



How Does Relative Leader-Member Exchange Influence Employee Proactive Behavior? The Roles of Pride, Shame, and Internal Attribution Tendency

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Abstract. The relative leader-member exchange (RLMX) relationship is a subjective perception of the relative status under the team background after comparing the individual leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship with others in the group. This study drew on attribution theory and affective events theory and investigated the influence mechanism of relative leader-member exchange (RLMX) on employee proactive behavior via employees' different emotions. Moreover, we examined the moderating effect of employees' internal attribution tendency. We collected data from 377 employees at 2 points in time to obtain the hierarchical regression results. The results concluded that individual RLMX positively related to employee proactive behavior, and both pride and shame mediated the positive relationship. Furthermore, it was found that RLMX had a stronger indirect effect on employee proactive behavior via pride when the internal attribution tendency was higher (vs. lower), while the relationship via shame was stronger when the internal attribution tendency was lower (vs. higher).

Keywords: relative leader-member exchange (RLMX) · proud · shame · internal attribution tendency · employee proactive behavior

1 Introduction

The 21st century is an era of the talent competition, thus, attracting and retaining talents is the key to staying competitive. Recently, the relative LMX (RLMX) has been proposed. Employees exist as a group in enterprises. Especially with the rise of internet enterprises, the management structure has gradually evolved from the traditional vertical type to a flat type. Teamwork has become a key factor in business development.

The RLMX relationship includes the concept of social comparison, whereby individuals will compare their perceptions of LMX with others in the group to obtain the relative relationship perception. In organizations, employees often pay attention to their working environment to help them judge their relative status [1] (Spence et al., 2011). The subjective RLMX of employees has a more significant impact than the individual LMX [2] (Lee et al., 2019).

Recent studies have proved that LMX can affect employee proactive behavior, but the mechanism of employees' subjective perception of RLMX on proactive behavior via emotion has not been clarified. We argue that each employee first evaluates his or her relative position in the working group and then experiences different work emotions. Both pride and shame can be aroused by status competition in the workplace [3] (Akutsu et al., 2022). When getting a better LMX, employees will have pride, and this kind of positive pride will promote employee proactive behavior. Nevertheless, when facing a negative evaluation from their leaders, employees can develop a sense of shame, which improves their motivation to restore their image [4] (Daniels et al., 2019). We introduce the emotional mechanism of shame, form two paths of pride and shame, and examine the mediating effect of pride and shame, which helps clarify the impact mechanism of RLMX on employee proactive behavior.

From the perspective of employee attribution, this study introduces the moderating role of internal attribution tendency, and explores how this tendency influences employees' cognitive and emotional attitudes and how RLMX differentiation affects work behavior through it. Previous attempts have seldom considered the effect of RLMX from the perspective of employee internal attribution. When the event is related to the internalized goal of the individual, one's judgment of the goal and different methods of attributing events will eventually lead to different emotions [5] (Tracy & Robins, 2004). To sum up, this study has three purposes as follows. First, we attempt to explore the effect of RLMX on employee proactive behavior. Second, to examine the mediating effect of pride and shame on the relationship between RLMX and employee proactive behavior. Third, to investigate the moderating effect of employees' internal attribution tendency in the relationship between RLMX and employees' emotions and behaviors.

2 Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

The RLMX refers to the employees' differentiated perception of the LMX quality at the individual level and the average LMX quality at the team level [6] (Hu & Liden, 2013). It reflects the relative actual position of employees in the team perceived by themselves at the individual level. Team members use conscious (controlled) and unconscious (automatic) processes to collect information about their colleagues [7] (Lord & Maher, 1991), thereby evaluating one's relative position in a certain attribute [8] (Wood, 1996). The effect of employees' subjective perception of RLMX is more significant than that of individual LMX [2] (Lee, 2019). Specifically, the higher the RLMX, the higher the employee considers his or her relative position in the team. As a result, the employee may consider it easier to get resources and psychological support from the leaders. The employee with lower RLMX deems that he or she is in a relatively lower position in the team and receives relatively less support.

This study extends this line of research on affective events theory by introducing pride and shame which are combined with the RLMX and proactive behavior. Individuals gain more pride through downward social comparison after completing the task [9] (Smith et al., 2006). However, few studies have introduced shame as a mediating variable. Based on the social threat defense model, a series of social threats experienced by individuals will challenge their belonging needs, and unmet needs of belonging will lead to individual

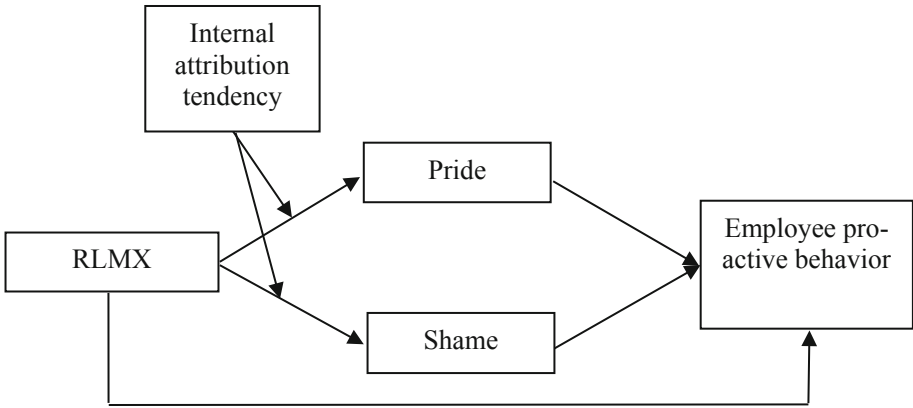


Fig. 1. The Hypothesized Model (From author)

shame [10] (Dewall et al., 2011). Studies have shown that shame has a positive side. When individuals feel ashamed, they will try to make up for self-cons and improve their integration into the team through proactive behaviors [11] (Hooge et al., 2010).

Based on attribution theory, we attempt to verify internal attribution tendency’s moderating effect on the relationship as well as the degree between RLMX and different emotions. When the event is related to the internalized goal of the individual, the individual’s judgment of the goal and the different attribution methods will eventually lead to different emotions in the individual [5] (Tracy & Robins, 2004). Thus, we argue that in the face of RLMX differentiation, employees’ internal attribution tendency affects their subsequent emotions and work behaviors (Fig. 1).

2.1 Relative Leadership-Member Exchange, Pride, Shame and Proactive Behavior

Employees’ RLMX may affect their work attitude and behavior in the working group [6, 12, 23, 28] (Henderson et al., 2008; Hu & Liden, 2009; Liden & Antonakis, 2009; Vidyarthi et al., 2010). Numerous studies have shown that employees are more engaged in their work when perceiving that they have a high RLMX in the team. The RLMX ranking of individuals has a significant influence both on their in-role and out-role performance as well as organizational citizenship behavior [12, 23] (Henderson et al., 2008; Vidyarthi et al., 2010).

Proactive behavior refers to a behavior that an individual has the foresight or initiative to create and control the current situation. Existing studies have proved that the LMX relationship positively drives employees’ proactive innovation behavior. Given that the subjective RLMX of employees has a more significant influence than the individual LMX [2] (Lee et al., 2019), we argue that the perception of the RLMX obtained by employees after comparing with others has a stronger positive effect on employee proactive behavior. Based on the foregoing arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: RLMX is positively related to employee proactive behavior.

Stimulating pride at the individual level requires two conditions: successful events experienced by the individual and the other is the sense of superiority obtained after comparing with others [13] (Lewis, 2000). In organizations, support and trust from leaders are seen as limited resources. Employees regard the support from their superiors as the affirmation of their work ability. RLMX contains the dimension of social comparison, in which employees have a subjective perception of their relative position in the team after comparing with others. Hence, in the case of higher RLMX, i.e., when an employee perceives more support from leaders than others, one may reinforce self-affirmation and is more likely to develop individual pride. Based on the above arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: RLMX is positively related to employee pride.

Pride can affect individuals' prosocial behavior and proactive behavior [14, 29] (Bagozzi et al., 2018; Krettenauer & Casey, 2015). When employees perceive a higher quality of LMX in the team, they will recognize this as a positive event and in turn generate positive emotion (i.e., real pride). Real proud individuals will increase self-affirmation and are willing to put in more effort and embark on more valuable work behaviors [15] (Williams & DeSteno, 2008). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Pride mediates the relationship between RLMX and employee proactive behavior.

Shame is an emotion of self-consciousness, which is triggered by self-reflection and self-evaluation [5] (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Employee competition for status in the workplace can lead to shame [3] (Akutsu et al., 2022). In the small scope of the team, the perception of RLMX, to a greater extent, is considered a positive or negative evaluation on themselves from their leaders [6] (Hu & Liden, 2013). Perceiving the lower RLMX means that the individual considers that the leader may not have a high affirmation of his or her work and conversely, may have a certain negative evaluation. However, shame arises when an individual fails to meet important criteria related to his or her identity [16] (Lewis, 1992). In the face of low RLMX, employees perceive it as a negative event, which will lead to negative self-reflection and self-criticism. Based on these arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: RLMX is negatively related to employee shame.

When individuals feel ashamed, they change their behavior through emotional perception in order to alleviate or avoid the pain caused by shame and achieve the internalized criteria and adapt to social life [17] (Muris & Meesters, 2014). Numerous scholars have proved that shame can motivate individuals to perceive the threat of social status, uphold individual and group values, promote interpersonal behavior, and stimulate prosocial and cooperative behavior [18,19,30.31] (Elison, 2005; Probyn, 2004; De Hooge, Breugelmans & Zeelenberg, 2008; Tangney et al., 1996). Employees who feel ashamed will respond to their unethical behaviors in the team in an attempt to protect their self-image [19, 20] (i.e., the way they consider others to treat them; Hooge et al., 2008; Bonner et al., 2017). When employees perceive the low RLMX, shame will arise. Therefore, to adapt to the situation and avoid negative evaluations from others, employees will take reasonable actions and choose to make compensatory behaviors, which can help them reduce negative emotions and prevent further harm. Based on the foregoing arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Shame mediates the relationship between RLMX and employee proactive behavior.

2.2 The Moderating Effect of Internal Attribution Tendency

Drawing upon attribution theory and affective events theory, we argue that the process of causal inferences leading to emotional response is more likely to be affected before emotion is stimulated. Facing various events in the workplace, employees have their emotions greatly influenced by their different attribution styles, which will in turn affect their subsequent attitudes and behaviors.

As suggested by the self-conscious emotions model based on the evaluation proposed by Tracy and Robins [5] (2004), emotions such as pride and shame are caused by cognitive evaluation of events. Specifically, on the one hand, individual pride will be enhanced when successful events are attributed to internal causes. On the other hand, negative emotions like shame will arise when failed events are attributed to internal causes.

In the workplace, RLMX can be regarded as the leader's evaluation of the employee's work ability and results [21] (Tremblay, 2021). When attributing successful events to personal internal reasons, individuals often feel a sense of positive emotion such as pride and self-confidence, which is conducive to gaining more confidence for the next success to some extent [5] (Tracy & Robins, 2007; Brown & Marshall, 2011). When being in a higher RLMX relationship, compared with the employee with low internal attribution tendency, an employee with high internal attribution tendency will affirm their own abilities and efforts, and then generate a positive feeling of real pride, which in turn can promote employee proactive behavior [15] (Williams & DeSteno, 2008). Thus, we propose the further hypotheses as follows:

Hypothesis 6: Internal attribution tendency positively moderates the relationship between RLMX and employee pride, such that this relationship is stronger when internal attribution tendency is higher (vs. lower).

Hypothesis 7: Internal attribution tendency positively moderates the indirect relationship between RLMX and employee proactive behavior through the mediation of pride.

Facing their low relative position in the team, employees with a higher internal attribution tendency will conduct self-reflection and self-criticism and attribute the causes of this negative event to themselves, which will enhance their perception of shame [22] (Scheff, 2003). When facing the situation of low RLMX, employees with a lower internal attribution tendency will not reflect and criticize themselves. Therefore, compared with those with high internal attribution tendencies, the shame of employees with low internal attribution tendencies can be alleviated to a certain extent. On the contrary, employees with a higher internal attribution tendency will focus on their own reasons for failure when facing the same situation and are more likely to feel ashamed. And then, to repair their self-image, they will try to make remedial behavior to assert their relative position in the organization [19, 20] (Hooge, 2008; Bonner, 2017). Based on these arguments, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 8: Internal attribution tendency positively moderates the relationship between RLMX and employee shame, such that this relationship is stronger when internal attribution tendency is higher (vs. lower).

Hypothesis 9: Internal attribution tendency positively moderates the indirect relationship between RLMX and employee proactive behavior through the mediation of shame.

3 Materials and Methods

3.1 Participants and Procedure

We adopted a multi-stage approach to collect data by questionnaire survey at 2 points in time from various industries, including manufacturing, Internet, and real estate in Hangzhou, Ningbo, and other regions in Zhejiang Province. In the first stage, the measurement variables in the questionnaire were RLMX and internal attribution tendency, while the variables included pride, shame, and employee proactive behavior in the second stage. After excluding incomplete or problematic questionnaires, our final sample consisted of 377 employees (a response rate of 90.6%). Spss24.0 was used for descriptive statistics to summarize and analyze the basic information of the subjects. In terms of demographics, a large percentage of employees (45.6%) were aged 18 to 25 years, and 44.3% were male. In terms of organizational tenure, 38.7% had more than 5 years. In terms of the property of the company, more subjects (38.5%) were in private companies. In terms of position level, most were ordinary employees (76.1%), 15.1% were junior managers.

3.2 Measures

The measurement of variables in this study refers to the methods commonly used by domestic and foreign scholars. Based on the background and purpose of our study, we selected relatively well-established scales repeatedly used in empirical research. Unless otherwise specified, all measures were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). RLMX. We adopted the measurement method of subjective relative leader-member exchange.

RLMX was measured with a six-item scale developed by Vidyarthi and Liden [23] (2010). An example item is “I have a better relationship with the leader than most of my colleagues in the department” ($\alpha = 0.936$).

Pride. This study focused on the true pride of employees, so we used the true pride scale developed by Tracy and Robins⁵ (2007). The scale contained 7 items, such as “I feel a sense of accomplishment”, and “I feel successful” ($\alpha = 0.935$).

Shame. Shame was measured with a seven-item shame scale developed by Watson [24] (1994). An example item is “I feel upset”, and another is “I am not kind to others” ($\alpha = 0.948$).

Employee proactive behavior. We used a nine-item scale developed by Griffin and Neal [25] (2007; $\alpha = 0.947$) to rate the level of employee proactive behavior, of which measurements were made at three levels: individual (e.g., “I take the initiative to complete

my job in a better way”, “I take the initiative to think about how to improve my job”), team and organization.

Internal attribution tendency. We adopted the achievement attribution part of the multidimensional-multiple-attribution causal scale to measure employee internal attribution tendency. Combined with the research background, the learning situation of the scale was modified to the work situation. Aimed at assessing the level of employee internal attribution tendency, we selected the scale of ability attribution and effort attribution, which included 12 items. An example item is “if I get low job performance, I usually think that I don’t work hard” ($\alpha = 0.941$).

4 Conclusions

4.1 Preliminary Analysis

We performed a multilevel confirmatory factor analysis on the key variables (i.e., RLMX, pride, shame, internal attribution tendency, and employee proactive behavior) to demonstrate discriminant validity of each variable. Results indicated that the hypothesized model of five factors fit the data well ($\chi^2/df = 1.724$, $df = 769$; $RMSEA = 0.044$; $NFI = 0.901$; $RFI = 0.894$; $IFI = 0.95$; $CFI = 0.956$). We also tested other alternative models, none of which fit significantly better than the hypothesized five-factor model. Our test showed that the five-factor model had the best good fit indices and good discriminant validity. All these results provided support for the discriminant validity of the constructs measured at the individual level.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, correlations and significance of the variables. The correlation between RLMX and employee proactive behavior was significant ($r = 0.484$, $p < 0.01$), pride ($r = 0.446$, $p < 0.01$), and shame ($r = 0.585$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, pride was positively correlated with employee proactive behavior ($r = 0.382$, $p < 0.01$), and shame was also positively correlated with employee proactive behavior ($r = 0.399$, $p < 0.01$). The results provided preliminary support for relevant hypotheses, which laid a good foundation for the hypotheses verification of subsequent regression analysis.

The regression analysis results are presented in Table 2. In support of Hypothesis 1 ($B = 0.496$, $p < 0.001$) and Hypothesis 2 ($B = 0.451$, $p < 0.001$). Whereas it is notable that RLMX was positively correlated to employee shame ($B = 0.549$, $p < 0.001$), which was contrary to Hypothesis 4. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

To examine parallel mediation effect, we used Process 3.3 macro to derive the 95% CI of the indirect effect. As shown in Table 3, the coefficients of the two indirect paths were significant (i.e., RLMX \rightarrow pride, $B = 0.4513$, $p < 0.001$; pride \rightarrow employee proactive behavior, $B = 0.2069$, $p < 0.001$; RLMX \rightarrow shame, $B = 0.5487$, $p < 0.001$; shame \rightarrow employee proactive behavior, $B = 0.2192$, $p < 0.001$). The bootstrap method with deviation correction was used to test the mediation effect, and the results are shown in Table 4. The indirect effect of RLMX on employee proactive behavior via pride

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables. (From author)

| Variable name | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|--------|-------|----------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----|
| 1. Gender (1 = male; 2 = female) | 1.557 | 0.497 | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Age | 29.329 | 7.197 | -0.149** | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Employee tenure | 6.557 | 6.942 | -0.141** | 0.981** | 1 | | | | | | | |
| 4. Property of the company ^a | 2.586 | 1.356 | -0.008 | -0.015 | -0.004 | 1 | | | | | | |
| 5. Position ^b | 1.355 | 0.723 | -0.116* | 0.657** | 0.665** | 0.015 | 1 | | | | | |
| 6. RLMX | 3.360 | 0.920 | 0.043 | 0.127* | 0.133** | -0.061 | 0.175** | 1 | | | | |
| 7. Internal attribution tendency | 3.017 | 0.765 | 0.084 | 0.079 | 0.098 | -0.041 | 0.045 | 0.127* | 1 | | | |
| 8. Pride | 3.076 | 0.957 | -0.083 | 0.229** | 0.219** | -0.063 | 0.156** | 0.446** | 0.149** | 1 | | |
| 9. Shame | 3.439 | 0.866 | 0.071 | 0.002 | 0.014 | -0.023 | 0.105* | 0.585** | 0.094 | 0.285** | 1 | |
| 10. Proactive behavior | 3.251 | 1.056 | -0.123* | 0.067 | 0.060 | -0.053 | 0.070 | 0.484** | 0.029 | 0.382** | 0.399** | 1 |

N = 377; RLMX = relative leader-member exchange; a 1 = state-owned enterprises, 2 = private companies, 3 = foreign-funded or joint ventures companies, 4 = government agencies and institutions, 5 = companies of other property; b 1 = ordinary employees, 2 = junior managers, 3 = intermediate managers, 4 = senior managers; *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05.

Table 2. Regression Analysis Results For Variables. (From author)

| Variables | Employee proactive behavior | Pride | Shame |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Control variables | | | |
| Gender | -0.147 | -0.150 | 0.063 |
| Age | 0.217 | 0.053 | -0.031 |
| Employee tenure | -0.219 | -0.028 | 0.018 |
| Property of the company | -0.021 | -0.022 | 0.005 |
| Position | -0.030 | -0.070 | 0.101 |
| Independent variables | | | |
| RLMX | 0.496*** | 0.451*** | 0.549*** |
| R ² | 0.259*** | 0.240*** | 0.354*** |
| F | 21.530*** | 87.905*** | 33.739*** |

Note: N = 377; *** p < .001.

Table 3. Parallel Mediation Effect Testing Results. (From author)

| Variables | Pride | | | Shame | | | Proactive behavior | | |
|-------------------------|------------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|------------|--------------------|--------|-----------|
| | B | SE | t | B | SE | t | B | SE | t |
| Intercept | 0.5787 | 0.7684 | 0.753 | 2.1535 | 0.6408 | 3.3607*** | 0.6173 | 0.823 | 0.7501 |
| Gender | -0.15 | 0.0885 | -1.6953 | 0.0629 | 0.0738 | 0.8522 | -0.2951 | 0.0938 | -3.1464 |
| Age | 0.0529 | 0.0316 | 1.6752 | -0.0315 | 0.0264 | -1.1938 | 0.0278 | 0.0335 | 0.8288 |
| Employee tenure | -0.0283 | 0.033 | -0.8575 | 0.0177 | 0.0275 | 0.6426 | -0.0314 | 0.0349 | -0.9008 |
| Property of the company | -0.0221 | 0.0321 | -0.6886 | 0.0053 | 0.0268 | 0.1993 | -0.0127 | 0.0339 | -0.3741 |
| Position | -0.0703 | 0.0811 | -0.8673 | 0.1008 | 0.0676 | 1.4918 | -0.0518 | 0.0859 | -0.6037 |
| RLMX | 0.4513 | 0.0481 | 9.3758*** | 0.5487 | 0.0401 | 13.6702*** | 0.3562 | 0.0662 | 5.3779*** |
| Pride | | | | | | | 0.2069 | 0.0549 | 3.7659*** |
| Shame | | | | | | | 0.2192 | 0.0659 | 3.3275*** |
| R ² | 0.4897 | | | 0.5947 | | | 0.5562 | | |
| F | 19.4559*** | | | 33.7392*** | | | 20.5994*** | | |

Note: N = 377; *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .0.

Table 4. Mediation Effects Testing Results. (From author)

| | Effect | BootSE | BootLLCI | BootULCI |
|-----------------------------------|--------|--------|----------|----------|
| Indirect effects | 0.2136 | 0.0441 | 0.1332 | 0.3075 |
| RLMX → pride → proactive behavior | 0.0934 | 0.0276 | 0.0434 | 0.1518 |
| RLMX → shame → proactive behavior | 0.1203 | 0.0382 | 0.0515 | 0.2021 |

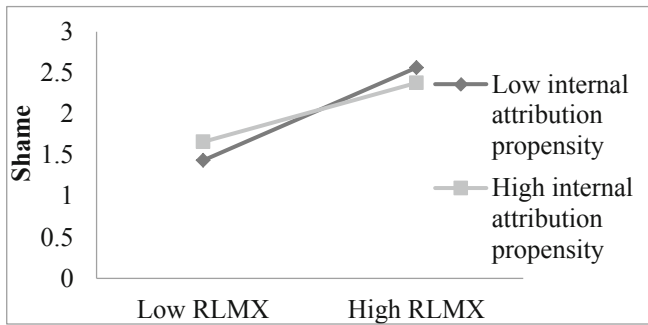
was 0.0934, with a 95% CI [0.0434, 0.1518]. The indirect effect of RLMX on employee proactive behavior via pride was 0.1203, with a 95% CI [0.0515, 0.2021]. Both pride and shame had significant mediating effects. In addition, the relationship between RLMX and employee proactive behavior was still significant after adding pride and shame, which meant that the parallel mediation effect was significant. Taken together, these findings supported Hypothesis 3. Since we predicted that there was a negative relationship between RLMX and shame in Hypothesis 4 and the data was not validated, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

We used SPSS 24.0 for hierarchical regression to examine the moderating effect of internal attribution tendency (Table 5). The interaction term between RLMX and internal attribution tendency was significantly related to pride (B = 0.211, p < 0.001), which indicated that internal attribution tendency had a moderating effect on the relationship between RLMX and pride. On the other hand, the results showed that there was a negatively moderating effect of internal attribution tendency on the relationship between RLMX and shame (B = - 0.145, p < 0.001). The interaction patterns are plotted in Fig. 2

Table 5. Moderating Effect of Internal Attribution Tendency. (From author)

| Variables | Pride | Shame |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Control variables | | |
| Gender | -0.083 | 0.054 |
| Age | 0.388 | -0.025 |
| Employee tenure | -0.243 | 0.015 |
| Property of the company | -0.024 | 0.004 |
| Position | -0.018 | 0.070 |
| Independent variables | | |
| RLMX | 0.402*** | 0.564*** |
| Internal attribution tendency | 0.099* | 0.020 |
| RLMX × Internal attribution tendency | 0.211*** | -0.145*** |
| R ² | 0.292*** | 0.386*** |
| F | 18.928*** | 28.940*** |

Note: N = 377; *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05.

**Fig. 2.** The Interaction Effect On Shame. (From author)

and Fig. 3. When internal attribution tendency was high (+1 SD), the positive relationship between RLMX and pride was stronger than when internal attribution tendency was low (-1 SD). Thus, Hypothesis 6 was supported while Hypothesis 8 was not.

Based on the process of indirect effect testing [26] (Preacher, Rucker & Hayes, 2007), to test the moderated mediation hypotheses (i.e., Hypothesis 7 and Hypothesis 9), we estimated the indirect relationship between RLMX and employee proactive behavior via pride and shame respectively at higher and lower levels of internal attribution tendency (Table 6). The results showed that when internal attribution tendency was high (+1 SD), the indirect effect of RLMX on employee proactive behavior via pride was positive and stronger (indirect effect = 0.128, 95% CI = [0.060, 0.201]) than when internal attribution tendency was low (-1 SD, indirect effect = 0.045, 95% CI = [0.007, 0.099]). Therefore, Hypothesis 7 was supported.

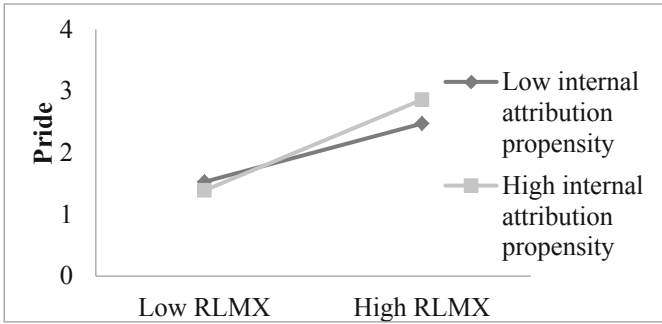


Fig. 3. The Interaction Effect On Shame. (From author)

Table 6. Conditional Indirect Effect Analysis of Internal Attribution Tendency. (From author)

| | Internal attribution tendency | Indirect effect | LLCI | ULCI |
|-------|-------------------------------|-----------------|-------|-------|
| Pride | M – SD | 0.045* | 0.007 | 0.099 |
| | M | 0.086* | 0.040 | 0.142 |
| | M + SD | 0.128* | 0.060 | 0.201 |
| Shame | M – SD | 0.158* | 0.067 | 0.257 |
| | M | 0.124* | 0.052 | 0.204 |
| | M + SD | 0.089* | 0.035 | 0.160 |

Note: N = 377; *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05.

In terms of shame, when internal attribution tendency was low (–1 SD), the indirect effect of RLMX on employee proactive behavior via shame was significant and stronger (indirect effect = 0.158, 95% CI = [0.067, 0.257]) than when internal attribution tendency was high (+1 SD, indirect effect = 0.089, 95% CI = [0.035, 0.160]). Nevertheless, given that internal attribution tendency had a negatively moderating effect on the relationship between RLMX and shame, both Hypothesis 8 and 9 were not supported.

5 Discussion

This study reveals that RLMX is positively related to employees’ pride and shame, and in turn affects employees’ proactive behavior through these two emotions. Given that RLMX is the subjective feeling of employees after comparison, its effect on emotions is stronger. We empirically found that RLMX was positively related to shame. That is, when employees have higher RLMX, they will have more negative shame. The data obtained in this study were inconsistent with our hypothesis. Reviewing the relevant researches, we get the possible explanations as follows.

Excessive positive status self-awareness damages the acceptance of individuals among the group [27] (Anderson et al., 2006). In the workplace, the interaction and practices between leaders and employees may inadvertently lead to the shame of employees.

Shame activates a motive to repair the self-threat caused by this negative emotion, which triggers prosocial constructive behavior at work [4] (Daniels et al., 2019). Therefore, when employees perceive a high level of RLMX, not only can they feel pride, but they can also feel shame. From the perspective of moral compensation, aimed at reducing moral pressure, individuals are likely to adopt proactive behavior to alleviate the negative impact of shame.

In addition, based on attribution theory, we investigated the moderating effect of internal attribution tendency. This study empirically proves that when employees recognize their abilities and efforts, the support obtained from leaders can stimulate employee pride and promote proactive behavior. The more employees attribute deviant behavior to the deficient self, the stronger their sense of shame is [4] (Daniels et al., 2019). Thus, when employees consider their abilities and efforts relatively lacking, they have a sense of contradiction between their real self and their moral self when perceiving favor from leaders, which leads to their shame. As a result, from the perspective of moral compensation, aimed at reducing the negative experience caused by shame, employees increase proactive behavior at work to repay the high expectations given by the leaders.

5.1 Practical Implications

We highlight that employees' internal attribution tendency has a strong influence on work by clarifying its moderating effect of it. Correct self-awareness can avoid negative emotions. Therefore, employees should timely and appropriately communicate with leaders in the work and get feedback from leaders, colleagues and other aspects, which can help them accurately understand the current work situation, increase the affirmation of their own ability, reflect on themselves, correct deficiencies, stimulate work enthusiasm and internal potential, and ultimately achieve self-worth.

On the other hand, for companies, managers are supposed to focus on employees' psychological characteristics, conduct psychological evaluations, clarify their psychological traits, create a harmonious team atmosphere, and keep them from mutual suspicion and comparison.

Finally, this study confirms that the shame employees feel in the workplace has a certain effect on promoting their subsequent proactive behavior. Managers can effectively stimulate employees' enthusiasm by virtue of the positive effect of shame. However, managers should not neglect the psychological safety of employees and need to make employees fully aware of the support from their organization and leaders.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several potential limitations that warrant consideration. First, measurement methods are deficient. All variables were measured by self-report scales at 2 points in time. Thus, the subjects were likely to be affected by social desirability. We recommend that future studies try the objective synthesis method and compare the two results.

Second, the lack of diversity in the sample is another limitation of this study. Employees of different ages varying from different properties of companies may lead to different emotional perceptions. Thus, we suggest that future studies should not only expand the

sample size and age range, but also introduce other variables to improve the scientificity and universality of the study.

Third, this study used the method of retrospective questionnaire to measure employees' pride and shame. Whereas it is notable that emotion is instantaneous, there's a certain lack of rigor in measuring it by the questionnaire. We call on future studies to design some situational experiments or neuroscience methods, which may make the study more scientific and rigorous.

Finally, this study does not go far enough in exploring the influence of emotion on employee work behavior. We only focus on the positive effects of pride and shame on employee work behavior but not the negative effects. And we suggest future studies investigate the influence of arrogant pride. Scholars have found that shame has a double-edged sword effect. We only examine the positive effects of shame but not its negative effects.

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