater reductions in job self-efficacy and weaker motivation to prove their abilities to the leader. Conversely, when employees have high job control, they have more resources to maintain their self-efficacy and opportunities to use work resources to prove their abilities to the leader, resulting in smaller reductions in self-efficacy and stronger motivation to prove their abilities.

Fourth, leader ability distrust may manifest in different types of behaviors (Baer et al., 2015), including not seeking professional advice from the employee, not delegating important work tasks to the employee, and expressing low expectations for work the employee is currently or will be performing. These different manifestations may have different effects on employees' job self-efficacy, motivation to prove ability, and work effort. For example, compared to not seeking professional advice, expressing low expectations for current or upcoming work may more strongly stimulate employees' motivation to prove their abilities. Future research could operationalize leader ability distrust into more specific aspects to deepen understanding of its effects.

References

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