How power and trust explain procedural fairness effects on self-esteem

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When authorities enact procedures in a fair manner, they positively influence their followers' self-esteem. Building on fairness heuristic theory and sociometer theory, we predicted that this effect is mediated by trust in the authority because procedural fairness heightens trust as an indicator of a valued relationship with an authority who will protect followers' interests. Trust should, subsequently, heighten followers' self-esteem as an indicator of their value to the organisation. Further, we expected this mediated effect to emerge particularly among high power authorities because high power makes the authority more effective in influencing follower status. These predictions were tested in a scenario experiment in which authority power and procedural fairness were orthogonally manipulated. Trust indeed mediated procedural fairness effects on self-esteem and power moderated the trust-self-esteem path. These results strongly suggest that self-esteem reflects a positive relationship with an authority capable of influencing follower status. (*Netherlands Journal of Psychology, 65*, 118-126).

Keywords: procedural fairness; power; trust; self-esteem

As social beings, people are constantly assessing their relationships with others (Leary, 2005), particularly with authorities who can wield power over them (Fiske, 1993; Kramer, 1996; Rusbult & van Lange, 2003). One important way to assess how authorities, representing the organisations that we are members of, view and evaluate us is by observing how fairly they enact decision-making procedures (i.e., procedural fairness;

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Lind, 2001; Tyler & Lind, 1992). People find such procedural fairness information relevant because it communicates how they are valued as an organisation member (Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001), consequently making such information also relevant to their self-esteem (e.g., Koper, van Knippenberg, Bouhuijs, & Vermunt, 1993; Tyler & Blader, 2002). Follower self-esteem is an important variable for organisations to take into account because self-esteem positively influences important organisational outcomes such as organisational citizenship behaviour (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004; Pierce & Gardener, 2004).

The present paper aims to increase our understanding of *why* procedural fairness positively

influences follower self-esteem by addressing the mediating role of trust in the authority in this process. Trust is arguably an important variable in this process because it reflects a positive relationship with authorities who are believed not to abuse their power (e.g., by making followers less valued as organisation members; Lind, 2001; van den Bos, Wilke & Lind, 1998). Further, a positive relationship with important group members is known to raise self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

As a stringent test of this idea, we also address the moderating role of authority power in this process. Power gives authorities the opportunity to effectively influence how followers are valued in the organisation, such as by promoting followers, or conversely, by excluding them from the organisation (Lind, 2001). This makes authority power an important issue for followers in their relationships with organisational authorities (Fiske, 1993; Kramer, 1996; Rusbult & van Lange, 2003; van Dijke, De Cremer & Mayer, 2009).

Procedural fairness, self-esteem, and trust

Procedural fairness refers to the perceived fairness of the decision-making procedures used to allocate outcomes (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Tyler, 1988). Interdependent relationships make up a large part of our social reality (Rusbult & van Lange, 2003, Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), making fair treatment by organisational authorities one of our greatest concerns (De Cremer, van Knippenberg, van Dijke, & Bos, 2004). One example of an important procedural rule, which will be the focus of the present research, is whether authorities make decisions in an unbiased manner (e.g., excluding their personal benefits; see Leventhal, 1980, for a discussion of procedural fairness criteria).

Research shows that fairly enacted procedures increase organisation members' self-esteem (e.g., Koper et al., 1993; Tyler & Blader, 2002; De Cremer, van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, Mullenders, & Stinglhamber, 2005; see also Brockner, Heuer, Siegel, Wiesenfeld, Martin, Grover, et al., 1998; De Cremer et al., 2004; De Cremer & Sidikides, 2008; Wiesenfeld, Swann, Brockner, & Bartel, 2007). According to the group value model (Tyler & Lind, 1992), the use of fair procedures indicates to followers that they are valued and worthy members of the group or organisation. Thus, when an authority treats us procedurally fairly, such as by excluding personal benefits from decision-making procedures, this signals that the authority is concerned about our status in the organisation (De Cremer & Tyler, 2005b). As status represents one's social evaluation by others, it stands to reason that procedural fairness influences follower self-esteem because it influences their status (see De Cremer & Sedikides, 2008, for empirical evidence).

In fact, research on the relationship between self-esteem and membership of social collectives shows that feeling valued as a part of a social collective raises self-esteem because it satisfies a general and fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gillespie & Greenberg, 2005). More precisely, according to sociometer theory, self-esteem is an indicator of the extent to which an individual feels valued by others (Leary, Gallagher, Fors, Buttermore, Baldwin, Kennedy, et al., 2003; Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004). Hence, sociometer theory provides a theoretical rationale for why feeling valued through the fair enactment of procedures positively influences followers' self-esteem.

The essential role of procedural fairness for organisation members' feelings of being valued as organisation members is also advocated in fairness heuristic theory (FHT). FHT notes that people, in their interaction with organisation authorities, face a fundamental social dilemma (Lind, 2001; see also Kramer, 1996). This dilemma results because group and organisation memberships offer a sense of identity and belongingness and opportunities for improved outcomes (i.e., people place great value on being part of social collectives). However, people fear that such group memberships also include possible exploitation and identity damage by abusive or rejecting group authorities. FHT argues that in order to assess whether authorities can be trusted not to abuse their power, they closely attend to the fairness with which authorities enact decision-making procedures (Lind, 2001, Lind, Kray, & Thompson, 2001; van den Bos et al., 1998). In support of this idea, procedural fairness displayed by an authority has been shown to positively influence levels of trust in the authority (Brockner, Siegel, Daly, Tyler, & Martin, 1997; see also Aryee, Budhwar, & Chen, 2002; De Cremer, 2004; Konovsky & Pugh, 1994).

Interestingly, leadership research shows that trust in the leader positively influences follower self-esteem (Chen, Aryee, & Lee, 2005; Dyne, Vandewalle, Kostova, Latham, & Cummings, 2000). Building on FHT and the group value model of procedural fairness, we therefore argue that trust in the authority explains (mediates) the effect of procedural fairness on followers' self-esteem. More specifically, if procedures are fair and the authority is thus trusted, the authority-follower relationship should be experienced as positive and enjoyable (De Cremer & Tyler, 2005a). As such, because people's self-esteem is for an important part derived from positive relationships with important others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000, see also Tajfel & Turner, 1986), trust in the authority can potentially explain why procedural fairness positively influences self-esteem. In other words, the positive relationship with the authority representing the organisation affirms interpersonal bonds and feelings of being valued, which, according to

sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), should enhance self-esteem.

The moderating role of power

One important characteristic of authorities representing the organisation is that they can wield power over organisation members. We define power in line with influential definitions (e.g. French & Raven,1959; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003) such that an actor has power over a target when this actor has the ability to influence the target's behaviour in the desired direction by providing or withholding valuable resources, even if the target resists such attempts. Hence, power is built on the target's dependence on the power holder, for instance for promotion opportunities, or to avoid negative outcomes, such as exclusion from the organisation.

Authorities vary in the power they have in the organisation and their actions will thus also vary in the implications they have for followers. High power authorities arguably have power to influence followers' perceptions of their value to the organisation because they have a relatively large say in who enters the organisation (e.g., by means of their influence in procedures for recruiting and selecting new organisation members), who gains status in the organisation (e.g., by influencing procedures designed to decide who is promoted to a higher organisational level) and ultimately, by determining who stays with the organisation. Low power authorities will often have much less of a say in such decisions.

Taking into account the power that an authority has within the organisation suggests that followers' reactions to procedural fairness may differ accordingly. In support of this idea, van Dijke and colleagues (2009) showed that authority power moderated the effect of procedural fairness on trust in the authority such that particularly for high power authorities, procedural fairness positively influenced the extent to which they were trusted by their followers. This supports the idea that procedures enacted by powerful authorities are more influential in shaping authority evaluations, presumably because high power authorities are more likely to be held accountable for the fairness with which procedures are enacted.

Our present focus on self-esteem as an outcome variable makes it necessary to recognise that power may not only moderate the relationship between procedural fairness and follower trust in the authority, but also the relationship between trust in the authority and follower self-esteem. This is because a positive relationship with a group authority (as indicated by trust in the authority) may not necessarily translate into higher perceived value in the organisation and, thus, higher self-esteem. In fact, we expect that

particularly a positive relationship with a high power authority can potentially raise followers' value in the organisation and thus their self-esteem.

Overview of the present research

To summarise, the present research set out to study the *process* that explains why authorities who enact procedures in a fair manner positively influence their followers' self esteem (Koper et al., 1993 Tyler & Blader, 2002; see also Brockner et al., 1998; De Cremer et al., 2004; De Cremer et al., 2005; De Cremer & Sidikides, 2008; Wiesenfeld et al., 2007). We, first of all, argued that trust in the authority mediates this effect: Procedural fairness is known to positively influence trust in the authority (Lind, 2001, Lind et al., 2001 van den Bos et al., 1998), most likely because trust subjectively reflects followers' belief that authorities will protect their interests. Such a positive relation with the group authority, in turn, should increase self-esteem as an indicator of the extent to which people feel valued as members of social collectives (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). We thus predicted that the effect of authority's procedural fairness on followers' self-esteem is mediated by trust in the authority (Hypothesis 1).

Further, in line with previous work (van Dijke et al., 2009), we predicted that the effect of procedural fairness on trust in the authority is moderated by authority power such that procedural fairness particularly improves trust, and consequently follower self-esteem, when authorities have high, rather than low power (Hypothesis 2). We expect this because high power authorities are more likely to be held accountable for the fairness with which decision-making procedures are enacted. Finally, high authority power implies that such authorities can strongly influence followers' perceived value in the organisation because such authorities determine who enters the organisation, who is promoted in the organisation, and who exits the organisation. Having a trusting relationship with an authority is thus particularly influential in heightening follower self-esteem when the authority can actually influence one's status. Hence, we expect that the effect of trust in the authority on follower self-esteem is also moderated by authority power (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Sample and Procedure

We randomly assigned 96 female and 32 male Dutch Open University students (M_{age} = 39.85; *SD* = 10.00) to a 2 (authority power: high versus low) x 2 (authority procedural fairness: fair versus unfair) between-subjects design. The partici-

pants were contacted by email and invited to participate via the internet.

On the webpage of the experiment, the participants were asked to read a scenario. The participants were asked to imagine that they worked for the company 'MICROMAC' that specialised in buying and selling computer parts. For a while they had been participating in a selection procedure for an internal corporate training. This training would take up a lot of free time but taking the training was considered valuable because passing would make one eligible for a promotion and a higher salary. The selection procedure for the training involved a number of different elements as well as an interview with the supervisor.

In the *unfair procedure* condition participants were told that it was widely known that the supervisor often takes decisions that benefit him, even if that hurts others. In the *fair procedure* condition participants were told that it was widely known that the supervisor never takes decisions that benefit him if that hurts others. This manipulation was based on an established bias suppression manipulation, taken from De Cremer (2004), thus directly reflecting one important procedural fairness rule (Leventhal, 1980).

After this, the participants were told that, in order to select trainees, their supervisor and the executive board would have a meeting in which the final decision concerning who would be allowed to enter the training would be made. Then, our manipulation of supervisor power was introduced by telling half of the participants that their supervisor had the final say (*high power*) in the decision concerning who was selected and half that he was merely an advisor (*low power*) to the board which would decide for itself.

On having read the scenario, we assessed manipulation checks and dependent measures.

Manipulation checks and dependent measures

All items were assessed on five-point scales (1 = *completely disagree*; 5 = *completely agree*).
- To check the procedural fairness manipulation we asked the participants whether they agreed with 'I think the way my supervisor judges me is fair'
- To check the power manipulation we asked the participants whether they agreed with 'I think my supervisor has a lot of power in the organisation'
- Trust in the supervisor was measured with the five-item 'Trust in supervisors scale' (e.g., Scott, 1983). An example of an item is 'I am confident that if I make a mistake, my supervisor would be willing to 'forgive and forget'' (Cronbach's α = .90).
- Self-esteem was measured using Heatherton and Polivy's (1991) 'State social self-esteem scale'. An example of an item is 'I worry what other people think about me' (Cronbach's α = .78).

Results

Manipulation checks

A 2 x 2 ANOVA with procedural fairness and authority power as independent variables showed that unbiased authorities were considered fairer ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.71$) than biased leaders ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.69$): $F (1, 125) = 134.06$, $p < .001$. No main or interaction effects of our power manipulation were significant.

A 2 x 2 ANOVA with procedural fairness and authority power as independent variables showed that high power leaders were considered more powerful ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.88$) than low power leaders ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.75$): $F (1, 125) = 9.56$, $p < .01$. No main or interaction effects of leader fairness were significant.

Trust

A 2 x 2 ANOVA with procedural fairness and authority power as independent variables showed that unfair authorities were trusted less ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.62$) than fair authorities ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.58$): $F (1, 120) = 105.26$, $p < .001$. However, no main or interactive effect of power was significant (Table 1).

Self-esteem

In line with our ideas, a 2 x 2 ANOVA with procedural fairness and authority power as independent variables showed that procedurally unfair authorities decreased organisation member's self-esteem ($F(1, 120) = 3.80$, $p = .05$), but only when they had high power ($F (1, 120) = 9.11$, $p < .01$) and not when authorities had low power ($F(1, 120) = 0.01$, $p = .92$). Table 1 presents the means for self-esteem in the different levels of procedural fairness and authority power.

Moderated mediation

To test our hypotheses regarding trust in the authority as a mediator of the effect of procedural fairness on self-esteem (as moderated by authority power) we used a method developed by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), which allows formal testing of mediated moderation (see Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005). Specifically, we estimated whether trust in the authority mediates the effect of procedural fairness on followers' self-esteem and whether power moderates (1) the effect of procedural fairness on trust (the mediator) and (2) the effect of trust on self-esteem (the outcome variable; for a visual representation of the hypothesised effects see Figure 1).

Table 1	Effects of authority power and procedural fairness on trust in the authority and followers' self-esteem.		
Dependent variable		*Procedural fairness*	
	Authority power	*Unfair*	*Fair*
Trust	High	2.39 (0.66)$_a$	3.60 (0.60)$_b$
	Low	2.49 (0.59)$_a$	3.54 (0.57)$_b$
	Mean	2.44 (0.62)$_a$	3.57 (0.58)$_b$
Self-esteem[c]	High	3.00 (0.52)$_a$	3.39 (0.59)$_b$
	Low	3.42 (0.52)$_a$	3.43 (0.44)$_a$
	Mean	3.21 (0.56)$_a$	3.41 (0.53)$_b$

Dependent variables were measured on five-point scales. Means on the same row that do not share subscript differ at $p < .01$. Standard deviations are in parentheses. [c]Mean self-esteem differed between high and low power at $p < .01$ when procedural fairness was unfair.
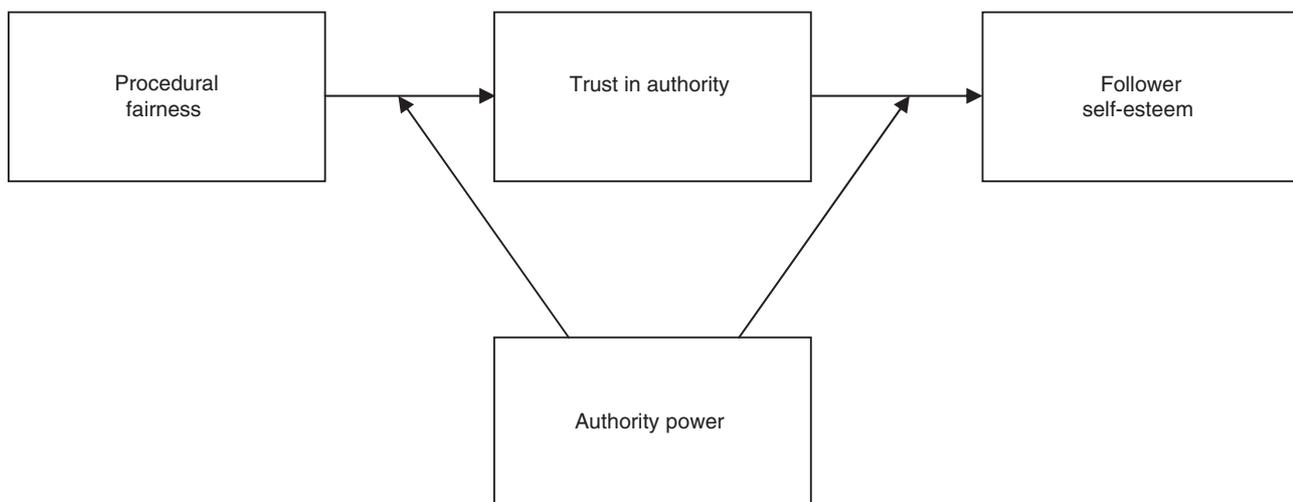
Figure 1
Model of the indirect effect of procedural fairness on follower self-esteem, via trust, moderated by power of the authority.

In line with the ANOVA presented above, this analysis showed that fairness affected trust ($b = 1.05$, $SE = 0.16$, $t = 6.42$, $p < .001$) but that leader power did not moderate the leader fairness-trust path (interaction $b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.22$, $t = 0.74$, $p = .46$). Hence, our second hypothesis was not supported. However, leader power did moderate the trust-self-esteem path ($b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.12$; $t = 2.37$, $p < .05$). Additionally, leader power had a significant main effect on self-esteem ($b = -1.06$, $SE = 0.36$, $t = -2.92$, $p < .01$.) Bootstrap estimates (using 5000 bootstrap samples) of the indirect effect of procedural fairness, via trust, on self-esteem showed that this effect was significant when the authority had high power (indirect $b_{high} = 0.28$, $SE = 0.12$; $z = 2.30$, $p < .05$) but not when the authority had low power (indirect $b_{low} = -0.02$, $SE = 0.12$;

$z = -0.24$, $p = .81$). This supports Hypothesis 1 and 3.

Discussion

Previous work has established that when authorities enact procedures in a fair manner, they positively influence their followers' self-esteem (De Cremer & Sedikides, 2008; De Cremer et al., 2005; Schroth & Shah, 2000; Tyler & Blader, 2002). The primary aim of the present research was to increase our understanding of *why* this occurs. We predicted that the effect of procedural fairness on self-esteem is mediated by trust in the authority because trust reflects a positive evaluation of the relationship with this author-

ity, indicating that the authority will protect the follower's interests as a valued organisation member. Because self-esteem reflects the extent to which people feel valued as members of a social collective (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), a valued relationship with an authority representing such a collective should explain (mediate) procedural fairness effects on self-esteem.

The argument concerning the procedural fairness, trust, and self-esteem relationship was built upon the idea that authorities enacting procedures actually *can* influence a follower's perceived value and status in the organisation (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002; van Dijke & De Cremer, 2008). In order to explicitly test this assumption, we also studied the moderating role of authority power in the effect of procedural fairness on self-esteem (via trust). We did this because high authority power implies that the authority can more effectively influence follower status by including or excluding and promoting the follower in the organisation. As expected, our findings indeed revealed that trust in the authority only influenced self-esteem positively when the authority had high power in the organisation. However, the results did not support our prediction that authority power would moderate the effect of procedural fairness on trust in the authority. In the following sections, we will discuss the implications and limitations of these findings.

Theoretical implications

The first theoretical implication of the current research is that follower's self-esteem reflects a positive relationship with an authority that represents the organisation. Previous work has extensively shown that procedural fairness communicates information about people's standing in the social collective (Schroth & Shah, 2000; Tyler, Degoey, & Smith, 1996; Tyler & Lind, 1992). The present research shows that self-esteem, as an indicator of being valued as an organisation member, is specifically related to trust in an important member of the organisation: an authority. When an authority enacts procedures in a fair manner, this is arguably interpreted as a sign that the authority will protect the follower's identity and values the follower (Brockner et al., 1997; De Cremer et al. 2005; Lind, 2001) so trust in this authority positively influences followers' self-esteem.

A second theoretical implication derives from the finding that particularly high (as opposed to low) power authorities affect their followers' self-esteem. This highlights the important role that authority power plays in influencing follower status in the organisation. Indeed, the present research is the first to explicitly test the idea that high power authorities strongly influence their followers' self-esteem because they determine for a large part who enters and leaves the organisation and who rises towards the top in the organisation. Indeed, the result of this aspect of authority power is that high power authorities influence follower self-esteem.

Practical implications

A first important practical implication of the present findings is that procedural fairness does not always matter. The results of the present research highlight that particularly high power authorities influence followers' self-esteem by enacting fair procedures. This is important information for organisations because self-esteem has been linked to important outcome variables that benefit the organisation, such as employees' organisational citizenship behaviour (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004; Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Because particularly high power authorities are viewed as being able to influence followers' perceived value to the organisation, and by that their self-esteem, such authorities should take this into account and explicitly focus on enacting procedures in a fair manner.

If authorities lack the power to influence followers' value in the organisation, they seem to affect their followers' self-esteem less and thus also presumably influence important organisational variables less strongly, such as employee organisational citizenship behaviour. It should be stressed, however, that this does not mean that low power authorities' procedural fairness is irrelevant: Although being fair as a low power authority may not influence followers' self-esteem, we found no moderating role for power on the procedural fairness-trust path. Acknowledging that the fairness with which authorities enact procedures influences their followers' trust in the authority, regardless of the authority's power, highlights the need for authorities to act in a procedurally fair manner. Interesting in this respect is that Skarlicki and Latham (2005) reviewed a number of studies that focused on the effects of structured fairness training for organisational authorities showing that authorities who are trained to be fair, are indeed perceived as more fair (Skarlicki & Latham, 1996), and this also results in increased follower organisational citizenship behaviour (Skarlicki & Latham, 1996, 1997; Skarlicki & Jones, 2002) and increased follower organisational commitment (Greenberg, 1999). In sum, organisational authorities can learn to act in a procedurally fair manner and the present results further stress why this is often of the highest importance.

Strengths and limitations

We found no support for our prediction that the effect of procedural fairness on trust in the authority would be moderated by authority power. In the present research, procedural unfairness always lowered trust. In this sense, the present findings are not in line with previous work by

van Dijke et al. (2009) who showed across a laboratory experiment and single- and multi-source field studies that power moderates the effect of procedural fairness on trust in the authority. It should, however, be noted that other work also found no role for proxies of power (decision control and hierarchical distance from the top) as moderators of procedural fairness on trust (Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995; Begley, Lee, & Hui, 2006). Our argument concerning the moderating role of procedural fairness on trust in the authority was based on whether this authority is held accountable for the unfairness (i.e., particularly high power authorities are viewed as controlling decision-making procedures). A possible explanation for why we did not find this moderating role of power is that our operationalisation of procedural fairness – whether the authority was biased towards his own interests or not – overrides this attribution because being self-interested is directly attributed to the authority.

A strength of the present research is that we used students of the Dutch Open University. These students are generally older than students of other universities (the mean age in our sample was 40). More importantly, they usually have abundant experience with functioning in work organisations and interacting with organisational authorities: The majority of the students have a job and most have at least a history of employment. Obviously, this is often not the case with most university students. This makes our

sample well suited for a scenario that refers to an organisational setting, a setting that is obviously of prime importance for the study of fairness. Scenario studies are valuable because this methodology brings hypothesis testing close to actual psychological processes as they take place in groups and organisations (van Knippenberg, Martin, & Tyler, 2006), and our choice of participants makes us confident in the validity of this approach for the present purposes.

Conclusions

To conclude, the present research shows that the well-established effect of procedural fairness on self-esteem is explained by trust in the authority. Better understanding of this process is important because a follower's self-esteem influences important outcome variables, such as organisational citizenship behaviour and organisational commitment, which benefit the organisation as a whole. Moreover, our findings also clearly show that power has a moderating role in this process. Our results thus strongly suggest that self-esteem reflects a positive relationship with an authority who can actually influence followers' status and perceived value in the organisation and who can thus be trusted to protect the identity of organisation members. This makes the present research a unique contribution to the field and a vantage point for further research.

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