

The Role of Inclusive Leadership on Employee Voice Under Balanced Reciprocal Regulation

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Abstract: This study examines the moderating role of a balanced reciprocal atmosphere in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee voice behavior in Chinese organizational contexts. Grounded in social exchange theory, we propose that inclusive leadership fosters both promotive and prohibitive voice behaviors, with balanced reciprocity strengthening these relationships. Using survey data from 368 employees in Chinese enterprises, we employ SPSS, PROCESS, and AMOS24 for analysis. Results indicate that (1) inclusive leadership positively influences promotive and prohibitive voice behaviors, and (2) a balanced reciprocal atmosphere enhances these effects. The findings highlight the importance of inclusive leadership and reciprocal norms in encouraging employee voice, offering practical insights for organizational management and future research.

Keywords: Inclusive leadership; Employee voice behavior; Balance reciprocity.

1. Introduction

Against global integration, economic transformation and COVID-19, employee voice (voluntary constructive ideas) [1] is vital for organizations but hindered by risks or hierarchy.

Inclusive leadership (openness, accessibility, appreciation, Nembhard & Edmondson [2]), encourages voice via psychological safety [3]. Yet its mechanisms on promotive (improvements) and prohibitive (problems) voice, especially in non-Western contexts, are unclear, with cultural exchange norms (Western economic vs. Eastern social [4, 5]) affecting effectiveness.

This study, based on social exchange theory [6], explores how balanced reciprocity (cultural mutual obligation) moderates inclusive leadership-employee voice in Chinese organizations. Using 368 employee surveys analyzed via SPSS, PROCESS and AMOS24, it tests the model for both voice types.

Theoretically, it introduces balanced reciprocity as a moderator, clarifies inclusive leadership's mechanism and integrates Chinese-Western norms. Practically, it shows combining inclusive leadership and balanced reciprocity fosters voice, aiding multinationals and Chinese firms post-pandemic.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

This chapter systematically reviews the literature on inclusive leadership, balanced reciprocity, and employee voice behavior, and proposes research hypotheses based on the relationships among these variables. The discussion is structured into four sections: (1) inclusive leadership, (2) balanced reciprocity, (3) employee voice behavior, and (4) the hypothesized relationships among these constructs.

2.1. Inclusive Leadership

2.1.1. Concept and Development

Inclusive leadership was first introduced by Nembhard & Edmondson [2], who defined it as a leadership style that encourages subordinates to voice opinions, contribute suggestions, and participate in decision-making. Hollander [7]

emphasized its dynamic and harmonious nature, highlighting respect, tolerance, and mutual responsibility. Carmeli [8] further conceptualized it as relational leadership characterized by openness, availability, and accessibility. In the Chinese context, Zhu & Qian [9] defined inclusive leadership as a people-oriented approach that values diversity, encourages participation, and fosters open communication. Given this study's focus on Chinese organizations, Zhu & Qian's [9] definition is adopted.

2.1.2. Dimensions of Inclusive Leadership

Following Carmeli's [10] framework, inclusive leadership is operationalized through three dimensions:

Openness: Leaders actively listen to employees, encourage cross-departmental collaboration, and maintain transparent communication channels.

Availability: Leaders provide recognition, support innovation, and create a psychologically safe environment where employees feel valued.

Accessibility: Leaders engage in frequent interactions, encourage participation in decision-making, and offer timely support.

Chinese scholars [11] proposed an alternative four-dimensional model (openness, affinity, tolerance, support), but Carmeli's [10] model is preferred here due to its empirical validation in Chinese settings.

2.2. Balanced Reciprocity

2.2.1. Concept and Development

Reciprocity originates from anthropological studies on gift exchange [4]. Sahlins [4] classified reciprocity into three types:

Generalized reciprocity: Altruistic exchanges without immediate expectations of return.

Balanced reciprocity: Mutual, equal, and timely exchanges of benefits.

Negative reciprocity: Exploitative interactions where one party benefits at the other's expense.

Rabin [12] later distinguished between positive reciprocity (rewarding beneficial actions) and negative reciprocity (punishing harmful actions). This study focuses on balanced reciprocity, defined as timely and equitable exchanges between parties, aligning with Chinese cultural norms of

mutual obligation.

2.3. Employee Voice Behavior

2.3.1. Concept and Development

Employee voice behavior refers to proactive, change-oriented communication aimed at improving organizational functioning ([13, 1]). Liang [14] categorized it into:

Promotive voice: Constructive suggestions for improvement.

Prohibitive voice: Concerns about harmful practices.

Voice behavior is linked to organizational adaptability [15] and is considered a form of challenging organizational citizenship behavior [16].

2.3.2. Dimensions of Voice Behavior

Prior studies have measured voice behavior differently: Van Dyne [13] classified it as pro-social, defensive, or acquiescent. Liang [14] developed a promotive-prohibitive scale, which is adopted here due to its alignment with this study's objectives.

2.4. Hypotheses Development

2.4.1. Inclusive Leadership and Employee Voice Behavior

Inclusive leadership fosters psychological safety [17], encouraging employees to voice ideas without fear of retaliation. Thus:

H1: Inclusive leadership positively relates to promotive voice behavior (H1a: openness; H1b: availability; H1c: accessibility).

H2: Inclusive leadership positively relates to prohibitive voice behavior (H2a: openness; H2b: availability; H2c: accessibility).

2.4.2. Moderating Role of Balanced Reciprocity

Balanced reciprocity enhances trust and mutual obligation [18], strengthening the relationship between inclusive leadership and voice behavior. However, its effect may differ by voice type:

H3: Balanced reciprocity positively moderates the link between inclusive leadership and promotive voice (H3a: openness; H3b: availability; H3c: accessibility).

H4: For prohibitive voice, balanced reciprocity may weaken the effect of openness (H4a) but strengthen availability (H4b) and accessibility (H4c).

These hypotheses are grounded in social exchange theory, suggesting that reciprocity norms shape employee responses to leadership behaviors.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Framework

This study examines the influence of inclusive leadership on employee voice behavior within the Chinese workplace context, incorporating balanced reciprocity as a moderating variable. The proposed research model is illustrated in Figure 3-1.

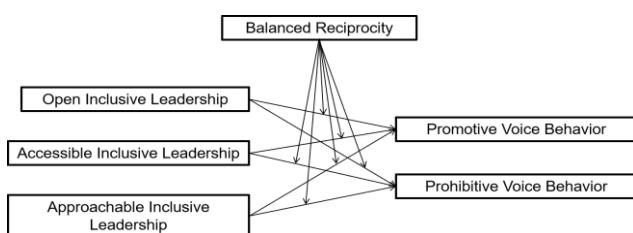


Figure 3-1. Research model schematic

3.2. Research Participants

The survey targeted employees with at least one year of work experience across diverse organizational settings, including state-owned enterprises, foreign-invested firms, and private companies of varying sizes. Participants spanned a broad age range, from early-career employees to seasoned professionals with over 30 years of experience. The duration of their working relationships with immediate supervisors ranged from one to eight years, ensuring variability in leadership dynamics and reciprocity perceptions.

Data collection was conducted via an online questionnaire, distributed to employees in multiple industries to enhance representativeness. The questionnaire comprised four sections: (1) demographic and organizational information, (2) perceptions of inclusive leadership, (3) self-reported voice behavior, and (4) balanced reciprocity within teams and organizations. To ensure response authenticity, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Out of 505 distributed questionnaires, 368 valid responses were retained after excluding 137 incomplete or inconsistent submissions, yielding a 72% effective response rate.

3.3. Measurement of Variables

All constructs were measured using established Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

3.3.1. Inclusive Leadership

Adapted from Carmeli [8], this 9-item scale assessed three dimensions: openness, availability, and accessibility of leaders.

3.3.2. Employee Voice Behavior

Liang's [14] 10-item scale measured two dimensions: promotive voice (proactive suggestions) and prohibitive voice (concerns about workplace issues).

3.3.3. Balanced Reciprocity

Wu's [5] 16-item scale evaluated three reciprocity types: generalized, balanced, and negative reciprocity.

3.3.4. Control Variables

Demographic controls included employee gender, age, supervisor gender, tenure with supervisor, and organizational type/size to account for potential confounding effects.

3.4. Data Analysis Methods

Data were analyzed using SPSS and the PROCESS macro for the following tests:

3.4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were computed for all variables.

3.4.2. Reliability and Validity

Reliability: Assessed via Cronbach's α (acceptable ≥ 0.70).

Validity: Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and KMO-Bartlett tests (KMO > 0.60 ; $p < 0.05$ for Bartlett's sphericity) verified construct distinctiveness.

3.4.3. Correlation Analysis

Pearson's r identified bivariate relationships among key variables ($p < 0.05$ significance threshold).

3.4.4. Regression and Moderation Analysis

Hierarchical regression tested the direct effect of inclusive leadership on voice behavior and the moderating role of balanced reciprocity. PROCESS Model 1 examined interaction effects with 5,000 bootstrap samples for robust confidence intervals.

This methodological approach ensures rigorous testing of

hypotheses while accounting for contextual and individual differences in the Chinese organizational setting.

4. Research Findings

This study examines the relationships among inclusive leadership, employee voice behavior, and balanced reciprocity through empirical analysis of survey data collected from Chinese enterprises. The research employed rigorous statistical methods to validate proposed hypotheses.

4.1. Sample Characteristics

The survey collected 368 valid responses (72% response rate) from employees across state-owned (47.3%), private (33.7%), joint-venture (6.8%), foreign-owned (5.7%), and partnership (6.5%) enterprises. Key demographic findings include:

Gender distribution: 40.8% male, 59.2% female employees

Leadership gender: 54.6% male supervisors, 46.4% female

Age distribution: 41.6% over 36 years old, with decreasing proportions in younger cohorts

Tenure with supervisor: 66.1% worked together for 1-5 years

Company size: 65.2% from SMEs (<100 employees)

4.2. Measurement Reliability

All scales demonstrated excellent internal consistency:

Inclusive leadership ($\alpha=0.985$, 9 items)

Employee voice behavior ($\alpha=0.989$, 10 items)

Balanced reciprocity ($\alpha=0.981$, 16 items)

Table 4-1. Reliability analysis

Study variables	Cronbach's alpha	Items
Inclusive leadership	0.985	9
Employees' voice behavior	0.989	10
Balanced reciprocity	0.981	16

4.3. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlations revealed significant relationships:

Available inclusive leadership strongly correlated with promotive voice ($r=0.821$, $p<0.01$).

Accessible inclusive leadership showed strongest association with prohibitive voice ($r=0.820$, $p<0.01$).

Balanced reciprocity correlated highly with both voice behaviors ($r=0.813-0.865$).

Table 4-2. Correlation analysis of research variables

Variable	mean value	Standard deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Open	2.25	.536						
2. Available	5.55	1.702	.141**					
3. Accessible	5.57	1.714	.143**	.957**				
4. Balance and reciprocity	5.35	1.588	.018	.731**	.751**			
5. promotive voice behavior	5.61	1.615	.155**	.821**	.841**	.813**		
6. prohibitive voice behavior	5.61	1.564	.146**	.793**	.820**	.865**	.943**	

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; p < 0.001

4.4. Validity Assessment

KMO values confirmed factorability:

Inclusive leadership (0.955), Employee voice behavior (0.954), Balanced reciprocity (0.955)

Table 4-3. KMO and Bartlett Test

	Inclusive leadership	Employees' voice behavior	Balanced reciprocity
KMO Value	0.955	0.954	0.955

4.5. Hypothesis Testing

4.5.1. Direct Effects

Table 4-4. Results of regression analysis

	promotive employee voice behavior	prohibitive employee voice behavior
Open and inclusive leadership	0.104	0.085
Available inclusive leadership	0.185	0.079
Accessible and inclusive leadership	0.611	0.670
Adj R ²	0.712	0.675
△ R ²	0.709	0.675
F	299.368***	251.494***

Regression analysis supported:

All dimensions of inclusive leadership positively predicted

promotive voice ($\beta=0.104-0.611$, $p<0.05$). Accessible leadership showed strongest effect on prohibitive voice ($\beta=0.670$, $p<0.05$).

4.5.2. Direct Impact of Inclusive Leadership on Prohibitive Employee Voice Behavior

To examine Hypothesis 2 regarding the influence of inclusive leadership on prohibitive employee voice behavior, regression analysis was conducted. As presented in Table 4-4, open inclusive leadership exhibited a significant positive effect on prohibitive voice behavior ($B = 0.085$, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, available inclusive leadership ($B = 0.079$, $p < 0.05$) and accessible inclusive leadership ($B = 0.670$, $p < 0.05$) also demonstrated significant positive impacts. These results confirm Hypothesis 2, supporting the proposition that inclusive leadership is positively associated with prohibitive employee voice behavior.

4.5.3. Moderating Effect of Balanced Reciprocity on Inclusive Leadership and promotive Employee Voice Behavior

Hypothesis 3, which posits the moderating role of balanced reciprocity in the relationship between inclusive leadership and promotive employee voice behavior, was tested using Process. Table 4-5 reveals that, with a sample size of 5,000 and a 95% confidence interval, the interaction terms between balanced reciprocity and all three dimensions of inclusive leadership (open, available, and accessible) were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating a robust moderating effect.

Further analysis of Figures 4-1 to 4-3 demonstrates that both low and high levels of balanced reciprocity significantly

strengthen the positive relationship between inclusive leadership (across all dimensions) and promotive voice behavior. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported, confirming that balanced reciprocity positively moderates the link between inclusive leadership and promotive employee voice.

Table 4-5. Interaction items under the premise of promoting employee voice behavior and actions

Product term	F	df1	df2	p
Open and inclusive leadership and balanced reciprocity	22.102	1.000	364.000	0.000
Available inclusive leadership and balanced reciprocity	11.951	1.000	364.000	0.001
Accessible and inclusive leadership and balanced reciprocity	11.767	1.000	364.000	0.001

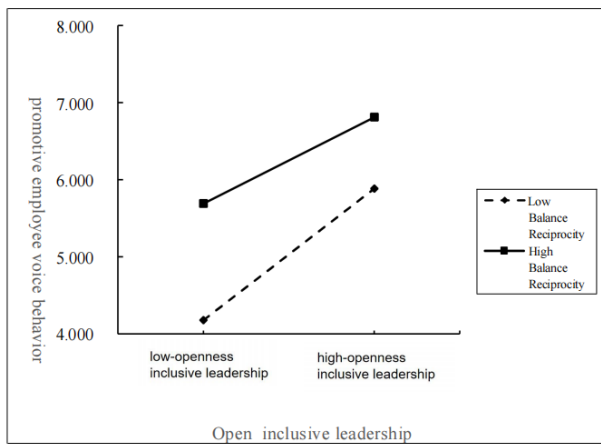


Figure 4-1. Effects of Balanced Reciprocity on Open Inclusive Leadership and promotive Employee Advocacy

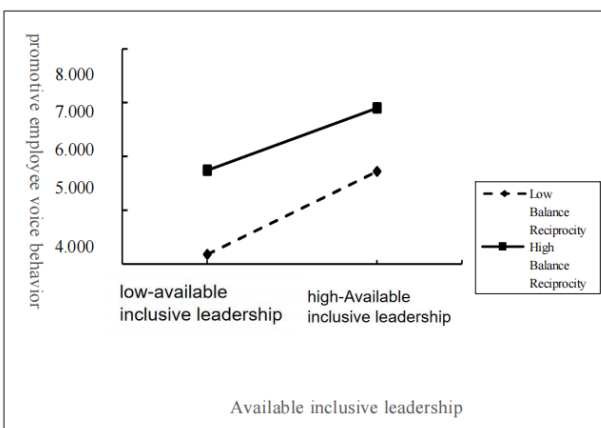


Figure 4-2. Effects of Balanced Reciprocity on Available Inclusive Leadership and promotive Employee Advocacy Behavior

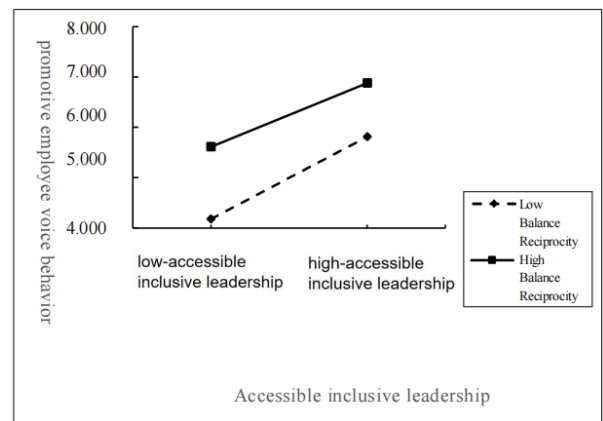


Figure 4.3. Effects of Balanced Reciprocity on Accessible Inclusive Leadership and promotive Employee voice behavior

4.5.4. Moderating Effect of Balanced Reciprocity on Inclusive Leadership and Prohibitive Employee Voice Behavior

The moderating role of balanced reciprocity in Hypothesis 4 was similarly tested using Process. Table 4-8 shows that the interaction terms between balanced reciprocity and the three inclusive leadership dimensions were significant ($p < 0.05$) under the same analytical conditions ($N = 5,000$, 95% CI), affirming a substantial moderating effect.

Figures 4-4 to 4-6 illustrate that balanced reciprocity—at both low and high levels—positively enhances the association between inclusive leadership (open, available, and accessible) and prohibitive voice behavior. Consequently, Hypothesis 4 is validated, indicating that balanced reciprocity significantly and positively moderates the relationship between inclusive leadership and prohibitive employee voice behavior.

Table 4-6. Interaction terms under the premise of prohibitive employee voice behavior

Product term	F	df1	df2	p
Open and inclusive leadership and balanced reciprocity	30.647	1.000	364.000	0.000
Available inclusive leadership and balanced reciprocity	19.956	1.000	364.000	0.000
Accessible and inclusive leadership and balanced reciprocity	18.014	1.000	364.000	0.000

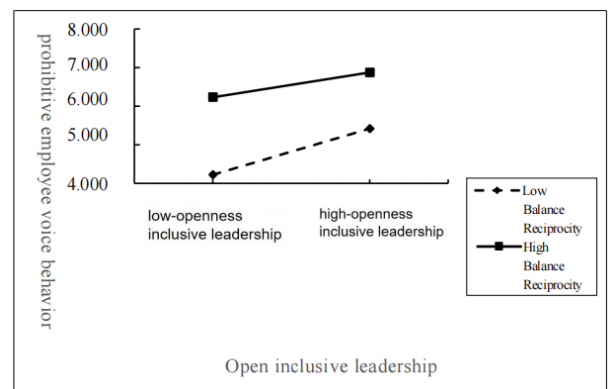


Figure 4-4. The Effects of Balanced Reciprocity on Open Inclusive Leadership and prohibitive Employee voice behavior

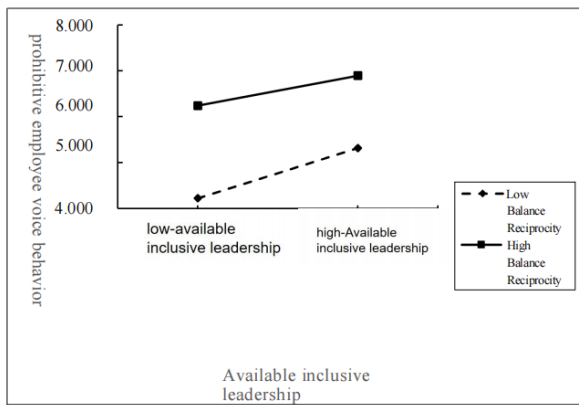


Figure 4-5. Effects of Balanced Reciprocity on Available Inclusive Leadership and prohibitive Employee Advocacy Behavior

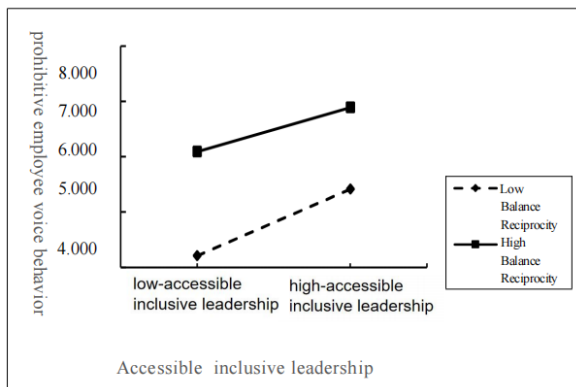


Figure 4-6. Effects of Balanced Reciprocity on Accessible Inclusive Leadership and prohibitive Employee voice behavior

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter presents the key findings and implications of the study, structured into two main sections. The first section summarizes the research conclusions, while the second provides managerial and practical recommendations based on the findings.

5.1. Key Findings

The study examines the impact of inclusive leadership on employee voice behavior, with a focus on the moderating role of balanced reciprocity. The hypotheses and corresponding results are summarized below:

5.1.1. Inclusive Leadership and Promotive Voice Behavior

Hypothesis 1 (Supported): Inclusive leadership positively influences promotive employee voice behavior.

1a: Open and inclusive leadership enhances promotive voice behavior.

1b: Available inclusive leadership facilitates promotive voice behavior.

1c: Accessible inclusive leadership encourages promotive voice behavior.

Inclusive leaders engage with employees, accept their input, and support their contributions, fostering a culture where employees actively suggest improvements.

5.1.2. Inclusive Leadership and Prohibitive Voice Behavior

Hypothesis 2 (Supported): Inclusive leadership positively affects prohibitive employee voice behavior.

2a: Open and inclusive leadership strengthens prohibitive

voice behavior.

2b: Available inclusive leadership supports prohibitive voice behavior.

2c: Accessible inclusive leadership encourages prohibitive voice behavior.

By reducing psychological barriers, inclusive leadership enables employees to voice concerns about organizational risks without fear of reprisal.

5.1.3. Moderating Role of Balanced Reciprocity on Promotive Voice

Hypothesis 3 (Partially Supported): Balanced reciprocity positively moderates the relationship between inclusive leadership and promotive voice behavior.

3a: Balanced reciprocity strengthens the effect of open inclusive leadership on promotive voice.

3b: Balanced reciprocity enhances the effect of available inclusive leadership on promotive voice.

3c: Balanced reciprocity reinforces the effect of accessible inclusive leadership on promotive voice.

A high level of balanced reciprocity fosters trust and efficient social exchange, amplifying employees' willingness to contribute constructive suggestions.

5.1.4. Moderating Role of Balanced Reciprocity on Prohibitive Voice

Hypothesis 4 (Mixed Support): Balanced reciprocity influences the relationship between inclusive leadership and prohibitive voice behavior.

4a: Balanced reciprocity negatively moderates open inclusive leadership's effect on prohibitive voice (Not Supported).

4b & 4c: Balanced reciprocity positively moderates available and accessible inclusive leadership's effect on prohibitive voice (Supported).

Contrary to expectations, open inclusive leadership did not weaken prohibitive voice under high reciprocity. Instead, a balanced and reciprocal environment may encourage employees to voice concerns despite perceived risks.

5.2. Managerial and Practical Implications

The results of this paper show that inclusive leadership style can positively promote employees' voice behavior, and the moderating variable of balance and reciprocity plays a positive role in it. The above research conclusions can bring some enlightenment to organizations on how to encourage employees to take voices in reality. The following are the voices of this article for organizations on promoting employees' voice behavior:

5.2.1. Recommendations to the organization

Organizations should establish a balanced, mutually beneficial corporate style early on (context - adapted), as it boosts employees' voice and organizational development. For rigid organizations lacking such an environment, style transformation must be gradual to prevent internal chaos from haste.

They also need to build voice - promoting systems and cultivate inclusive leaders. Inclusive leadership, which values employees' contributions, recognizes their worth and cares for their interests, encourages beneficial voice. Leaders can get regular inclusive leadership training. Internal management should foster a supportive atmosphere, such as rewarding constructive suggestions, setting fixed voice times, allowing anonymous voice if needed, and opening leapfrog communication channels.

5.2.2. Recommendations to leaders

Leaders should be open, accessible and available in front of employees. Openness means being willing to listen to new ideas, paying attention to new opportunities to improve work progress for employees, and discussing team goals and ways to achieve them with employees. Accessibility means that employees can report problems to leaders and discuss solutions to problems with team members. Availability refers to whether employees can step up and deal with problems when they encounter problems. Therefore, leaders and employees are required to form a benign two-way interaction and help each other in the team.”

6. Research Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations with relevant future research directions for voice behavior. Firstly, limited samples and China’s regional cultural differences may affect results. Future research should expand sample coverage across regions and conduct cross-regional comparisons.

Secondly, though enterprises were classified into private and state-owned ones, their impacts were not analyzed. Industry information was also uncollected. Subsequent studies should distinguish industries and enterprise types.

Thirdly, constrained by resources, this study only explored inclusive leadership, balanced reciprocity, and voice behavior. Future research may add moderating/mediating variables like employee trust.

Fourthly, original English scales may have translation deviations and misfit China’s context. Their reliability/validity in Chinese mainland needs further verification.

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