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## The Double-Edged Sword Effect of Employee Authenticity on Coworker Relationships: The Moderating Role of Shared Tenure

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### Abstract

It is widely believed that employee sincerity in the workplace facilitates the establishment of positive relationships with coworkers. This study proposes that the influence of employee sincerity on coworker relationships likely entails both positive and negative aspects, with its effects contingent upon the duration of working together between the employee and colleagues. Grounded in social penetration theory and integrating attribution literature, this study posits that coworker suspicion and coworker trust constitute key mediating mechanisms through which employee sincerity impacts coworker relationships. To test the hypotheses of the theoretical model, two independent investigations were conducted using round-robin survey and experimental methods, respectively. The results reveal that when the duration of working together is short, employee sincerity triggers coworker suspicion, diminishes coworker trust, reduces interpersonal helping, and increases interpersonal ostracism. When the duration of working together is long, employee sincerity helps dispel coworker suspicion, enhances coworker trust, increases interpersonal helping, and reduces interpersonal ostracism. By introducing duration of working together as a moderating variable, this study demonstrates that the transformation of employee sincerity's impact on coworker relationships from negative to positive necessitates a sufficiently long period of working together.

## Full Text

# The Double-Edged Sword of Employee Authenticity in Coworker Interactions: The Moderating Role of Relationship Duration

TANG Yipeng<sup>1</sup>, JIA Rongwen<sup>2</sup>, LONG Lirong<sup>3</sup>, REN Zhiyu<sup>1</sup>, PU Xiaoping<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

The prevailing view holds that employee authenticity in the workplace facilitates positive coworker relationships. This study proposes that authenticity likely exerts both positive and negative effects on coworker relations, with its impact contingent upon the duration of the working relationship. Grounded in social penetration theory and integrating attribution literature, we posit that coworker suspicion and trust represent the key mediating mechanisms through which employee authenticity influences coworker relations. To test our theoretical model, we conducted two independent studies using a round-robin survey and an experimental design. Results reveal that when relationship duration is short, employee authenticity triggers coworker suspicion, reduces trust, decreases interpersonal helping, and increases interpersonal exclusion. Conversely, when relationship duration is long, authenticity helps dispel suspicion, enhances trust, increases helping behavior, and reduces exclusion. By introducing relationship duration as a moderator, this study demonstrates that the transformation of authenticity's impact from negative to positive requires sufficient time working together.

**Keywords:** employee authenticity, relationship duration, coworker trust, coworker suspicion, interpersonal helping, interpersonal exclusion

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, both society and academia have increasingly focused on authenticity in the workplace (Cha et al., 2019; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Authenticity refers to employees' tendency to act in accordance with their inner, true selves (Caza et al., 2017). This topic has garnered widespread attention for multiple reasons. For instance, the entry of self-focused new generations into the workforce ("Generation Me"; Twenge et al., 2010) and rising inter-organizational mobility have heightened people's desire to find suitable jobs (Lindholm, 2009), leading them to act more in alignment with their authentic selves at work. Research indicates that workplace authenticity satisfies needs for self-determination (Leroy et al., 2015), imbues work with deeper meaning (Ménard & Brunet, 2011), and enhances work engagement (Metin et al., 2016). However, discussions regarding authenticity's impact on workplace interpersonal relationships remain nascent (Cha et al., 2019). Scholars currently assume that authenticity promotes positive coworker interactions (Ilies et al., 2005; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Gill & Caza, 2018; Tang, Xu et al., 2021), primarily based on

findings that authenticity helps eliminate interactional doubts and build mutual trust (e.g., Swann Jr et al., 1994; Wickham, 2013). These studies have primarily examined close relationships such as romantic partners (Wickham, 2013) or friends (Peets & Hedges, 2018), yet coworker interactions may not reach such depth. With increased employee mobility (Lindholm, 2009), many coworkers remain relatively unfamiliar or even distant from one another (e.g., Xu et al., 2020). Basing arguments about authenticity's positive effects on coworker interactions on these findings may therefore be premature.

We contend that employee authenticity likely exerts both positive and negative influences on coworker relationships. On one hand, authenticity can build trust and facilitate positive coworker interactions. On the other hand, it may lead coworkers to perceive such behavior as exceeding relational boundaries, generating suspicion and triggering negative interactions. Workplace authenticity research supports this inference. For example, Yagil and Medler (2013) found that when service employees confide personal struggles to customers, such authentic self-disclosure may cause customers to view the behavior as inconsistent with the relationship's nature and as boundary-crossing, leading to exclusion. What remains to be explored is the mechanism through which employee authenticity influences coworker relationships and when positive versus negative effects dominate. To clearly delineate authenticity's double-edged effects, this study focuses on how employee authenticity affects interpersonal helping (e.g., Grant & Mayer, 2009) and interpersonal exclusion (e.g., Robinson & Schabram, 2019), as these behaviors represent typical positive and negative workplace interactions. Drawing on social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Taylor & Altman, 1987) and integrating attribution literature (i.e., Hilton et al., 1993; Reeder et al., 2004), we propose that employee authenticity influences coworker relationships by affecting coworkers' trust and suspicion. Social penetration theory suggests that displaying self-aspects appropriate to the relationship fosters trust, whereas revealing overly internal or external self-aspects relative to the relationship may cause the other party to find the behavior difficult to attribute clearly, generating suspicion and affecting interactions. The theory further posits that people primarily determine appropriate self-levels to display based on relationship stage: initial stages typically involve more superficial, external self-aspects, while longer-term relationships involve more internal self-aspects. Accordingly, this study proposes a key moderator: the duration of the working relationship. In early-stage relationships, employee authenticity's impact may be primarily negative, triggering suspicion, reducing trust, decreasing helping, and increasing exclusion. After extended collaboration, authenticity's positive effects may become dominant, helping dispel suspicion, enhancing trust, increasing helping, and reducing exclusion.

### 1.1 Employee Authenticity and Coworker Interactions

Authenticity refers to employees' behavioral tendency to act according to their inner, true selves in daily work (Kernis, 2003; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Ac-

cording to Kernis and Goldman's analysis, this behavioral tendency comprises four dimensions: (1) self-awareness—knowing who one is and clearly understanding one's inner true self, including feelings, thoughts, and values; (2) unbiased processing—facing one's true self 坦然 and acknowledging one's weaknesses and shortcomings; (3) authentic behavior—acting according to one's inner true self, using behavior to express one's positions, thoughts, and values; and (4) relational transparency—employees revealing their inner true selves in interactions with coworkers. Based on these dimensions, they proposed a four-component authenticity construct, which has become the most widely applied conceptualization in management research and has been used to develop the construct of authentic leadership (e.g., Ilies et al., 2005; Neider & Schriesheim, 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008). This study adopts Kernis and Goldman's authenticity construct, defining employee authenticity as acting according to one's inner true self in daily work. This behavioral tendency affects coworker interactions.

Based on social penetration theory and attribution literature, we propose that employee authenticity influences coworkers' trust and suspicion of the focal employee. Social penetration theory posits that people divide the self into many layers from internal to external, like an onion wrapping the inner core self within inner layers, and set appropriate self-levels to present (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Taylor & Altman, 1987). Interactions with newly acquainted individuals typically limit self-presentation to relatively superficial, external layers (Harrison et al., 1998), while interactions with familiar others involve more internal layers (Altman et al., 1981). Displaying self-aspects appropriate to the relationship is easily understood and accepted, fostering trust. However, revealing overly external or internal self-aspects relative to the relationship may cause the other party to become suspicious. Extending this logic, we argue that employee authenticity's behavioral tendency likely affects coworkers' trust and suspicion. Employee authenticity involves acting according to one's inner true self, upholding one's values, 坦白 acknowledging shortcomings, and expressing genuine feelings (Kernis, 2003; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). If this inner true self-presentation aligns with coworkers' defined appropriate self-level for the relationship, employee authenticity will generate trust. This trust is primarily knowledge-based trust (Lewicki et al., 2006), grounded in coworkers' ability to understand and anticipate the employee's behavior because authenticity can be attributed to the relationship. Conversely, if this inner true self-presentation does not align with coworkers' defined appropriate self-level, coworkers may become suspicious. Attribution research finds that suspicion emerges when others' actions are difficult to understand, leaving multiple possible attributional explanations (Ham & Vonk, 2011; Hilton et al., 1993). This suspicion manifests as an uncertain mind-set regarding the employee's ambiguous motives (suspicion of ulterior motives; Fein, 1996; Marchand & Vonk, 2005). In short, when employee authenticity reveals an inner true self that does not align with coworkers' defined appropriate self-level, coworkers may find such behavior difficult to understand, attribute the behavior's motives ambiguously, and consequently become suspicious and reduce trust. When employee authenticity aligns with coworkers' defined ap-

propriate self-level, it helps clarify this ambiguous attribution, dispel suspicion, and generate trust.

### 1.2 The Moderating Role of Relationship Duration on the Links Between Employee Authenticity and Coworker Suspicion/Trust

Based on social penetration theory, we propose that employee authenticity's effects on coworker suspicion and trust depend largely on the duration of the working relationship. The theory suggests that the primary basis for determining appropriate self-levels to display in interactions is the relationship stage (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Taylor & Altman, 1987). At initial acquaintance, because individuals know little about each other, self-presentation is typically limited to relatively external layers. As acquaintance time increases and interactions multiply, mutual understanding deepens, leading to the revelation of more internal self-layers (Altman et al., 1981; Collins & Miller, 1994). Applying this logic to our study, in early-stage relationships, because coworkers know little about the focal employee and remain relatively unfamiliar, they expect more external self-presentation. Employee authenticity's tendency to act according to one's inner true self may exceed the appropriate level for this stage, causing coworkers to feel the employee's actions do not meet expectations. At this stage, trust is primarily based on adherence to universal norms and relatively predictable behavior (Rousseau et al., 1998). The employee's actions may make it difficult for coworkers to establish trust. Moreover, research finds that people tend to make multiple ambiguous attributions for difficult-to-understand behaviors during initial acquaintance (Fein et al., 1990). Coworkers may harbor multiple possible explanations for the employee's behavioral style, leading to suspicion about their motives. Specifically, an employee's 坦白 admission of weaknesses and shortcomings may lead coworkers to suspect they are trying to avoid work in those areas or preemptively deflect responsibility for future mistakes (Wooten, 2009). An employee's clear expression of values and insistence on their viewpoints may cause coworkers to question such actions without prior experience as a reference. The employee's authentic revelation of their inner self, this exceeding-expectations behavior, may lead coworkers to suspect ulterior motives. Overall, in early-stage relationships, employee authenticity makes it difficult for coworkers to establish trust and raises suspicion about hidden motives.

After extended collaboration, coworkers accumulate sufficient knowledge about the employee and gradually form a holistic understanding—an impression of who he/she is. At this stage, coworkers' holistic understanding forms the basis of their trust, which they use to interpret the employee's specific words and actions (Lewicki et al., 2006). Employee authenticity—acting according to one's inner true self, clearly expressing values and putting them into practice, acknowledging shortcomings, and 坦诚 sharing thoughts—aligns with coworkers' defined appropriate self-level for this stage, making coworkers feel more at ease. Moreover, coworkers can now make relatively accurate dispositional attributions

about the employee's behavior (Reeder et al., 2004), judging whether the behavior stems from inner authenticity. In this context, employee authenticity helps coworkers feel the behavior aligns with their holistic understanding, facilitating trust and dispelling suspicion (Greene et al., 2006; Taylor & Altman, 1987). If the employee were to hide their inner true self at this point, it might instead cause coworkers to feel the behavior does not meet expectations, generating suspicion and reducing trust. Integrating these analyses, we propose that when relationship duration is short, employee authenticity may increase coworker suspicion and reduce trust; after extended collaboration, authenticity may reduce suspicion and increase trust. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 1a:** Relationship duration moderates the relationship between employee authenticity and coworker suspicion. The relationship is positive when relationship duration is short and negative when duration is long.

**Hypothesis 1b:** Relationship duration moderates the relationship between employee authenticity and coworker trust. The relationship is negative when relationship duration is short and positive when duration is long.

### 1.3 The Indirect Effects of Employee Authenticity on Interpersonal Helping and Exclusion

We propose that coworker suspicion and trust subsequently influence coworkers' interpersonal helping behavior toward the focal employee. Interpersonal helping is a common behavior expressing closeness in the workplace (Grant & Mayer, 2009; Van Dyne et al., 1995). Because helping consumes time, energy, and resources, people typically prefer to help those likely to provide returns (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015; Koopman et al., 2016). Coworker suspicion involves uncertainty about the focal employee's behavioral motives (Marchand & Vonk, 2005). When suspicion is high, even if coworkers observe the employee encountering difficulties, they may hesitate to help for fear of being "taken advantage of" or exploited, believing help will not yield appropriate returns. Even if the employee seeks help, coworkers may waver and deflect (Grodal et al., 2015). Thus, coworker suspicion likely reduces interpersonal helping. However, when coworkers develop sufficient trust in the employee, they may view helping as necessary and beneficial for the future, substantially increasing the likelihood of providing help (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015). Moreover, trusted coworkers may be more attuned to the employee's difficulties and more willing to help (Cialdini et al., 1997). Therefore, we propose a negative relationship between coworker suspicion and interpersonal helping, and a positive relationship between coworker trust and interpersonal helping.

**Hypothesis 2a:** Coworker suspicion is negatively related to interpersonal helping.

**Hypothesis 2b:** Coworker trust is positively related to interpersonal helping. Coworker suspicion and trust may also influence coworkers' interpersonal ex-

clusionary behavior toward the focal employee. Interpersonal exclusion is a typical behavior expressing distance in the workplace, manifesting as avoiding eye contact and evading communication (Ferris et al., 2008). Due to suspicion, coworkers feel interacting with the employee carries substantial risk and worry about hidden information (Fein, 1996; Hilton et al., 1993). Coworkers will minimize contact to avoid unsafe and ambiguous situations (Zhang & Zhou, 2014). Suspicious mindsets also prompt coworkers to probe for reasons behind the employee's behavior and attribute it to self-serving motives (DeCarlo, 2005). Coworkers may interpret authentic actions as selfish—for example, insisting on one's position may be seen as disregarding others' feelings (Jones & Paulhus, 2009), leading coworkers to distance themselves (Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011). Conversely, when coworkers trust the employee, this trust leads them to view the employee's behavior more positively. Authentic behavior is likely understood as expressing trust and goodwill (Tang, Xu et al., 2021). Coworkers feel safer interacting with the employee and thus exhibit less interpersonal exclusion. Based on this analysis, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 3a:** Coworker suspicion is positively related to interpersonal exclusion.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Coworker trust is negatively related to interpersonal exclusion.

Building on the above arguments about the relationships between employee authenticity and coworker suspicion/trust (Hypothesis 1), we further propose that employee authenticity influences coworkers' interpersonal helping through its effects on coworker suspicion and trust, and that these indirect effects are moderated by relationship duration. Specifically, when relationship duration is short, employee authenticity may increase suspicion and reduce trust, thereby decreasing interpersonal helping; when relationship duration is long, authenticity may reduce suspicion and increase trust, thereby increasing interpersonal helping. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 4:** Relationship duration moderates the indirect effects of employee authenticity on interpersonal helping through coworker suspicion (4a) and coworker trust (4b). When relationship duration is short, employee authenticity increases suspicion and reduces trust, producing a negative indirect effect on interpersonal helping; when relationship duration is long, authenticity reduces suspicion and increases trust, producing a positive indirect effect on interpersonal helping.

We propose that employee authenticity also influences coworkers' interpersonal exclusion through its effects on coworker suspicion and trust, and that these indirect effects are similarly moderated by relationship duration. When relationship duration is short, employee authenticity may increase suspicion and reduce trust, thereby increasing interpersonal exclusion; when relationship duration is long, authenticity may reduce suspicion and increase trust, thereby decreasing interpersonal exclusion. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 5:** Relationship duration moderates the indirect effects of em-

ployee authenticity on interpersonal exclusion through coworker suspicion (5a) and coworker trust (5b). When relationship duration is short, employee authenticity increases suspicion and reduces trust, producing a positive indirect effect on interpersonal exclusion; when relationship duration is long, authenticity reduces suspicion and increases trust, producing a negative indirect effect on interpersonal exclusion.

In summary, our theoretical model is depicted in Figure 1. To test this model, we conducted two independent studies. Study 1's survey primarily examined coworker suspicion as the mediating mechanism in the relationship between employee authenticity and coworker relations, as this represents a key explanatory mechanism distinguishing our research from previous studies. After obtaining supportive results, Study 2 used an experimental design to test the full model. This approach offers two advantages. First, Study 1's survey results cannot support causal inferences; Study 2's experimental design effectively addresses this issue. Second, using different research methods allows us to test theoretical hypotheses across multiple contexts, substantially enhancing the robustness and generalizability of our findings (Wright & Sweeney, 2016).

## 2. Study 1: Round-Robin Survey Examining the Mediating Role of Coworker Suspicion

### 2.1.1 Participants

The sample for this study was drawn from work teams in a large enterprise in South China. Team members typically worked in the same office and interacted frequently. The survey employed a round-robin design (Warner et al., 1979), requiring members within each team to rate one another. This design has been increasingly adopted in management research to capture workplace interpersonal interactions (e.g., Lee & Duffy, 2019; Ouyang et al., 2018). For example, in a four-member team (Members A, B, C, and D), when measuring coworker suspicion, Member A would report their suspicion of Members B, C, and D; simultaneously, Member B would report their suspicion of Members A, C, and D, and so on. All participating members reported their suspicion of every other member. We used the round-robin design to measure coworker suspicion, interpersonal helping, and interpersonal exclusion. At Time 1 (T1), participants reported personal information and we measured employee authenticity and coworker suspicion. To reduce common method bias, two weeks later at Time 2 (T2), participants reported interpersonal helping and exclusion. In this study, employees reported the interpersonal helping they received from coworkers, while coworkers reported their exclusionary behavior toward the focal employees. All measures were established scales that have been validated in published research. English versions were translated into Chinese using back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1980).

In this study, 384 questionnaires were distributed at Time 1, yielding 333 valid responses (86.7% valid response rate). At Time 2, 333 questionnaires were

distributed, yielding 299 valid responses (89.8% valid response rate). After matching the round-robin surveys and deleting incomplete dyadic data, the final sample consisted of 1,027 dyads within 63 teams. Average team size was 5.6 members ( $SD = 2.82$ ). Among the 299 employees who completed valid questionnaires, 44.8% were female, average age was 34.39 years ( $SD = 7.46$ ), 78.6% held bachelor's degrees or higher, and average organizational tenure was 9.18 years ( $SD = 6.96$ ).

### 2.1.2 Measures

**Employee Authenticity (T1).** We used the employee authenticity scale developed by Leroy et al. (2015), adapted from Kernis and Goldman's (2006) Authenticity Inventory. The scale comprises four dimensions with four items each (16 total items), including "I am very clear about why I do what I do" (self-awareness), "I do not hide my weaknesses and mistakes" (unbiased processing), "I act according to my beliefs" (authentic behavior), and "I honestly explain my thoughts to others" (relational transparency). Participants indicated their agreement with each item as a description of themselves using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater authenticity. Confirmatory factor analysis showed the single-factor second-order model fit the data well,  $2(116) = 234.0$ , CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.05, indicating the four dimensions could be integrated into a single authenticity factor. Cronbach's alpha was 0.86.

**Coworker Suspicion (T1).** We used DeCarlo's (2005) three-item scale to measure coworkers' suspicion of the focal employee's motives. Participants recalled their interaction experiences with each teammate and indicated their agreement with each item as a reflection of their feelings toward a specific member (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Items included "He/she always seems to have a hidden agenda," "His/her motives seem ambiguous," and "He/she gives the impression of having ulterior motives." Cronbach's alpha was 0.95.

**Interpersonal Helping (T2).** We used the four-item scale employed by Ouyang et al. (2018) in their round-robin design to measure interpersonal helping. The scale asked participants to report the frequency with which other members provided them help (1 = never, 7 = always). Items included "He/she provides me with help at work," "He/she shares his/her professional knowledge and skills with me," "He/she spends time helping me solve work problems," and "He/she helps me complete backlogged work." Cronbach's alpha was 0.96. This other-rated scale was used to represent coworkers' helping behavior toward the focal employee.

**Interpersonal Exclusion (T2).** We adapted Ferris et al.'s (2008) workplace ostracism scale to measure interpersonal exclusion. The original scale measures individuals' experienced social exclusion in the workplace. Following common practice in round-robin designs of adapting and shortening scales (e.g., Lam et al., 2011; Lee & Duffy, 2019), we modified the scale to fit the dyadic context

and reduce participant fatigue, as round-robin designs require each member to rate multiple others on identical items. We first rephrased items to fit the two-person interaction context and worded them from the excluder's perspective to reflect coworkers' exclusionary behavior toward the focal employee. For example, the original item "When you enter a room, others leave" was adapted to "When he/she enters a room, I leave"; the original item "Others do not look at you" became "I avoid eye contact with him/her." Two management doctoral students then evaluated the content validity of the adapted items. Based on their assessment, we selected the three items that best captured interpersonal exclusion: "I avoid eye contact with him/her," "I avoid talking with him/her," and "When he/she is present, I act as if he/she is not there." Participants reported the frequency with which they engaged in each behavior toward each teammate (1 = never, 7 = always). Cronbach's alpha was 0.95.

**Relationship Duration.** We sought to obtain accurate dyadic relationship duration data. At T1, we asked members in the round-robin survey to report their relationship duration with each teammate, resulting in two reports per dyad. We then compared the two reports for consistency; 84.2% were consistent. To ensure accuracy, at T2 we presented both reports to participants and asked them to confirm. This procedure effectively clarified discrepancies.

**Control Variables (T1).** Participants reported demographic characteristics including gender, age, education, and organizational tenure. We controlled for these variables in hypothesis testing as they may affect dyadic relationships (Harrison et al., 1998). We also asked team leaders to report team size and controlled for it in analyses, as research shows team size affects interpersonal interaction processes (Richter et al., 2006). Our primary logic is that employee authenticity influences coworkers' helping or exclusion through suspicion. However, coworkers' helping or distancing may stem not from suspicion of authenticity but from a desire to maintain clear relational boundaries to preserve their own independence (Robinson et al., 2013). Therefore, we controlled for coworkers' desire for independence using Nagumey et al.'s (2004) scale. Items included "Maintaining my independence is very important to me," "I must face my own problems," and "I cannot rely on others to handle my own matters" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha was 0.75. Statistical conclusions were consistent whether or not control variables were included in analyses.

### 2.1.3 Analytical Strategy

Data from round-robin designs are not independent and have a complex hierarchical structure. For example, in a four-member team, the A-B relationship is nested within both individuals A and B, who are nested within the same team. This complex hierarchy creates three levels: dyadic (A-B), individual (Members A and B), and group. We used a specialized hierarchical data analysis method –the social relations model (SRM; Kenny, 1994; Kenny et al., 2006). This approach first decomposes dependent variable variance across levels. Due to its hierarchical nature, variance can be partitioned into components attributable

to the group, individuals (including actor and partner effects), and the unique dyadic relationship. Our primary focus is the employee-coworker relationship, so we first isolated variance arising from the dyadic interaction and analyzed it at the dyadic level. Before analysis, we ensured sufficient variance existed at the dyadic level; if dyadic variance is too small, even significant predictor effects would have negligible explanatory power. This method has been increasingly adopted by management scholars analyzing interpersonal interactions in work teams (e.g., de Jong et al., 2007; Lee & Duffy, 2019).

In this study, to analyze the effect of independent variables (e.g., A's authenticity) on dependent variables (e.g., B's exclusion of A), we first decomposed the dependent variable's variance. After confirming sufficient dyadic-level variance, we proceeded to analyze predictor-outcome relationships. To test hypotheses (e.g., Hypothesis 1a), we sequentially added control variables, independent variables, moderators (e.g., A-B relationship duration), and their interaction terms (product of independent variable and moderator) to predict the dependent variable. Effect estimates in this model represent the direction and strength of predictor-outcome relationships, analogous to regression coefficients (Kenny et al., 2006). We used the SRM\_R application developed by Kenny and Wong (2016) for social relations model analysis (e.g., Lam et al., 2021; Tang, Lam et al., 2021). Notably, two members in the same team form two distinct dyads (e.g., A's exclusion of B differs from B's exclusion of A). Thus, a four-member team yields 12 unique dyads. To increase statistical power, we examined both the significance of effect estimates and whether adding predictors significantly improved model fit. For moderated mediation hypotheses, we followed Preacher et al.'s (2007) procedures and used the Monte Carlo approach to test conditional indirect effects.

### 2.2.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We conducted multilevel confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus 7.0 to test discriminant validity of individual-level variables (i.e., employee authenticity and desire for independence) and dyadic-level variables (i.e., coworker suspicion, interpersonal helping, and interpersonal exclusion). Results (Table 1) showed the five-factor model fit the data well,  $\chi^2(183) = 491.4$ , CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR<sub>between</sub> = 0.09, SRMR<sub>within</sub> = 0.02, and fit significantly better than all alternative models,  $\Delta \chi^2 = 1634.1(2)$ , 2954.0(2), 3821.1(3), 67.3(1), 3853.1(4),  $p < .001$ . These results indicate our measures effectively discriminated between variables.

**Table 1. Multilevel Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

Model	$\chi^2(df)$	$\Delta \chi^2(\Delta df)$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR <sub>between</sub>	SRMR <sub>within</sub>
Five-factor model	491.4 (183)	—	0.94	0.93	0.04	0.09	0.02

Model	2(df)	$\Delta 2(\Delta df)$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	between	SRMR	within
Merged									
fac-									
tors									
model									
Merge	2125.6	1634.1							
suspi-	(185)	(2)***							
cion									
&									
exclu-									
sion									
Merge	3445.4	2954.0							
exclu-	(185)	(2)***							
sion									
&									
help-									
ing									
Merge	4312.5	3821.1							
dyadic	(186)	(3)***							
vari-									
ables									
Merge	558.7	67.3							
indi-	(184)	(1)***							
vidual									
vari-									
ables									
Two-	4344.5	3853.1							
factor	(187)	(4)***							
(indi-									
vidual									
&									
dyadic)									

*Note:  $\Delta 2$  compares each alternative model to the five-factor model. \*\*p < 0.001.\**

### 2.2.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability coefficients. Correlation results show B's suspicion of A was significantly negatively correlated with B's helping of A,  $r = -0.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and significantly positively correlated with B's exclusion of A,  $r = 0.38$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , providing preliminary evidence that coworker suspicion may reduce helping and increase exclusion.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. A'	34.39	7.46	—													
s age																
(indi-																
vid-																
ual)																
2. A'	44.8%	0.498	—													
s																
gen-																
der																
(indi-																
vid-																
ual)																
3. A'	78.6%	0.411	—	0.227**												
s ed-																
uca-																
tion																
(indi-																
vid-																
ual)																
4. A'	9.18	6.96	0.78**	—	—	—										
s																
tenure																
(indi-																
vid-																
ual)																
5. B'	34.39	7.46	0.33**	—	—	0.274**										
s age																
(indi-																
vid-																
ual)																
6. B'	44.8%	0.498	—	0.38**	—	—	—									
s																
gen-																
der																
(indi-																
vid-																
ual)																
7. B'	78.6%	0.411	—	0.33**	—	—	0.214**									
s ed-																
uca-																
tion																
(indi-																
vid-																
ual)																

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
8. B'	9.18	6.96	0.28**	0.20	0.24	0.78**	-	-								
s				0.07*			0.08	0.20**								
tenure																
(indi-																
vid-																
ual)																
9.	5.6	2.82	0.22**	-	0.24	0.06*	0.15	0.09**								
Team				0.14	0.06*		0.07*									
size																
(group)																
10.	5.21	0.79	0.25**	-	0.07	0.11**	0.12	0.13	0.07	(0.75)						
B' s				0.11	0.20**		0.14**									
de-																
sire																
for																
inde-																
pen-																
dence																
(indi-																
vid-																
ual)																
11.	5.46	0.73	-	0.11	0.13**	-	0.08*	-	0.12	0.21	(0.86)					
A' s				0.24**		0.09	0.11**	0.11	0.17**							
au-																
then-																
ticity																
(indi-																
vid-																
ual)																
12.	2.94	2.31	0.19**	-	0.08	0.08*	-	0.09	0.38**	-						
A-B				0.11	0.12**		0.11	0.17**		0.12**						
rela-																
tion-																
dura-																
tion																
(dyadic)																
13.	2.71	1.34	-	0.09	0.08*	-	0.09**	-	0.25	0.12	0.13	(0.95)				
B' s				0.15**		0.16	0.14**	0.20	0.16**							
sus-																
pi-																
cion																
of A																
(dyadic)																

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
14. B' s helping of A (dyadic)	4.33	1.12	0.09**	0.15*	0.06*	0.11**	0.15*	0.09**	-	0.19**	(0.96)					
				0.07*			0.07*		0.14*	0.12**		0.12**				
15. B' s exclusion of A (dyadic)	1.33	0.58	-	0.08*	0.07*	-	0.08*	-	0.25*	0.38**	0.38*	0.09*	(0.95)			
				0.20**		0.18*	0.20**	0.18*	0.20**		0.09**					

*Note:* (1)  $N = 1,027$  dyads among 299 employees in 63 teams;  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ . Parentheses contain Cronbach' s alpha. (2) Gender (0 = male, 1 = female); Education (0 = college or below, 1 = bachelor' s or above).\*

### 2.2.3 Variance Decomposition

Using the social relations model, we first decomposed variance in the dependent variables: B' s suspicion of A, B' s helping of A, and B' s exclusion of A. As Table 3 shows, dyadic interaction accounted for 27.9% of total variance in B' s suspicion of A, 31.4% in B' s helping of A, and 24.1% in B' s exclusion of A. These results indicate that B' s suspicion, helping, and exclusion of A are substantially influenced by the dyadic interaction.

**Table 3. Variance Decomposition Results**

Source	B' s Suspicion of A		
	Estimate	%	SE
A effect	0.29	64.5%	0.03
B effect	0.12	28.0%	0.02
A-B relationship	0.12	27.9%	0.02

*Note:*  $N = 1,027$  dyads among 299 employees in 63 teams.

### 2.2.4 Hypothesis 1a Test

Hypothesis 1a proposed that relationship duration moderates the relationship between employee authenticity and coworker suspicion, such that the relationship is positive when duration is short and negative when duration is long. To test this hypothesis, we sequentially added control variables, A' s authenticity,

A-B relationship duration, and their interaction term to predict B' s suspicion of A. As Table 4 shows, the interaction between employee authenticity and relationship duration significantly affected B' s suspicion of A ( $b = -0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that A-B relationship duration moderates the relationship between A' s authenticity and B' s suspicion of A.

**Table 4. Social Relations Model Predicting B' s Suspicion of A**

Step and Variables	b	SE	$\Delta 2$
Step 1: Controls			22.96*
A' s age (individual)	0.10*	0.05	
A' s gender (individual)	-	0.06	
	0.16**		
A' s education (individual)	0.09*	0.04	
A' s tenure (individual)	-	0.06	
	0.16**		
B' s age (individual)	0.10**	0.04	
B' s gender (individual)	-	0.06	
	0.16**		
B' s education (individual)	0.09*	0.04	
B' s tenure (individual)	-	0.06	
	0.16**		
Team size (group)	0.00	0.01	
B' s desire for independence (individual)	-0.01	0.03	
Step 2: Main effects			11.75**
A' s authenticity (individual)	-	0.02	
	0.08***		
A-B relationship duration (dyadic)	-0.10*	0.04	
Step 3: Interaction			14.16***
Authenticity $\times$ Relationship Duration (cross-level)	-	0.02	
	0.08***		

*Note: N = 1,027 dyads among 299 employees in 63 teams; p < 0.05, **p < 0.01**,  $p < 0.001$ ; b = unstandardized coefficient, SE = standard error.*

We plotted the interaction effect (Figure 2) and conducted simple slope tests (Aiken & West, 1991). Results showed that when A-B relationship duration was short (-1 SD), A' s authenticity was significantly positively related to B' s suspicion of A ( $b = 0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ). When relationship duration was long (+1 SD), A' s authenticity was significantly negatively related to B' s suspicion of A ( $b = -0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ). To clearly contrast the differences, we tested the difference between simple effects under short versus long duration conditions, finding a significant difference ( $d = 0.16$ ,  $t(950) = 3.39$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These results support Hypothesis 1a.

We further used Gardner et al.'s (2017) method to analyze how relationship

duration changes affect the authenticity-suspicion relationship. This method examines how the relationship transitions from significant to non-significant as the moderator increases, mapping regions of significance. Following Gardner et al.'s recommendations, we used the Johnson-Neyman technique, which calculates moderator values at the boundaries of significance by inverting the moderation formula at a specified significance level. This can be implemented using software like SPSS or Mplus, or via online applications (Preacher et al., 2006; Miller et al., 2013). We used the online application (<http://www.quantpsy.org/interact/interactions.htm>) with significance level set at  $p < 0.05$ . Results showed that when A-B relationship duration ranged from 0 to 0.89 years, A' s authenticity was significantly positively related to B' s suspicion of A. From 0.89 to 5.21 years, the relationship was non-significant. Beyond 5.21 years, authenticity was significantly negatively related to suspicion.

**Figure 2. Moderating Effect of A-B Relationship Duration on the Relationship Between A' s Authenticity and B' s Suspicion of A**

#### 2.2.5 Hypotheses 2a and 3a Tests

Hypothesis 2a proposed that coworker suspicion is negatively related to interpersonal helping. To test this, we added control variables, A' s authenticity, A-B relationship duration, the authenticity  $\times$  duration interaction, and B' s suspicion of A to predict B' s helping of A. As Table 5 shows (Model 2), B' s suspicion of A was significantly negatively related to B' s helping of A ( $b = -0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Hypothesis 2a is supported.

**Table 5. Social Relations Model Predicting B' s Helping of A and B' s Exclusion of A**

Step and Variables	B' s Helping of A	B' s Exclusion of A
	b	SE
Step 1: Controls		
A' s age (individual)	-0.29***	0.08
A' s gender (individual)	0.27***	0.08
A' s education (individual)	0.00	0.05
A' s tenure (individual)	-0.01	0.08
B' s age (individual)	-0.04*	0.02
B' s gender (individual)	-0.10*	0.05
B' s education (individual)	-0.14*	0.06
B' s tenure (individual)	-0.08***	0.02
Team size (group)	0.24***	0.07
B' s desire for independence (individual)	-0.10*	0.04
Step 2: Main effects		
A' s authenticity (individual)	0.02	0.03
A-B relationship duration (dyadic)	0.01	0.02
Authenticity $\times$ Relationship Duration	-0.01	0.02

Step and Variables	B' s Helping of A	B' s Exclusion of A
Step 3: Mediator		
B' s suspicion of A (dyadic)	-0.14***	0.04

*Note: N = 1,027 dyads among 299 employees in 63 teams; p < 0.05, **p < 0.01**, p < 0.001; b = unstandardized coefficient, SE = standard error.*

Hypothesis 3a proposed that coworker suspicion is positively related to interpersonal exclusion. Similarly, we added control variables, A' s authenticity, A-B relationship duration, the authenticity  $\times$  duration interaction, and B' s suspicion of A to predict B' s exclusion of A. Results (Table 5, Model 4) showed B' s suspicion of A was significantly positively related to B' s exclusion of A (b = 0.23, SE = 0.02, p < 0.001). Hypothesis 3a is supported.

## 2.2.6 Hypotheses 4a and 5a Tests

Hypothesis 4a proposed that relationship duration moderates the indirect effect of employee authenticity on interpersonal helping through coworker suspicion, such that the effect is negative when duration is short and positive when duration is long. Given the significant interaction effect of authenticity  $\times$  duration on B' s suspicion of A and the significant negative relationship between B' s suspicion and B' s helping, we proceeded to test conditional indirect effects using the Monte Carlo approach (Preacher & Selig, 2012). Table 6 shows that when relationship duration was short (-1 SD), the indirect effect of authenticity on helping through suspicion was significantly negative (effect = -0.01, 95% CI [-0.02, -0.00]). When duration was long (+1 SD), the indirect effect was significantly positive (effect = 0.01, 95% CI [0.00, 0.03]). The difference between these indirect effects was significant (effect = -0.02, 95% CI [-0.04, -0.01]).

**Table 6. Indirect Effect Test Results**

Conditional Indirect Effect	Effect	95% CI	
		Lower	Upper
<b>A' s Authenticity <math>\rightarrow</math> B' s Suspicion <math>\rightarrow</math> B' s Helping</b>			
Long relationship duration (+1 SD)	0.01	0.00	0.03
Short relationship duration (-1 SD)	-0.01	-0.02	-0.00
Difference between conditions	-0.02	-0.04	-0.01
<b>A' s Authenticity <math>\rightarrow</math> B' s Suspicion <math>\rightarrow</math> B' s Exclusion</b>			
Long relationship duration (+1 SD)	-0.02	-0.04	-0.00
Short relationship duration (-1 SD)	0.02	0.00	0.04
Difference between conditions	0.04	0.02	0.06

*Note: CI = confidence interval; Monte Carlo method with 20,000 resamples.*

Hypothesis 5a proposed that relationship duration moderates the indirect effect of employee authenticity on interpersonal exclusion through coworker suspicion, such that the effect is positive when duration is short and negative when duration is long. Using the same Monte Carlo approach, results (Table 6) showed that when relationship duration was short (-1 SD), the indirect effect of authenticity on exclusion through suspicion was significantly positive (effect = 0.02, 95% CI [0.00, 0.04]). When duration was long (+1 SD), the indirect effect was significantly negative (effect = -0.02, 95% CI [-0.04, -0.00]). The difference between these indirect effects was significant (effect = 0.04, 95% CI [0.02, 0.06]). These results support Hypotheses 4a and 5a.

Study 1 provides strong preliminary evidence for the moderating role of relationship duration and confirms coworker suspicion as a key explanatory mechanism. Despite its strong internal validity, Study 1 tested only part of the theoretical model, and survey data cannot effectively support causal inferences. Therefore, Study 2 uses an experimental design to test the full model.

### 3. Study 2: Experimental Test of the Full Model

#### 3.1.1 Participants

Data collection was assisted by MBA students at a university in Central China. We used snowball sampling, asking MBA students to participate and invite working friends and colleagues. To increase response rates, participants received 10 RMB upon completion. We distributed 320 experimental questionnaires, obtaining 281 valid responses (87.8% valid response rate). The final sample was 58.0% female, with mean age 33.86 years (SD = 4.54), 40.6% holding master's degrees or higher, and mean job tenure 6.01 years (SD = 4.21).

#### 3.1.2 Experimental Design and Manipulation

The experiment used the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954). Participants were asked to recall a specific employee and complete a questionnaire about that employee based on their interactions as coworkers. This technique is widely used in management research (e.g., Casciaro et al., 2014; Ouyang et al., 2018). We manipulated employee authenticity and relationship duration in a  $2 \times 2$  between-subjects design, creating four experimental conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions with content developed based on existing research and measures.

**Employee Authenticity.** In the experimental group (high authenticity), participants were asked to recall an employee who: "Acts according to his/her own ideas even when it sometimes disappoints others, and withstands social pressure for doing so. He/she knows his/her weaknesses and shortcomings but accepts being an imperfect person. He/she clearly expresses his/her thoughts and viewpoints without hiding them." In the control group (low authenticity), the recalled employee: "Adjusts his/her behavior according to the situation. If adhering to

principles might cause embarrassment or disappointment, he/she compromises. He/she tries to avoid revealing weaknesses and shortcomings. He/she considers many factors when expressing ideas and rarely states overly clear and firm viewpoints.”

**Relationship Duration.** Based on Study 1 findings, the experimental group (long duration) received instructions: “This person has worked with you for a long time, for example, more than five years.” The control group (short duration) received: “This person has worked with you for a short time, for example, less than one year.”

To ensure participants recalled the specific employee and responded accordingly, we asked them to spend time imagining the employee and write down his/her name. Failure to write a name or writing meaningless characters was considered invalid.

### 3.1.3 Measures

Coworker suspicion ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) and interpersonal exclusion ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ) were measured as in Study 1. Unlike Study 1’s other-rated helping measure, we used self-rated helping rephrased accordingly ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). For example, “He/she spends time helping me solve work problems” became “I spend time helping him/her solve work problems.”

**Coworker Trust.** We used McAllister et al.’s (2006) five-item scale measuring participants’ trust in the employee. The scale assesses knowledge-based trust. Participants indicated agreement with items based on interaction experiences (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Items included “His/her behavior meets my expectations” and “Based on my experience with him/her, he/she is a trustworthy person.” Cronbach’ s alpha was 0.86.

**Control Variables.** As in Study 1, we controlled for participant demographics and desire for independence ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ). Statistical conclusions were consistent with or without controls.

**Manipulation Checks.** To assess the authenticity manipulation, we adapted Study 1’s 16-item self-rated authenticity scale into an other-rated format. For example, “I am very clear about why I do what I do” became “He/she is very clear about why he/she does what he/she does.” Cronbach’ s alpha was 0.91. Participants also reported the specific duration they had worked with the employee to check the duration manipulation.

### 3.2.1 Manipulation Checks

We first tested manipulation effectiveness. Comparing the two authenticity conditions, the experimental group ( $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) scored significantly higher on authenticity than the control group ( $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ,  $t(279) = 5.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen’ s  $d = 0.61$ ). Comparing duration conditions, the experimental group ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 3.53$ ) reported significantly longer relationship

duration than the control group ( $M = 0.78$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ,  $t(279) = 16.82$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen's  $d = 2.01$ ). These results confirm successful manipulation of both factors.

### 3.2.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Descriptive Statistics

Confirmatory factor analysis tested discriminant validity. Results (Table 7) showed the six-factor model (desire for independence, employee authenticity, coworker suspicion, coworker trust, interpersonal exclusion, and interpersonal helping) fit well,  $\Delta 2(194) = 493.0$ ,  $CFI = 0.93$ ,  $TLI = 0.91$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.07$ ,  $SRMR = 0.08$ , and fit significantly better than all alternative models,  $\Delta 2 = 309.4(5)$ ,  $713.9(5)$ ,  $662.9(5)$ ,  $289.4(5)$ ,  $458.6(5)$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating effective variable discrimination.

**Table 7. Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

Model	2(df)	$\Delta 2(\Delta df)$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Six-factor model	493.0 (194)	—	0.93	0.91	0.07	0.08
Merged factors model						
Merge independence & authenticity	802.3 (199)	309.4 (5)***				
Merge suspicion & trust	1206.8 (199)	713.9 (5)***				
Merge exclusion & helping	1155.9 (199)	662.9 (5)***				
Merge suspicion & exclusion	782.4 (199)	289.4 (5)***				
Merge trust & helping	951.6 (199)	458.6 (5)***				

*Note:  $\Delta 2$  compares each alternative model to the six-factor model. \*\*p < 0.001.\**

Descriptive statistics and correlations appear in Table 8. Correlation results show coworker suspicion was significantly positively correlated with interpersonal exclusion,  $r = 0.59$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and negatively correlated with interpersonal helping,  $r = -0.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Coworker trust was significantly negatively correlated with exclusion,  $r = -0.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and positively correlated with helping,  $r = 0.59$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . These results preliminarily support the proposed relationships.

**Table 8. Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Participant gender	42.0%	0.49	—						
2. Participant education	40.6%	0.49	0.56***	—					
3. Desire for independence	5.21	0.79	-	0.16** (0.88)					
				0.14*					
4. Employee authenticity (manipulation)	5.20	0.88	-	-	0.24*** (0.91)				
				0.14*	0.29***				
5. Relationship duration (manipulation)	3.30	3.20	-	-	0.22*	0.08***			
				0.26**	0.31***				
6. Coworker suspicion	3.35	1.53	0.51***	0.27***	-	-	(0.93)		
					0.16*	0.31***	0.47***		
7. Coworker trust	5.14	1.13	-	-	0.67***	0.24***	0.24***	(0.86)	
				0.22***	0.20***			0.59***	
8. Interpersonal exclusion	2.94	1.31	0.59***	0.31***	-	-	0.59***		
					0.08	0.16*	0.26**	0.22***	
9. Interpersonal helping	4.70	1.05	-	0.59***	0.15**	0.15**	0.15**	-	0.59***
				0.20***				0.20***	

Note:  $N = 281$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\mathbf{p} < 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; parentheses contain Cronbach's alpha.

### 3.2.3 Hypothesis 1 Tests

Hypothesis 1 proposed that relationship duration moderates the relationships between employee authenticity and coworker suspicion (1a) and trust (1b). We used regression analysis to test these hypotheses. We sequentially added control variables, employee authenticity, relationship duration, and their interaction term to predict coworker suspicion. As Table 9 shows (Model 2), the authenticity  $\times$  duration interaction significantly affected coworker suspicion ( $b = -0.47$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The moderation effect (Figure 3) revealed that when relationship duration was short, the high authenticity condition ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) generated significantly higher suspicion than the low authenticity condition ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ,  $t(140) = 3.04$ ,  $p = 0.003$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.51$ ). When duration was long, the high authenticity condition ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) generated significantly lower suspicion than the low authenticity condition ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ,  $t(137) = 3.99$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.68$ ). Thus, the relationship between authenticity and suspicion was positive when duration was short and negative when duration was long. Hypothesis 1a is supported.

**Table 9. Regression Models Predicting Coworker Suspicion and Trust**

Step and Variables	Coworker Suspicion		Coworker Trust
	b	SE	
Step 1: Controls			
Participant gender	0.41*	0.18	
Participant education	0.06*	0.03	
Desire for independence	-0.21*	0.10	
Step 2: Main effects			
Employee authenticity	-0.47***	0.09	
Relationship duration	-0.08***	0.02	
Step 3: Interaction			
Authenticity $\times$ Relationship Duration	0.24***	0.07	

*Note: N = 281; p < 0.05, **p < 0.01**, p < 0.001; b = unstandardized coefficient, SE = standard error.*

To test Hypothesis 1b, we sequentially added the same predictors to predict coworker trust. As Table 9 shows (Model 4), the authenticity  $\times$  duration interaction significantly affected coworker trust ( $b = 0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The moderation effect (Figure 3) revealed that when relationship duration was short, the high authenticity condition ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) generated significantly lower trust than the low authenticity condition ( $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ,  $t(140) = 2.61$ ,  $p = 0.010$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.44$ ). When duration was long, the high authenticity condition ( $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) generated significantly higher trust than the low authenticity condition ( $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ,  $t(137) = 2.43$ ,  $p = 0.016$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.42$ ). Thus, the relationship between authenticity and

trust was negative when duration was short and positive when duration was long. Hypothesis 1b is supported.

**Figure 3. Moderating Effect of Relationship Duration on the Relationships Between Employee Authenticity and Coworker Suspicion/Trust**

### 3.2.4 Hypotheses 2 and 3 Tests

Hypothesis 2 proposed that coworker suspicion (2a) is negatively related to interpersonal helping and coworker trust (2b) is positively related to helping. To test Hypothesis 2, we sequentially added control variables, employee authenticity, relationship duration, the authenticity  $\times$  duration interaction, coworker suspicion, and coworker trust to predict interpersonal helping. Results (Table 10, Model 2) showed coworker suspicion was not significantly related to helping ( $b = -0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ , n.s.), while coworker trust was positively related to helping ( $b = 0.67$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 2a was not supported, but Hypothesis 2b was supported.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that coworker suspicion (3a) is positively related to interpersonal exclusion and coworker trust (3b) is negatively related to exclusion. To test Hypothesis 3, we used the same predictors to predict interpersonal exclusion. Results (Table 10, Model 4) showed coworker suspicion was positively related to exclusion ( $b = 0.51$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while coworker trust was not significantly related to exclusion ( $b = -0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , n.s.). Therefore, Hypothesis 3a was supported, but Hypothesis 3b was not supported.

**Table 10. Regression Models Predicting Interpersonal Helping and Exclusion**

Step and Variables	Interpersonal Helping		Interpersonal Exclusion
	b	SE	
<b>Step 1: Controls</b>			
Participant gender	0.51**	0.16	
Participant education	0.22*	0.09	
Desire for independence	-0.31***	0.09	
<b>Step 2: Main effects</b>			
Employee authenticity	0.67***	0.08	
Relationship duration	0.24***	0.07	
Authenticity $\times$ Relationship Duration	0.15**	0.05	
<b>Step 3: Mediators</b>			
Coworker suspicion	-0.03	0.05	
Coworker trust	0.67***	0.06	

*Note: N = 281; p < 0.05, **p < 0.01**, p < 0.001; b = unstandardized coefficient, SE = standard error.*

### 3.2.5 Hypotheses 4 and 5 Tests

Hypothesis 4 proposed that relationship duration moderates the indirect effects of employee authenticity on interpersonal helping through coworker suspicion (4a) and trust (4b). Because coworker suspicion was not significantly related to helping, Hypothesis 4a could not be supported and was not tested. We tested Hypothesis 4b using the same Monte Carlo approach as Study 1. Results (Table 11) showed that when relationship duration was short, the indirect effect of authenticity on helping through trust was significantly negative (effect = -0.18, 95% CI [-0.32, -0.05]). When duration was long, the indirect effect was significantly positive (effect = 0.15, 95% CI [0.02, 0.28]). The difference between these indirect effects was significant (effect = 0.33, 95% CI [0.20, 0.48]). Hypothesis 4b is supported.

**Table 11. Indirect Effect Test Results**

Conditional Indirect Effect	Effect	95% CI	
		Lower	Upper
<b>Authenticity → Trust → Helping</b>			
Long relationship duration (+1 SD)	0.15	0.02	0.28
Short relationship duration (-1 SD)	-0.18	-0.32	-0.05
Difference between conditions	0.33	0.20	0.48
<b>Authenticity → Suspicion → Exclusion</b>			
Long relationship duration (+1 SD)	-0.26	-0.40	-0.13
Short relationship duration (-1 SD)	0.24	0.09	0.39
Difference between conditions	-0.49	-0.67	-0.33

*Note: CI = confidence interval; Monte Carlo method with 20,000 resamples.*

Hypothesis 5 proposed that relationship duration moderates the indirect effects of employee authenticity on interpersonal exclusion through coworker suspicion (5a) and trust (5b). Because coworker trust was not significantly related to exclusion, Hypothesis 5b could not be supported and was not tested. We tested Hypothesis 5a using the Monte Carlo approach. Results (Table 11) showed that when relationship duration was short, the indirect effect of authenticity on exclusion through suspicion was significantly positive (effect = 0.24, 95% CI [0.09, 0.39]). When duration was long, the indirect effect was significantly negative (effect = -0.26, 95% CI [-0.40, -0.13]). The difference between these indirect effects was significant (effect = -0.49, 95% CI [-0.67, -0.33]). Hypothesis 5a is supported.

## 4. Discussion

This study examined the double-edged effects of employee authenticity on coworker relationships, proposing relationship duration as the primary mod-

erator. Grounded in social penetration theory and attribution literature, we argued that employee authenticity influences both positive and negative coworker interactions—interpersonal helping and exclusion—through its effects on coworker trust and suspicion of ulterior motives. Using both survey and experimental methods, results supported our theoretical model. When relationship duration was short, employee authenticity increased coworkers' suspicion and reduced trust, thereby decreasing helping and increasing exclusion. When relationship duration was long, authenticity reduced suspicion and increased trust, thereby increasing helping and decreasing exclusion. These findings substantially advance current understanding of authenticity in workplace contexts and offer important practical implications.

#### 4.1 Theoretical Implications

First, this study broadens the scope of authenticity research in workplace contexts. Because authenticity represents the external manifestation of one's inner true self, most research has analyzed authenticity from a self-perspective, focusing on individual benefits (e.g., Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Pugh et al., 2011). Organizational research has recently begun examining authenticity's social effects (Cha et al., 2019), primarily in leader-subordinate contexts exploring how authentic leadership elicits positive follower behaviors. Our study extends this context to examine authenticity's impact on coworker relationships. We argue that theoretical logic from leader-subordinate contexts may not adequately explain employee authenticity's role in coworker interactions. For instance, research finds authentic leadership enhances follower identification (Gill & Caza, 2018) because revealing one's true self fosters acceptance. This mechanism assumes that, due to status differences and leader idealization (Bligh et al., 2011), followers are inclined to **包容** and accept leaders' authentic self-expression. This identification process may not occur in coworker relationships. Employee authenticity may not trigger identification and acceptance among coworkers; instead, coworkers may reject the revealed authentic self and even misunderstand the employee, negatively affecting the relationship. Our results confirm this inference, showing that under certain conditions, employee authenticity can indeed trigger coworker suspicion, reduce trust, and increase exclusion. By extending authenticity research to coworker relationships and examining potential negative effects, this study substantially advances existing theory.

Second, this study introduces a new perspective for analyzing coworker relationships. Mainstream coworker relationship research has focused on social exchange and similarity-attraction theories, suggesting that facilitating positive social exchange and demonstrating similarity promote good coworker interactions (e.g., Flynn, 2003; Tsui et al., 1992). We introduce social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Taylor & Altman, 1987), which has been widely applied in communication research to explain how self-disclosure deepens relationships. Recent research has used this theory to analyze self-disclosure and reactions in social media contexts (Kay et al., 2020; Maheshwari & Mukherjee, 2020). Social penetra-

tion theory posits that self-disclosure in interpersonal interactions must follow a stage-based principle: revealing self-aspects appropriate to the relationship stage builds positive relationships, while exceeding the relationship stage damages them (Altman & Taylor, 1973). This study applies this theory to coworker interactions, proposing that employees' self-revealing actions must also follow a stage-based principle. We integrate social penetration theory with attribution literature to argue that in early-stage relationships, employee authenticity—revealing inner true self—exceeds the relationship's nature, violates interaction norms, undermines trust-building foundations, triggers suspicion, and creates barriers to closeness. Only after developing substantial mutual understanding does authenticity facilitate positive coworker interactions and closeness, as the relationship becomes more appropriate for revealing inner true self. By introducing social penetration theory, this study deepens understanding of coworker interactions.

Finally, this study elaborates the process and mechanisms through which authenticity influences interpersonal interactions. Previous research found that authenticity in close relationships promotes mutual trust and strengthens bonds (e.g., Swann Jr et al., 1994; Wickham, 2013), heavily influencing scholars' understanding of how authenticity affects workplace relationships. Based on these findings, researchers generally propose that authenticity builds trust and facilitates positive workplace relationships (e.g., Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Ilies et al., 2005; Tang, Xu et al., 2021). However, findings from related domains do not fully support this view. Research shows that employees who adapt self-presentation across situations are more liked and popular (Mehra et al., 2001; Oh & Kilduff, 2008), suggesting that revealing inner true self does not always build positive coworker relationships. We argue that directly applying findings from close relationships to coworker relationships overlooks the process of developing mutual understanding and familiarity, as close relationships already imply substantial familiarity (Taylor & Altman, 1987), whereas coworkers require time to build such understanding. Therefore, we introduced relationship duration as a key moderator to reveal this familiarity difference. Results indeed showed that when relationship duration was short, employee authenticity's effects were primarily negative—reducing trust, increasing suspicion, decreasing helping, and increasing exclusion. As relationship duration increased, positive effects emerged and became dominant: authenticity helped dispel suspicion, increase trust, reduce exclusion, and increase helping. This finding clarifies the boundary conditions for applying close-relationship logic to coworker relationships, reconciles inconsistent conclusions about authenticity's effects in workplace interactions, and illuminates the process through which employee authenticity operates in coworker relationships.

#### 4.2 Practical Implications

This study offers important practical implications for organizational management and employee interaction norms. Findings show that authenticity's impact

on coworker relationships shifts from negative to positive as relationship duration increases. In early-stage relationships, authenticity not only fails to bring coworkers closer but reduces trust, triggers suspicion, and leads to negative interactions, including decreased helping and increased exclusion. However, with rising employee mobility, employees increasingly work with unfamiliar coworkers (Lindholm, 2009) and tend to act according to their inner true selves (Chae et al., 2019). Our study finds that interacting authentically with unfamiliar coworkers may trigger suspicion and exclusion. Therefore, we recommend that employees follow the basic process of social penetration, gradually revealing their inner selves to build good coworker relationships. This is particularly important in relationship-building's initial stages. Additionally, our findings show that authenticity influences coworker relationships primarily by increasing or decreasing trust and suspicion. When relationship duration is short, lack of mutual understanding means authenticity may reduce trust and increase suspicion. As duration increases and mutual understanding deepens, authenticity helps dispel suspicion and build trust. The key to this mechanism is sufficient mutual understanding. Without it, trust is difficult to establish and suspicion more likely to arise (Marchand & Vonk, 2005). Thus, we recommend that organizations provide environments offering more opportunities for employee communication to facilitate mutual understanding.

#### 4.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations that future research could address. First, the effects of employee authenticity on coworker relationships occur through ongoing interaction. A longitudinal design would more accurately capture this process. Although we used relationship duration as a moderator, this approach cannot precisely reflect the dynamic process through which authenticity gradually affects the relationship as interactions increase. For example, continuously revealing inner true self may need to reach a certain threshold before producing positive effects. Future research could employ longitudinal designs with repeated measurements to more precisely analyze how authenticity's effects on coworker relationships evolve. Second, this study was conducted in a Chinese cultural context, which emphasizes social relationships (Gelfand et al., 2011). Samples from other cultural contexts may not yield identical effects. Future research could extend these findings across cultural contexts and examine authenticity's effects in different organizational types. Finally, this study integrated social penetration theory and attribution literature to propose suspicion and trust as mechanisms explaining authenticity's positive and negative effects. Other mechanisms may exist. For instance, authenticity implies that employees may not change their expressed viewpoints across social situations (Wood et al., 2008), which may lead coworkers to feel the employee shows little consideration for others' feelings or willingness to adapt. This persistence may manifest as less concern for others' face (Ting-Toomey, 2005), also causing coworkers to distance themselves.

#### 4.4 Future Research Directions

This study suggests several avenues for future research. First, while we treated authenticity as a trait and examined its effects on coworker relationships, some research conceptualizes authenticity as a state (e.g., Sheldon et al., 1997; Lenton et al., 2013). Future research could examine how coworker relationships affect employees' authenticity states during interactions, or use panel research designs to capture potential bidirectional effects between authenticity and coworker relationships. Second, because authenticity involves acting according to one's inner true self, its effects on coworker relationships likely depend on the nature of that true self. If the employee has high dark triad personality traits (Furnham et al., 2013), revealing their true self may negatively affect coworker relationships. Future research could explore this aspect further. Third, although our theoretical arguments and empirical support for relationship duration as a moderator are strong, it is possible that interaction patterns between employees and coworkers change during the course of working together. For example, relative status between two people may gradually shift, or 隔阂 may deepen. Future research could analyze this issue in greater depth.

The prevailing view holds that employee authenticity helps build trust, dispel coworker suspicion, and promote positive coworker relationships. However, this study finds that in early-stage relationships—for example, when coworkers have worked together for less than one year—authenticity may actually trigger suspicion, reduce trust, decrease interpersonal helping, and increase exclusion. Only as relationship duration increases do authenticity's positive effects emerge. After extended collaboration—for example, more than five years—authenticity helps build trust, dispel suspicion, increase helping, and reduce exclusion. In other words, sufficient time working together is required for authenticity's positive effects to become dominant.

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