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Leader–member exchange and organizational dehumanization: The role of supervisor's organizational embodiment

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This research examined the negative relationship between leader–member exchange (LMX) and organizational dehumanization (i.e., employees' perceptions that their organization treats them like tools), and specifically the consequences of this LMX–dehumanization relationship on employees' emotional exhaustion, affective commitment, and voice behaviors. Further, given that supervisors act as representatives of the organization, we argued that these relationships would be stronger for employees identifying their supervisor with the organization (i.e., high supervisor's organizational embodiment). Across two samples, results showed that high-quality LMX was negatively associated with organizational dehumanization. Further, organizational dehumanization was found to mediate the relationships between LMX and outcomes (i.e., emotional exhaustion, affective commitment, and voice behaviors). Finally, the mediation model was moderated by supervisor's organizational embodiment. More specifically, the negative effects of LMX on organizational dehumanization and its subsequent outcomes were stronger when leaders were perceived as sharing many characteristics with their organization. This research expands the recent and scarce knowledge on the determinants, boundary conditions and outcomes of organizational dehumanization. Our findings suggest that interpersonal relationships at work and, in particular, very common supervisor-related perceptions should be considered when examining organizational dehumanization.

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1. Introduction

In exploring the employee–organization relationship, scholars have recently started to examine the concept of organizational dehumanization (e.g., Bell & Khoury, 2016; Caesens, Nguyen, & Stinglhamber, 2019; Caesens, Stinglhamber, Demoulin, & De Wilde, 2017; Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2018). Drawing from the social psychology literature (Haslam, 2006), organizational dehumanization is broadly defined as "the experience of an employee who feels objectified by his/her organization, denied personal subjectivity, and made to feel like a tool or an instrument for the organization's ends" (Bell & Khoury, 2011, p. 170). According to this recent literature, organizational dehumanization has detrimental effects for both employees (e.g., reduced job satisfaction, increased emotional exhaustion) and organizations (e.g., increased turnover intentions; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2019; Caesens et al., 2019; Caesens et al., 2017; Demoulin et al., 2020; Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2018, 2020; Taskin, Parmentier, & Stinglhamber, 2019).

Given its significant negative consequences and its prevalence within the work context (e.g., Belmi & Schroeder, 2020), it is crucial to advance theory and to better understand its main determinants. Recently, based on the idea that supervisors represent the organization so that employees often interpret their unfavorable/favorable treatment as reflecting the malevolence/benevolence of the whole organization toward them (e.g., Stinglhamber, Marique, Caesens, Hanin, & De Zanet, 2015), Caesens et al. (2019) proposed that the relationship between supervisor-related determinants and organizational dehumanization should be explored. In line with this perspective, they found that abusive supervision positively drives employees' perceptions of organizational dehumanization.

Fortunately, not every employee encounters an abusive supervisor. It is thus important to consider whether experiencing such

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negative and destructive treatment is a necessary condition for leadership to affect perceptions of organizational dehumanization, or whether the more or less positive judgment that any employee may make about his/her supervisor is in itself a determining factor of these perceptions. In this respect, Leader—Member Exchange (LMX) is one of the most prominent theories dealing with the quality of the relationship between a leader and his/her subordinates. This theory suggests that leaders develop different relationships with their subordinates, ranging from a "low quality relationship" characterized by formal relations, little interaction and limited support, to a "high quality relationship" characterized by high levels of trust, support and information exchange (Aggarwal, Chand, Jhamb, & Mittal, 2020).

In this research, we argue that a low versus high quality relationship with the supervisor might be perceived as partly reflecting the malevolent versus benevolent orientation of the organization toward them, and thus will be associated with more or less organizational dehumanization. More precisely, the first aim of this research is to analyze the LMX—organizational dehumanization relationship and its consequences on several outcomes (i.e., emotional exhaustion, affective organizational commitment, and voice behaviors). The second objective of this research is to examine the moderating role played by supervisor's organizational embodiment (SOE), defined as the extent to which employees identify their supervisor with the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2010), in these indirect effects of LMX on outcomes via organizational dehumanization. Fig. 1 provides an overview of the theoretical model tested in this research.

By pursuing these goals, this research makes three important contributions to the LMX and organizational dehumanization literatures. First, this study explores for the first time the relationship between LMX and organizational dehumanization and thus seeks to better understand the role of any leader in enhancing or reducing organizational dehumanization. In doing so, this research responds to Caesens et al.'s (2017) call for studies that examine the nomological network of organizational dehumanization, by identifying new determinants (i.e., LMX) but also new outcomes (i.e., voice behaviors) and boundary conditions (i.e., SOE). Second, by investigating the moderating role of SOE in these relationships, this research also contributes to the LMX and organizational dehumanization literatures by examining when and to what extent experiencing an exchange relationship with the *immediate supervisor* influences subordinates' attitudes or behaviors toward the

entire organization. It therefore contributes to the development of our knowledge of 'cross-foci' or 'spillover' effects (Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007; Stinglhamber et al., 2015). Third, by identifying predictors and boundary conditions of organizational dehumanization and its subsequent consequences (for both employees and organizations), this research is also of critical importance to practitioners. Since every leader develops a more or less good relationship with his/her subordinates, it will help organizations to better understand the role of their managers in the development of this negative organizational phenomenon and to prevent its adverse consequences.

1.1. Organizational dehumanization

Dehumanization is defined as the denial of one's membership to humanness (Haslam, 2006). According to the dual model of dehumanization proposed by Haslam (2006), the humanity of others may be denied in two different ways resulting in two forms of dehumanization. Animalistic dehumanization emerges when uniquely human attributes are denied, so that people are explicitly or implicitly likened to animals and seen as lacking of culture, being coarse, amoral, irrational, and childlike. Mechanistic dehumanization emerges when human nature attributes are denied. People are then explicitly or implicitly likened to objects or machines and seen as superficial, rigid, passive, cold, fungible, and interchangeable.

While both forms might occur in the work context, researchers have argued that the mechanistic form is more common (e.g., Bell & Khoury, 2011, 2016). Organizational dehumanization was therefore defined as the perceived experience of an employee resulting from the feeling to be used as a tool or instrument for the organization's ends (Bell & Khoury, 2011, 2016). Although described as a phenomenon commonly experienced by employees in modern organizational contexts (Bell & Khoury, 2016; Belmi & Schroeder, 2020; Christoff, 2014), it has only recently begun to be examined empirically in the workplace.

In essence, scholars have early suggested that organizational dehumanization should have negative consequences across three main outcome categories, namely employees' well-being, attitudes toward the organization and work behaviors (e.g., Taskin et al., 2019). More precisely, Christoff (2014) proposed that dehumanizing maltreatment leads to negative consequences in terms of psychological well-being as it thwarts employees' basic psychological needs (e.g., such as their need for autonomy, competence, or
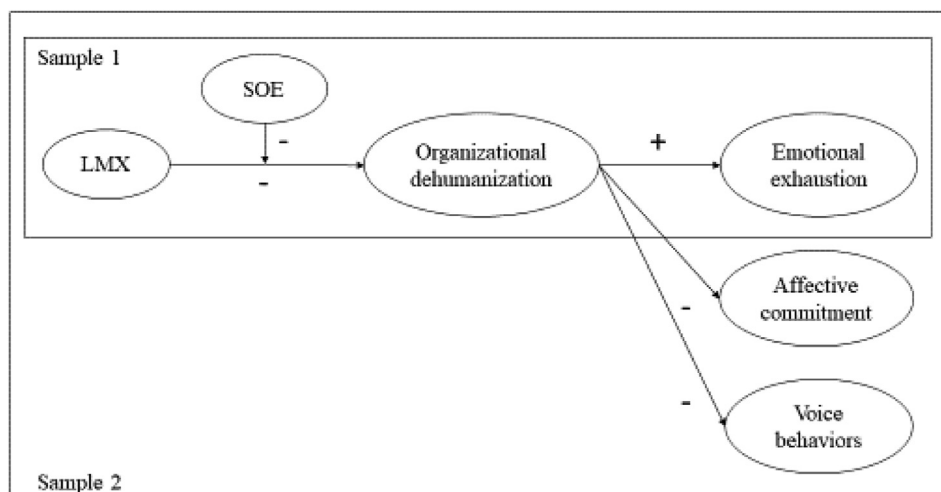

Fig. 1. Theoretical model. LMX = leader-member exchange; SOE = supervisor's organizational embodiment.

relatedness). Indeed, she stated that "dehumanizing maltreatments, however subtle, lead to impaired ability to satisfy these needs and may therefore directly contribute to mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and stress-related disorder" (p. 2). In line with this idea, prior research showed that organizational dehumanization is positively related to employees' emotional exhaustion and psychosomatic strains, and negatively associated with employees' job satisfaction and self-esteem (e.g., Caesens et al., 2019; Caesens et al., 2017; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2019; Demoulin et al., 2020; Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2018).

In addition, Bell & Khoury (2011) suggested that feelings of dehumanization should be related to reduced attachment toward the organization and to increased intention to leave the organization. In particular, they claimed that "dehumanization is a negative experience that diminishes the individual and is therefore likely to motivate the individual to dissociate from the organization" (Bell & Khoury, 2011, p. 184). In accordance with this view, prior research reported that organizational dehumanization is positively related to several indicators in terms of negative attitudes and behaviors at work such as reduced affective commitment and extra-role performance and increased turnover intentions (Bell & Khoury, 2016; Caesens et al., 2019; Taskin et al., 2019).

Due to its detrimental effects, scholars quickly began to identify the main predictors of organizational dehumanization. First, it has been argued that organizational dehumanization perceptions are based on the general policies and practices that the organization implements. Specifically, scholars have found that organizational dehumanization is negatively predicted by procedural justice (Bell & Khoury, 2016) and perceived organizational support (Caesens et al., 2017). Second, empirical evidence has also supported that the specific job conditions offered to the employee by the organization are also important determinants of this organizational dehumanization. Concretely, organizational dehumanization is positively predicted by fragmented and repetitive work tasks (Andrighetto, Baldissarri, & Volpato, 2017) and professional isolation, and negatively predicted by job autonomy and meaning of work (Caesens et al., 2019; Demoulin et al., 2020). Third, research has shown that work environment factors are also associated with organizational dehumanization. Office designs such as flex desks, for example, are more likely to lead to organizational dehumanization than a cell office (Taskin et al., 2019).

Recently, Caesens et al. (2019) suggested that as supervisors act as representatives or agents of the organization, employees might interpret the unfavorable treatment received from supervisors as reflecting the malevolence of the whole organization toward them. In doing so, these authors pointed out that interpersonal factors must also be considered in the development of organizational dehumanization. In line with this perspective, they found that perceiving abusive treatments from supervisors leads the employee to attribute it partly to the organization, and therefore favors the emergence of organizational dehumanization, leading to negative consequences for the individual and the organization. Nevertheless, this prior research focused on a very specific and negative form of leadership. Yet, as employees develop relationships with their supervisor that are distinct from those with the whole organization, so that the supervisor and the organization represent two distinct entities that may elicit dissimilar perceptions (e.g., Caesens, Gillet, Morin, Houle, & Stinglhamber, 2020), it seems of upmost importance to better understand if a more common exchange with the leader, referring to LMX, is related to organizational dehumanization.

1.2. Leader−member exchange and organizational dehumanization

LMX represents the overall quality of the relationship developed over time and on the long run between a supervisor and an employee. Relying on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the LMX theory is indeed a relationship-based approach to leadership that explains the development of the two-way relationship between a supervisor and his/her subordinate (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The central principle of LMX theory is that supervisors form differential relationships with their employees that range on a continuum from low-to high-quality exchanges (Bauer & Green, 1996). Low-quality LMX is characterized by formal exchanges, little interactions, low respect, and a lack of loyalty, while high-quality LMX is based on high levels of trust, respect, obligation and loyalty (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Supervisors in high-quality LMX provide their subordinates with more resources: they spend more time with them, offer them more information, emotional support, as well as intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Consequently, employees in high-quality LMX perceive that their supervisors are satisfied with their work, understand their job problems and needs, recognize their potential, and are willing to help them solve problems (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). They feel valued and respected and, as such, as part of their supervisor's "ingroup". In line with this, numerous studies have therefore shown that high-quality LMX increases well-being at work (e.g., reduced emotional exhaustion; Medler-Liraz & Seger-Guttmann, 2018). Furthermore, high-quality LMX results in a perceived obligation from the subordinate to reciprocate to the supervisor and organization, by demonstrating positive work attitudes such as increased affective organizational commitment and favorable work behaviors such as voice behaviors (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 2010).

We suggest in the present research that high-quality LMX should reduce organizational dehumanization, with positive consequences for both employees and organizations. Several theoretical arguments and empirical evidence support this assumption. Firstly, several scholars previously noted that several factors lead employees to view that supervisor's actions are reflecting and indicative of those of the whole organization. For instance, Levinson (1965) claimed that employees view the directive, evaluative, and coaching functions of supervisors as responsibilities assigned to them by the organization. In the same vein, Eisenberger et al. (2014) stated that "employees understand that supervisors are charged with accomplishing frontline goals and objectives of the organization and, to do so, are provided with the authority to direct, monitor, and coach subordinates' performance and with discretion over the distribution of resources that employees need to do their jobs effectively" (p .638). More importantly, they further suggested that "when a supervisor establishes a high-quality LMX relationship with a subordinate, the subordinate should view the supervisor as acting at least partly on behalf of the organization" (p. 638). Secondly, and in support of these theoretical propositions, previous empirical results have reported that any treatment (positive or negative) from supervisors is indicative of an organizational treatment and thus expand, at least partly, to the whole organization (e.g., Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002; Stinglhamber et al., 2015). Thirdly, since Renger, Mommert, Renger, & Simon (2016) have suggested that social recognition experiences are useful in protecting against dehumanization, high-quality LMX with the supervisor that is based on trust, respect, obligation and loyalty should therefore reduce feelings of dehumanization from the organization and finally engender positive outcomes at work.

In sum, a treatment like a high-quality LMX is characterized by respect, support, developmental opportunities and other valued resources that should lead the employee to feel treated like a human by his/her employing organization rather than like a tool or an instrument for the organization's ends. More precisely, these favorable exchanges with the supervisor should reduce

organizational dehumanization with, finally, positive consequences in terms of employees' well-being, attitudes toward the organization, and work behaviors. In line with previous research on organizational dehumanization and its outcomes, the present research selected one key indicator per category of outcomes. More specifically, we focused on emotional exhaustion (referring to feelings of being constantly depleted and drained emotionally by work, Bakker & Costa, 2014) as an indicator of employee well/ill-being in the workplace, affective organizational commitment (defined as an "emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization"; Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 67) for attitudes toward the organization, and voice behaviors (defined as promotive behaviors that emphasize expression of constructive challenge intended to improve work environment rather than merely criticizing it; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998) for work behaviors. Accordingly, we posited the following hypotheses:

H1. High-quality LMX is negatively associated with organizational dehumanization.

H2. Organizational dehumanization mediates (at least partially) the relationship between LMX and (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) affective commitment, and (c) voice behaviors.

1.3. Moderating role of supervisor's organization embodiment

As suggested by scholars for many years (e.g., Levinson, 1965) and as developed above, every supervisor is by nature an organizational representative through his/her managerial functions toward his/her employees. More recently, Eisenberger et al. (2010) have suggested that the strength of this organizational representativeness of the supervisor may nevertheless vary from one supervisor to the other. More precisely, they proposed that employees are motivated to form a perception, called supervisor's organizational embodiment (SOE), concerning the extent of their supervisor's shared identity with the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2010). If the supervisor expresses positive views regarding the organization and its functioning, shares the values and objectives of the organization and promotes the organizational policies, his/her employees are more likely to perceive similarity between this supervisor's characteristics and those of the organization, and would thus consider him/her as a strong organizational representative.

This variation in supervisor's perceived alignment with the organization would influence the extent to which employees generalize the (un)favorableness of their exchange relationship from the supervisor to the organization. When SOE is high, compliments, criticisms, requests, directives from the supervisor are perceived as emanating from the organization. In contrast, when SOE is low, the supervisor is viewed as acting more on his/her own behalf, and the employee's relationship with the supervisor is less of a guide to the quality of the exchange relationship with the organization. In line with this view, several studies (Eisenberger et al., 2014, 2010; Shoss, Eisenberger, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2013; Stinglhamber et al., 2015) have found that SOE moderated the relationship between leadership variables such as LMX, abusive supervision or transformational leadership and organization-related outcomes such as perceived organizational support or affective commitment. For example, Eisenberger et al. (2014) found that LMX is more strongly related to perceived organizational support when employees highly identified their supervisors with the organization, and this interaction extends to reduced withdrawal behaviors.

In accordance with these findings, we suggest that, for employees who strongly identify their supervisor with the organization (i.e., high SOE), LMX should have more influence on organizational dehumanization. In this way, when employees strongly identify their supervisor with the organization, they would

attribute the favorable exchanges from the supervisor even more to the organization, reducing organizational dehumanization perceptions. Furthermore, combining this assumption with our H2, we suggest a moderated mediation model in which this interaction between LMX and SOE on organizational dehumanization leads to lower detrimental consequences (i.e., reduced levels of emotional exhaustion, and higher levels of affective commitment and voice behaviors). In other words, the more leaders are identified to the organization, the higher LMX would elicit lower perceptions of being treated like a tool or object by the organization. These lower organizational dehumanization perceptions would, in turn, lead to lower levels of emotional exhaustion, and higher levels of affective commitment and voice behaviors. Accordingly, we posited the following hypotheses:

H3. Supervisor's organizational embodiment moderates the relationship between LMX and organizational dehumanization so that this relationship is stronger when SOE is high.

H4. The effect of LMX on (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) affective organizational commitment and (c) voice behaviors through organizational dehumanization is stronger when SOE is high.

2. Method

The research was conducted on two samples. Both samples were composed of employees originating from a variety of jobs and organizations to increase the potential generalizability of our findings. Using Sample 1, we tested the effect of LMX on organizational dehumanization (H1), the mediating effect of organizational dehumanization in the LMX−emotional exhaustion relationship (H2a), the interactive effect of LMX and SOE on organizational dehumanization (H3), and the moderated mediation model on emotional exhaustion (H4a). Sample 2 allowed us to replicate the results from Sample 1 and extend them to two additional outcomes, i.e. affective commitment (H2b and H4b) and voice behaviors (H2c and H4c).

2.1. Participants and procedure

Sample 1. The data were collected through an online survey posted on social networks. The survey was completed by a diverse sample of employees coming from different organizations in Belgium. A total of 227 employees completed our survey. Of this final sample 57.3% were woman and the average age of participants was 40.95 years old ($SD = 12.08$). The average tenure of employees within the organization was 10.17 years ($SD = 11.09$). On average, participants worked with their current supervisor for 3.28 years ($SD = 5.17$). Most of the participants held a master's degree (44.90%) and had a full-time job (81.90%). Moreover, participants worked in a variety of professional sectors. The most common ones were IT and information services (18.90%), public sector and administration (13.70%), and health and social care (9.70%). Finally, most of the participants (40.50%) worked in large organizations (> 500 employees).

Sample 2. The data were collected from employees working in four organizations located in Belgium (i.e. a transport company, an organization specialized in agricultural products, a pharmaceutical company and an organization specialized in the production of food products) and through social networks. We collected 384 questionnaires, 193 (50.3%) of which came from the contacted organizations and 191 (49.7%) from our social networks. Of these 384 questionnaires, only 202 were fully completed and were therefore used. Of the 202 participants, 52% were women and the average age was 41.31 years old ($SD = 11.98$). The average tenure with the organization was 13.29 years ($SD = 14.14$) and 5.28 years ($SD = 8.47$)

with the supervisor. Most of the participants held a Master degree (44.6%) and worked in an organization with 50 to 249 employees (46.5%).

2.2. Measures

All items used in this research are listed in the Appendix. The response scale for all items ranged from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree"), unless otherwise specified.

LMX (Sample 1 and 2) was assessed with the seven-item scale of Scandura & Graen (1984). In the same way as Eisenberger et al. (2014) did, the seven items were slightly adapted so that they were no longer questions but statements (e.g. "My leader understands my job problems and needs"), allowing us to use an agreement scale as response scale.

Organizational dehumanization perceptions (Sample 1 and 2) were measured with the 11 items developed by Caesens et al. (2017). A sample item is "My organization considers me as a tool to use for its own ends".

Supervisor's organizational embodiment (Sample 1 and 2) was assessed with the five items used by Eisenberger et al. (2014). A sample item is "My supervisor is representative of my organization".

Emotional exhaustion (Sample 1 and 2) was measured using nine items from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1981, e.g. "I feel emotionally drained from my work"). The response scale for these items ranged from 1 ("Never") to 7 ("Everyday").

For the sake of brevity, the three highest loading items from Meyer, Allen, and Smith's six-item scale (1993) were used to assess affective commitment (Sample 2). An example item was "This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me".

Voice behaviors (Sample 2) were measured using the six-item scale of Van Dyne & LePine (1998). In line with previous research (e.g., Hu & Jiang, 2016; Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Joireman, 2008), the target of these behaviors was modified from "this work group" to "my organization" to be aligned with the focus of the central variable of our model (i.e., organizational dehumanization; cf. target-similarity model of Lavelle et al., 2007). An example item was "I develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect my organization".

Following Becker et al.'s (2016) recommendations on how to deal with control variables, the empirical relationships between the socio-demographic variables and the dependent variables of our model were examined. We then ran analyses with and without the socio-demographic variables displaying a significant correlation with one of the dependent variables and contrasted the findings. As the differences in the findings were negligible, only the analyses without control variable are reported here.

3. Results

Means, SD, reliability coefficients, and correlations among the variables included in both samples are presented in Table 1.

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). In order to examine the distinctiveness of the constructs included in our analyses, we performed CFA using Mplus. Because of the large number of items (and thus parameters to be estimated) relative to the overall sample size, the model failed to converge in Sample 1 (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Therefore, we used the item-to-construct balance technique to reduce the number of indicators per factor to five by creating parcels in both samples (except for voice behaviors in Sample 2 for which we reduced the number of indicators to three). In addition, this parceling strategy allowed us to preserve the common construct variance while minimizing

unrelated specific variance (Little, Rhemtulla, Gibson, & Schoemann, 2013). As shown in Tables 2 and 3, the results highlighted that the hypothesized measurement model in both samples fitted the data well. Moreover, in each sample, the hypothesized model showed fit indices that were significantly better than those of all more constrained models. Finally, all the items loaded reliably on their respective factor.

Structural model. We used SEM to test our hypotheses.[1] Following Marsh, Wen, and Hau's (2004) recommendations, the indicators used to create the interaction term (i.e., the indicators of LMX and SOE) were first centered to lessen multicollinearity. Then, based on the measurement model, the indicators of the latent interaction term were constructed by multiplying the highest-loading indicator of LMX with the highest-loading indicator of SOE. This procedure was followed for each subsequent pair of indicators. We then tested in both samples a model in which LMX, SOE and their interaction were related to the final outcome(s) both directly and indirectly through organizational dehumanization.

In Sample 1, this model showed a good fit with the data (χ^2 (265) = 615.12; RMSEA = 0.07; SRMR = 0.04; CFI = 0.92). The results showed that all the paths were significant except between SOE and emotional exhaustion. An alternative model without this non-significant path (χ^2 (266) = 618.73; RMSEA = 0.07; SRMR = 0.04; CFI = 0.92) showed to be equivalent to the previous one ($\Delta\chi^2$ (1) = 3.61, ns.). Due to parsimony reasons, we retained the alternative model as the best description of the data. As shown in Fig. 2, LMX, SOE and their interaction were all significantly associated with organizational dehumanization, supporting H1 and H3. Organizational dehumanization was found to be positively related to emotional exhaustion. The analyses to test the significance of the indirect effects using bootstrap on our latent constructs (Cheung & Lau, 2008) showed that the indirect effect of LMX on emotional exhaustion via organizational dehumanization was significant (-0.12; 95% CI = [-0.20; -0.05]), supporting H2a.

In Sample 2, this first structural model also showed a good fit with the data (χ^2 (413) = 956.001; RMSEA = 0.08; SRMR = 0.06; CFI = 0.90). The results, however, showed that the paths between SOE and organizational dehumanization and between SOE and the three outcomes as well as the paths between the interactive term and the three outcomes were not significant. As the path between the interactive term and organizational dehumanization was significant, we decided to keep the path between SOE and organizational dehumanization. An alternative model without the other non-significant paths (χ^2 (419) = 966.659; RMSEA = 0.08; SRMR = 0.06; CFI = 0.90) showed to be equivalent to the previous one ($\Delta\chi^2$ (6) = 10.65, ns.). For parsimony reasons, we retained this alternative model as the best depiction of the data. As Fig. 2 shows, both LMX and the interaction term with SOE were significantly associated with organizational dehumanization, supporting H1 and H3. Organizational dehumanization was found to be positively related to emotional exhaustion, but negatively to affective commitment and voice behaviors. Bootstrap analyses showed that the indirect effects of LMX on our three outcomes via organizational dehumanization were significant (emotional exhaustion = -.18; 95% CI = [-0.27; -0.09]; affective commitment = 0.21, 95% CI = [0.12; 0.31]; voice behaviors = 0.15; 95% CI = [0.07; 0.22]) supporting H2.[2]

Fig. 3 illustrates the moderating influence of SOE on the relationship between LMX and organizational dehumanization in both samples. The simple slopes tests revealed that the relationship

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[1] Bootstrap analyses were also performed on our observed variables, using the Process macro for SPSS of Hayes (model 8; 2018). The results of these analyses were essentially identical and did not change the interpretation of the findings.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables in Sample 1 (below diagonal) and Sample 2 (above diagonal).

Variables	M₁	SD₁	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	M₂	SD₂
1. Gender	-	-	-	-.01	-.33	-.14*	.12	.14*	.08	-.07	-.08	-.01	.12	.04	-	-
2. Age	40.95	12.08	.15*	-	.49***	.10	-.14	-.06	-.01	-.05	.04	-.06	.21**	.20**	41.31	11.98
3. Organizational tenure	10.17	11.09	.05	.68***	-	.37***	-.08	.02	.05	-.07	.03	-.09	.17*	.09	13.29	14.14
4. Tenure with the supervisor	3.28	5.17	.03	.31**	.47**	-	-.07	-.08	.13	-.08	.01	.02	.06	.02	5.28	8.47
5. Level of education	4.33	.89	.06	-.13	-.10	-.19**	-	.01	-.02	-.12	-.13	-.06	-.02	.05	4.43	1.11
6. Organizational size	3.49	1.44	.09	.08	.14*	-.07	-.04	-	.05	-.16*	.06	-.01	-.05	.04	4.03	1.98
7. LMX	3.13	.84	.10	-.08	.04	.07	.06	.04	(.91/.94)	-.03	-.52***	-.48***	.47***	.36***	4.99	1.35
8. SOE	3.19	.90	.06	-.04	-.04	-.07	-.03	-.16*	.00	(.93/.94)	-.02	.09	.07	.02	4.16	1.46
9. Organizational dehumanization	3.07	.93	-.03	.12	.05	.01	-.10	.18***	-.51***	-.08	(.95/.92)	.47***	-.51***	.36***	3.47	1.33
10. Emotional exhaustion	2.96	1.39	-.12	-.03	-.07	-.06	-.09	.04	-.48***	.11	.47***	(.92/.92)	-.46***	-.31***	2.66	1.33
11. Affective commitment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	(-/.83)	.50***	4.52	1.32
12. Voice behaviors	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	(-/.89)	5.07	1.02

Note. $N_1 = 227$ and $N_2 = 202$. LMX = leader-Member Exchange; SOE = supervisor's Organizational Embodiment. Cronbach's alphas are provided in brackets on the diagonal. Gender was coded 1 for women and 2 for men. Level of education was coded 1 for primary education, 2 for lower secondary education, 3 for upper secondary education, 4 for bachelor, 5 for master, and 6 for PhD. Organizational size was coded 1 for organizations between 1 and 10 employees, 2 for organizations between 11 and 49 employees, 3 for organizations between 50 and 249 employees, 4 for organizations between 250 and 500 employees and 5 for organizations with more than 500 employees.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2
Sample 1: Fit indices for measurement models.

Model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	$\Delta\chi^2$ SB	(Δdf)
1. Four-factor model	433.3	164	.09	.04	.93	—	—
2. Three-factor model (LMX and SOE = 1 factor)	1294.2	167	.17	.16	.72	860.9***	3
3. Three-factor model (LMX and organizational dehumanization = 1 factor)	954.9	167	.10	.14	.80	521.6***	3
4. Three-factor model (LMX and emotional exhaustion = 1 factor)	966.8	167	.10	.15	.80	533.5***	3
5. Three-factor model (organizational dehumanization and emotional exhaustion = 1 factor)	1125.9	167	.16	.12	.76	692.7***	3
6. Two-factor model (LMX, SOE and organizational dehumanization = 1 factor)	1812.5	169	.21	.18	.58	1379.2***	5
7. Two-factor model (LMX, SOE and emotional exhaustion = 1 factor)	1819.2	169	.21	.18	.58	1385.9***	5
8. Two-factor model (LMX and SOE = 1 factor; organizational dehumanization and emotional exhaustion = 1 factor)	1978.9	169	.22	.19	.55	1545.7***	5
9. Two-factor model (LMX and organizational dehumanization = 1 factor; SOE and emotional exhaustion = 1 factor)	1886.5	169	.21	.25	.57	1453.2***	5
10. One-factor model	2456.0	170	.24	.20	.43	2022.7***	6

Note. $N = 227$. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; CFI = comparative fit index; $\Delta\chi^{21}$ SB = strictly positive Satorra-Bentler chi-square difference test; LMX = leader-member exchange, SOE = supervisor's organizational embodiment. ***$p < .001$.

Table 3
Sample 2: Fit indices for measurement models.

Model	χ^2	df	SRMR	RMSEA	TFI	CFI	$\Delta\chi^2$ SB	Δdf
1. Six-factor model	611.7	284	.05	.08	.92	.93	—	—
2. Five-factor model (Voice & AC = 1 factor)	822.2	289	.07	.09	.87	.89	210.54	5
3. Four-factor model (Voice, AC & EE = 1 factor)	1186.0	293	.10	.12	.79	.81	574.33	9
4. Three-factor model (SOE & LMX = 1 factor; Voice, AC & EE = 1 factor)	2149.9	296	.23	.18	.56	.60	1538.23	12
5. Two-factor model (OD, SOE & LMX = 1 factor; Voice, AC & EE = 1 factor)	2917.7	298	.29	.21	.38	.43	2305.99	14
6. One-factor model	3097.3	299	.17	.21	.34	.40	2485.61	15

Note. $N = 202$. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; CFI = comparative fit index; $\Delta\chi^2$ SB = strictly positive Satorra-Bentler chi-square difference test; OD = organizational dehumanization; SOE = supervisor's organizational embodiment; LMX = leader-member exchange; AC = affective commitment; EE = emotional exhaustion.

between LMX and organizational dehumanization was statistically significant at 1SD above (Sample 1: $B = -0.87$, $t(227) = -11.72$, $p < .001$; Sample 2: $B = -0.69$, $t(202) = -6.95$, $p < .001$) and below (Sample 1: $B = -0.24$, $t(227) = -3.39$, $p < .001$; Sample 2: $B = -0.34$, $t(202) = -3.52$, $p < .001$) the SOE mean score. These results indicated that the relationship between LMX and organizational dehumanization is stronger in both samples when SOE is high.

We then followed Cheung and Lau's (2017) procedure to test a moderated mediation on latent variables. The results for Sample 1 showed that the indirect effect of LMX on emotional exhaustion via organizational dehumanization was significant at both a low (-0.10; 95% CI = [-0.18; -0.04]) and a high (-0.38; 95% CI = [-0.54; -0.22]) level of SOE. Moreover, the index of moderated mediation was significantly different from 0 (index = -0.18; SE = 0.05; 95% CI = [-0.27; -0.09]). These results support H4a. In Sample 2, the results showed that the indirect effects of LMX on the three outcomes via

organizational dehumanization were significant at both a low (emotional exhaustion = -0.10; 95% CI = [-0.17; -0.05]; affective commitment = 0.13; 95% CI = [0.07; 0.20]; voice behaviors = 0.08; 95% CI = [0.04; 0.14]) and a high (emotional exhaustion = -0.19; 95% CI = [-0.31; -0.10]; affective commitment = 0.25; 95% CI = [0.16; 0.35]; voice behaviors = 0.15; 95% CI = [0.08; 0.25]) level of SOE. Moreover, the index of moderated mediation significantly differed from 0 for emotional exhaustion (index = -0.03; SE = 0.01; 95% CI = [-0.07; -0.01]), affective commitment (index = 0.04; SE = 0.02; 95% CI = [0.02; 0.08]), and voice behaviors (index = 0.03; SE = 0.01; 95% CI = [0.01; 0.05]), supporting H4.

4. Discussion

The goal of our research was to investigate the role of supervisors in the development of organizational dehumanization
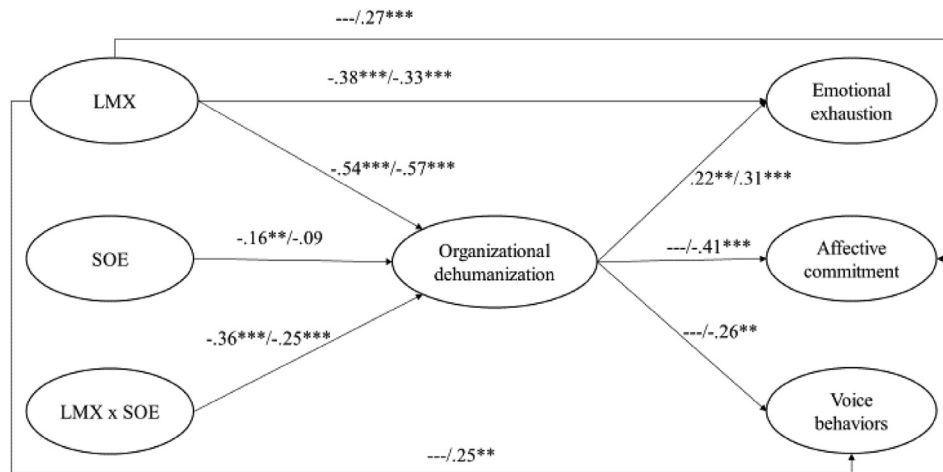
Fig. 2. Completely standardized coefficients for the retained structural equation model in Sample 1/Sample 2. LMX = leader-member exchange; SOE = supervisor's organizational embodiment.
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

perceptions and its effects on the employee's well-being, attitudes and behaviors toward the organization. Accordingly, we developed a moderated-mediation model in which we explore the indirect effects of LMX on outcomes through organizational dehumanization by taking the moderating role of SOE into account. Across two distinct samples, we showed that employees having high quality exchanges with their supervisor (i.e., high-quality LMX) tend to have lower perceptions of being dehumanized by their organization. Additionally, we showed that organizational dehumanization partially mediates the relationship between LMX and employees' emotional exhaustion, affective commitment and voice behaviors toward the organization. In addition, our research indicated that SOE moderated the relationship between LMX and organizational dehumanization relationship and the indirect effects of LMX on the outcomes through organizational dehumanization. More precisely, a high SOE was found to strengthen the effect of LMX on organizational dehumanization and its outcomes. Overall, our findings contribute to the recent and scarce literature on organizational dehumanization by extending our knowledge of its nomological network.
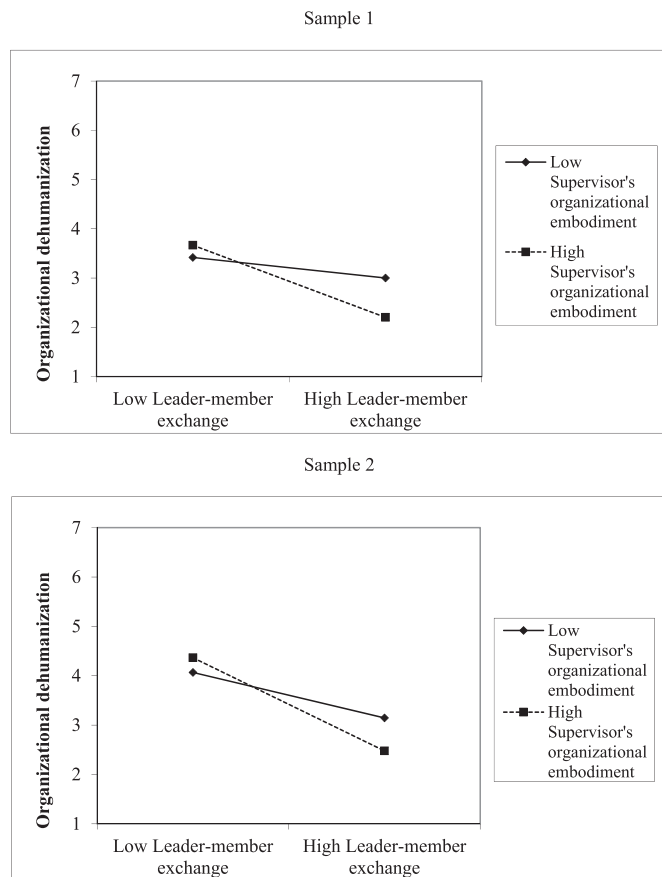
Our findings highlight that, although they are at stake differently, LMX and SOE are two key factors explaining when employees feel dehumanized or not by their organization. In this way, a positive relationship with supervisors (i.e., high LMX) acting as organizational representatives may prevent employees feeling dehumanized by their organization. These results are in line with previous work in the literature indicating that the treatment received from the supervisor affects perceptions of the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2010). Our findings regarding SOE as a significant moderator of the relationship between LMX and organizational dehumanization are consistent with this view. Interestingly,

the relationship between LMX and organizational dehumanization is still significant even when supervisors are less identified with the organization. This suggests that SOE is not a boundary condition but reinforces the effect of LMX on organizational dehumanization. Even at low SOE, supervisors seem to bear some degree of responsibility from the organization. If an employment relationship theoretically originates on the basis of exchanges between the employee and the employing organization, this result maybe suggests that employees cannot ignore the interactions they have with specific organizational members, such as their supervisors, when assessing this relationship. This may be due to the fact that the relationship between employees and supervisors is the most powerful connection an employee can develop in the organization. As stated by Eisenberger et al. (2010), this may however depend on the level of authority and power that organizations provide supervisors. Taken together, these findings are consistent with Caesens et al.'s (2019) proposition about the key role played by supervisor-related variables on organizational dehumanization and its outcomes. The present paper extends the research efforts of these authors by adding LMX and SOE, despite their different roles, to the list of the factors contributing to the development of organizational dehumanization.

Our research also adds to the literature by showing that organizational dehumanization partially mediates the relationship between LMX and emotional exhaustion, affective commitment, and voice behaviors. These findings are consistent with studies that showed significant relationships between LMX and emotional exhaustion (Medler-Liraz & Seger-Guttmann, 2018), affective commitment (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015), and voice behaviors (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015) and in line with research reporting significant associations between organizational dehumanization and emotional exhaustion (Caesens et al., 2017), affective commitment (Caesens et al., 2019) and extra-role performance (Taskin et al., 2019). Importantly, our results indicate that organizational dehumanization perceptions explain unique variance in employees' well-being, emotional attachment to the organization and voice behaviors toward the organization above and beyond that explained by LMX. By showing this, the present study supports the view that organizational dehumanization is an important mechanism underlying the relationships between LMX and these outcomes.

Our findings also provide evidence that voice behaviors represent significant outcomes of organizational dehumanization. By

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[2] We included abusive supervision (15 items; Tepper, 2000) as an additional variable explaining organizational dehumanization in the final model. This additional analysis aimed to test whether the effect of LMX remains significant over and beyond other supervisor-related variables that were known to have an impact on dehumanization (cf. Caesens et al., 2019). This model showed a good fit to the data (χ^2 (640) = 1367.786; RMSEA = 0.075; SRMR = 0.065; CFI = 0.895). Importantly, the results were essentially identical and did not change the interpretation of the findings as both LMX and the interaction term between LMX and supervisor's organizational embodiment remained negatively and significantly related to organizational dehumanization. The only difference found is that the direct relationship between LMX and emotional exhaustion was not significant when abusive supervision was controlled for.

Sample 1

Sample 2

Fig. 3. Relationship between leader-member exchange and organizational dehumanization as function of supervisor's organizational embodiment in Sample 1/Sample 2. High and low supervisor's organizational embodiment are, respectively, one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean.

doing so, our research responds to the call of scholars (Caesens et al., 2017) to examine other theoretically relevant outcomes of organizational dehumanization. To date, research has mainly focused on consequences of organizational dehumanization in terms of well-being and attitudes at work. Taskin et al. (2019) are the only ones to have examined consequences in terms of work behaviors (i.e. self-reported extra-role performance). The present research is therefore the second study to investigate behavioral consequences of organizational dehumanization, even if they are also self-reported in the present research, which is inevitably a limitation that we will expand on later. Beyond exploring other behavioral consequences (e.g. counterproductive work behaviors), future research should certainly examine whether organizational dehumanization may also impact employee behavior toward the internal (e.g., supervisors or colleagues) and external (e.g., customers) stakeholders of this organization. Furthermore, research should now investigate the mechanisms underlying these relationships to improve our understanding of organizational dehumanization's implications. Several scholars suggested that a dehumanizing treatment from the organization can thwart employees' basic psychological needs (i.e. need for competence), leading to negative consequences (e.g., Christoff, 2014). In addition to showing the relevance of this explanation, future research would benefit from examining the role of other mechanisms. Several other theoretical frameworks may indeed explain the negative impact of organizational dehumanization on outcomes beneficial for the individual and the organization. It would for instance be worthwhile

to determine whether social exchange and/or social identity processes are at stake.

4.1. Limits and future research

Some limitations have to be acknowledged. First, both samples relied on self-reported measures, which raises concerns about the possibility that the common method variance bias has impacted our results. To minimize this bias, we followed several scholars' recommendations (e.g., Conway & Lance, 2010; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) and took several precautions at methodological and statistical levels. At the methodological level, we assured potential participants of the anonymity or confidentiality of their responses, and stressed that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. We also used validated scales to measure our study variables and took great care to ensure that there is no conceptual overlap in items used to measure different constructs. At the statistical level, we demonstrated the construct validity of our measures by providing evidence of their reliability and by performing confirmatory factor analyses. Additionally, we conducted the Harman's single factor test which indicated that a one-factor model fits very poorly with the data from each sample (see Tables 2 and 3). Moreover, considering that common source bias is likely to reduce interaction effects (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010), finding a significant interaction provides strong evidence for its existence. Overall, it therefore reduced our concerns regarding this potential bias in our data. Having said this, future research would certainly benefit from using more objective measures to assess, for instance, behavioral consequences of organizational dehumanization.

Second, the present research relies on cross-sectional studies, hampering to identify any causal links between our variables. Future research should replicate our study by using experimental and/or longitudinal designs with repeated measures.

Third, our two samples are composed of employees working in Belgium, which may limit the generalizability of our findings. Although the relationship between LMX and organizational dehumanization was established across different occupational groups and organizational contexts, the samples were indeed both located in the same country. The findings and implications of our research might not be generalizable to organizations located in other countries and/or cultures, and our findings might thus have limited external validity. In their research, Sels, Janssens, Van den Brande, & Overlaet (2000) claimed that the employer–employee relationship in Belgium is "driven by attitudes and behaviors of high loyalty and low exit; respect for authority combined with the value of equality; strong work and salary orientations as driving motivators; a culture of compromise grounded in an institutional basis of rules and regulations; and a paradoxical mix between the need to belong to a group and individualistic perspective on work" (p. 48). One cannot exclude the possibility that this culture specific to Belgium may have influenced the way employees working in this country develop their relationship with their supervisor and their employing organization, and the role these relationships play in determining individual and organizational outcomes. In line with this perspective, Nguyen, Dao, Nhan, & Stinglhamber (in press) recently showed that cross-cultural differences moderate the impact of organizational dehumanization on outcomes. These authors indeed found that the deleterious effects of organizational dehumanization on both job satisfaction and intention to quit were stronger in low power distance countries. Overall, all of this suggests that it would be very important to replicate our findings in other countries and/or cultures to investigate potential differences in the strength of the relationships studied in this research.

Fourth, in the present research, we examined the effects of the

LMX that the employee individually experiences, independently of the other members of the workgroup, on organizational dehumanization. Interestingly, recent research on LMX has focused on the social comparison processes that may intervene in the LMX processes and outcomes. Research showed that group members are aware of each other's LMX. Researchers have addressed this issue through the construct of LMX differentiation, which refers to the degree to which the quality of LMX within the work group varies. Studies (e.g., Erdogan & Bauer, 2015) showed that the effects of LMX differentiation on work attitudes, coworker relations, and retention within the work group were contingent on the fairness climate that existed in the group so that LMX differentiation had negative effects on outcomes only when fairness climate was low. In such a climate, LMX differentiation tends to indicate that some members do not have a high-quality LMX, potentially resulting in envy, differences in resource distribution, or even potential feelings of favoritism. Yet, signs of cronyism and unequal treatment were suggested as being related to dehumanization (Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018). Moreover, Bell & Khoury (2016) found that organizational justice was negatively related to organization dehumanization. Therefore, future research would benefit from examining how LMX differentiation and justice climate act in the development of organizational dehumanization.

Finally, by studying the role of leadership on organizational dehumanization, our research puts interpersonal relationships at the heart of its development. However, it does not determine the weight of this determinant in the prediction of organizational dehumanization in comparison with predictors pertaining to other categories such as organizational, work-related or environmental factors. The robustness of our results would have been strengthened if we had controlled for the already known antecedents of organizational dehumanization (e.g., perceived organizational support, organizational justice, fragmented activities, etc.).

More generally, it might also be interesting to examine whether and to what extent leadership could moderate the effects of some determinants (known or new) of organizational dehumanization. For example, organizations around the world are implementing new digitized business processes and relying on technological advances to implement automation solutions (Czarniawska & Joerges, 2020). However, little is known about how employees experience these organizational changes and the role played by leaders in this process. In particular, empirical examination of the impact of such digitization and robotization/automation in terms of organizational dehumanization seems particularly necessary. Moreover, directly related to the present research, future research should test whether positive leadership (such as LMX) could buffer their potentially negative impact.

4.2. Practical implications

The present findings hold important implications for management practices. Our paper shows the importance of the role of supervisors in contributing to their employees' well-being at work, as well as in fostering their positive attitudes and behaviors toward the organization. Both companies and managers should be aware that managers are not only perceived as acting as individuals in their own right but also as representatives of the organization. Thereby, when employees strongly identify their supervisor with the organization, a high quality of the exchange relationship with the supervisor (i.e., high-quality LMX) extends to the entire organization, leading to a lower chance of dehumanization perceptions.

Practically, these results suggest that first and foremost managers and organizations should foster positive high-quality relationships between leaders and followers (i.e., high-quality LMX). To do so, organizations can design trainings that help leaders develop positive exchange relationships with their subordinates. These trainings should focus on active listening skills, emphasizing the importance of reciprocal understanding and helpfulness within dyads regarding job issues and behaviors. In this way, these trainings should help both the leader and the follower to discuss each other's grievances, concerns, and job expectations (Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982).

Then, for dyads with high-quality LMX, organizations can engage in strategies enhancing employees' perceptions of their managers as sharing identity with the organization. In order to increase these SOE perceptions, organizations should help managers to realize their responsibility as organizational agents (Eisenberger et al., 2010) by using institutionalized organizational socialization tactics that emphasize organization's values and the way employees should interpret and respond to situations (Stinglhamber et al., 2015).

In conclusion, the present study shows, on the one hand, the crucial role of leaders in developing/preventing organizational dehumanization and in fostering employees' well-being, positive attitudes and behaviors towards the organization and, on the other hand, that this role is exacerbated by the employee's identification of the supervisor with the organization.

Funding

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2021.01.006.

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