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A Review of Employees' Social Courage Behavior from a Paradox Perspective: Conceptual Evolution, Theoretical Integration, and Mechanism of Action

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Abstract

In organizational settings, social courage behavior refers to employees' willingness to voice concerns or correct errors for collective goals or organizational integrity while consciously taking on reputational, status, and relational risks. This paper systematically reviews existing research and distinguishes social courage from related constructs such as moral courage and voice behavior. Drawing on social risk theory, positive organizational behavior, moral cognition and motivation theory, and social exchange theory, it integrates the generation logic of four dimensions-risk, resources, values, and relationships-and conceptualizes social courage as a state-like behavior that can be situationally activated and managed. Furthermore, the paper proposes a theoretical model in which paradoxical leadership functions as the antecedent, leader–member exchange (LMX) quality serves as the mediating mechanism, social courage behavior is the outcome, and organizational support climate acts as the moderating variable. The model reveals the interactive effects of leadership, relationship quality, and organizational climate, enriching theoretical understanding and offering practical insights for fostering employees' willingness to "speak up" and "act courageously" within organizations.

Keywords

Social Courage Behavior; Paradoxical Leadership; LMX.

1. Introduction

Courage has long been regarded as one of the most fundamental human virtues, and its essence and significance have been extensively and continuously discussed across history (Detert & Bruno, 2017)[1]. Research has revealed that in the vast majority of cultures, courage appears as one of the most frequently referenced keywords in myths, literature, and cultural studies (Worline, 2004) [2]. Furthermore, scholars have argued that courage is often considered the most essential and foundational virtue within human society, as other virtues may not be fully manifested in the absence of courage (Scarre, 2010; Fowers et al., 2021) [3]. For instance, an individual who aspires to be "just and impartial" must often act courageously when confronting injustice.Generally, courage is perceived to exert positive influences across a wide range of situations—it enhances individuals' capacity for action, facilitates adaptability to change, fosters the ability to love, and stimulates creativity, among other benefits (Worline, 2004; Detert & Bruno, 2017) [4]. Within organizational contexts, scholars have proposed that courage can positively affect decision-making processes, strengthen workplace safety, and enhance organizational competitiveness (Harris, 1999; Geller, 2009; Vuori & Huy, 2016) [5-8]. A larger body of research emphasizes the individual-level outcomes of courage, indicating that it contributes to greater managerial competence, improved performance, heightened self-confidence, higher self-esteem, and greater well-being (Finkelstein, Hambrick, & Cannella, 2009;

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Lester et al., 2010) [9].In light of the increasing turbulence, volatility, and complexity of the global environment, nations, governments, individuals, and organizational entities-including employees-are all facing unprecedented challenges. Consequently, courage has emerged as a frontier topic and a growing focal point in contemporary research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Evolution and Multidimensional Structure of Courage Research

Courage has long been regarded as a central topic in human society. In traditional Chinese culture, courage is considered one of the "Three Cardinal Virtues of a Gentleman"-benevolence, wisdom, and courage. In Western philosophical traditions, courage is similarly recognized as one of the four cardinal virtues, alongside justice, temperance, and wisdom. The study of courage in psychology and sociology originated from the philosophical reflections of Plato and Aristotle, where courage was conceptualized as a fundamental dimension of virtue. With the development of modern psychology and organizational behavior, scholarly inquiry into courage has evolved from a trait-oriented perspective to a behavioral and process-oriented perspective. The early "honor-based view" understood courage as a socially rewarded virtue, primarily focused on distinguishing bravery from cowardice as a personality trait. However, such definitions were often tightly bound to prevailing social values, leading to moral relativism in the evaluation of courageousness based on behavioral outcomes.In contrast, the process-based perspective conceptualizes courage as a voluntary action undertaken by individuals in the presence of perceived risk in order to achieve a valued goal. This view highlights the goal-directed and risk-assessing nature of courageous behavior. Within the organizational context, courage is typically defined as "a deliberate and prosocially intended behavior involving the conscious acceptance of significant personal risk." Empirical research increasingly suggests that courage is a multidimensional construct, manifested in distinct forms depending on contextual demands. In organizational behavior research, three major types of courage have gained the most theoretical recognition: physical courage, moral courage, and social courage. Physical courage involves confronting threats to one's physical safety-such as in firefighting or military operations-and has thus been primarily explored in high-risk occupational settings. Moral courage refers to principled action in the face of ethical conflict, yet its conceptualization often remains constrained by normative and culturally contingent value systems. Social courage, by contrast, emphasizes behaviors that entail interpersonal risk in social interactions-such as voicing dissenting opinions, confronting authority, or addressing workplace injustice-and is considered the form of courage most relevant to contemporary organizational environments.

2.2. Conceptualization and Characteristics of Social Courage Behavior

Social courage refers to individuals' voluntary engagement in socially risky behaviors within interpersonal or organizational contexts, undertaken to achieve positive goals or to uphold relational integrity. Such behaviors may potentially harm the actor's social image, status, or relationships, yet simultaneously serve to enhance organizational communication, trust, and innovation. Social courage is conceptually distinct from moral courage. Whereas moral courage emphasizes adherence to ethical or value-based principles when facing moral conflict, social courage focuses on risk-taking within social relationships, the willingness to act authentically even when such actions may threaten one's standing or acceptance within a group. In organizational settings, examples of social courage include pointing out supervisory errors, questioning unreasonable decisions, and openly admitting personal mistakes.

Howard et al. (2017) [10] proposed that social courage within organizational settings encompasses two complementary yet distinct dimensions: relational courage and impression

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courage. Relational courage involves taking actions that may endanger interpersonal relationships-such as confronting colleagues or offering constructive criticism to superiors-whereas impression courage entails accepting the potential loss of social standing or reputation by expressing dissenting or unconventional views. Together, these two dimensions capture the relational and reputational risks inherent in socially courageous behavior. Empirical studies have demonstrated that social courage is significantly associated with positive organizational outcomes, including increased employee voice, organizational citizenship behavior, and reduction in counterproductive work behaviors. These findings suggest that social courage plays a crucial role in sustaining open communication, ethical expression, and constructive dissent in contemporary organizations.

2.3. Theoretical Foundations of Social Courage Behavior

Existing theoretical foundations of social courage behavior derive primarily from four complementary perspectives: the social risk perspective, the positive organizational behavior perspective, the moral cognition and motivation perspective, and the social exchange perspective.

Social Risk Perspective. In interpersonal interactions, individuals continuously assess potential social risks such as reputational damage, relational distancing, and status loss. Within this context, social courage refers to the willingness to voice authentic opinions or take just actions despite possible negative social consequences. Its essence lies in risk-taking under perceived social evaluation threat. Unlike physical or moral courage, social courage centers on relational risks and thereby reflects employees' psychological states within hierarchies, power structures, and networks of trust. In organizational settings, speaking up, challenging decisions, exposing problems, or upholding fairness often involve short-term interpersonal costs but yield long-term benefits for learning and innovation. This perspective highlights the tension between safety and authenticity, suggesting that courage arises from self-regulation between value orientation and risk perception (e.g., Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Rate et al., 2007) [11-12].

Positive Organizational Behavior Perspective. From the lens of positive organizational scholarship, employees mobilize psychological resources when facing challenging situations. Courage interacts synergistically with constructs such as hope, self-efficacy, and optimism to enhance proactive behavior and resilience. Social courage is thus viewed as a state-like phenomenon shaped by contextual cues and available psychological resources. Inclusive or supportive leadership and a psychologically safe climate can strengthen individuals' perceived safety, mitigate threat sensitivity, and facilitate the emergence of courageous actions-thereby offering practical pathways for organizational intervention and development (Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Carmeli et al., 2010)[13-14].

Moral Cognition and Motivation Perspective. Courage often emerges in the presence of value conflict and moral tension. Although social courage does not always entail explicit moral judgment, behaviors such as exposing errors, addressing misconduct, or confronting injustice inherently reflect the pursuit of fairness, responsibility, and integrity. When individuals' moral or personal values are challenged, their motivation to act courageously intensifies. Hence, social courage represents not only a process of risk assessment but also a value-driven decision aimed at achieving higher-order moral or prosocial goals. This links social courage closely to research on ethical behavior and employee voice (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007; Fowers et al., 2021) [15].

Social Exchange Perspective. From the perspective of social exchange theory, individuals' willingness to engage in socially risky actions depends on the perceived quality of their exchange relationships. High-quality leader–member exchange (LMX) relationships foster psychological safety and status stability, reducing perceived social risks and promoting behaviors such as voice, proactivity, and organizational citizenship-thus providing a relational foundation for social courage. In contrast, low-quality or ambivalent LMX relationships

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increase sensitivity to social risk and inhibit courageous expression (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Lee et al., 2019) [16-17].

In summary, social courage behavior is shaped through the dynamic interplay of risk appraisal, psychological resources, value motivation, and relational context. It is a context-dependent yet developable organizational behavior, playing a vital role in enhancing organizational learning, transparency, and innovation.

3. Propositions and Hypotheses

3.1. Propositions

Social courage emphasizes individuals' willingness to engage in constructive behaviors such as voicing dissent, disclosing problems, or correcting errors, even when such actions may jeopardize their reputation, social status, or interpersonal relationships. Although these behaviors may trigger short-term interpersonal tension or negative evaluations, in the long run they contribute to organizational learning, process optimization, and ethical compliance. Whether employees demonstrate social courage under conditions of potential social risk largely depends on the structure of their relational networks and their subjective perceptions of the organizational climate. Therefore, identifying the conditions under which employees are willing to "speak truth to power" despite interpersonal risks is essential for achieving high-quality governance and sustainable organizational competitiveness.

Paradox theory provides a critical framework for understanding the emergence of social courage in organizations. Contemporary organizational environments are inherently characterized by interdependent yet conflicting tensions, such as control versus empowerment, stability versus change, and cooperation versus competition. These tensions can elicit defensive silence and risk avoidance, but they may also stimulate creativity, dialogue, and growth. The key lies in how individuals and organizations integrate these opposing demands—maintaining order and goal alignment while encouraging differentiated perspectives and problem disclosure.In this sense, social courage can be conceptualized as an active individual response to organizational paradoxes. It entails accurately recognizing the reputational and relational risks embedded in such tensions yet viewing these tensions as opportunities for improvement rather than threats to stability. Guided by internalized values and prosocial motives, employees engage in authentic expression and corrective action to restore balance and foster organizational adaptation (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Zhang et al., 2015) [18-19].

Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory provides a relational framework for explaining how organizational tensions are transformed into constructive behavioral outcomes. High-quality LMX relationships, which are built upon mutual trust, respect, reciprocity, and open communication, enhance employees' psychological safety, role clarity, and predictability of interaction. Conversely, low-quality exchanges, characterized by resource asymmetry and communication barriers, often elicit self-protective behavior and employee silence. Importantly, LMX is not a static dichotomy but often exhibits ambivalence, where trust and doubt coexist. When the quality of the relationship reaches a threshold sufficient to create a sense of security and predictability, employees are more inclined to reinterpret organizational tensions as constructive challenges rather than threats. Under such relational conditions, the perception of risk can be transformed into motivational energy for authentic expression and proactive corrective action, leading to the behavioral manifestation of social courage within the workplace.

Paradoxical leadership serves as the behavioral embodiment of paradox theory and functions as an upstream catalyst that activates the aforementioned relational mechanism. This leadership style integrates competing managerial demands: it maintains authority and performance standards while simultaneously accommodating divergent voices and flexible

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practices; it exercises control over vital processes yet allows autonomy and tolerance for mistakes; and it upholds common goals while recognizing diversity in perspectives and approaches. Paradoxical leadership facilitates the emergence of social courage through several interrelated mechanisms. First, by clarifying the scope of acceptable topics and ensuring procedural legitimacy, it provides normative justification for employees to engage in candid discussions and constructive dissent. Second, by granting access to resources, information, time, and top-management endorsement, it reduces the perceived costs and potential sanctions associated with speaking up. Third, by incorporating feedback and corrective voice into performance assessment and learning cycles, it reframes direct communication as a developmental rather than face-threatening behavior. Collectively, these processes enhance relationship quality and psychological safety, thereby indirectly promoting socially courageous behaviors among employees.

However, the extent to which these mechanisms take effect depends critically on contextual boundary conditions, particularly the organizational support climate. Organizational support climate refers to employees' collective perception of whether their organization values their contributions, cares about their well-being, and provides needed support. A supportive climate creates an institutional safeguard for employees who "speak truth to power" by encouraging constructive dissent, recognizing good-faith error correction, and ensuring consistency and fairness in conflict management. It strengthens the transformation of LMX relationships into courage-driven actions through three reinforcing pathways. First, by buffering perceived risks, a supportive climate decreases employees' expectations of reputational or relational cost, allowing trust and support to be interpreted as enduring commitments. Second, by embedding social courage into the organization's value system, it imbues such behavior with moral and professional meaning, making the act of voicing congruent with normative expectations. Third, by enriching employees' material and emotional resources-such as time availability, information access, collaborative networks, and psychological resilience-the organization enhances their capacity to act under risky social conditions. In contrast, when the organizational support climate is low, even in the presence of paradoxical leadership and moderately positive LMX, employees tend to adopt cautious communication strategies, thereby diminishing the likelihood of openly exhibiting social courage.

3.2. Hypotheses

Building upon the above theoretical integration, this study proposes a set of conceptual propositions and empirically testable hypotheses.

Proposition 1: Organizational paradoxical tensions provide the fertile ground for the emergence of social courage behavior.

Employees who possess stronger abilities to identify, reframe, and integrate paradoxical tensions are more likely to engage in constructive expression and action under socially risky conditions, thereby transforming organizational tension into opportunities for learning and improvement.

Hypothesis 1: Paradoxical leadership is positively related to employees' social courage behavior. Leaders who can dynamically balance authority and inclusiveness, as well as control and autonomy, are more likely to encourage employees to express authentic opinions and reveal problems despite potential reputational or relational risks.

Proposition 2: High-quality leader–member exchange (LMX) serves as the key relational pathway through which paradoxical tensions are transformed into social courage. Through increasing psychological safety, interactional predictability, and role clarity, high-quality LMX relationships enable employees to interpret organizational tensions as constructive challenges rather than interpersonal threats.

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Hypothesis 2: LMX quality mediates the relationship between paradoxical leadership and employees' social courage behavior.

Paradoxical leadership promotes social courage indirectly by enhancing the quality of LMX relationships, which in turn fosters trust and safety that support courageous expression.

Proposition 3: A supportive organizational climate provides the normative legitimacy and safety boundary for the enactment of social courage, thereby strengthening the relational mechanisms through which leadership exerts its influence.

A supportive climate affects employees' subjective assessment of social risk and benefit, shaping their willingness to "speak up at a cost."

Hypothesis 3: Organizational support climate positively moderates the effect of LMX on social courage behavior.

Under a high-support climate, the positive influence of high-quality LMX on social courage is stronger, whereas under a low-support climate, this facilitative effect is weakened.

Proposition 4: Leadership behavior influences social courage through relational mechanisms, and this chain effect is contingent upon the level of organizational support.

Hypothesis 4: Organizational support climate strengthens the indirect effect of paradoxical leadership on social courage behavior through LMX.

Compared with a low-support climate, a high-support climate amplifies the indirect pathway by which paradoxical leadership enhances social courage via improved LMX quality.

Together, these propositions and hypotheses form a mediated model of paradoxical leadership, LMX, and social courage behavior, with organizational support climate serving as a boundary condition. The theoretical contribution of this model lies in positioning social courage as a state-like behavioral tendency shaped jointly by leadership and relational mechanisms under paradoxical tension. By introducing LMX as the mediating link, the model explicates how paradoxical leadership is internalized at the micro-interaction level into psychological safety and trust, which subsequently manifest as authentic voice and corrective behavior. Moreover, by identifying organizational support climate as an amplifying factor, this framework highlights how institutional and cultural contexts facilitate the effective transformation of leadership and relational resources into employees' social courage.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

4.1. Conclusion

This study reviewed the concept, theoretical foundations, and mechanism of employees' social courage behavior, highlighting its essence as a conscious willingness to assume social risks such as reputation, status, and relational loss. Social courage is defined as a state-like and context-dependent behavior that can be shaped through organizational leadership and climate interventions. Integrating perspectives from social risk theory, positive organizational behavior, moral cognition and motivation, and social exchange and LMX theory, the study proposed an integrative logic of risk, resources, values, and relationships, suggesting that ongoing organizational tensions provide the key soil for the emergence of social courage. Based on this, a mediated model of paradoxical leadership–LMX–social courage was developed, with organizational support climate as the boundary condition. The model explains why, under similar risk contexts, some employees dare to voice and act constructively while others remain silent, offering both theoretical insight and managerial guidance for fostering social courage in organizations.

4.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions.

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First, it reconceptualizes social courage as state-like, situationally activated behavior that involves conscious social risk-taking, expanding research beyond trait or moral virtue perspectives. Second, by integrating paradox theory and leader–member exchange (LMX) theory, it identifies LMX as the key relational mechanism through which paradoxical leadership transforms organizational tension into constructive expression and action. Third, the study introduces organizational support climate as a boundary condition that strengthens this mechanism, highlighting how institutional and cultural contexts shape the translation of leadership and relational resources into social courage. Finally, the proposed mediated and moderated model offers a structural explanation for why employees respond differently-some speak up courageously while others remain silent-under similar social risk conditions.

4.3. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its theoretical contributions, this study has several limitations that offer opportunities for future research.

First, the proposed model is conceptual in nature; empirical validation through longitudinal or multilevel studies is needed to capture the dynamic processes linking paradoxical leadership, LMX, and social courage. Second, as leadership perception and courage expression are culturally embedded, cross-cultural comparative research could deepen understanding of how cultural values (e.g., power distance or collectivism) shape these relationships. Third, future studies may explore the potential downsides of social courage, such as social backlash or leader defensiveness, to present a more balanced view of its outcomes. Finally, researchers could examine interaction effects among multiple contextual factors—for example, psychological safety, trust climate, or ethical culture, to further explain how organizations nurture or constrain socially courageous behavior.

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