Vulnerability in the lead? – A qualitative study researching leader vulnerability, trust, and employee motivation

Researcher: Arrewin Wisselink

Supervisor: Ester van Laar

Second supervisor: Suzanne Janssen

Program: Communication Science (master)

Faculty: Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences

Institution: University of Twente (Enschede, the Netherlands)

Date of thesis defence: July 12th, 2024

Abstract

The concept of leader vulnerability has so far received little attention in leadership literature. Nevertheless, it has the potential to contribute to a safe working culture, high quality leader-employee relationships, and positive work experiences of employees. This potential is particularly relevant for male-dominated work environments, as vulnerability is typically relatively less prominent here. However, what leader vulnerability entails and its connection with relational and employee outcomes have not become sufficiently clear from the literature. Hence, in the current study it was researched what leader vulnerability means to employees, its connection to employees' trust towards the leader and employee motivation. During semi-structured interviews with male employees (N = 21) working in male-dominated work environments, participants were prompted to reflect on their leader's vulnerability, their relationship with, and their feelings towards the leader. Results show that leader vulnerability is mostly associated with sharing difficult matters, i.e. active vulnerability, but encompasses giving freedom to employees, i.e. passive vulnerability, too. Moreover, leader vulnerability generally contributes to a high quality and trusting relationship with the employee. This depends on leader emotion management and employees' personal characteristics. Further, a positive connection between leader vulnerability and employee motivation was found, due to the enhanced relationality and autonomy that come with leader vulnerability. All in all, these findings provide an in-depth conceptualization of leader vulnerability in relation to trust and motivation. This novel theoretical foundation includes employees' interpretations of leader vulnerability and therefore helps academics understand the concept more thoroughly. Lastly, this research explains how vulnerability can be a tool for leaders to establish and maintain strong relationships with employees.

Keywords: Leader vulnerability, trust, motivation, interview study, male-dominated workplace

Table of contents

1. Introduction

Being human means having vulnerabilities. However, in the current world where social media, competition and reputation dominate, there often seems little space to truly be vulnerable. Consequently, a lack of vulnerability in society may well hinder building high quality relationships and damage individual's self-concepts (Flett et al., 2022), which complicates both personal and organizational functioning. Nevertheless, looking at vulnerability in the professional context, Orgad (2024) argues that for example displaying vulnerability is starting to increase on LinkedIn, thereby countering the expectations of perfections and made-up realities. It can be said that the start of this trend on LinkedIn points to the societal need for vulnerability in the professional domain.

Although vulnerability may be relatively invisible in the workplace, feeling vulnerable is a common phenomenon. For example, the impostor phenomenon (IP) – experiencing a strong sense of inadequacy that does not reflect an individual's actual capabilities is experienced by many (Bravata et al., 2019). This can be associated with anxiety and depression (Bravata et al., 2019), and can prevent individuals from looking for new challenges (Hudson & González-Gómez, 2021), complicate decision-making and dealing with change (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2017) in the workplace. This seems to be particularly problematic for working men. To illustrate, although males have insecurities too, they are generally less likely to disclose negative information (Carbone et al., 2024), despite the positive connection between "general distress sharing" and well-being (Kim & Yoon, 2024). Therefore, tackling impostor-like experiences of male employees at work should be on the agenda of both leaders and communication scholars.

Specifically, leaders in male-dominated work environments need to know how to create a culture that acknowledges the IP and improves possible negative work experiences of male workers. Although many IP studies focused on the individual, scholars now increasingly point to the relevance of the role of the context on impostor experiences (Sears et al., 2021; Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019; Gullifor et al., 2024; Feenstra et al., 2020), thereby emphasizing the role the workplace can play. To illustrate, Bravata et al. (2019) argue that "employers can target impostor syndrome by creating healthier expectations and a culture where mistakes are not interpreted as failures" (p. 1272). Thus, how employees make sense of leaders' efforts in creating a healthy culture at work is vital for the way employees experience their job.

An important part of this culture-building is the type of relationship the leader has with the employees. Firstly, Gregory (2024) explains that a high quality relationship between leader and employee helps employees to make sense of the organization's culture. Secondly, in literature it is generally understood that more emotionally intimate relationships between leader and employee are connected to both positive relational and employee outcomes (for a meta-analytic review, see for example Martin et al., 2016). However, with the growing attention to the IP in the workplace, it is striking to see that the concept of leader vulnerability has barely been considered in studying the connection between leader and employee.

Until now, a small number of academics have initiated a conceptualization of leader vulnerability, taking different perspectives. In the professional context, Nienaber et al. (2015) reviewed studies that mention vulnerability when researching relational trust, whereas Ito and Bligh (2017) have looked at leader vulnerability through the lens of charismatic leadership. Further, Agnihotri et al. (2024) investigated power dynamics related to leader vulnerability more generally. Though, research addressing the employee perspective on leader vulnerability is lacking. This has been a missed opportunity for scholars, as this knowledge could help understand emotional intimacy in workplace relationships and interpersonal trust better. Moreover, leader vulnerability could buffer the negative consequences of employee IP and so contribute to employee motivation. In sum, leader vulnerability is potentially beneficial for the leader-employee relationship, trust towards the leader and employee motivation.

Hence, to understand the work dynamics with which leader vulnerability interplays, researching employee interpretations of leader vulnerability is essential. Firstly, due to the lack of academic attention for leader vulnerability, a more in-depth conceptualization is needed. Consequently, the relationship between leader vulnerability, trust and employee motivation needs to be investigated to improve leadership effectiveness in practice. The case of male employees in male-dominated work environments is the starting point of the current study about interpretations of leader vulnerability, since these workplaces do not seem to naturally welcome vulnerability. Concretely, this study addresses the next research questions:

1. What does leader vulnerability mean for male employees in male-dominated work environments?
2. How does leader vulnerability relate to trust towards the leader for male employees in male-dominated work environments?
3. How does leader vulnerability relate to work motivation of male employees in male-dominated work environments?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Leader vulnerability

Currently, the conceptualization of leader vulnerability has received some attention in literature. The few academics that considered leader vulnerability provide distinct understandings of what the concept entails, for example highlighting leaders communicating their pains (Ito & Bligh, 2017) or the leader's ability to protect oneself (Agnihotri et al., 2024). However, employee interpretations of leader vulnerability have not yet been incorporated in the conceptualization of the construct. Nonetheless, in essence it can be said that "making oneself vulnerable is taking risk" (p. 712 in Mayer et al., 1995). To gain a more in-depth conceptualization, Nienaber et al. (2015) conducted a systematic review to investigate the nature of trust and vulnerability between leaders and followers in the workplace. Concretely, the current study adopts the distinction they make between leaders displaying passive and active vulnerability. As Nienaber et al. (2015) point out, the former has received most academic attention and is related to leaders "reducing control mechanisms or monitoring systems" (p. 577). This includes giving employees the opportunity to have a say in how they do their work. In contrast, active vulnerability entails leaders sharing specific sensitive information that may harm the individual that shares (Mayer & Gavin, 2005). Thus, leader vulnerability implies letting go of control, in both behaviour and communication.

Firstly, *passive vulnerability* is perceived as a behavioural act that includes giving employees autonomy through practices like involvement and delegation. Generally, leaders engaging in task delegation are viewed positively by employees in terms of their ability and likeability (Drescher, 2017). However, Farr-Wharton et al. (2011) concluded that an employee's stance towards autonomy depends on the leader-employee relationship. Put differently, giving workers autonomy through passive vulnerability can be beneficial for the leader's reputation, provided that the leader has a high quality connection with the worker. It is therefore interesting to investigate whether passive leader vulnerability can also function as a way to create and maintain a strong relationship with the employee in the first place.

Secondly, *active vulnerability* relates to the communicative side of leader vulnerability. Concretely, it includes leaders sharing intimate information about themselves and expressing emotions. The nature of this information can be both positive and negative, as for example sharing sadness on the one hand, and pride on the other, can be experienced as equally intimate. In the literature, particularly emotion management and expression are said to

be influential for the nature of the leader-employee relationship. For instance, it can be questioned to what extent leaders experiencing negative emotions are able to constructively express their vulnerability and thus work on connections with subordinates in an effective way. To illustrate, Byrne et al. (2014) note that when leaders' well-being is low, they have a lack of resources (i.e. "depletion") and are, consequently, less likely to carry out transformational leadership. Hence, proper emotion management is key for effective leadership.

Looking at the mere sharing of emotions by the leader, it becomes clear that it can have benefits for the workplace, depending on the leader's communication style. As Kaplan et al. (2014) note, an integral part of successful leadership emotion management is showing emotions to employees to alter employee attitudes strategically. Thus, the vulnerable sharing of emotions can be a persuasive tool for leaders. However, leaders need to be cautious, as employees generally have more trust in their leader when they perceive the emotions displayed to be real (Caza et al., 2015). Therefore, when vulnerable leader emotion management transforms into manipulative practices, the communication is likely to backfire.

Next to emotional sincerity, the nature of the already existing leader-employee relationship can also be a determining factor in how employees interpret leader vulnerability. For example, according to the theorization of Silard and Dasborough (2021), if the leader-employee relationship is already of low quality, the vulnerable display of negative emotions is expected to only worsen the situation. Nevertheless, leaders that show their negative emotions would improve the relationship with their employees, if their relationships with the employees were already good. Thus, leader vulnerability cannot be treated as a stand-alone variable and instead needs to be viewed within the perspective of the whole leader-employee dyad.

2.2 Leader-member exchange

In studying the relational dynamics between supervisor and subordinates in the workplace, the leader-member exchange construct (LMX) has been widely considered. The LMX perspective distinguishes professional leader-employee relationships in terms of interaction quality (Luo et al., 2016). Stemming from *social exchange theory*, LMX explains that low quality connections find their origin in more economic and contract-based agreements, whereas high quality connections require more social investments (Blau, 1964 as mentioned in Dulebohn et al., 2012). Leaders can establish stronger relationships with their subordinates when they move their focus beyond formal obligations and make an effort to increase affective bonding with team members. This implies that particularly leaders play a

crucial role in initiating social exchanges. Indeed, in the meta-analysis of Dulebohn et al. (2012) on LMX it was found that leaders impact the quality of the leader-member relationship more heavily than employees do. Thus, looking at leader behaviours is helpful in understanding relational dynamics in the workplace.

At the moment, academics have indeed widely acknowledged the impact of leader behaviour on the relationship between leader and employee. Specifically, scholars so far uncovered several leadership styles and communicative behaviours that are determining for LMX. For example, authoritarian leadership is negatively associated with a strong leader-employee relationship (Siddique et al., 2020). Leader extraversion, however, has been found to be positively related to high quality LMX (Bauer et al., 2006). Furthermore, Li and Hung (2009) have shown that transformational leadership positively impacts the relationship between leader and employee. Specifically, they discovered that the separate leader behaviours that together shape transformational leadership – in their article named "intellectual stimulation", "inspirational motivation", "idealized influence" and "individualized consideration" – also impact LMX positively on their own. In other words, many social behaviours of leaders have been researched in the context of LMX.

In contrast to the behaviours mentioned, leader vulnerability has so far been overlooked by communication scholars. Although leader vulnerability literature is scarce, this type of leader behaviour and communication may interplay with LMX as well. Looking at passive vulnerability, it for example has been found that autonomy of workers has a positive association with LMX (Basu & Green, 2006). Further, active leader vulnerability could open the door to discuss feelings and insecurities within the leader-follower relationship, thereby enhancing emotional intimacy and consequently LMX. For example, in the study of An et al. (2023) on leader self-deprecating humour, it becomes clear that the supervisor-subordinate relationship is generally stronger when leaders make fun of their own flaws. This may indicate that when managers attach little meaning to their reputation and show their human side, employees feel more similar and related to their manager. According to the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971, as mentioned in Oren et al., 2012), people that feel alike are more drawn to each other. This similarity perception correlates positively with LMX (Dulebohn et al., 2012). In this way, the positive effect of leader self-deprecating humour might be similar to how leaders' active vulnerability displays are interpreted by employees.

However, the contrary is imaginable too. As showing vulnerability potentially determines a leader's reputation, it is possible that followers will experience confusion regarding the leader's role. This role ambiguity is negatively associated with a high quality

LMX (Kuvaas & Buch, 2020). Nonetheless, it can be questioned to what extent vulnerability changes role perceptions, as the supervisor-subordinate relationship is primarily based on a formal contract, which could provide sufficient role clarity itself. This, however, has so far remained unclear in literature. Moreover, how employees recognize leader vulnerability in the first place is yet to be investigated, adding to this study's relevance. Hence, more knowledge is needed to understand concrete indicators of leader vulnerability and the conditions that determine if and how leader vulnerability is part of strong leader-follower relationships.

2.3 Trust towards the leader

Within the leader-employee dyad, trust towards the leader plays a crucial role. As Scandura and Pellegrini (2008) highlight, maintaining strong LMX requires trust. For the scope of this study, a conceptualization of trust by Mayer et al. (1995) is adopted. In their paper, trust is defined as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (p. 712). Thus, employees need to feel sure enough about their expectations of the manager to have a trusting relationship with their leader.

Taking a closer look, it becomes visible that trust can be unpacked in three dimensions. Specifically, Mayer et al. (1995) distinguished ability, benevolence and integrity. In this perspective, *ability* relates to the belief that the other party is competent. Typically, it is thus important that employees view their supervisor as a capable leader. *Benevolence* relates to "the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor" (p. 719), meaning that in order to build trust, employees need to have the impression that their leader wants the best for them. Finally, *integrity* can be understood as the trustor's belief that the trustee behaves in an ethical manner. Hence, leaders are expected to behave in line with ethical principles to earn trust. These three aspects together provide a lens for interpreting how an employee trusts the leader, when exposed to leader vulnerability in the workplace.

In current literature, there is no existing consensus on the relationship between active leader vulnerability and trust towards the leader. On the one hand, in a mixed-method study it has been found that leaders can earn trust through several actively vulnerable behaviours, including sharing sensitive information regarding work or the leader's private life (Rosenbruch et al., 2023). As an opposing logic, it could be argued that leaders showing vulnerability can give the impression that they are incompetent in their role, harming the ability dimension of trust. Regarding this reasoning, Lapidot et al. (2007) found that leaders'

ability-related actions are more impactful in reducing trust towards the leader than in increasing it. Moreover, they highlight that the so-called "trust-eroding behaviours", i.e. behaviours that diminish trust, are more memorable among employees, as rebuilding trust is said to be much more complicated than establishing it in the first place. Thus, vulnerability displays could also be negatively connected to trust in the leader.

This negative connection seems to be confirmed when looking at the effects of overconfidence, as opposed to vulnerability. As Kennedy et al. (2013) have shown, overconfident persons gained a high status, even when those assessing had knowledge about the actual ability of this person. As a result, leaders that behave overconfidently could possibly receive high trust, as their confidence impacts ability-related perceptions more than their actual competence. Following that rationale, moving away from vulnerability seems to be the best practice for leaders that want to have a trustworthy reputation. The underlying assumption here is that leaders should know it all according to employees. Though, the remaining question is what employees precisely expect from leaders in terms of competence, suggesting that the relationship between leader vulnerability and trust is not as straightforward as it may seem at first glance. Therefore, more investigation on whether and how leader vulnerability and trust towards the leader are connected is necessary. The current research aims to provide clarity in this regard.

2.4 Employee motivation

Not only do specific leader behaviours leave a mark on the relationship between manager and employee, they are also connected to individual outcomes such as employee motivation. Specifically, transformational leadership is an example of an influential leader behaviour, as employees that observe this type of leadership in the workplace generally feel intrinsically motivated (Chua & Ayoko, 2021). Additionally, Webb (2007) researched the impact of a set of leader behaviours on employee motivation. Specifically, he concluded that charismatic leaders that challenge employees cognitively, engage in personal coaching and provide rewards are expected to be most successful in instilling employee motivation. Thus, the way leaders act in relation to their employees impacts work motivation. However, the connection between leader vulnerability concretely and employee motivation has not received much academic attention yet.

In the current study, motivation is looked at through the lens of *self-determination theory* (SDT), as explained by Deci and Ryan (2000). According to SDT, humans need to fulfil their universal psychological needs in order to feel intrinsically motivated to undertake

activities, for instance at work. Concretely, individuals have the need to feel *autonomous* to do the job. Moreover, employees want to feel *related* to others in performing their tasks. Lastly, to be intrinsically motivated it is necessary for individuals to feel *competent* to perform the job. As these three dimensions are based on perceptions, leaders can alter employee motivation to some extent with their social skills.

Specifically, leader vulnerability seems to be related to employee self-determination through the LMX concept. Whereas low quality LMX is related to a lack of autonomy, relatedness and competence among employees, high quality and thus more emotionally intimate LMX correlates with the fulfilment of the motivational factors (Martin et al., 2016; Andersen et al., 2020; Xue et al., 2022; Henderson & Jeong, 2024). Letting employees assess LMX, Graves and Luciano (2013) have also shown a positive connection between LMX and motivation. These conceptual links may translate to the connection between leader vulnerability and employee motivation, but so far scholars have not investigated the exact relationship sufficiently. Hence, in the current study it is researched if and how leader vulnerability is related to employee motivation and the construct's three dimensions.

The study at hand advances the leadership literature by investigating the concept of leader vulnerability and its possible role within LMX theory. As the concept has so far received little academic attention, an interview study on the meaning of leader vulnerability, as well as its connection with trust towards the leader and work motivation is deemed essential. By focusing on interpretations of male employees in male-dominated workplaces, leader vulnerability is explored in an environment where there is often little space for vulnerability, making it an interesting case to study. It is believed that a qualitative research method is the most appropriate one available for studying this case, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of relational dynamics and personal experiences in the workplace.

3. Method

3.1 Methodology

To address the research questions, in-depth interviews with male employees were held. These interviews took place in a semi-structured fashion. That is, the researcher used a set of prepared questions to start the conversation and give the interview focus, but left space for new points raised by participants. Also, initial findings inspired adjustments of questions for

interviews that were conducted later. As the conceptualization of leader vulnerability with its connection to trust and motivation involves assessments of behaviours and relationships, the methodological openness and focus of semi-structured interviews fits the study. Since the current topic is relatively understudied, a qualitative rather than quantitative method was selected, for qualitative research provides in-depth insights.

3.2 Sample

To select participants, non-random sampling was carried out. Concretely, the researcher contacted workers directly, used his network and snowball sampling to reach possible participants. Before inclusion in the sample, potential participants needed to meet several criteria. Firstly, only those who identified as male and were working in male-dominated environments were selected. For this, it was required that participants were working in industries that have a workforce consisting of at least 80% males. Following recent numbers of the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (2024), solely employees working in the ICT (N = 11), technical (N = 8) and transport and logistics (N = 2) work field were thus selected. Secondly, all 21 participants were above 18 years and Dutch – the latter to control for cultural differences and to enhance the quality of the data analysis, since the researcher's first language is Dutch as well. Thirdly, the interviewees had at least 2 years of working experience, to ensure that the possible experienced novelty of entering the workforce did not impact the results. Finally, participants had to be regularly in touch with their supervisor, to be able to sufficiently judge the leader's communication style. To be selected, participants had to have on average at least once per fortnight contact with their manager. All in all, these sample requirements led to a specific, yet sufficiently diverse sample. This balance of specificity and diversity in the sample was considered an enrichment for the research, as knowledge from distinct perspectives informs a conceptualization of vulnerability that is wider applicable for scholars, yet is still focused enough to address the research questions.

3.3 Procedure

Before the interviews were held, ethical considerations were taken very seriously. Concretely, the interviews involved employees talking about their manager and the relationship to that person, which can be sensitive information, as the participant is part of a power dynamic. Therefore, several measures were taken to ensure proper research practices. Firstly, participants were provided with knowledge about the research, as well as their rights during the process, and consequently asked to give informed consent before active

participation. Secondly, participants have been debriefed after the interviews and have been reminded of their right to withdraw from the study if desired. Thirdly, only audio recordings and memos were made, and transcriptions were anonymized before analysis. In this way, the researcher ensured ethical research to the best of his ability. The study was assessed and approved by the Ethical Committee of the Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences Faculty of the University of Twente.

The data was collected within 2 months, from March 2024 until April 2024. After the participant was given the opportunity to give informed consent, an audio-recording was started. Though, for one interview an exception was made and alternatively notes were taken. Videos were not made, to ensure that participants felt safer in expressing their opinions. On average, an interview took 47 minutes. During the interviews, an interview guide with a number of prepared questions was used. Detailed questions can be found in the Appendix. This initial interview guide was subject to change based on insights gained during data collection.

During the interviews, the participants were firstly prompted to elaborate on their job and work environment. Next, questions relating to their relationship with their leader were asked, and participants elaborated on their stance towards and experiences with vulnerability at work in general as well. Then, participants were asked whether or how they experience vulnerability of their leader at work and how this leader vulnerability is connected to both the nature of the leader-employee relationship and individual work outcomes, such as employee motivation. For example, participants were asked the following questions: *(How) does your leader sometimes take on a vulnerable position? (How) does your leader sometimes share doubts or insecurities with you? (In what way) does your leader sometimes ask you for advice? (How or why) do you think that your connection with your leader would change, if he or she takes on a more or less vulnerable position?* Ultimately, participants were debriefed and offered the opportunity to ask questions and withdraw from the study.

To be able to reflect on vulnerability and their relationship with their leader, participants needed to be able to be vulnerable themselves. Since the case of males in male-dominated work environments was characterized as a context with relatively little space for vulnerability, there were concerns for gaining in-depth data on the topic. However, practice showcased that participants were generally quite open and elaborative when firstly asked to explain what their jobs entailed, as a way to gradually move towards discussing more sensitive topics. For instances in which depth seemed to lack in the interviews, participants were stimulated to reflect further by reformulating questions asked.

3.4 Analysis

After interviews were held, an anonymous transcription was made. Initial versions of transcriptions were created using the software Amberscript. Then, transcriptions were checked manually by the researcher. The interviews were analysed according to the principles of the constant comparative method (CCM), as described by Boeije (2002).

Firstly, by making memos during the data collection, some interview questions were altered or added for interviews to come. This enabled comparison between participants. To exemplify, during the data collection gradually more emphasis was put on discussing leader role expectations and opinions about different styles of emotion management by leaders. These topics initially received less attention in the interview guide, but proved to be valuable to discuss further as the data collection proceeded. Generally, this flexibility of CCM in comparing data and adjusting interviews allows for conceptualizing and understanding key constructs more in-depth (Boeije, 2002).

Secondly, the data were analysed in an abductive manner using Atlas.ti. Being informed by insights from literature, all 21 interviews were coded in a semi-open fashion. Examples of codes were 'vulnerability indicators', 'leader role expectations' and 'trust interpretation'. During this coding process, it became clear that for instance participants' leader role expectations were vital to take into account to interpret participants' opinions on leader vulnerability. After the round of coding, every interview was summarized in a memo. These memos structured the coded data in tables based on the study's core concepts. Ultimately, all 21 memos were compared to each other and findings were extracted. All in all, the balance of flexibility and focus of the conducted semi-structured interviews and CCM provided space and guidance for gaining a deeper understanding of leader vulnerability and its relationship with relevant constructs.

4. Results

4.1 Active vulnerability leads the way

For the conceptualization of leader vulnerability, interviewees were prompted to come up with several examples to illustrate what the concept means for them. Looking at the case of their own current leader, participants responded rather quickly to the question whether their leaders make room for vulnerability in their behaviour and communication or not. Though, coming up with an argumentation and example for their answers proved to be a challenge for

employees. This shows that leader vulnerability as a concept easily elicits a first emotional response, but is quite hard to pinpoint and explain.

However, by aiding the thinking process of participants through reconsidering question formulations, they were able to make sense of and concretize leader vulnerability. Specifically, a small number of interviewees referred to passive vulnerability behaviours, such as asking for advice, feedback and help in general. More often, however, vulnerable leaders were said to talk about difficult emotions, problems, failures, insecurities, their private lives and imperfections. Thus, employees mostly interpreted leader vulnerability as active vulnerability.

Looking at the examples given, one leader behaviour was mentioned prominently by several participants as an indicator of (active) leader vulnerability: admitting mistakes. To exemplify, in the following quote a participant was asked to reflect on his experiences with his leader's vulnerability. At first, he concisely answered that he did not recognize vulnerability in his leader's behaviour. However, after being prompted further, the first example that came to his mind related to admitting mistakes:

Something I have seen multiple times is that [leader] has a certain opinion or thinks

something is like that, but during the conversation, or two sentences later, it appears to not

work like that. And then, yes, in the end he says he was wrong, but in a particular way:

'let's continue!'. So that is his way of showing his vulnerabilities: in a way admitting 'okay,

I was wrong'. (Participant 21, work field: ICT)

This quote describes an example of active vulnerability and how hard it is to be actively vulnerable. From a linguistic perspective, it can even be questioned if 'active' is the best way to describe this reserved behaviour, despite *active* and *passive vulnerability* being leading terminology in existing literature (see Nienaber et al., 2015). Regardless of linguistic matters, this participant's case illustrates that active vulnerability is generally top-of-mind for employees when discussing leader vulnerability. As a result, it can be argued that according to employees leader vulnerability predominantly concerns sharing information that is difficult to share.

However, that the information is hard to express, does not necessarily mean that leader vulnerability always entails sharing negatively themed messages. In fact, one participant

moved away from interpreting leader vulnerability as talking about negative situations or emotions and took a positive approach instead. Concretely, this interviewee explained that leader vulnerability can also include sharing compliments when talking about his own leader in the workplace:

[Leader] has said that he is happy with me. I think that is maybe also a way to be vulnerable because you of course do not have to say it. (Participant 13, work field: technical)

Comparing the logic of this quote to the other interviews, it becomes clear that although it is agreed upon that leader vulnerability relates to sharing thoughts that are hard to share, employees tend to think about expressing negative situations and emotions only. However, as the quote illustrates, the idea that vulnerability solely includes sharing negative matters is not exhaustive, as positively themed messages can be difficult to share and thus be labelled as leader vulnerability as well.

Next to the difference in positive and negative matters shared, the data show that leader vulnerability can also be divided in sharing work-related matters on the one hand, and private ones on the other. From the interviews it became clear that active vulnerability about work-related matters is viewed as essential, since openness about tasks and projects ensures that the best professional decisions are being made. Being asked to elaborate on his leader's vulnerability, the following participant for example made a distinction between work and private conversations. In his argumentation, he highlighted the importance of work-related vulnerability specifically:

We sometimes have open conversations about projects, about choices, about corporate topics and there we do have dilemmas sometimes: you could pick option A or you can pick option B. And then, [the leader] also does not always have the answer. He also does not know it all the time. So he does not pretend. He too can express his doubts. […] I can imagine that if he does not share such doubts, that he is less vulnerable, but then you also have a different relationship and that would be less beneficial for me in the projects. (Participant 9, work field: technical)

Put differently, leader vulnerability for work-related topics has the potential to make work processes run smoother. In comparison, leader vulnerability regarding private matters is perceived as less vital, but can be a good bonus according to employees. Being asked about their opinion on leader vulnerability, many interviewees initially replied with an indifferent attitude towards the topic at hand. After reflecting further, though, employees generally concluded that leaders that share vulnerably about private matters, come across as more 'human'. More concretely, participants agreed that leader vulnerability helps in establishing a strong connection between leader and employee.

In sum, it can be said that participants interpret leader vulnerability rather as active vulnerability than passive vulnerability and relates to sharing things that are difficult to share, regardless of sentiment or topic. Finally, the data suggest that leader vulnerability helps in forming and maintaining a high quality leader-employee relationship.

4.2 The complexities of trusting the vulnerable leader

The way in which leaders do or do not appear vulnerable to employees is connected to how employees trust their leader. In order to have trust, it is key to know what one can expect from a leader. From the interviews, it became clear that specifically active leader vulnerability plays a role in this. For instance, an interviewee indicated that the openness and emotional proximity that comes with active vulnerability can make it easier for employees to know what to expect from the leader. In this way, employees could better estimate how their leaders would respond to employee vulnerability. However, only knowing what you can expect is not necessarily sufficient to establish trust. This is particularly the case when leaders behave in such ways that they harm employees' perceptions of the leader in terms of doing good to others, ethical behaviour and being skilled, i.e. respectively benevolence, integrity and ability. Hence, there must be a match between predicted leader behaviour and desired leader behaviour.

Firstly, when looking at the data, it becomes clear that employees have wishes regarding leader emotion management. Although leader vulnerability does include showing emotions, employees have expectations about how leaders handle their emotions. Generally, interviewees indicated that leaders should be calm and not project their feelings onto the employees. Specifically, participants used leaders' displays of more extreme sadness and anger as exemplifications of bad leadership. Good leadership, on the other hand, was characterized by participants in terms of "stability" and "calmness". To illustrate, the next interviewee was asked about what made him trust his leader. He answered the following:

That is a difficult question. I don't know, it is just about how I expect his behaviour to be. When you are together with someone for a certain amount of time per month, then I know how that person is approximately. And in his way of doing things, [leader] is calm and never takes it out on us or someone else, so he is very cautious. And yes, he just shows calmness and then also trust. It is not really something tangible that shows why I trust him. It just developed like that. (Participant 1, work field: ICT)

This quote speaks for the majority of the employees interviewed. Participants saw proper leader emotion management as a key factor for establishing trust. All in all, the trend in the interviews was that desired leader vulnerability has a limit, since employees generally do not appreciate the leader's display of more extreme emotions at work and do not want to have to deal with these emotions in the workplace.

Secondly, during the interviews participants articulated what they demand from their leaders in terms of ability. For example, some employees had the opinion that leaders that are actively vulnerable put their reputation at risk. When discussing whether he expects his leader to mention emotions in his communication, the following participant gave this reply:

But if you really want to manage an organization, then you should not show too much emotion to the rest because that just does not work. [...] I think that your prestige will be reduced. (Participant 15, work field: technical)

Adding to this, interviewees reported that active leader vulnerability can make the distance between leader and employee too small and result in confusion about the leader's role in the hierarchy. Lastly, a couple of employees interpreted work-related active vulnerability as a signal of incompetence. For example, the following interviewee elaborates on his expectations and trust towards his leader when being asked about his experiences with his leader's vulnerability:

We now have a team with a clear leader and when I would say 'I don't know how to do that' and if he then would say 'I don't know either' or come to me and says 'I have no clue', then I would think that I do not have my person to hold on to anymore. Of course, I understand that he does not know everything and I understand very well that he has questions too, but principally I expect that.. If he suddenly comes across as very insecure about everything, I would think: how can you manage me, when you do not even know what you are talking about? (Participant 11, work field: logistics)

Thus, active leader vulnerability is connected to ability-related assessments of the leader. One step further, employees may interpret active leader vulnerability as a so-called "trust-eroding behaviour" (see Lapidot et al., 2007) because of role confusion.

Nevertheless, leader vulnerability generally did not confuse employees about the leader's role. From the data it can be extracted that there exists a general consensus that leaders cannot and do not have to know everything. Overconfident leaders that do pretend to be all-knowing were often perceived as "unsympathetic", "insecure" and "dominant" by interviewees, complicating the LMX. Instead, some participants see leader vulnerability as a strength, as it shows that they are sure about themselves and not afraid to lose their job. After being asked how competent he finds his leader when the leader shares insecurities and doubts, the following participant puts it like this:

For me, that would not elicit doubts about whether [leader] is competent or not. […] Then, they are not scared that their position is so fragile. Then, they do not feel like they have to prove themselves. Then, they perhaps have that position already more naturally.
(Participant 7, work field: technical)

In other words, active leader vulnerability can also be held separate from ability evaluations and actually contribute to trust towards the leader, depending on an individual's stance towards authority. Ultimately, interviewees indicated that leader vulnerability can enhance trust through reciprocity as well. If the leader is vulnerable, it is a signal to the employees that

they are trusted, which makes them trust their leader too. Out of reciprocity, they are then more willing to be open and vulnerable too at work.

Thus, leader vulnerability, particularly active vulnerability, overall has a strong potential to contribute to trust towards the leader. For this, however, it is important to consider how leaders manage their emotions and what expectations employees hold regarding a leaders ability.

4.3 Motivated by genuine leader vulnerability

The interviews have shown that leader vulnerability is an important factor to consider when understanding employee motivation in the workplace. Although the relationship between leader vulnerability and employee motivation did not appear very explicitly from the data, a connection can be observed. This suggests that employees themselves are not necessarily aware of what their leader's vulnerability does to their motivation to work. However, the link between leader vulnerability and motivation becomes clearer when viewing motivation in terms of relatedness, competence and autonomy. Then, both active and passive vulnerability are found to be influential.

Firstly, a relationship between active leader vulnerability on the one hand, and relatedness and competence experienced by the employee on the other can be distilled from the interviews. As mentioned before, through behavioural examples participants indicated that active vulnerability makes leaders more human, enabling relatedness between leader and employee. Additionally, an interviewee explained that leader overconfidence, as opposed to active vulnerability, can make employees afraid to be vulnerable and relates to low self-assessments of competence. When discussing leaders that make an attempt to be perfect, he mentioned the following:

If my manager would do that, acting like the perfect manager? Yes, then you only feel

smaller as an employee, when you make mistakes yourself. […] [My fun at work] would

reduce because in the end you just want to feel seen and appreciated at work. Feeling like

you are less adequate than another colleague, does not fit to that. (Participant 19, work

field: ICT)

In other words, active leader vulnerability can help employees in feeling more related and competent at work. This experience of relatedness and competence is needed for employees to feel intrinsically motivated.

Next, participants connected passive leader vulnerability even more to motivational factors. For example, an interviewee indicated that giving employees freedom and asking employees for advice, is a way to acknowledge the competence of employees and give them autonomy. Moreover, several participants raised the point that when leaders provide employees with a say in decision-making, employees feel more inclined to support the decisions the leader makes and be motivated to execute tasks for these decisions. To exemplify, after elaborating on his leader's collaborative way of decision-making, the following interviewee says this about his consequent motivation:

I appreciate it really when I am being listened to. If [leader] forces solutions on me that I do not support, I find it difficult. Because then I do not feel heard, then I have the feeling that they do not have the information they need to make a good decision or that they are withholding information from me, so that I do not know why it is a good decision. […] That is what I find more difficult to motivate myself to still execute the solution. (Participant 7, work field: technical)

Hence, passive vulnerability can be a motivating aspect of leadership. One condition, though, that participants mentioned, is that passive vulnerability only works motivating when it is sincere. When employees receive autonomy in performing unpleasant tasks, for example out of laziness of the leader and not because the leader really needs the employee's competence, it demotivates employees.

All in all, it can be said that leader vulnerability is expected to work in favour of employee motivation. Though rather implicit in the data, potentially because employees were not aware themselves, both active vulnerability and passive vulnerability are seemingly positively related to dimensions of motivation, provided that the leader vulnerability comes across as genuine.

5. Discussion

5.1 Main findings & theoretical implications

The current research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of leader vulnerability in the workplace. By looking at interpretations of employees specifically, a novel take on leader vulnerability has been presented. Moreover, the exploration of the connection between leader vulnerability, trust and employee motivation has been a new approach to leader vulnerability in order to better understand how employees deal with vulnerable leaders. By means of semi-structured interviews with male employees in male-dominated work environments, the construct has been further unpacked to address the study's research questions.

Concretely, it has been found that employees mostly think about active forms of leader vulnerability. This active vulnerability is viewed essential when discussing work-related issues, but sharing vulnerably about private matters was perceived as less relevant, though beneficial for LMX. Leader vulnerability brings more reciprocity to the leader-employee relationship and shows that leaders are sure of their abilities, provided that leaders do not project their feelings onto employees and remain generally calm. These factors are determining in the positive but complex connection between leader vulnerability and trust towards the leader. Finally, genuine leader vulnerability is related to the dimensions of employee motivation. Active leader vulnerability makes employees feel more competent and related through LMX, whereas passive leader vulnerability offers space for employee autonomy. In conclusion, leader vulnerability has a positive but nuanced connection to both trust and motivation.

Positioning the current study in the leadership literature, the findings can be compared to, explained by and add to the work of other researchers. Firstly, similarities in the conceptualization of the construct have been found when comparing this research to the influential study of Nienaber et al. (2015). In both investigations, leader vulnerability was unpacked as passive vulnerability on the one hand, and active vulnerability on the other. Though, using the terminology "active vulnerability" can cause confusion, as the current study shows that forms of active vulnerability can also be very subtle and may be hard to recognize by employees, making the vulnerability less "active". Further, Nienaber et al. (2015) indicated that active vulnerability has not received much academic attention, yet employees mostly think of leader vulnerability as active vulnerability. Therefore, in advancing

a theory of leader vulnerability, the conceptualization of active vulnerability should be reconsidered and studied more.

Further, the study at hand warns for pitfalls when studying leader vulnerability. Firstly, the concept should not only be treated as a cognitive construct, but as an emotional one as well. It became clear that employees quickly assessed whether their leader was vulnerable, but employees had difficulties when thinking of specific examples for leader vulnerability. This suggests that the concept elicits quick emotional responses, but is hard to make sense of. Secondly, it must be acknowledged that leader vulnerability does not only revolve around negativity. In fact, active vulnerability relates to opening up about matters that are difficult to share for the person sharing, implying that both positively and negatively themed messages can be vulnerable. This is in contrast with previous studies on leader vulnerability, as vulnerability is generally perceived in a negative perspective - e.g. Ito and Bligh (2017) defined leader vulnerability as solely "communicating an experience to followers, in which the leader was hurt emotionally, physically, or spiritually" (p. 66). Thus, the current study adds to existing vulnerability literature by enriching the conceptualization of leader vulnerability with a broader perspective.

Next, it became clear that it cannot be assumed that employees are necessarily emotionally occupied with and aware of the impact leader vulnerability has on them. For example, it was surprising that despite the connection with social LMX, employees deemed active leader vulnerability on private matters not so relevant. This was a striking finding, for there are a number of positive outcomes that come with social LMX (for a review, see Mumtaz & Rowley, 2019). An explanation for the smaller perceived relevance of active leader vulnerability in the private domain could be that male employees are generally less programmed for the sharing of emotions (Carbone et al., 2024) and private matters may be perceived as more emotionally intimate than corporate ones. Additionally, the rather implicit connection between leader vulnerability and motivation suggests that employees may not be fully aware of the influence of leader vulnerability on them. Motivation itself was not often mentioned when discussing leader vulnerability, but Deci and Ryan's (2000) three motivational dimensions – relatedness, autonomy and competence, were. Hence, emotionality and awareness of employees is an important factor when interpreting existing studies on leader vulnerability.

Further, the complexities around how leader vulnerability and trust towards the leader are connected deserve more attention. There seems to be an underlying mechanism explaining the found differences in trust responses to leader vulnerability. Whether employees view

leader vulnerability as a strength or weakness, and thus their accompanying trust towards their leaders, may depend on the employee's stance towards authority. When employees value authority and hierarchy, they possibly expect "strong" leadership, in which there is no room for vulnerability. Indeed, Van der Toorn et al. (2011) argue that differences in personal values influence an individual's legitimization of authority, meaning that personal characteristics determine how one perceives authority and likely leader vulnerability as well. Building on that, Johnson et al. (2023) showed that the relationship between leader behaviours and positive affective responses from employees is mediated by the extent to which employees legitimize the leader. Thus, in future the lens that authority legitimacy provides should be considered in the context of leader vulnerability and trust, using the current study as point of departure.

5.2 Practical implications

Not only does the current research bring new theoretical insights, it is relevant to organizational practice as well. Specifically, leaders can learn more about vulnerability in leadership. Concretely, this research is a signal for leaders to carefully consider what their role is and what their role should be. This reflection enables leaders to critically assess their current behaviour in terms of vulnerability and overconfidence. Moreover, leaders are advised to start the conversation with their employees about the expectations one has of the leader. This way of open communication can inform the leader about how employees might receive leader vulnerability and how they view authority. Based on that, leaders know better how to build a trusting relationship with the employee and how to motivate the employee.

Another practical implication for leaders revolves around building social LMX. As touched upon before, depending on the employees' expectations of the leader, high quality leader-employee relationships can be built through leader vulnerability. Concretely, leaders are advised to regularly initiate personal conversations with employees, thereby being vulnerable. Although employees expected leaders to mostly be vulnerable to their own managers, leaders can open the door for a reciprocal and trusting high quality LMX when they also open up to their employees. Moreover, leaders are encouraged to view passive vulnerability as an opportunity, rather than a risk, as a way to acknowledge employees' competence and provide them with autonomy, thereby stimulating employee motivation. Lastly, for these recommendations it is key that employees experience leadership as sincere and calm, as leader's ingenuity and instability hinders the potential of leader vulnerability in practice.

5.3 Research limitations

As in any research, the study at hand is subject to several limitations. First of all, social desirability in the participants' answers is a limitation of this study. Despite the efforts to create and inform interviewees about the safe research environment, some participants were noticeably cautious in expressing negative opinions about their leader's behaviour. This can have led to results slightly deviating from reality. Moreover, it may also explain why employees had difficulties when asked to exemplify their leaders' vulnerability for example. Nevertheless, there were also cases in which participants were very honest and thanked the researcher for the interview, as for the participant it was a chance to reflect on his relationship with his leader.

Secondly, the diversity of the sample challenges the study's quality. Although several criteria for inclusion in the sample were defined beforehand – e.g. participants had to work in male-dominated sectors and were required to have sufficient work experience, these criteria still left space for many different types of professionals to be included in the research. This has resulted in a diverse sample, including participants from different hierarchical levels, organizational cultures and job types. An advantage of this is that during the interviews leader vulnerability has been approached from many different angles, thereby enriching a relatively universal conceptualization of leader vulnerability. At the same, this diversity may complicate applying the current findings to one specific organization, where leader vulnerability exists in and is partially determined by one specific hierarchy, culture and business. For instance, it is imaginable that employees would interpret leader vulnerability as the norm in a flat and informal organization. In contrast, in a more formal and hierarchical company leader vulnerability may be perceived as weak leadership. Therefore, the current study's sample enriches the theoretical conceptualization of leader vulnerability, but limits the findings' practical applicability for specific organizations.

5.4 Future research

Several departures for future investigation can be derived from the current research. Firstly, as leader vulnerability has now been investigated in a relatively less vulnerability-centred context – male-dominated work environments, it would be very insightful to research interpretations of leader vulnerability in female-dominated work environments too (such as healthcare, pedagogy and service in the Netherlands, according to the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2024). An investigation of this kind could not only enrich the conceptualization of leader vulnerability, but allows for comparison between males and females in terms of trust

and motivation too. In this way it can be researched whether leader vulnerability has a different meaning and different indicators according to employees from female-dominated work environments, compared to male-dominated work environments. This can either complement the findings of the current study by adding more indicators of leader vulnerability, or showcase a gender stereotype in the literature when results are similar. Regardless of the outcome, with such a follow-up study leaders could be even better informed about how to go about vulnerability in the workplace, as they have a better understanding of their target group: the employees in their specific work environment.

Apart from research based on semi-structured interviews, scholars are recommended to study the role of leader vulnerability in observational research too. Based on the richer conceptualization of leader vulnerability that the current study provides, academics are now better informed to spot vulnerability in leader's behaviour and communication. Specifically, observational research on the dyadic and group dynamics that surround leader vulnerability would add to the body of literature on vulnerability, as observations remove the risk of research bias resulting from socially desirable answers (Rundle-Thiele (2009) demonstrates this phenomenon). In this way, researchers can connect leader behaviours to employee responses directly, as added value to retrospective employee self-assessments that dominate in interviews. Thus, observational research would complement the findings of the study at hand.

Lastly, the relationship between diversity and vulnerability at work needs more attention. The topic of diversity has been raised during the interviews as a possible facilitator of vulnerability and an open culture at work. After giving more attention to this topic in the subsequent interviews, it became clear that different interpretations among employees exist. On the one hand, it was argued that diversity contributes to an open culture as individuals become more acquainted with different viewpoints. On the other hand, diversity was perceived as an obstacle to safely expressing thoughts without being afraid of judgement. Especially with the recent advancement of diversity research (Roberson, 2019), it would thus be worthwhile to dive further into the connection between diversity and vulnerability in the workplace.

5.5 Conclusion

All in all, concentrating on the case of male-dominated work environments, the interview study at hand advanced the conceptualization of leader vulnerability. Building on literature, it was discovered that leader vulnerability elicits emotional employee responses, is predominantly interpreted as active vulnerability and can be positively-themed as well. Also,

leader vulnerability can instil trust and motivate employees, but important nuances have been explicated. With these novel insights gained, scholars are provided with a firm starting point to investigate leader vulnerability further in different contexts, with different methodologies and considering different factors in the workplace. In practice, leaders are encouraged to discuss employees' expectations of leadership to learn how their vulnerability relates to trust and motivation in their context. Thus, based on the study at hand high quality leader-employee relationships can be prioritized further in both theory and practice, with vulnerability in the lead.

Reference list

Agnihotri, A., Callahan, C. M., & Bhattacharya, S. (2024). Influence of power imbalance and actual vulnerability on trust formation. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis, 32*(5), 861-886. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-11-2022-3499

An, J., Di, H., Yang, Z., & Yao, M. (2023). Does my humour touch you? Effect of leader self-deprecating humour on employee silence: The mediating role of leader-member exchange. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 16*, 1677-1689. https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S411800

Andersen, I., Buch, R., & Kuvaas, B. (2020). A literature review of social and economic leader-member exchange. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 1474. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01474

Basu, R., & Green, S. G. (2006). Leader-member exchange and transformational leadership: An empirical examination of innovative behaviors in leader-member dyads. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 27*(6), 477-499. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1997.tb00643.x

Bauer, T. N., Erdogan, B., Liden, R. C., & Wayne, S. J. (2006). A longitudinal study of the moderating role of extraversion: Leader-member exchange, performance, and turnover during new executive development. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 91*(2), 298-310. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.91.2.298

Boeije, H. (2002). A purposeful approach to the constant comparative method in the analysis of qualitative interviews. *Quality & Quantity, 36*(4), 391-409. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020909529486

Bravata, D. M., et al. (2019). Prevalence, predictors, and treatment of impostor syndrome: A systematic review. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 35*(4), 1252–1275. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-019-05364-1

Byrne, A., Dionisi, A. M., Barling, J., Akers, A., Robertson, J., Lys, R., Wylie, J., & Dupré, K. (2014). The depleted leader: The influence of leaders' diminished psychological resources on leadership behaviors. *The Leadership Quarterly, 25*(2), 344-357. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.09.003

Carbone, E., Loewenstein, G., Scopelliti, I., & Vosgerau, J. (2024). He said, she said: Gender differences in the disclosure of positive and negative information. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 110*, 104525. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104525

Caza, A., Zhang, G., Wang, L., & Bai, Y. (2015). How do you really feel? Effect of leaders' perceived emotional sincerity on followers' trust. *The Leadership Quarterly, 26*(4), 518-531. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.05.008

Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (2024). *Beroepen van werkenden [Professions of workers].* Retrieved on March 7, 2024 from https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/dashboard-arbeidsmarkt/werkenden/beroepen-van-werkenden

Chua, J., & Ayoko, O. B. (2021). Employees' self-determined motivation, transformational leadership and work engagement. *Journal of Management & Organization, 27*(3), 523-543. https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2018.74

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "What" and "Why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11*(4), 227-268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01

Drescher, G. (2017). Delegation outcomes: Perceptions of leaders and follower's satisfaction. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 32*(1), 2-15. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-05-2015-0174

Dulebohn, J. H., Bommer, W. H., Liden, R. C., Brouer, R. L., & Ferris, G. R. (2012). A meta-analysis of antecedents and consequences of leader-member exchange: Integrating the past with an eye toward the future. *Journal of Management, 38*(6), 1715-1759. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206311415280

Farr-Wharton, R., Brunetto, Y., & Shacklock, K. (2011). Professionals' supervisor-subordinate relationships, autonomy and commitment in Australia: A leader-member exchange theory perspective. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 22*(17), 3496-3512. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2011.599681

Feenstra, S., Begeny, C. T., Ryan, M. K., Rink, F. A., Stoker, J. I., & Jordan, J. (2020). Contextualizing the impostor "syndrome". *Frontiers in Psychology, 11,* 575024. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.575024

Flett, G. L., Hewitt, P. L., Nepon, T., Sherry, S. B., & Smith, M. (2022). The destructiveness and public health significance of socially prescribed perfectionism: A review, analysis, and conceptual extension. *Clinical Psychology Review, 93*, 102130. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2022.102130

Graves, L. M., & Luciano, M. M. (2013). Self-determination at work: Understanding the role of leader-member exchange. *Motivation and Emotion, 37*(3), 518-536. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-012-9336-z

Gregory, B. (2024). The antecedents and consequences of perceptual fit: An examination of how employees come to understand organizational culture. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis, 32*(4), 645-661. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-01-2023-3573

Gullifor, D. P., Gardner, W. L., Karam, E. P., Noghani, F., & Cogliser, C. C. (2024). The impostor phenomenon at work: A systematic evidence-based review, conceptual development, and agenda for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *45*(2), 234-251. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2733

Henderson, A. A., & Jeong, S. S. (2024). Leader-member exchange (LMX) and work performance: An application of self-determination theory in the work context. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 33*(3), 310-324. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2023.2276535

Hudson, S., & González-Gómez, H. V. (2021). Can impostors thrive at work? The impostor phenomenon's role in work and career outcomes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *128*, 103601. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2021.103601

Ito, A., & Bligh, M. C. (2017). Feeling vulnerable? Disclosure of vulnerability in the charismatic leadership relationship. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 10*(3), 66-70. https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21492

Johnson, C., Gibson, R., Hawks, K., & Hegtveldt, K. A. (2023). Emotional benefits of leader legitimacy. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 0*(0) [Ahead of print]. https://doi.org/10.1177/01902725231199720

Kaplan, S., Cortina, J., Ruark, G., LaPort, K., & Nicolaides, V. (2014). The role of organizational leaders in employee emotion management: A theoretical model. *The Leadership Quarterly, 25*(3), 563-580. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.015

Kennedy, J. A., Anderson, C., & Moore, D. A. (2013). When overconfidence is revealed to others: Testing the status-enhancement theory of overconfidence. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 122*(2), 266-279. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2013.08.005

Kim, S., & Yoon, S. (2024). Contexts matter in 'a distress shared is a distress halved': A meta-analysis of distress sharing-psychological distress relations. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy, 31*(3), e2999. https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.2999

Kuvaas, B., & Buch, R. (2020). Leader self-efficacy and role ambiguity and follower leader-member exchange. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 41*(1), 118-132. https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-05-2019-0209

Lapidot, Y., Kark, R., & Shamir, B. (2007). The impact of situational vulnerability on the development and erosion of followers' trust in their leader. *The Leadership Quarterly, 18*(1), 16-34. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.11.004

Li, C.-K., & Hung, C.-H. (2009). The influence of transformational leadership on workplace relationships and job performance. *Social Behavior and Personality, 37*(8), 1129-1142. https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2009.37.8.1129

Luo, Z., Wang, Y., Marnburg, E., & Øgaard, T. (2016). How is leadership related to employee self-concept? *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 52*, 24-32. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2015.09.003

Martin, R., Guillaume, Y., Thomas, G., Lee, A., & Epitropaki, O. (2016). Leader-member exchange (LMX) and performance: A meta-analytic review. *Personnel Psychology, 69*(1), 67-121. https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12100

Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *Academy of Management Review, 20*(3), 709-734. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1995.9508080335

Mayer, R. C., & Gavin, M. B. (2005). Trust in management and performance: Who minds the shop while the employees watch the boss? *Academy of Management Journal, 48*(5), 874-888. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2005.18803928

Mullangi, S., & Jagsi, R. (2019). Imposter syndrome: Treat the cause, not the symptom. *JAMA, 322*(5), 403-404. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2019.9788

Mumtaz, S., & Rowley, C. (2019). The relationship between leader-member exchange and employee outcomes: Review of past themes and future potential. *Management Review Quarterly, 70*(1), 165-189. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-019-00163-8

Neureiter, M., & Traut-Mattausch, E. (2017). Two sides of the career resources coin: Career adaptability resources and the impostor phenomenon. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 98*, 56-69. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2016.10.002

Nienaber, A.-M., Hofeditz, M., & Romeike, P. D. (2015). Vulnerability and trust in leader-follower relationships. *Personnel Review*, *44*(4), 567-591. https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-09-2013-0162

Oren, L., Tziner, A., Sharoni, G., Amor, I., & Alon, P. (2012). Relations between leader-subordinate personality similarity and job attitudes. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 27*(5), 479-496. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683941211235391

Orgad, S. (2024). Posting vulnerability on LinkedIn. *New Media & Society, 0*(0) [Ahead of print]. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241243094

Roberson, Q. M. (2019). Diversity in the workplace: A review, synthesis, and future research agenda. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 6*, 69-88. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012218-015243

Rosenbruch, A., Nohe, C., Schwarz, I., & Hertel, G. (2023). Leader trusting behaviours: A mixed-method approach on follower's perceptions and reactions. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 32*(6), 798-815. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2023.2250087

Rundle-Thiele, S. (2009). Bridging the gap between claimed and actual behaviour: The role of observational research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 12*(3), 295-306. https://doi.org/10.1108/13522750910963818

Scandura, T. A., & Pellegrini, E. K. (2008). Trust and leader-member exchange: A closer look at relational vulnerability. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 15*(2), 101-110. https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051808320986

Sears, D., Razeghi, S., Gaidos, J., & Charabaty, A. (2021). Overcoming imposter syndrome, addressing microaggressions, and defining professional boundaries. *Gastroenterology & Hepatology, 6*(11), 881-884. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-1253(21)00339-3

Siddique, C. M., Siddique, H. F., & Siddique, S. U. (2020). Linking authoritarian leadership to employee organizational embeddedness, LMX and performance in a high-power distance culture: A mediation-moderated analysis. *Journal of Strategy and Management, 13*(3), 393-411. https://doi.org/10.1108/JSMA-10-2019-0185

Silard, A., & Dasborough, M. T. (2021). Beyond emotion valence and arousal: A new focus on the target of leader emotion expression within leader-member dyads. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 42*(9), 1186-1201. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2513

Van der Toorn, J., Tyler, T. R., & Jost, J. T. (2011). More than fair: Outcome dependence, system justification, and the perceived legitimacy of authority figures. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 47*(1), 127-138. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.09.003

Webb, K. (2007). Motivating peak performance: Leadership behaviors that stimulate employee motivation and performance. *Christian Higher Education, 6*(1), 53-71. https://doi.org/10.1080/15363750600932890

Xue, H., Luo, Y., Luan, Y., & Wang, N. (2022). A meta-analysis of leadership and intrinsic motivation: Examining relative importance and moderators. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 941161. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.941161

Appendix: Interview guide

Below, the initial interview guide of the current study can be found. As the research was done in the Netherlands, the interview questions were originally formulated in Dutch. Furthermore, as explained in the Method chapter, deviations from this initial interview guide/topic list have taken place.

Ethics

1. Have you read and understood the information sheet?
2. Do you give me permission to anonymously use your data for my master thesis?

Start

1. Can you tell me what your work entails?
   a. For how long have you been working there?
   b. Average working day
   c. Fun at work
   d. Less fun parts of the job

LMX-related questions

1. How does the team you work in look like?
   a. Department
   b. Number of direct colleagues
   c. Collaboration
2. And your leader?
   a. Duration of collaboration
   b. Contact & relationship with the leader
   c. Positive experiences + example
   d. Negative experiences + example

Vulnerability-related questions

Vulnerability in the team.

1. Do you have the feeling that everyone can discuss everything at work, or are there also things of which you would say, we do not discuss that with each other?
    a. Example
    b. Focus on successes vs. hard things
    c. Opinion about that
    d. Work-related doubts?
    e. Insecurities?
    f. Feelings?

Own vulnerability.

1. Do you sometimes say something at work that you find hard to share?
    a. Why?
    b. Example
2. Have you experienced that you wanted to say something at work, but ended up not doing it?
    a. Example
    b. Feeling about that

Leader vulnerability.

1. Does your leader sometimes take on a vulnerable position?
    a. How?
    b. Example
    c. Opinion about that
2. Does your leader sometimes share doubts or insecurities with you?
    a. How?
    b. Example
    c. Opinion about that
3. Does your leader sometimes ask you for advice?
    a. About what?
    b. In what way?
    c. Example

       d. Opinion about that

4. Does your leader sometimes talk about his/her personal successes?
       a. How?
       b. Example
       c. Opinion about that

5. Do you think that your connection with your leader would change, if he/she takes on a more/less vulnerable position?
       a. How?
       b. Why?

6. Do you think that leaders should take on vulnerable positions, to be a good manager?
       a. Why?
       b. In what way?
       c. Example

7. Imagine, you are the leader of your team. Are there things you would do differently than your leader?
       a. Example
       b. Why?
       c. What would you do the same?

End

1. Is there something you still want to highlight, that has not been discussed so far?
2. The recording will be stopped now and you will be debriefed about the research after.

AI Statement

During the preparation of this work, the author used Amberscript, as provided by the University of Twente, in order to create first versions of the interview transcriptions. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.