

**The Dark Side of Humor :
A Mechanism of Leader Humor Style and Organizational Cynicism**

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of negative leader humor on employee outcomes, focusing on distrust and organizational cynicism through the lens of Social Exchange Theory (SET). While positive leader humor enhances employee well-being and organizational performance, negative humor can lead to adverse effects. Existing research primarily highlights positive outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding the negative consequences of leader humor. Our research addresses this gap by investigating how negative leader humor influences employee attitudes and behaviors, proposing that it increases distrust, which in turn fosters organizational cynicism. We also explore the moderating role of belief in reciprocity on these relationships. Data were collected from team-based employees in Indonesia across three waves and analyzed using SPSS and AMOS.

Keywords: Leader humor, distrust, organizational cynicism, social exchange theory, belief in reciprocity.

Word count : 1566

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Introduction

In today's fast-paced and ever-evolving organizational landscape, the essence of effective leadership extends beyond mere goal achievement. It encompasses the ability to inspire, energize, and connect with a diverse workforce on a deeper level. Leaders who effectively engage with others can significantly enhance employees' attitudes towards work and their overall sense of well-being, which in turn boosts organizational performance (Alimo et al, 2008). One impactful aspect of leadership is the use of humor. Leader humor, defined as a key interpersonal resource used by leaders to foster positive emotions and enhance social exchanges within teams, is increasingly recognized for its importance in promoting organizational effectiveness. Research demonstrates that leader humor can trigger positive emotions, improve leader-member exchanges, and enhance subordinate organizational citizenship behaviors, contributing to overall organizational success (Cooper et al, 2018). This kind of humor is often referred to as positive humor.

However, humor is a double-edged sword; while it can have positive effects, inappropriate or negative humor can lead to adverse outcomes. Negative humor has been linked to organizational deviance, lower employee voice, and reduced performance (Neves and Karangolar, 2020; Liu et al, 2020). Much of the existing literature emphasizes the relationship between leader humor and employee outcomes, focusing mainly on the positive effects. Limited research has examined the negative aspects of leader humor on employee outcomes. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how negative humor impacts employee outcomes based on Social Exchange Theory (SET).

A key principle of SET is the concept of reciprocity, which suggests that the actions of one party in a social exchange influence the responses of the other party (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In the original model of SET, social exchange relationships evolve when employers take care of employees, leading to beneficial consequences related to advantageous and fair transactions, strong relationships, effective work behavior, and positive employee attitudes (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). However, more recent studies propose that negative exchanges can lead to negative outcomes when individuals are treated poorly (Cropanzano et al, 2017). This study aims to make a theoretical contribution by examining the effects of negative humor on employee outcomes through the negative mechanisms in SET.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Social Exchange Theory and Leader Humor

Social Exchange Theory (SET) has been studied extensively as a conceptual model for understanding workplace behavior, specifically the dynamics of interpersonal relationships in the workplace. According to SET, interactions are usually seen as interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person, with the potential to generate high-quality relationships (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Recent SET models share common features: an actor's initial treatment of a target individual, the target's reciprocal responses (both attitudinal and behavioral) to the action, and

relationship formation (Cropanzano et al, 2017). The initial phase begins when an organizational actor, usually a supervisor or coworker, treats a target individual positively or negatively. This interaction leads to reciprocal responses, where the target individual reciprocates with either positive or negative behaviors, referred to as positive and negative hedonic value (Cropanzano et al, 2017).

Humor is defined as any expression of intended amusement that can be used to enhance oneself or one's relationships with others (Martin et al, 2003). Humor to enhance oneself can function as a method of coping with stress or as a defense mechanism (Dixon, 1980; Lefcourt & Martin, 1986; Freud, 1928). Conversely, humor to enhance relationships relates to interpersonal dynamics, increasing others' feelings of well-being, reducing conflicts, strengthening ties, and increasing attractiveness (Martin et al, 2003).

Humor can be benign and benevolent or potentially detrimental or injurious (Martin et al, 2003). Positive, non-hostile humor can affirm self and others, enhancing interpersonal cohesiveness and attraction (affiliative humor) (Martin et al, 2003), and maintain a humorous perspective in the face of stress (self-enhancing humor) (Kuiper, Martin, & Olinger, 1993). In contrast, humor can manipulate others through ridicule (aggressive humor) (Janes & Olson, 2000) or amuse others at one's own expense to gain approval (self-defeating humor) (Martin et al, 2003).

Based on SET, humor can serve as initiating actions from the actor. The type of humor used by leaders, whether positive or negative, significantly influences members' attitudes and behaviors. While much research has focused on positive humor, studies on negative humor are scarce. Yam et al. (2018) found that leader humor can be a double-edged sword, eliciting both positive and unforeseen negative behaviors. Their study primarily used social information processing theory, leaving a gap in understanding through SET. According to SET, negative humor will lead to negative outcomes by shaping different types of relationships during leader-follower interactions. Negative humor results in low-quality relationships, thereby producing negative outcomes.

Hypothesis 1: Negative leader humor style is positively related to distrust.

A key principle of SET is the concept of reciprocity, suggesting that the actions of one party in a social exchange influence the responses of the other party (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Positive actions lead to positive outcomes, while negative actions result in negative outcomes (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Cropanzano et al, 2017). Leader humor serves as actions leading to consequential responses from employees.

In SET, negative exchanges, such as the use of negative humor, can disrupt the balance of perceived reciprocity in the workplace (Cropanzano et al, 2017). These negative exchanges create perceptions of unfairness and disrespect, leading to negative attitudes (Tepper, 2000). Employees develop negative attitudes toward the organization, believing it lacks integrity, and exhibit negative affect and critical behaviors toward it (Dean et al, 1998). Organizational cynicism is defined as a negative affect toward the organization, comprising three dimensions: (1) a belief that the organization lacks integrity; (2) negative affect toward the organization; and (3) tendencies to disparaging and critical behaviors toward the organization consistent with these beliefs and affect (Dean et al, 1998).

Research on distrust includes team-level distrust (Lowry et al, 2015) and interpersonal distrust between leaders and members (Cerne et al, 2014; Keyton & Smith, 2009). Interpersonal distrust underlies ineffective social exchanges, where members reciprocate negative humor with negative attitudes. When members distrust their leaders, they doubt the organization's policies implemented by leaders, likely leading to disparaging and critical behaviors toward the organization.

Negative leader humor, involving sarcasm, ridicule, or demeaning comments, creates a hostile work environment and fosters alienation among employees. This disrupts reciprocity, leading to negative exchanges that undermine trust between employees and leaders, perceived as disrespect and lack of support. This distrust fosters organizational cynicism, characterized by negative affect toward the organization, beliefs that the organization lacks integrity, and tendencies to engage in disparaging and critical behaviors (Dean et al, 1998). When employees distrust their leader, they develop cynical attitudes towards the organization, leading to disengagement and reduced organizational commitment. We argue that distrust is positively related to organizational cynicism and has an indirect effect between negative humor and organizational cynicism.

Hypothesis 2: Distrust is positively related to organizational cynicism.

Hypothesis 3: Negative leader humor style will have a positive indirect effect on organizational cynicism via distrust.

Belief in Reciprocity

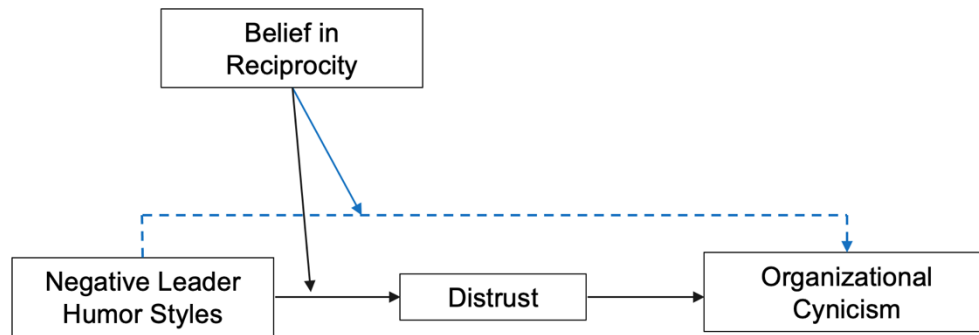
Reciprocity, a central tenet of SET, is the tendency to reciprocate behavior, rewarding helpful behavior and retaliating against harmful behavior (Perugini, 2003). Belief in reciprocity shapes how individuals respond to others' actions (Perugini et al., 2003). This concept is crucial in moderating both positive and negative interactions, highlighting the expectation that actions will be met with corresponding responses (Lyons & Scott, 2012). Positive actions elicit positive responses, while harmful actions lead to retaliation. This sensitivity to balanced social exchange is pertinent in leader-member interactions (Gouldner, 1960; Blau, 1964).

Members who perceive negative work events, such as negative leader humor, are more likely to respond with negative attitudes due to their sensitivity to maintaining a balanced exchange. Negative humor, characterized by sarcasm or ridicule, disrupts the workplace environment, leading to alienation and diminished trust (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Employees may view such negative behavior as a breach of respectful interaction, prompting retaliation through organizational cynicism. Belief in reciprocity motivates members to seek balanced negative exchange by responding to negative leader humor with negative attitudes towards the organization, enhancing the indirect relationship between negative leader humor and organizational cynicism via distrust (Dineen, Lewicki, & Tomlinson, 2006; Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006).

Hypothesis 4a: Belief in reciprocity moderates the direct relationship between negative leader humor style and distrust.

Hypothesis 4b: Belief in reciprocity moderates the indirect relationship between negative leader humor style and organizational cynicism via distrust.

Figure 1. Research Framework



Methodology

Data will be collected in three waves from Indonesian workers in teams, with intervals of two weeks between each survey. Following the principle of voluntariness, we will ask respondents about their willingness to participate and inform them that this is a three-wave survey. We will separate the measurement times of predictor and criterion variables to control common method bias.

In the first wave, participants will complete a questionnaire on negative leader humor styles. In the second wave, they will fill out a questionnaire on distrust, and in the last wave, they will complete questionnaires on organizational cynicism and belief in reciprocity. Data analysis will be performed using SPSS and AMOS.

Measurements

Seven-point Likert scales ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree" will be used. We will adapt Martin et al. (2003) sixteen-item scale to measure negative leader humor style, Min & Zickar (2023) fifteen-item scale to measure distrust, Brandes et al. (1999) eleven-item scale to measure organizational cynicism, and Perugini et al. (2003) nine-item scale to measure belief in reciprocity.

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