

You're so good-looking and wise, my powerful leaders! When deference becomes flattery in employee–authority relations

Deference in
employee–
authority
relations

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between employees' deference to leaders' authority and their upward ingratiation behavior, which may be invigorated by two personal resources (dispositional greed and social cynicism) and two organizational resources (informational justice and forgiveness climate).

Design/methodology/approach – In this study survey data were collected among employees who work in the banking sector.

Findings – Strict adherence to leaders' authority stimulates upward ingratiation behavior, especially when employees (1) have a natural tendency to want more, (2) are cynical about people in power, (3) believe they have access to pertinent organizational information and (4) perceive their organization as forgiving of mistakes.

Practical implications – For human resource (HR) managers, this study points to the risk that employees' willingness to comply blindly with the wishes of organizational leaders can escalate into excessive, inefficient levels of flattery. Several personal and organizational conditions make this risk particularly likely to materialize.

Originality/value – This study extends prior human resource management (HRM) research by revealing the conditional effects of an unexplored determinant of upward ingratiation behavior, namely, an individual desire to obey organizational authorities unconditionally.

Keywords Upward ingratiation behavior, Deference to leaders' authority, Dispositional greed, Social cynicism, Informational justice, Forgiveness climate, Conservation of resources theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As human resource management (HRM) scholars and practitioners readily acknowledge internal organizational operations tend to be highly political, because employees want to generate favorable opinions (Maher *et al.*, 2018; Wulani *et al.*, 2021). They engage in dedicated efforts to leave positive impressions, which promise to help them improve their organizational standing (Molleman *et al.*, 2012; Ward and Ravlin, 2017). Among the various impression management behaviors that employees might undertake – such as self-promotion or highlighting their own competencies, building a coalition of close supporters or proactively seeking feedback from others (Clarke *et al.*, 2022; Hsieh and Huang, 2018; Molleman *et al.*, 2012) – a critical example is ingratiation, or “efforts to induce high degrees of liking and acceptance in others” (Baron and Tang, 2009, pp. 285–286), which often targets organizational leaders or authorities (Geertshuis *et al.*, 2015; Harris *et al.*, 2007) [1].

These *upward* ingratiation behaviors can manifest in different ways, such as singing the praises of organizational authorities, using excessive flattery during interactions or offering favors in the hope of some reciprocation (Bolino and Turnley, 1999). Their intended purpose is to generate advantages for the employees who display them, such as more positive performance evaluations or access to pathways that help them ensure that their personal



preferences inform organizational decision-making (Bolino *et al.*, 2014; Geertshuis *et al.*, 2015; Gordon, 1996). The people in charge of organizational decision-making are organizational authorities or leaders (following prior literature, we use these terms interchangeably), who operate at higher levels than the focal employee (De Clercq *et al.*, 2021; De Clercq and Pereira, 2021). Thus, in addition to behaviors targeted at an immediate supervisor, HRM research highlights how employees' upward ingratiation attempts can also target supervisors' supervisors, or people in upper management positions, such as when employees engage in "leapfrogging" at work (Ferris and Hochwarter, 2011; Segrest *et al.*, 2020).

Upward ingratiation activities are not easy; they can be distracting and usurp significant energy that employees otherwise might devote to more productive activities (Klotz *et al.*, 2018; Liden and Mitchell, 1988). They also might evoke negative responses among both organizational leaders and peers, who may regard ingratiation efforts as overly political, manipulative or even deceptive, which would put the employees displaying these behaviors in a negative light (Carlson *et al.*, 2011; Vonk, 1998). But studies in both HRM and related fields also identify factors that can spur ingratiation behaviors, such as employees' Machiavellianism, need for achievement, fear of negative evaluation (Segrest *et al.*, 2020), performance orientation (Molleman *et al.*, 2012), extraversion (Cable and Judge, 2003), external locus of control (Guzman and Espejo, 2015) or power and social dominance orientations (Aiello *et al.*, 2013; Guzman and Espejo, 2015). Organizational features also might be influential, including leader-member exchange (LMX, Segrest *et al.*, 2020), perceived job insecurity (Huang *et al.*, 2013) or exclusion by coworkers (Scott *et al.*, 2015). Considering these competing views, we might reasonably ask, why and when are employees likely to dedicate energy to upward ingratiation behaviors?

To answer these questions, and advance extant research, we consider a novel set of potentially influential factors. To start, we address the likely effects of employees' unconditional compliance with the preferences of organizational authorities (Kanat-Maymon *et al.*, 2018). Our focus on deference to organizational leaders in general – or deference to leaders' authority – instead of just to immediate supervisors is consistent with real-world practices, in which employees often display upward ingratiation behaviors targeted at a broader group (Ferris and Hochwarter, 2011; Segrest *et al.*, 2020). Deference to leaders' authority may offer a source of individual *energy* that fuels employees' propensity to seek out attributions of likability from people who operate at higher echelons than themselves (Haslam and Reicher, 2017; Quinn *et al.*, 2012). Their strong desire to please also implies that these employees perceive their position as inferior, relative to organizational authorities (Carsten *et al.*, 2010), which justifies their use of ingratiation behaviors, such as flattery, even if the practice might prompt some criticisms (Carlson *et al.*, 2011).

In addition, we detail personal and organizational *conditions* that make this process more likely. In particular, employees' deference to leaders' authority might spur upward ingratiation behaviors; a strong risk of negative responses to such efforts instead might hinder those behaviors (Klotz *et al.*, 2018). In turn, factors that counteract this risk might serve as additional *catalysts* that encourage subservient employees to embrace upward ingratiation behaviors. We propose four such factors, which we categorize according to two categories of resources: person-related (dispositional greed and social cynicism) and organization-related (informational justice and forgiveness climate). Each resource can trigger or invigorate a sense of deference to leaders' authority into purposeful, potentially controversial attempts to please and flatter organizational leaders. We theorize that an unconditional willingness to obey escalates into upward ingratiation behavior particularly strongly among employees who (1) are greedy and always want more (Seuntjens *et al.*, 2015), (2) hold cynical beliefs that people in powerful positions tend to get their way (Leung *et al.*, 2010), (3) regard organizational information provision as fair (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001) and (4) perceive that their organization does not hold grudges against people who make errors (Guchait *et al.*, 2016).

All four of these resources promise to increase the *vigor* with which employees leverage their pertinent discretionary energy, derived from their desire to obey organizational leaders (Carsten *et al.*, 2010), in the form of upward ingratiation efforts. Beyond this similarity, investigating these four precise factors is insightful because of their complementary roles, along two critical dimensions. First, dispositional greed and social cynicism both capture employees' *personal* beliefs and preferences (Hirschfeld and Van Scotter, 2019; West *et al.*, 2015), whereas their perceptions of informational justice and forgiveness climate reflect their sense of how the *organization* functions (Cameron and Caza, 2002; Cheung, 2013). Second, the mechanisms that underlie the invigorating roles of the resources in each category differ. That is, the catalytic roles of subservient employees' dispositional greed and informational justice stem from their potentially positive *outcomes*, in the sense that their upward ingratiation efforts might lead to outcomes that are appealing (due to dispositional greed) or viable (due to informational justice). But social cynicism and forgiveness climate instead capture how subservient employees experience the *process* of engaging in upward ingratiation behaviors, whether as acceptable according to their personal values (social cynicism) or unlikely to evoke much risk (organization does not hold grudges) [2]. These four contingencies thus constitute a consistent, comprehensive set of resources that may increase the chances that employees' desire to submit to the whims of organizational leaders steers them to use flattery in their interactions with those leaders.

Conservation of resources theory

Our arguments for how and when employees' subservience to organizational authorities might enhance their propensity to engage in upward ingratiation behaviors follow the logic of conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000). This theory posits that employees' dedication of individual energy resources to certain work behaviors is shaped by the resource gains that they expect to accomplish through their behaviors (Alessandri *et al.*, 2018; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Employees thus should be especially likely to try to make positive impressions on organizational leaders if this effort and resource expenditure already is consistent with their individual preferences (Haslam and Reicher, 2017; Liu and Shi, 2017). Moreover, COR theory indicates significant *reinforcing* effects, such that access to additional resources strengthens the process, whether the resources derive from personal characteristics or the organizational environment in which employees operate (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2015; Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000). Specifically, through resource gain spirals (Hobfoll, 2001), pertinent complementary resources can stimulate the exploitation of discretionary individual energy, in ways that make this exploitation more appealing and realistic (Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000).

Contributions

With these perspectives, we aim to contribute to HRM research in several ways. First, we explicate the unexplored role of employees' deference to leaders' authority (Chen *et al.*, 2009) in stimulating the likelihood that they complement organizational authorities, through ingratiation. This focus on deference complements previous studies of other leader-related attitudes or features – such as power distance orientation (Guzman and Espejo, 2015), social domination orientation (Aiello *et al.*, 2013) or LMX (Segrest *et al.*, 2020) – that shape employees' upward impression management efforts. This study accordingly details a hitherto overlooked individual factor that can *escalate* into possibly controversial activities that prioritize flattery over diligent work efforts (Carlson *et al.*, 2011). Even if unconditional obedience to organizational leaders might seem advantageous in some situations, it can backfire for both employees and their employers, by stimulating a politically oriented organizational culture predicated on favoritism, not actual contributions to organizational effectiveness (Vigoda and Cohen, 2002).

Second, we tackle the critical question of *when* employee subservience is most likely to escalate into enhanced upward ingratiation behaviors. The risk that a blind desire to please organizational authorities becomes overly political may be more salient in the presence of resources that make this process seem appealing, acceptable, feasible or safe (Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000). By detailing the catalytic roles of four corresponding resources (dispositional greed, social cynicism, informational justice and forgiveness climate), we build on studies that identify their *direct* roles in shaping employees' work behaviors (e.g. Alexandra *et al.*, 2017; Belle and Cantarelli, 2017; Cheung, 2013; Guchait *et al.*, 2016). That is, we seek to determine how these four factors might stimulate employees to *apply* their discretionary energy, which they gather from their desire to submit to the wishes of organizational leaders, to upward ingratiation behavior.

Empirical context

The empirical setting of this study is Mozambique, which helps us address calls for more studies of employee work behaviors in African-based organizations (e.g. Antwi *et al.*, 2019; Zoogah and Zoogah, 2020). But more critically, this context is highly relevant, in that the high power distance that marks this country's national culture makes it not unlikely that employees' behaviors might be driven by desires to impress others in more powerful hierarchical positions (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Such a dynamic likely reinforces motivations to leverage individual deference to leaders' authority in upward ingratiation efforts targeted at organizational authorities. In addition, Mozambique features high levels of collectivism, so perceptions of upward ingratiation behaviors might be generally positive; organizational peers likely anticipate collective advantages of such efforts for the entire group (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). From this angle, Mozambique offers a compelling context to investigate how employees' subservience may escalate into deliberate efforts to ingratiate with organizational leaders, with practical value for organizations that operate in country contexts with cultural features similar to Mozambique's.

Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual model and its constitutive hypotheses. As a baseline, we predict a positive link between employees' deference to leaders' authority and their upward ingratiation behaviors. Then we argue that this relationship gets invigorated by four distinct factors, across two categories: person-related (dispositional greed and social

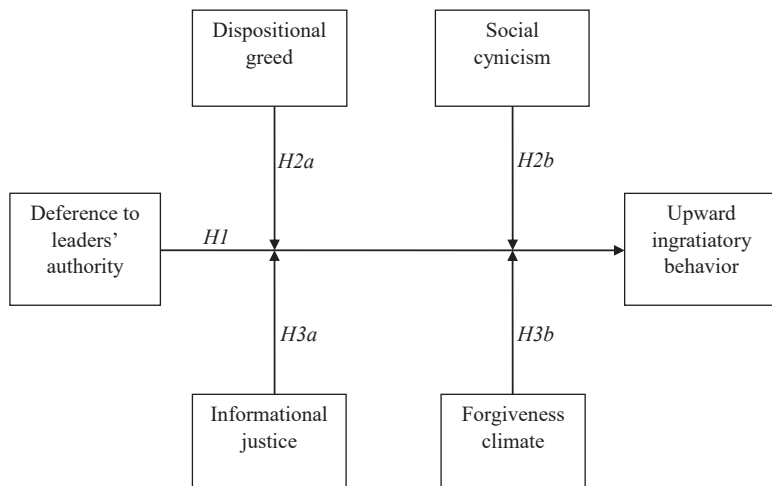


Figure 1.
Conceptual model

cynicism) and organization-related (informational justice and forgiveness climate). The arguments for each hypothesis follow.

Hypotheses

Deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behavior

Employees' desire to submit to the whims of organizational authorities may enhance their propensity to undertake deliberate efforts to receive positive evaluations from these authorities. The logic of COR theory states that employees feel more compelled to direct their discretionary energy, stemming from their personal beliefs and desires, to specific work behaviors when this energy expenditure can produce additional resource gains (Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000). Employees who exhibit blind deference to organizational leaders gain significant personal satisfaction from pleasing people who occupy powerful positions, even if doing so requires them to resort to excessive flattery (Haslam and Reicher, 2017; Liu and Shi, 2017). These employees believe that their energy-consuming efforts to compliment organizational members who operate at higher hierarchical levels than themselves are justified, because these members *deserve* both their powerful positions and praise (Beu and Buckley, 2004; Carsten *et al.*, 2010). A desire to forgo their own interests and goals for those of organizational authorities enhances employees' allocation of personal energy resources to upward ingratiation efforts, with the conviction that the organizational authorities are worthy of this resource investment (Guzman and Espejo, 2015).

Conversely, if employees do *not* believe that they should strictly obey organizational leaders, they may exhibit a low propensity to engage in flattery during interactions with leaders. These employees likely derive little personal joy from devoting valuable energy to deliberate efforts to praise organizational authorities (Haslam and Reicher, 2017). Rather, their sense that unconditional obedience to leaders is inappropriate may lead them to experience unbridled ingratiation as demeaning and unnecessary, so they avoid this behavior (Aiello *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, employees marked by low levels of deference to leaders' authority may be less inclined to work actively to please organizational authorities with ingratiation activities, due to their belief that everyone is equal, so authorities are not worthy of exceptional efforts to sing their praises (Carsten *et al.*, 2010; Liu and Shi, 2017). *Ceteris paribus*, employees' deference to leaders' authority should spur their propensity to leverage their discretionary individual energy, derived from their desire to comply with the people in charge, as upward ingratiation behaviors.

H1. There is a positive relationship between employees' deference to leaders' authority and their upward ingratiation behavior.

Invigorating role of dispositional greed

We expect employees' dispositional greed to strengthen this positive relationship. This predicted moderating role speaks to the anticipated *attractiveness* of the outcomes that may arise when employees apply their discretionary, leader-oriented energy, stemming from their subservience (Bolino *et al.*, 2014; Quinn *et al.*, 2012), to offer flattery to organizational authorities. According to the notion of resource gain spirals, as proposed by COR theory (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2015), employees who can draw from pertinent energy resources are more inclined to engage in certain work behaviors if doing so enables them to achieve outcomes that produce even more resource gains. Greedy employees should have a strong desire to leverage their desire to please organizational leaders into upward ingratiation behavior, because they anticipate positive reactions by these leaders, in accordance with their personal adage that "more is always better" (Hirschfeld and Van Scotter, 2019;

Seuntjens *et al.*, 2015). Employees with less greedy tendencies instead may be generally less obsessed with the possibility of receiving positive benefits from organizational leaders, so their desire to comply with leaders' interests and preferences is less salient for stimulating their upward ingratiation behaviors (Haslam and Reicher, 2017). These employees may deem it less attractive to apply their sense of deference to leaders' authority by relentlessly complimenting them.

H2a. The positive relationship between employees' deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behaviors is moderated (invigorated) by their dispositional greed.

Invigorating role of social cynicism

According to COR theory, upward ingratiation behaviors should be more likely if employees sense that these responses are *acceptable* (Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000), which may depend on their social cynicism or extent to which they hold cynical beliefs about how people in higher positions use their power (West *et al.*, 2015). Admittedly, employees might be less willing to "degrade" themselves by engaging in upward ingratiation behaviors when they cynically believe powerful leaders do not deserve such efforts (Leung *et al.*, 2010). However, our theoretical focus addresses how such social cynicism influences employees who *already* have a strong desire to please organizational leaders, such that they channel their existing desires into flattery directed at these leaders. Employees cynical about exploitation by powerful leaders likely believe there is little they can do to stop the leaders from taking advantage of their privileged positions (Leung and Bond, 2004), in which case the process of converting a desire to please organizational authorities into upward ingratiation efforts appears both appropriate and acceptable. These employees similarly may be convinced of the value of affirming strong power differentials in their organization (Alexandra *et al.*, 2017) and thus gain personal fulfillment, and related resource gains, when they apply the discretionary energy they derive from their desire to submit to the preferences of organizational leaders to engage in upward ingratiation behaviors (Guzman and Espejo, 2015; Haslam and Reicher, 2017).

H2b. The positive relationship between employees' deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behaviors is moderated (invigorated) by their social cynicism.

Invigorating role of informational justice

Employees' perception of informational justice reflects their belief that members of the organization are frank and transparent in providing information (Kernan and Hanges, 2002). We predict an invigorating effect of this belief, because it suggests that subservient employees possess greater *ability* to generate positive outcomes when they allocate their individual energy resources to upward ingratiation behaviors (Colquitt, 2001). The perceived need to engage in upward ingratiation behavior arguably might be lower in benevolent organizational environments that provide complete information, but our theoretical focus is on the *incremental* role that employees' deference to leaders' authority plays in spurring their upward ingratiation behavior. According to COR theory, people devote discretionary energy to specific behaviors only if they can access pertinent resources that increase the effectiveness of their applications (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). If information spreads throughout the organization easily and transparently, employees who already have a strong desire to comply with the preferences of organizational leaders can gain a deeper understanding of these preferences (Wo *et al.*, 2015), which should enhance their capacity to package their flattery in ways that will be well-received by leaders. Similarly, access to pertinent organization-wide information helps subservient employees position themselves

appropriately to be able to convince organizational colleagues of the *collective* benefits that might be generated from their upward ingratiation efforts (Scott and Judge, 2009). Therefore

H3a. The positive relationship between employees' deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behaviors is moderated (invigorated) by their perceptions of informational justice.

Invigorating role of forgiveness climate

Finally, employees' beliefs that they work in a forgiveness climate may function as triggers of the translation of their deference to leaders' authority into upward ingratiation behavior. This contingent factor speaks to the sense of *safety* that employees experience in doing so, because they have confidence in a protective organizational environment (Fehr and Gelfand, 2012). Similar to the case of informational justice, organizational climates that embrace forgiveness might diminish the perceived need for upward ingratiation behavior, but we focus on the role of such climates in stimulating employees who already have subservient tendencies to undertake such behavior. According to COR theory (Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000), a supportive organizational climate – which may arise when employees perceive that people in their organization are willing to forgive potentially controversial behaviors – may increase motivations to *allocate* pertinent energy to desired flattery targeted at organizational leaders, because the negative consequences that would arise if the flattery were ill received by the leaders are less of a concern (Klotz *et al.*, 2018; Liden and Mitchell, 1988). A forgiving organizational climate accordingly may reduce subservient employees' fears that their upward ingratiation behaviors backfire and lead to accusations of inappropriate manipulation attempts, whether by the targets of their efforts (leaders) or their peers (Bowler *et al.*, 2019; Guchait *et al.*, 2016). Conversely, if employees believe that people in their organization do not overlook mistakes easily, they might be unwilling to channel the discretionary energy that comes with their subservient tendencies into upward ingratiation behaviors, due to their fears of possible criticisms of the deceptive nature of their behaviors (Carlson *et al.*, 2011).

H3b. The positive relationship between employees' deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behavior is moderated (invigorated) by their perceptions of a forgiveness climate.

Research method

Sample and data collection

To test the study hypotheses, we collected survey data among employees who work in a large banking organization based in Mozambique. This organization operates in different subsectors, including retail and corporate banking. The focus on one specific organization in one industry reduces the risk of unobserved differences in internal functioning or pertinent market characteristics. For example, the financial sector in Mozambique is marked by high market pressures and limited job opportunities, in line with its difficult economic climate (Dibben *et al.*, 2015; Gradin and Tarp, 2019; Jones and Tarp, 2015), so employees may worry about the possibility of losing their jobs and perceive relatively greater merit in complimenting organizational leaders, as a tactic to help safeguard their job positions. From this perspective, this empirical setting is highly relevant for addressing how and when employees' desire to obey organizational leaders may spur deliberate efforts to sing their praises.

After obtaining support from the organization's senior management, we requested the participation of 400 employees, randomly drawn from an employee list provided by the

organization's HR department. A pilot version of the survey was pretested with a limited set of five employees who did not participate in the actual data collection. Their input contributed to the readability of the surveys. The working language of the organization is Portuguese, so we used translation-back-translation to develop the survey (Brislin *et al.*, 1973). That is, the survey questions were first written in English, then translated into Portuguese by a bilingual translator. To ensure the quality of the translation, diminish cultural bias and identify any discrepancies, this Portuguese version was back-translated into English by another bilingual translator. After some minor discrepancies were resolved, the survey was finalized and administered in Portuguese.

Several steps were undertaken to protect participants' rights and reduce the likelihood of social desirability or acquiescence biases (Spector, 2006). The invitation statement that accompanied the survey emphasized that all answers would be guaranteed complete confidentiality. Not only would the organization have no knowledge of who participated, but only aggregate findings would ever be included in any research output. We also highlighted that there were no good or bad answers and that the answers to the same questions were likely to vary across respondents. We received 312 completed responses, for a response rate of 78%. Among the respondents, 47% were women, and they had worked for their organization for an average period of 12 years.

Measures

The measurement items for the focal constructs came from previously validated scales and used seven-point response categories that ranged from 1 ("complete disagree") to 7 ("completely agree").

Upward ingratiation behavior. To measure the extent to which employees expressed praise and flattery in their interactions with organizational authorities, we used four items from Bolino and Turnley's (1999) original scale of ingratiation behavior, with a precise focus on the extent to which such behavior is targeted at organizational authorities [3]. Consistent with our theoretical focus, the survey clarified, in a statement that preceded the measurement items that the term "organizational authorities" captured organizational leaders in general, including respondents' immediate supervisor or any other organizational members who operate at higher levels than themselves. Two sample items were, "I use flattery and favors to make organizational authorities like me more" and "I compliment organizational authorities so they will see me as likable" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.92). Self-assessments of such behaviors are consistent with prior research on upward ingratiation and influence (e.g. Baron and Tang, 2009; Lu *et al.*, 2019; O'Neil, 2004).

Deference to leaders' authority. We assessed employees' desire to submit to the wishes of organizational authorities with a four-item deference scale (Liu and Shi, 2017). Similar to the case of upward ingratiation behavior, our conceptual focus is on how employees seek to comply with organizational leaders in general, rather than just their direct supervisor, so we again clarified this focus in a statement that preceded the survey items. Employees rated their agreement with items such as, "I am willing to obey organizational authorities unconditionally" and "I am willing to sacrifice my interests in order to fulfill the interests of organizational authorities" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.76).

Dispositional greed. We measured employees' eagerness to have or get more with a seven-item scale of dispositional greed (Seuntjens *et al.*, 2015). For example, employees indicated whether "I always want more" and "Actually, I'm kind of greedy" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.83).

Social cynicism. To measure employees' cynical beliefs about people in power, we applied a four-item scale of social cynicism (Leung *et al.*, 2010). For example, employees indicated whether "Powerful people tend to exploit others" and "Kind-hearted people are easily bullied by people in power" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86).

Informational justice. A five-item scale of informational justice (Colquitt, 2001) assessed the extent to which employees believed that people in their organization were fair in their information provision. Two measurement items were: “People in my organization are candid/frank in their communications with me” and “People in my organization communicate details in a timely manner” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.91).

Forgiveness climate. To assess the extent to which employees believed that they operated in a forgiving organizational climate, we relied on a three-item scale of perceived organizational forgiveness (Guchait *et al.*, 2016). For example, participants reported their agreement with the following statements: “People in my organization are forgiving of each other’s errors, mistakes, and offenses” and “People in my organization do not hold grudges” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.91).

Control variables. The statistical models accounted for the effects of five control variables: employees’ gender (1 = female), education (1 = secondary, 2 = college, non-university, 3 = bachelor, 4 = masters, 5 = doctorate), organizational tenure (in years), job level (1 = line worker, 2 = supervisor, 3 = management) [4] and job function (operational, commercial or administrative, with the last category used as the base category). The extent to which employees expect that they will be successful in their ingratiation efforts may depend on their gender, how much education they have enjoyed, their level of organization-specific experience, their hierarchical position or the type of job that they perform (Liden and Mitchell, 1988; Rai, 2009; Sibunruang and Tolentino, 2016; Singh *et al.*, 2002).

Construct validity. The fit of a six-factor measurement model, obtained through confirmatory factor analysis, was adequate: $\chi^2(309) = 711.89$, confirmatory fit index = 0.90, Tucker–Lewis index = 0.98, incremental fit index = 0.90, and root mean squared error of approximation = 0.07. Further, each of the items had very strong factor loadings on its respective constructs ($p < 0.001$), which indicated convergent validity (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988). We also found evidence of discriminant validity; the fit of the models of the 15 different unconstrained construct pairs, in which correlations between two constructs were free to vary, was significantly better than the fit of the associated constrained models in which correlations between the constructs were set equal to 1 ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} > 3.84$, $p < 0.05$; Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

Common method bias. Concerns about the presence of common bias were assessed with two diagnostic tests. First, Harman’s one-factor test revealed that the focal constructs – upward ingratiation behavior, deference to leaders’ authority, dispositional greed, social cynicism, informational justice and forgiveness climate – accounted for only 28% of the total variance in the data. In addition, the aforementioned six-factor model offered superior fit compared with a one-factor model in which all measurement items loaded on one construct ($\chi^2(15) = 2,360.70$, $p < 0.001$). From a theoretical angle, concerns about relying on a common respondent tend to be significantly diminished for conceptual frameworks that include multiple moderating effects, as in this research study; it is highly unlikely in such a scenario that participants can guess what the hypotheses might be and thus to force their answers to map with these intuitive predictions (Simons and Peterson, 2000).

Results

We provide the zero-order correlations between the study’s focal constructs and their descriptive statistics in Table 1, as well as the findings from the hierarchical moderated regression analyses in Table 2. Model 1 included the control variables, Model 2 added deference to leaders’ authority, Model 3 added the direct roles of the four moderators and Models 4–7 added the deference \times dispositional greed, deference \times social cynicism, deference \times informational justice, and deference \times forgiveness climate interaction terms, respectively. Previous research recommends including multiple moderating effects in separate regression equations, to avoid the risk of masking true moderating effects

Table 1.
Correlations and
descriptive statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Upward ingratiation behavior	0.292**											
2. Deference to leaders' authority	0.249**	0.318**										
3. Dispositional greed	0.016	0.305**	0.425**									
4. Social cynicism	0.047	0.209**	0.256**	0.070								
5. Informational justice	0.179**	0.324**	0.194**	0.051	0.378**							
6. Forgiveness climate	-0.218**	-0.073	-0.225**	-0.158**	-0.055	-0.088						
7. Gender (1 = female)	-0.089	-0.073	-0.051	-0.093	-0.066	-0.016	0.133*					
8. Education	0.043	0.102	0.156*	0.053	0.243**	0.049	-0.104	-0.184**				
9. Organizational tenure	-0.114	-0.006	-0.072	-0.169**	0.237**	0.019	-0.036	0.098	0.310**			
10. Job level	-0.082	-0.090	-0.041	0.061	0.055	0.019	-0.073	0.012	0.083	0.009		
11. Operational function	0.023	0.031	0.019	-0.071	-0.032	-0.033	0.121*	0.015	-0.128*	-0.074	-0.613**	
12. Commercial function	2.783	4.066	4.264	4.540	4.949	4.036	0.472	2.474	12.150	1.821	0.228	0.561
Mean	1.842	1.496	1.492	1.721	1.503	1.683	0.500	0.874	8.728	0.661	0.420	0.497
Standard deviation												

Note(s): $N = 312$. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Gender (1 = female)	-0.716***	-0.662***	-0.605**	-0.578**	-0.597**	-0.595**	-0.592**	-0.573**
Education	-0.067	-0.048	-0.074	-0.073	-0.077	-0.062	-0.108	-0.090
Organizational tenure	0.012	0.007	0.005	0.000	0.005	0.003	0.001	0.000
Job level	-0.342*	-0.319*	-0.325*	-0.290*	-0.331*	-0.318*	-0.315*	-0.301*
Operational function ^a	-0.446	-0.335	-0.276	-0.271	-0.328	-0.215	-0.213	-0.239
Commercial function	-0.089	-0.070	-0.096	-0.105	-0.099	-0.061	-0.072	-0.072
H1: Deference to leaders' authority		0.303***	0.289***	0.283***	0.292***	0.305***	0.278***	0.288***
Dispositional greed			0.211**	0.212**	0.207**	0.216**	0.207**	0.208**
Social cynicism			-0.180**	-0.155*	-0.137*	-0.171**	-0.160*	-0.125
Informational justice			-0.046	-0.022	-0.034	-0.014	-0.042	-0.008
Forgiveness climate			0.071	0.070	0.085	0.064	0.090	0.088
H2a: Deference to leaders' authority × Dispositional greed				0.132***				0.070
H2b: Deference to leaders' authority × Social cynicism					0.107***			0.064 [†]
H3a: Deference to leaders' authority × Informational justice						0.087*		0.039
H3b: Deference to leaders' authority × Forgiveness climate							0.113**	0.069
R ²	0.068	0.129	0.169	0.202	0.198	0.185	0.192	0.225
Change in R ²		0.061***	0.040**	0.033***	0.029***	0.016*	0.023**	0.056***

Note(s): *N* = 312; unstandardized coefficients. [†]*p* < 0.10; **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001 (two-tailed)

^aAdministrative function serves as the base category

Table 2.
Regression results
(dependent variable:
upward ingratiation
behavior)

(e.g. Covin *et al.*, 2006; De Clercq, 2021; Zahra and Hayton, 2008). As Aiken and West (1991) recommend, the constructs were first mean-centered, before their respective product terms were calculated. The variation inflation factor for each estimated regression coefficient was lower than a conservative cut-off value (Studenmund, 1992, p. 5), so multicollinearity was not a concern.

Model 1 indicated that female employees were less likely to ingratiate with organizational leaders, compared with their male counterparts ($\beta = -0.716, p < 0.001$) and upward ingratiation behavior was more common among employees who operated at lower job levels ($\beta = -0.342, p < 0.05$). This latter finding might imply that employees at lower operational levels expect *relatively* greater benefits from praising higher-ranked organizational leaders. Consistent with the baseline Hypothesis 1, the discretionary energy derived from a desire to defer to organizational leaders spurs employees' propensity to use flattery toward them, as revealed by the positive relationship in Model 2 between deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behaviors ($\beta = 0.303, p < 0.001$).

In relationships that are outside the theoretical scope of our proposed conceptual framework, Model 3 revealed a direct positive relationship between dispositional greed and upward ingratiation behavior ($\beta = 0.211, p < 0.01$), a direct negative relationship in the case of social cynicism ($\beta = -0.180, p < 0.01$) and no direct relationships for informational justice ($\beta = -0.046, ns$) or forgiveness climate ($\beta = 0.071, ns$). The first relationship may reflect the ability of greedy employees to meet personal goals through flattery, whereas the second relationship may arise because cynically oriented employees consider it degrading to try to impress organizational leaders with flattery (Leung *et al.*, 2010). With regard to the non-significance of the third and fourth relationships, we posit that pairs of contrary effects might balance each other out, in both scenarios. On the one hand, consistent with the proposed moderating effect logic, transparent and forgiving organizational environments may spur upward ingratiation behavior by diminishing the associated challenges, such as a lack of comprehension of how best to flatter organizational leaders or concerns of being accused of being self-serving, respectively. On the other hand, these favorable organizational environments may reduce the underlying perceived need to overload organizational leaders with praise and flattery [5].

Models 4–5 indicated support for the hypothesized moderating effects of the two personal resources: Dispositional greed ($\beta = 0.132, p < 0.001$) and social cynicism ($\beta = 0.107, p < 0.001$) both invigorated the positive relationship between deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behaviors. The likelihood that employees' desire to submit to the whims of organizational authorities would translate into deliberate efforts to praise these authorities was higher among employees who were greedier (Hypothesis 2a) and more cynical (Hypothesis 2b). Models 5–6 similarly provided support for the hypothesized invigorating effects of the two organizational factors. The positive relationship between deference and upward ingratiation behaviors was stronger at higher levels of informational justice ($\beta = 0.087, p < 0.05$) and a forgiveness climate ($\beta = 0.113, p < 0.01$). The likelihood that employees' increasing desire to obey organizational leaders unconditionally enhanced their upward ingratiation behaviors thus grew greater when they believed that organization-wide information provision was fair (Hypothesis 3a) and that people in the organization did not hold grudges against those who make mistakes (Hypothesis 3b). We present these interaction effects visually in Figures 2–5, revealing the relationship between deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behaviors at high and low levels of the respective personal and organizational factors.

Post hoc analysis

Even if the estimation of multiple interaction terms in a single model tends to mask true moderating effects, a comprehensive model can provide some evidence for the robustness of the focal results, to the extent that the signs of the product terms align with those in the

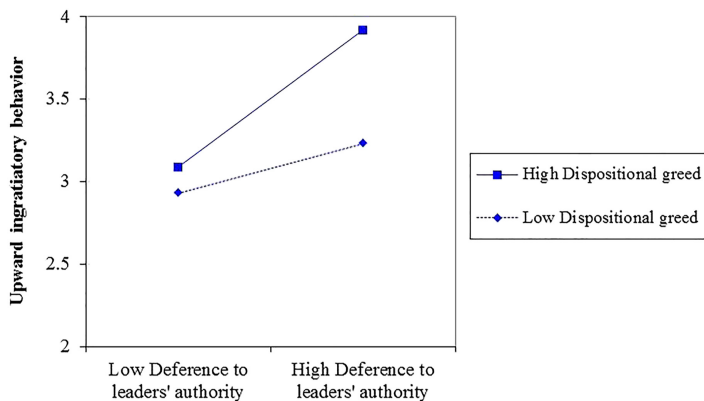


Figure 2. Moderating effect of dispositional greed on the relationship between deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behavior

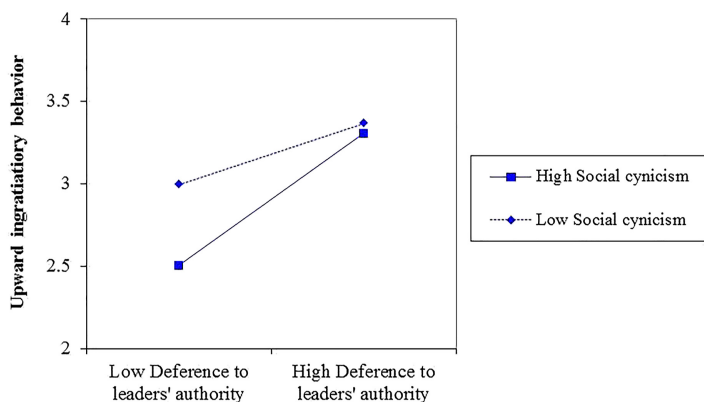


Figure 3. Moderating effect of social cynicism on the relationship between deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behavior

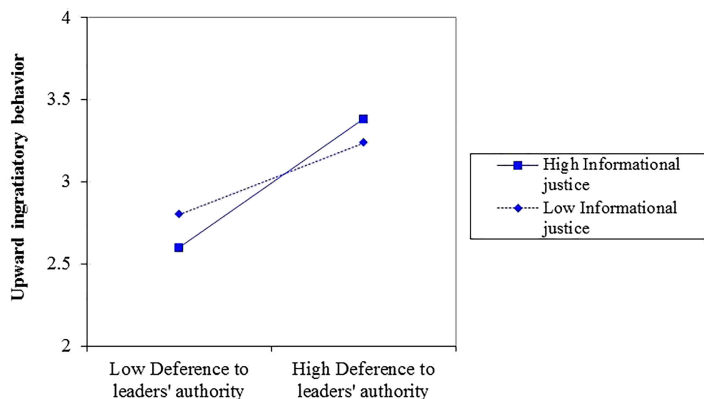
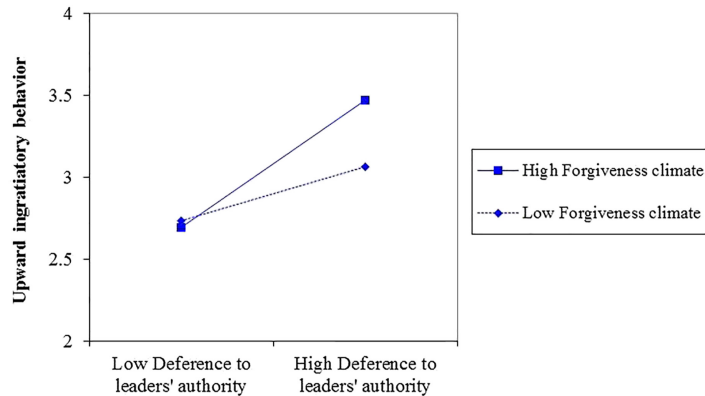


Figure 4. Moderating effect of informational justice on the relationship between deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behavior

Figure 5. Moderating effect of forgiveness climate on the relationship between deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behavior



models that estimate one product term at a time (Covin *et al.*, 2006; De Clercq and Pereira, 2019, 2021). Therefore, we calculated Model 8 (Table 2), in which only one of the four interaction terms was (weakly) significant (deference to leaders' authority \times social cynicism; $\beta = 0.064, p < 0.10$); more critically though, the *signs* of each of the four terms were positive, in line with the findings of Models 4–7. The significance of the product terms in Models 4–7 but not in Model 8 offers evidence that each (mean-centered) product term conveys distinct meaning, when the effects of the other three terms are accounted for (De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia, 2020).

In more detail, Models 4–7 estimate the relationship between deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behavior at non-mean values of a specific moderator, but Model 8 reveals the impact of each moderator in a multidimensional space that is constrained to the mean values of the other three moderators. For example, the moderating influence of dispositional greed in Model 8 reflects a scenario in which social cynicism, informational justice and forgiveness climate (mean-centered in their respective productive terms) operate at their mean values. The moderating effect of dispositional greed in Model 4 instead entails the complete range of values for social cynicism, informational justice and forgiveness climate. The non-significance of the product terms in Model 8 indicates, in essence, that each of the moderating influences depends on the effects of the other moderators (Aiken and West, 1991; De Clercq, 2021). Continued research could adopt configurational approaches to assess the degree to which employees' access to an "ideal" configuration marked by high scores on all four moderators, might reinforce the process by which deference to leaders' authority translates into greater upward ingratiation behavior (Vorhies and Morgan, 2003).

Discussion

Previous HRM research has recognized the efforts that employees undertake to create favorable perceptions among other members, through their impression management activities. It explicates that such behaviors can take different shapes, such as self-promotion (Molleman *et al.*, 2012), feedback-seeking behavior (Hsieh and Huang, 2018) or, as is the focus of this study, upward ingratiation (Clarke *et al.*, 2022). Upward impression management behaviors might target direct supervisors, but they also can extend to include other persons with authority who operate at higher levels in the organization (Segrest *et al.*, 2020). Consistent with prior research, we purposefully investigate this broad set of organizational authorities (De Clercq *et al.*, 2021) to examine an unexplored determinant of

upward ingratiation efforts toward them, namely, employees' desire to comply with the preferences of these authorities (Liu and Shi, 2017). Extant HRM research implies that expectations of compliance generate persistent discrimination in contemporary workplaces (Arifeen and Syed, 2020), but it has not considered how a desire to comply with the preferences of organizational authorities may translate into flattery.

As specific contributions to prior research, this article (1) examines how employees' deference to leaders' authority spurs their ingratiation with organizational authorities, even if these behaviors might be ill received by some leaders or peers and (2) explicates the conditions in which this translation is more likely, due to pertinent personal and organizational resources. The paucity of research on this topic is striking, in light of widespread acknowledgment that work activities that seek to put employees in a positive light tend to be influenced by employees' effective management of their available resources (Brouer *et al.*, 2016; Liden and Mitchell, 1988), as well as the associated likelihood that these activities get perceived as attractive or viable (Quinn *et al.*, 2012). Consistent with COR theory, we have theorized that upward ingratiation behavior is more likely among employees who are energized by a desire to comply with the wishes of organizational authorities. This process also should be more forceful when they are greedy and cynical or believe that people in their organization are fair and forgiving. The empirical findings align with these theoretical predictions.

Extant HRM research has shown that deliberate efforts to evoke favorable evaluations from organizational authorities may generate advantages for employees, in the form of positive leader evaluations (Molleman *et al.*, 2012), or risk, in the form of accusations that their efforts are inappropriate or deceptive, whether from the leaders or from organizational colleagues who worry they will be excluded from similar leader support if they do not offer similar flattery (Bowler *et al.*, 2019). A unique theoretical insight that this study provides for HRM scholarship is that employees' concerns about these negative side effects may become less relevant, to the extent that they can gather discretionary energy and fuel their existing desire to subvert their own interests for those of organizational authorities (Liu and Shi, 2017). A critical aspect herein, according to the premises of COR theory, is that subservient employees anticipate additional resource gains when they dedicate their individual energy resources to behaviors that compliment and flatter organizational leaders (Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000). Those resource gains might take the form of a sense of personal satisfaction or beliefs that leaders are deserving of their ingratiation efforts (Bolino *et al.*, 2014; Geertshuis *et al.*, 2015).

This study also contributes to HRM research by pinpointing *triggering* roles of pertinent personal and organizational resources in converting deference to leaders' authority into upward ingratiation behaviors. As predicted by the concept of resource gain spirals (Hobfoll, 2001), leveraging a desire to submit to the whims of organizational authorities into flattery targeted at these authorities is more likely if employees possess or have access to resources that strengthen their motivation or ability to exploit their energy reservoirs this way (Scott and Judge, 2009). Notably, the resources we study complement one another in this stimulating influence, on two fronts. First, two are personally held (dispositional greed and social cynicism), while the other two capture employees' beliefs about how their organization operates (informational justice and forgiveness climate). Second, they reflect the desirability or feasibility of achieving positive *outcomes* from applying discretionary energy to upward ingratiation behaviors (dispositional greed and informational justice) but also the extent to which this application *process* seems acceptable and safe (social cynicism and forgiveness climate). With these insights, this study enriches HRM research on the dynamics between employees and organizational leaders, by detailing how the former's desire to defer to the latter stimulates such behavior more forcefully when they (1) regard this translation as an attractive means to fulfill their greedy wishes, (2) have cynical beliefs that people tend to

abuse their power, (3) anticipate access to pertinent information that supports their successful upward ingratiation and (4) can count on a protective organizational climate that makes the process less risky.

In summary, deference to leaders' authority is an important but hitherto overlooked driver of upward ingratiation behavior and establishing this role offers a complement to prior HRM research on how factors such as Machiavellianism or high-quality leader relationships (Segrest *et al.*, 2020) shape employees' dedicated impression management activities. Moreover, the detailed consideration of the four, distinct resources under study – dispositional greed, social cynicism, informational justice and forgiveness climate – informs HRM scholars about the *indirect* instead of direct effects of these resources for stimulating pertinent work behaviors (Alexandra *et al.*, 2017; Belle and Cantarelli, 2017; Cheung, 2013; Guchait *et al.*, 2016). These resources, whether individually possessed or accessed from the organizational environment, trigger and steer discretionary energy, gained from employees' desire to please authorities, toward deliberate efforts to compliment organizational leaders.

Limitations and future research

This study has some shortcomings, which provide opportunities for continued investigations. First, its cross-sectional research design creates a possibility of reverse causality. Our arguments are anchored in the well-established framework of COR theory – which emphasizes that employees are motivated to apply their discretionary resource bases to activities that can generate even more resource gains (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) – yet employees' success in pleasing organizational leaders with compliments and flattery might fuel their conviction that these leaders deserve unconditional dedication or obedience. We also propose the leveraging influence of resource gains, manifested as a sense of personal fulfillment that subservient employees anticipate when they engage in upward ingratiation behaviors (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Further longitudinal studies could measure this intermediate mechanism more formally, as well as outline the short- and long-term, positive and negative effects of employees' upward ingratiation efforts, as informed by leaders' and peers' reactions.

Second, our theoretical focus was on the connection between employees' deference to the authority of organizational leaders in general and their upward ingratiation behaviors targeted at these same leaders, instead of the dyadic relationship between employees and their immediate boss. As mentioned, this focus aligns with both real-world behaviors and previous HRM research that acknowledges how employees' efforts to leave positive impressions include targets such as immediate supervisors, supervisors of those supervisors or top management (Clarke *et al.*, 2022; Ferris and Hochwarter, 2011; Segrest *et al.*, 2020). More generally, this focus on organizational authorities is consistent with the argument that the benefits that subservient employees may expect from their upward ingratiation behaviors likely are greater to the extent that the targets span a wider set of organizational actors (Ferris *et al.*, 2019). Future research could investigate the relative strength of the connection between deference and upward ingratiation, according to whether the targets are limited to immediate supervisors or extend to organizational authorities in general and the potency of the theorized moderators in strengthening this connection.

Third, our focus on two personal (dispositional greed and social cynicism) and two organizational (informational justice and forgiveness climate) resources as catalysts of the positive relationship between deference to leaders' authority and upward ingratiation behaviors could be expanded by investigations of other features. Personal characteristics that also might function as triggers include employees' self-enhancement motives (Yun *et al.*, 2007), persuasion self-efficacy (Ng and Lucianetti, 2016), or extraversion (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2015); organizational context features could include perceptions of organizational politics

(Varela-Neira *et al.*, 2018), exposure to despotic leadership (Naseer *et al.*, 2016) or organizational rewards that emphasize short-rather than long-term performance (Shields, 2016). We hope for studies that compare the relative strength of these additional personal and contextual factors, as well as examine whether the roles of the four focal resources that we study persist, even after controlling for their effects.

Fourth, by dedicating our study to one organization that operates in one industry (banking) in one country (Mozambique), we avoid concerns about the effects of unobserved organizational, industry or country differences. Even though our theoretical arguments are industry-neutral, it would be useful to perform comparisons; arguably, the strength of the tested relationships might vary, but their nature should not. For example, in industries characterized by high levels of competitive rivalry, employees might be especially worried about job security (Hassard and Morris, 2018), so they could be particularly eager to leverage their deference to leaders' authority by performing devoted ingratiation behaviors to please organizational leaders. In a similar vein, two notable cultural features of Mozambique (high power distance and high collectivism) may make it particularly likely that subservient employees go out of their way to ingratiate with organizational authorities (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Cross-country studies that explicitly examine how specific cultural values influence employees' upward ingratiation efforts, in response to their desire to comply, would be interesting, especially if they also could investigate the role of corresponding values at an *individual* level, such as employees' power distance or collectivistic orientations (Yang, 2019).

Practical implications

This study has relevant implications for HRM practice. Upward ingratiation behaviors, even if potentially useful for employees in the short run, can be counterproductive in the long term, because they require significant energy that employees then cannot direct to productive activities (Klotz *et al.*, 2018). The findings, as reported herein, show HR managers that the danger that these behaviors arise is particularly high among employees with a strong desire to submit to people in authority (Carsten *et al.*, 2010). Employees with such subservient inclinations might become easily complicit with an organizational mentality that grants precedence to superfluous compliments rather than true performance (Vigoda and Cohen, 2002). This problem could intensify if employees are reluctant to acknowledge their subservient preferences, for fear of being rubberstamped as weak or vulnerable (Haslam and Reicher, 2017). The HR managers accordingly must make it very clear that a blind desire to obey authority is counterproductive and undesired, particularly when it escalates and leads employees to engage in excessive, time-consuming praise and flattery.

This study also provides HR managers with critical insights into other factors that *reinforce* this escalation. Specifically, the situation is most problematic when deference to leaders' authority combines with personal tendencies to want more, cynicism about how leaders behave, beliefs that the organization provides information readily and confidence that their mistakes will be forgiven. As for the two personal factors (dispositional greed and social cynicism), HR managers should be aware, when making recruitment and retention decisions, that a combination of a desire to please others with greedy or cynical tendencies may generate a counterproductive spiral that fuels employees' engagement in extensive flattery with organizational leaders. The two organizational factors (informational justice and forgiveness climate) are not harmful in and of themselves, and firms generally should benefit from ensuring fair information provision and acts of forgiveness. But what our study highlights is that HR managers also need to be cognizant of the risk that subservient employees may regard these organizational features as opportunities to match their desire for obedience with counterproductive ingratiation efforts, instead of more productive behaviors. They need to issue clear cautions to employees: Abusing pertinent information or a forgiveness climate by

engaging in more upward ingratiation behaviors to meet their own subservient desires is likely to backfire and hinder their productive work activities, with detrimental implications for the well-being of their organization and its constituents, including themselves.

Conclusion

This study contributes to HRM research by showing how residual energy, derived from a blind deference to leaders' authority, can spur employees to go out of their way to appeal or appear likable to organizational leaders. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in the presence of specific factors that make the associated outcomes more attractive (dispositional greed) or feasible (informational justice), as well as those that make the underlying process more acceptable (social cynicism) or safer (forgiveness climate). In this sense, this study may serve as a bridge to continued investigations of how organizations can keep employees from excessive ingratiation efforts, which might seem to have short-term benefits but that backfire over time, because they are predicated on the value of personal favors instead of diligent, productive work.

Notes

1. [Clarke et al. \(2022\)](#) provide a comprehensive overview of various upward influence behaviors.
2. As we explicate in more detail when developing the hypotheses, even if the two organizational characteristics (informational justice and forgiveness climate) could be conceived of as supportive contextual elements that diminish the perceived need to engage in upward ingratiation behavior directly, our conceptual focus is on their *moderating* roles in stimulating employees who are already subservient to engage in such behavior.
3. [Baron and Tang \(2009\)](#) relied on the same four-item scale to measure the extent to which entrepreneurs engage in ingratiation behavior, but they labeled this scale as "social skills."
4. The survey specified that the line worker category involved no supervisory responsibilities, the supervisor category had some supervisory responsibilities and the management category had significant supervisory responsibilities.
5. We thank a reviewer for raising this useful insight.

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