Cognitive asymmetry in employee emotional reactions to leadership behaviors

Marie T Dasborough, University of Miami

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/dasborough/10/
Cognitive asymmetry in employee emotional reactions to leadership behaviors

Marie T. Dasborough *

University of Queensland, Business School, St. Lucia, QLD, 4072, Australia

Abstract

This article is predicated on the idea that leaders shape workplace affective events. Based on Affective Events Theory (AET), I argue that leaders are sources of employee positive and negative emotions at work. Certain leader behaviors displayed during interactions with their employees are the sources of these affective events. The second theoretical underpinning of the article is the Asymmetry Effect of emotion. Consistent with this theory, employees are more likely to recall negative incidents than positive incidents. In a qualitative study, evidence that these processes exist in the workplace was found. Leader behaviors were sources of positive or negative emotional responses in employees; employees recalled more negative incidents than positive incidents, and they recalled them more intensely and in more detail than positive incidents. Consequently, leaders may need to exercise their emotional intelligence to generate emotional uplifts to overcome the hassles in the workplace that employees seem to remember so vividly.

© 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Leadership; Affective events; Asymmetry; Emotions

“I’ve been doing my job for a long time and I put in my regular report where I’m going and for my manager to come back and say, “no I don’t want you to go there”, bothers me. I travel a lot in my job, so I’ll ask my boss: why? In one case, my boss simply said, “I didn’t want you to go”, and I was frustrated with that. I never found out why he didn’t want to go there. It’s pure frustration, not knowing why. I’m the most experienced in that area; I know what has to be done. All my boss had to do was give a reason . . . I don’t mind if someone gives me a reason, but it’s frustrating when I’m never given one.”

Employee talking about a recent interaction with his manager (face to face organizational leader).

In the opening quotation, the employee expresses negative emotions about his boss’s lack of communication at work. This quotation, extracted from one of the interviews conducted in the present study, serves to illustrate the reactions that negative encounters can generate in the workplace. In this article, therefore, the findings of a qualitative study of subordinate perceptions of leaders during face-to-face interactions in the workplace and how they respond emotionally to particular leadership behaviors are presented. The study represents an exploration of a model based on
Affective Events Theory (AET), which posits that effective leaders are seen to shape the affective events that determine employees’ attitudes and behaviors in the workplace (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). The research also explores the Asymmetry Effect (Peeters, 2002) of emotion, which purports that a negativity bias (prominence) exists when employees report emotional incidents they have encountered. Thus, the overall purpose of this study was to provide a preliminary understanding of employee emotional responses to leadership behaviors displayed during face-to-face interactions.

Emotions have always been an important factor in management practice, and the subject of emotions in the workplace is now one of the hot topics in management today (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002). It has been suggested that emotions may be disruptive in the workplace, preventing rational and objective behavior. However, individual emotions are unavoidable, and are thus inherently a part of organizational life. This is particularly true in the case of interpersonal relationships at work, which are inherently emotional in nature. As George (2000) argues, leadership is a particularly emotion-laden process, with emotions entwined with the social influence process.

While the early work on leadership implicitly touched on emotional aspects of leadership behaviors, there was no explicit mention of emotional responses or moods caused by leaders. The Ohio State Leadership studies and the Michigan Leadership studies of the 1950s highlighted task oriented behaviors versus relations oriented behaviors (Yukl, 2002). The relations oriented behaviors are socio-emotional in nature; however, there was no reference to the moods or emotions of employees in these studies. Like management research in general, most leadership research has traditionally emphasized rational and cognitive processes, with emotions as a basis for influence only coming to the spotlight in the 1980s (Yukl, 2002). Early work identifying emotional consequences of leadership was on charisma (see George, 2000 for a discussion); however, since employee behavior and productivity are directly affected by their emotional states (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002), it is imperative to consider employee emotional responses to organizational leaders.

To investigate the emotional process of leadership, a qualitative approach was chosen for data collection. Conger (1998) asserts that qualitative research must play a pivotal role in leadership studies because leadership is a rich and complex phenomenon (Conger, 1998). Alvesson (1996) has also argued for a qualitative approach that takes the socially constructed nature of leadership seriously. Conger (1998) argues in particular that leadership is not a simple reflection of objective reality, but is a socially constructed process where leadership can be produced and reproduced over time (see Chen & Meindl, 1991). Further, interpretation plays a large role in how leadership is defined and experienced; for example, employee perceptions and emotional reactions to leader behavior (Conger, 1998). Thus, this research focuses on employee recollections of emotional interactions with their leaders, rather than the “actual” interaction itself.

Before embarking on the theoretical underpinnings of this study, first it is necessary to explain how leadership is defined within the context of this research. Leadership is “the ability to decide what is to be done, and then to get others to want to do it” (Larson, 1968, p. 21). The distinction between a leader and a manager is blurry, and academic circles continue to debate the degree of overlap (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Kotter (1990) argues that the key distinction is in the processes and core outcomes associated with each. He argues that management aims to produce organizational stability and order through goal setting, monitoring, and organizing. Leadership on the other hand aims to promote organizational change through developing and communicating a vision, then inspiring and motivating people to achieve the vision.

Alvesson & Sveningsson (2003) argue, however, that the dichotomy between leaders and managers is not fully convincing. In their study, they found that managers doing everyday mundane acts, such as chatting with their employees, were viewed as leaders. The reason was due to the formal position of managers, which frames their acts to appear more significant than acts by other individuals. Based on Alvesson and Sveningsson’s findings, I argue that managers, even when they are not doing extra-ordinary activities such as inspiring employees to achieve a vision, are still viewed as leaders. This is because their behaviors are given a special emotional value beyond the everyday significance of the behavior. Hence, in this study, managers who evoke emotional responses in employees are considered to be leaders.

1. Theoretical background

Historically research on leadership has focused on such leadership behaviors from cognitive and behavioral perspectives. Recent advances, however, have shifted attention from purely behavioral and cognitive processes to
emotions, a dimension that has been neglected to date by most scholars of leadership (see Humphrey, 2002). Ashkanasy & Tse (2000) were among the first to highlight the role that emotions play in facilitating leadership effectiveness. Other scholars, including Caruso, Mayer, & Salovey (2001) and George (2000), have also pointed out the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership. The focus here is on detailed accounts of incidents involving leader–employee interactions and the employees’ emotional reactions to these interactions. Emotions, rather than mood, were chosen because emotions are more intense and usually have a definite cause and clear cognitive content (see Cropanzano, Weiss, Hale, & Reb, 2003). Therefore, employee emotional responses can be linked to particular leader behaviors.

1.1. Leadership as a source of affective events in the workplace

In this study, leadership is examined from the perspective of Affective Events Theory (AET: Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). In AET, factors in the organizational environment create affective events. The terms “hassles” and “uplifts” were developed by Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus (1981), and were later used to represent positive and negative affective events. Hassles and uplifts result in emotional reactions that, in turn, determine attitudinal and behavioral outcomes for organizational employees. As critical components of the organizational environment; leaders may be seen as architects of affective events experienced by organizational employees within the AET model. Leaders may evoke follower emotions through the allocation of work activities, by making requests of followers, by providing feedback on task performance, or by displaying emotions themselves. Gaddis, Connelly, & Mumford (2004) recently examined failure feedback by leaders as an affective event in the workplace. They found that subordinates’ attitudes and performance were influenced by the nature of the failure feedback and the emotional response of the subordinate to the feedback. Thus, in terms of AET, leader behavior can be seen as an affective event in the workplace producing constant positive and negative emotions in employees (see Fig. 1).

Within AET, employees see their leaders as sources of “hassles” (if negative emotions are evoked) or “uplifts” (if positive emotions are evoked) (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2003). The literature suggests that effective leaders will provide regular small uplifts, such as positive feedback, praise, or inspiration, which serve to ameliorate the daily hassles experienced by employees. As a consequence, employees experience positive emotional states, and are therefore more likely to engage in positive behaviors, such as organizational citizenship (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Given the importance of employee emotions at work, the first research question to be explored is:

**Research Question 1.** What leader behaviors evoke positive emotions and negative emotions in their employees?

1.1.1. The asymmetrical nature of employee perceptions of affective events

In association with Research Question 1, it is necessary also to consider the relative impact of positive and negative emotions. In particular, consideration of the exact nature of employee perceptions of affective events extends the coverage and depth of this examination. Specifically, this research explores the notion that employee recollections of

---

**Fig. 1.** An affective events theory view of leadership behavior and employee emotional responses.
leader emotion-evoking behaviors will be asymmetrical, as recently suggested by Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer (2004) and Gaddis et al. (2004). This phenomenon, referred to by Peeters (2002) as the asymmetry effect, attempts to explain why people do not pay equal attention to positive and negative valence items. In psychology, there have been many experimental studies conducted on positive–negative asymmetries (see Blanz, Mummendy, & Otten, 1997; Lewick, Czapinski, & Peeters, 1992; Peeters, 2002). Many of these have focused on positive and negative outcomes, for example, the outcomes resulting from inter-group and social discrimination (see Blanz et al., 1997; Crisp & Hewstone, 2001; Gardham & Brown, 2001). Across these studies, strong empirical support has been found for the asymmetry effect, with Gardham and Brown going as far as asserting that they can “confirm the reality of the positive negative asymmetry effect” (p. 31).

A common example is that of the negativity bias, in which humans give greater weight to negative entities than to positive entities (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). In terms of asymmetry, a positive bias also exists (the “Pollyanna Principle”, see Rozin & Royzman, 2001, p. 297); however, for the purpose of parsimony, this study only focuses on the negativity bias – as this bias is of greater concern for leaders in the workplace. The main advocate of the negativity bias, Peeters, asserts that negative stimuli elicit more cognitive processing and attention than positive stimuli, and he has produced many demonstrations of this (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). As a result of the tendency to analyze negative events more intensively than positive events, Peeters (1992) argues that negative events will bring about more prominent responses than positive events. More recently, Peeters (2002) found that negativity bias occurs when people focus on the avoidance or prevention of negative outcomes, rather than on the approach of positive outcomes.

While prior work in this area has mostly focused on the valence of outcomes, the asymmetry effect has also been linked to emotions and moods. For example, Clore, Schwarz, & Conway (1994) found that negative moods result in more systematic processing. In addition, Carretie, Mercado, Tapia, & Hinojosa (2001) examined attention in relation to negativity bias, using an experimental design with emotional stimuli (positive and negative valence). Carretie and colleagues explored the negativity bias by studying emotional responses and attention-related event-related brain potentials activity. Findings indicated that negative events did elicit, to a greater extent than positive ones, the mobilization of attentional resources of the brain. It was found that the attentional phases of the emotional response play an important role in the negativity bias. Therefore, following from these results, Carretie et al. suggest that brain activity during an emotional response is asymmetrical.

Very early work in the organizational sciences by Hertzberg and colleagues examined the concept of asymmetry. Hertzberg developed a two-factor theory (the motivator-hygiene theory), which distinguishes between sources of work satisfaction and dissatisfaction. According to this theory, leaders may be sources of employee dissatisfaction if they have poor relationships with their employees; or they may be sources of employee satisfaction, by providing employees with a sense of achievement, recognition, responsibility, advancement and growth (see Hertzberg, 1968). Hence, early research suggested that leaders could be sources of both positive and negative reactions in employees.

Based on the psychological concept of the cognitive negativity bias discussed earlier, in the context of leader–employee relationships, it is argued that, if given the choice to report on any kind of emotional interaction with their leaders, employees will be more likely to report negative interactions and would pay more attention to their description of negative events by providing more detail. I argue that in the case of negative interactions with leaders, employees will use more sentences to describe the negative interactions than in the case of a positive interaction. Given the amount of prior research within psychology on the cognitive negativity bias, it is appropriate to propose a hypothesis rather than a research question:

**Hypothesis 1.** When employees recall emotional interactions with their leaders, negative interactions will be described using more sentences than positive interactions.

In view of the evidence of increased attention to negatively valenced items, it is also arguable that employees are likely to be more sensitive to the negative incidents they encounter with their leaders. Emotional experiences can vary according to not only valence (positive–negative), but also arousal (high–low activation) (Larsen & Diener, 1992). If employees are more sensitive to negative interactions, they will experience higher arousal, or experience more intense negative emotions. Further, in the workplace, I argue that negative interactions with a leader are of more concern for employees, as negative interactions could threaten the security of the employee’s job or decrease the employee’s
psychological well being. Thus, due to increased sensitivity to negative features, an exploratory question to be asked is:

**Research Question 2.** When employees recall emotional interactions with their leaders, what is the nature of the intensity of employee emotional responses?

Finally, Rozin & Royzman (2001) discuss negativity bias or negativity dominance in detail, providing possible explanations for why such asymmetries occur. One argument they put forward is that, when it comes to emotions, there are a greater number of categories and response options for the negative side than the positive side. This is evidenced by the nature of “basic emotions” – there are more negative basic emotions than positive basic emotions (Izard, 1971). Literature on the asymmetry effect of emotions suggests that, when employees recall more negative interactions with their leaders, they will also use a greater number of negative emotions to describe them. Thus, the final question to be explored:

**Research Question 3.** What emotions words do employees use when describing interactions with their leaders?

In summary, the aim of this research was to explore the affective process of leadership, and to determine if the asymmetrical effect of emotion is present in employee recollections of emotional interactions with their leaders in the workplace. In this respect, it is important to note that the asymmetry effect is in relation to the qualitative recollection of emotional interactions, not the actual number of emotional interactions that have occurred.

2. Methods

Although qualitative leadership studies are relatively rare (Conger, 1998; see also Lowe & Gardner, 2000), such research is beginning to make inroads into the field of leadership (see Bryman, 2004; Bryman, Stephens, & Campo, 1996; Hunt & Ropo, 1995). Some would argue that qualitative research is the method of choice for topics as contextually rich as leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Bryman, 2004; Conger, 1998). Given the nature of the research questions to be explored in this study, a qualitative approach to data collection was ideal because of its ability to produce descriptions of leader–employee interactions, and the personal emotions experienced by employees in response to the leaders’ behaviors during these interactions. In this study, the method of data collection was qualitative (interviews), while the method of analysis was primarily quantitative (content analysis).

The critical incident interview technique (CIIT) was employed during both individual and group interviews as the primary method of data collection. This qualitative technique involves asking participants to recall a specific event and to explain the circumstances surrounding the incident. The critical incident technique, developed by Flanagan (1954), is especially useful when examining defined situations and situationally relevant aspects of managerial behavior (see also Boyatzis, 1998). As Pescosolido (2002) explains, the CIIT method provides a retrospective account of behavior and thoughts, and validity and reliability of event descriptions are strong due to the interviewers’ probing for highly detailed responses.

Participants in this study were asked to describe real workplace interactions with their leaders or employees, during or after which they recall having a strong positive emotional reaction (a critical uplift) or a strong negative reaction (a critical hassle). Participants were not limited in their responses; they could recall both positive and negative incidents as many times as they desired. The interviewer limited her questioning to probing questions about the incidents, such as “what led up to the event”, “who said what to whom”, “who did what”, “how did that make you feel”, “what happened afterwards”. Therefore, the employees were asked about emotional interactions with their leader, while the leaders were asked about emotional interactions with employees, when their own behavior evoked an emotional response in the employee. On average, the individual interviews lasted around 65 min, and the focus group interviews lasted between 70 and 120 min each.

2.1. Participants

Participants included both leaders and employees, to represent both perspectives of their interactions. In this case, as is common in field research on leadership, the leaders in this study are the immediate supervisors of the employees
These supervisors and managers are considered to be leaders as they have influence over the employees directly below them in the organizational hierarchy, and their behaviors are considered to be significant by their employees (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). A variety of perspectives increases the validity of qualitative research (Parry, 1998). Patton (2002) suggests further that, to achieve external validity, sampling should include respondents from a variety of demographic backgrounds. Therefore, the sample included male and female informants; informants from private, government, and not-for-profit organizations; and informants from various levels in the organizational hierarchy. A random sampling strategy was employed; whereby telephone calls to randomly selected organizations were the method of initially contacting potential participants. Thus, the participants were not known to the interviewer prior to the research.

Individuals from four organizations agreed to participate in the research. The first organization was a large management consultancy firm. Three leaders were interviewed from this firm \((N=3)\), and two focus groups were conducted \((N=3)\) with employees working under each of the leaders. Thus, the focus groups comprised individuals who knew each other, and who were at the same hierarchical level in the organization. The second organization is a medium sized retail firm. Here, three leaders were interviewed \((N=3)\) and three focus groups were conducted \((N=3)\). The third organization in the sample was a large government department, where three leaders were interviewed \((N=3)\) and three focus groups were conducted \((N=2, N=3, N=3)\). The final organization in the sample was a small not-for-profit educational provider. One interview was conducted with the leader \((N=1)\) and one focus group was conducted with two employees \((N=2)\).

Alexandersson (1994; in Sandberg, 2000) advises a sample of at least 20 respondents is needed for maximum variation. Sample size was determined by theoretical saturation or information redundancy (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985), when few new data, concepts, or themes emerge. In the end, the sample comprised individual interviews with 10 leaders (eight males, two females; ages ranging from 35 years to 61 years), and focus group interviews with 24 employees (12 males, 12 females; ages ranging from 19 years to 50 years).

### 2.2. Focus groups

The use of focus groups allowed for insights from groups of employees about their leader. Since employees interact daily in organizations, by reflecting this reality in the data collection phase of the research, the information gathered would be more insightful. The focus groups consisted of homogeneous participants; all were employees of a particular work group and at the same level in the organization. This was to ensure participants felt secure enough to provide honest answers (as recommended by Kumar, Aaker, & Day, 1999), and to provide the benefit of past knowledge. The focus groups consisted of three participants on average, described by Greenbaum (1998) as a “mini” focus group. The main benefit associated with smaller groups is that they allow more speaking time per participant, providing the opportunity for more in-depth discussion (Fern, 1982). This was critical to the research, enabling detailed accounts of the positive and negative interactions as experienced by the employees.

To maximize validity of data collection, all interviews and focus groups were taped, and then the contents of the tapes were transcribed verbatim. On average, the textual transcripts from the interviews were approximately 28 pages type-written single-spaced, while the focus groups resulted in approximately 38 pages type-written single-spaced. In addition, the transcripts were cross-checked with the participants following the interviews and focus groups to ensure their accuracy. No participants were re-interviewed.

### 2.3. Data analysis

Two types of analysis were utilized in this study. To answer Research Question 1, thematic analysis was utilized to provide initial descriptive information about the emotional process of leadership. This analysis was used in conjunction with content analysis (the predominant analytical method in this article), to enable comparison of leader behaviors and the employee emotional responses. Research Questions 2 and 3 were based primarily on content analysis alone, focusing on frequency counts. Content analysis is the most appropriate means by which to test the asymmetry effect, which is concerned with relative frequencies (comparing the nature of employee recollections of positive and negative incidents). Hypothesis 1 was tested using a non-parametric test \((\chi^2)\), which was also based on the frequencies determined by the content analysis.
2.3.1. Content analysis software

QSR NUD*IST (Qualitative Solutions and Research, Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing) was employed to conduct the content analysis. It was solely used to identify the units of analysis (relevant sentences), which were then coded for thematic content by the RAs and the interviewer. QSR NUD*IST is a code and retrieve system allowing for multi-level coding of unstructured data. It assists in maintaining large data sets (Parry, 1998), and contributes to the maintenance of precision and rigor in data analysis (Richards & Richards, 1992). The unit of analysis for the purpose of coding was a sentence. The average number of text units (sentences) in the focus groups was 481 (range: 398–578; S.D. = 55), and for individual interviews the average was 342 text units (range: 111–664; S.D. = 142).

2.4. Content analysis of transcripts

Content analysis was used to quantify participants’ statements into frequencies, similar to work by Keenan & Newton (1985), and Narayanan, Menon, & Spector (1999). A valid content analysis scheme depends on the ability to code all the data from the interviews, as well as the precision of the coding categories. Coding categories are precise if they are mutually exclusive, i.e. if they only allow for statements to fit one code (Kerlinger, 1964). Given these aims, there is a tradeoff between obtaining rich complex information through a larger number of categories, and reliable simplicity through less coding categories (Larsson, 1993).

The content analysis scheme used to code the interview data included the category label as well as definitions (please see the Appendix). Some of the categories were predetermined by the interview questions themselves (Negative/Positive Incident). Others were derived from the interview content (Leader Behavior categories and Emotions). This coding involved both open coding and axial coding. First, a line-by-line analysis of the text was conducted by the interviewer to determine initial categories (open coding). Given the large number of categories that emerged from the rich data, this coding was followed by axial coding, which reviewed the initial categories identified and re-sorted them into a smaller number of categories based on similarity. This was performed by the interviewer and the research assistants. An example of a category derived from the interviews following the axial coding is “Empowerment”, defined as whether the employee participated in decision-making, if he or she felt empowered, and if leaders were seen to allow employees control over what her or she did (these were the initial categories identified during the open coding).

First, statements were coded for the nature of the incident (Positive/Negative). Most interviewees began their critical incident description in the interview by saying “I have a positive/negative incident”. In the scarce cases where interviewees did not mention upfront which type of incident they were reporting, general rules similar to those utilized by Amabile et al. (2004) were applied. Incidents were coded as negative if: 1) the leader behavior was negative, 2) the employee reported negative emotion following the interaction, or 3) the leader behavior was done poorly or in an unexpected manner. Incidents were coded as positive if: 1) the leader behavior was positive, 2) the employee reported positive emotion following the interaction, or 3) the leader behavior was done well or in an expected manner.

Next, the statements were coded for leader behavior, using the operational definitions decided by the researchers following the open and axial coding. Statements were then re-coded to reflect to the emotional reactions of the employee. This involved using statements in the transcripts and the coders’ judgments in order to link the leader behavior to specific emotional reactions. An example of coding for a leader behavior and the corresponding emotional response is: “my leader acknowledges individual employees’ efforts” (Leader Behavior); following a description of such an incident, the employee reported that she “felt happy and proud” (Emotional Response). In the case of the interview participant being a leader, an example is: “I simply asked the employee where the reports were, as he was two days late” (Leader Behavior), and “the employee was very short with me about having too many deadlines, and said he was angry about the amount of work that was expected of him” (Emotional Response).

Finally, the intensity of the emotional response was determined using the Larsen & Diener (1992) Circumplex Model as a guide. The Larsen and Diener view on the structure of affect is based on unrotated factor analyses of self-report emotions (see Capanzano et al., 2003 for a discussion). This model of affect classifies discrete emotions in terms of valence (positive–negative, also labeled hedonic tone) and intensity (high–medium–low, also labeled engagement, arousal, or activation). For example, when interview participants reported that the emotional response was “anxiety” or “excitement”, these emotions were classified as “high intensity” as they are associated with high levels of intensity in the Circumplex Model. Alternatively, emotional responses such as “depressed” or “calm” were classified as “low intensity” emotions based on this model.
It is important to note that, similar to the recent study by Amabile et al. (2004), there were positive and negative emotions associated with each classification of leader behavior. As Amabile et al. explain in their article, although leader behaviors such as “communication” may seem positive, there can be a negative version of the behavior. This entails 1) engaging in a negative form of that behavior, for example yelling at employees; and 2) performing the behavior poorly, for example, only communicating half of the required information. Thus, there were positive and negative emotional responses associated with each type of leader behavior recalled by the employees.

2.4.1. Reliability of content analysis

The transcripts were independently coded by the interviewer (in QSR NUD*IST) using the previously described content analysis scheme, aiming for mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories (see Cohen, 1960; Kerlinger, 1964). Following this, two research assistants (RA1 and RA2) independently categorized the data (manually), guided only by the content analysis scheme. In addition to the guidance of the coding scheme, the raters were also able freely to assign coding units to any category and were given the option of creating a new category if required. Both assistants were blind to the research purpose, and conducted the coding separately. This is critical in establishing the integrity of the content analysis scheme (Larsson, 1993).

Three people independently coded the data, two of whom were blind to the theory behind the study. Inter-rater reliability was calculated based on a random representative sample of interview transcripts (5 individual interviews, 2 focus group interviews). The initial proportions of agreement were: between the Interviewer and RA1, 0.69; between the Interviewer and RA2, 0.72; and between two RAs, 0.66. According to Currell et al. (1999), reliability at this level is acceptable and it indicates that there is convergence across the raters. Coding decisions that were not agreed upon by all three coders were examined. In most cases, there was no disagreement per se, but simply the omission of a code by one of the two independent coders (omission rates were 22%, 14%, and 13%). To counter this, the two independent coders were asked to re-examine their coding and to add in any additional codes they may have missed initially. As a result, the new codes added were almost identical to those identified by the interviewer. The final codes were determined by consensus resolution (Amabile et al., 2004; Larsson, 1993; Narayanan et al., 1999), where differences in coding were discussed before all three coders agreed on the final assignments within the QSR NUD*IST program. Thus, the final reliability of the coding was in effect 100%, eliminating the need to report inter-rater reliabilities for every individual code.

3. Results

To recap the aims of this research, Research Question 1, based on affective events theory, asked: What leader behaviors evoke emotional responses in employees? This question was answered using thematic analysis and content analysis. Hypothesis 1 concerned the asymmetry effect, testing if negative interactions would be described using more sentences than positive interactions. Research Questions 2 and 3 followed-up on this hypothesis, asking: When employees recall emotional interactions with their leaders, what is the nature of the intensity of employee emotional responses? and What emotions words do employees use when describing interactions with their leaders? Each of these questions was answered using content analysis to uncover the asymmetry effect. In the following sections, the specific findings in relation to the research questions and the hypothesis are outlined.

3.1. Leader behavior as a source of affective events

With regard to Research Question 1, as anticipated, it was found in the thematic analysis that leaders are ongoing sources of employee hassles and uplifts in the workplace. Employees and leaders themselves see leadership as a source of affective events, with leader behaviors prompting either positive or negative emotional responses in employees. The descriptive thematic analysis is supplemented with frequencies of the specific emotional responses to the leader behaviors. First, the positive emotions evoked by specific leader behaviors are discussed, followed by a discussion of the negative emotions evoked by leader behaviors.

3.1.1. Leader emotion-evoking behaviors–positive emotion themes

When reporting positive critical incidents (uplifts), employees indicated that they experienced small but regular positive interactions with their leaders, saying that it was “hard to pick one... just everyday kind of things” and, “there
are examples of small positive incidents, twenty times a day”. Positive incidents were mostly related to the leader showing awareness of employee concerns, and respect for all employees. Other leader behaviors prompting positive employee emotions were motivational and inspirational behaviors. Employees also felt positive about being empowered by their leaders, and by having effective communication with the leader.

The positive emotions experienced by employees ranged from “excitement” and “enthusiasm”, to “comforted” and “calm”. Generally, employees expressed positive emotions—such as being comforted, calm, and satisfied—when leaders behaved in a manner they expected them to; and when leaders displayed behaviors associated with effective leadership, such as transformational leadership (see Bass, 1998). More details about these specific positive emotional responses are presented later, when the content analysis findings are presented.

Another theme to emerge from the data was that employees reported high levels of respect and admiration for leaders who consistently provided small uplifts for them throughout the day, and often reported that such leaders were role models that they aspired to be like, and someone who other leaders should try to be like. The admiration felt by employees was often a result of the leader being motivational and inspirational through his or her behavior, for example by displaying expertise on the job and “leading by example”.

As a result of these positive interactions, employees consistently reported they were motivated to work harder and were more likely to perform citizenship behaviors. They also reported experiencing higher levels of job satisfaction and having more positive opinions of their leader. Employees who reported many positive incidents with their leaders tended to have a much more favorable opinion of their leaders than those who reported only a few positive incidents. The positive incidents were often small things, such as simply saying “thank you” for completing a task. Most interestingly, leaders who frequently initiated small uplifting experiences for their employees were regarded as the best leaders in the organization, although specific uplifts were small in comparison to other positive events experienced by employees. Please note, these findings are based on interpretative thematic analysis and are by no means conclusive of causal relationships supporting affective events theory. Further, in this study, the actual number of incidents that occur in the workplace was not measured.

Content analysis sheds more light on the thematic data. Table 1 provides details of the frequencies for specific leader behaviors and the associated positive emotional reactions to these behaviors.

In Table 1, it is clear that leaders who display awareness and respect for their employees will promote the most positive emotions (such as happiness and comfort). Motivation and inspiration, and empowerment are the next highest in terms of frequency of employee recall. These two classifications of leader behavior are perhaps more important than awareness and respect, as they arouse the highest levels of excitement and enthusiasm in employees. These emotions are highly important in the organizational context, because they are energizing, promoting workplace action. Further, it may be surprising to managers and supervisors that providing rewards and recognition (traditional forms of motivating employees) are not high on the list.

### 3.1.2. Leader emotion-evoking behaviors—negative emotion themes

The thematic analysis suggested that although negative incidents were not a daily occurrence according to employees, the experience of negative incidents aroused intense emotions such as anger and frustration. The most common negative incidents revolved around cases of ineffective or inappropriate communication by the leaders. In some cases, employees felt annoyed they had not been made aware of important issues; in other cases, employees were spoken to in a rude manner, leading to anger toward the leader. Specific examples of communication leading to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Leader emotion-evoking behaviors – positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Admiration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness and respect</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation and inspiration</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward and recognition</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Numbers in the table represent frequencies of text units (sentences) describing interactions, not the actual number of interactions that occurred.
negative emotional responses in employees are, “when he yelled at me I was terrified...”, and “after being so arrogant toward me... I was just enraged”.

Other negative incidents were related to lack of awareness, respect, support, and acknowledgement. Following a lack of support by leaders, employees felt “betrayed”, “disappointed”, “like a disgruntled postal employee”. In the case of poor acknowledgement, employees felt “frustrated”, “annoyed”, and “under-appreciated”. Lack of empowerment was also an issue. When leaders were too controlling, or employees felt they were forced to perform work activities, the employees became annoyed and frustrated. For example, an employee reported “she wants to do it all herself and doesn’t feel comfortable with others doing it, she does not trust us... but she makes me do other tasks instead.” Further, leaders who failed to act as role models, or “do as they said,” were also associated with negative emotional responses such as disappointment. Some employees reported that they did not think their leader had the “hands on skills” required for work in their departmental area.

Finally, perceptions of the leader’s intentions were also considered important. For example, one employee commented that “there is no motivation other than client fees–you know, the dollar sign.” When employees perceived their leaders to be focused only on financial gain, they felt disappointed and in some cases disgusted with their leader’s intentions.

Basically, when leaders did not perform the behaviors they were expected to, or when they performed the behaviors inappropriately, employees experienced negative emotions in response. A theme to emerge from the data concerned the outcomes of these negative interactions. Employees reported that following negative interactions, they lost respect for their leaders, their work environment had decayed and, in extreme cases, employees had left their position to escape their leader. A small number of employees reported frequent hassles prompted by their leaders. These employees expressed the lowest levels of commitment to the organization and the lowest levels of respect for their leaders. Often, those employees who had worked in these unhealthy situations for a long time developed strong negative feelings towards their leaders, even hatred. Some even reported a desire to sabotage projects so that the leader would have to take the blame from a higher level. Frequent hassles prompted by leaders appeared to promote the development of loathing and a desire for revenge. The findings indicate that leaders who regularly promote hassles for employees, for example by scolding them in public, are not effective.

Again, content analysis was utilized to further explore the themes in the data. Table 2 provides details of the frequencies for specific leader behaviors and the associated negative reactions to these behaviors.

The standout finding is for communication behaviors of leaders, supporting earlier findings by Alvesson & Sveningsson (2003) who found that listening and informal chatting are important aspects of leadership. As shown in Table 2, poor communication evokes more negative emotions than any other two behaviors combined. Poor communication is associated with employee anger, annoyance, frustration, disappointment and, in extreme cases, loathing. Failure to display awareness and respect was the next most frequently discussed leader behavior leading to negative emotion, followed by lack of, or inappropriate, empowerment. Consistent with previous research that reported negative emotions (Keenan & Newton, 1985; Narayanan et al., 1999), the most common negative emotions discussed are, anger and annoyance, frustration, and loathing. Leaders should be very concerned about the presence of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Leader emotion-evoking behaviors – negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness and respect</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation and inspiration</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward and recognition</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leader behaviors in this table are “lacking” or “inappropriate” in nature.
these intense negative emotions in the workplace. Not only do these emotions demand attention and interrupt cognitive processes and workplace behaviors, but also, “once the intensity of the emotions subsides, the emotion lingers in the form of a feeling or mood” (see George, 2000, p. 1032). Further, as Dasborough & Ashkanasy (2003) report, negative moods are associated with employees who are less satisfied with their jobs and who engage in more withdrawal behaviors.

3.2. The nature of employee accounts of emotions – asymmetry

In examination of the data during the thematic analysis, consistently and as anticipated, employees spoke more frequently about negative interactions they had had with their leaders. Employees themselves indicated that a negativity bias exists. One employee summed it up by saying, “you never really remember the good experiences, but boy, you can remember the bad ones!” Another employee explains, “You remember the bad incidents because they are really burnt into your mind”. Others reported, “you don’t tend to remember the positive ones... but the negative ones are easy to pick up”, and “negative ones stay in your mind longer than the positives... without a doubt”. However, this anecdotal evidence is by no means confirmation of the asymmetry effect. In Table 3, the results of coding positive and negative emotions and their intensity are presented.

Hypothesis 1 represents an initial test of the asymmetry effect of emotional responses to leader behaviors. In comparing the frequency of recalling negative incidents and positive incidents (see Table 3), there were significantly more negative emotion evoking incidents, 655 counts, than positive incidents, 520 counts, $\chi^2(5)= 88.00, p<.001$. This indicates that employees do recall significantly more detail in regards to negative events than positive events. This finding does provide initial support for Hypothesis 1; however, the accuracy of this result may not be definite because of concerns about interview impression management (potential positive bias in the case of interviews with leaders). In effect, the negativity bias may actually be underrepresented in this particular study.

Table 3 also highlights an interesting finding that runs counter to my predictions about the negativity bias. Although negative emotions are dominant, when considering each individual emotion alone, rather than grouped together as positive or negative emotions, the most frequently mentioned emotion is happiness and pleased (253 counts). This is followed closely by anger (240 counts), and then comforted and calm (168 counts).

Research Question 2 concerned the intensity of the emotional response of employees to leader behaviors. The intensity of the emotional response was determined by the arousal or level of activation associated with each emotion. Larsen & Diener’s (1992) Circumplex Model was utilized to represent the level of emotional arousal. Using this model as a guide, levels of intensity were allocated to each emotional response recalled by employees during the content analysis. From Table 3, it is clear that the majority of positive emotional responses fall within the low–medium arousal categories (88%). On the other hand, the negative emotional responses fall most often within the high

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Emotion–Valence</th>
<th>Arousal–Intensity</th>
<th>Frequency (lines)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive incidents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Happy/Pleased</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Comforted/Calm</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Excited/Enthusiastic</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Admiration</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total=520</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative incidents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Annoyed/Angry</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Frustration</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Disappointment</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Loathing</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Anxious/Distressed</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Dejected/Fatigued</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Fear/Apprehension</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total=655</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
arousal category (82%). Clearly, negative emotions experienced by employees in response to leader behaviors involved higher activation in terms of arousal.

Research Question 3 also concerned the asymmetry effect of emotional recall, and was examined using content analysis. This question was assessed based on the number of different words employees used to describe their emotional response to leadership behaviors. It was found that when employees were recalling emotional interactions with their leaders, they used a wider variety of negative emotions words ($n=11$) than positive emotions words ($n=7$). In the content analysis, the words used by employees to describe their negative emotional responses were as follows: annoyed, angry, frustrated, disappointed, hate (loathing), anxious, stressed (distressed), dejected, worn out (fatigued), scared (fear), nervous (apprehension). Please note, the words in brackets are the more formal labels assigned to the emotion for the purpose of coding. With regard to positive emotions words used, there was less variety than the negative emotions: happy, pleased, comforted, calm, excited, enthusiastic, and admiration. This finding supports the argument for a negativity bias put forward by Rozin & Royzman (2001), concerning the impact of the variety of positive and negative emotions in the affective lexicon.

4. Discussion

In summary, the findings support the idea that leaders are sources of affective events in the workplace. Findings show that employees react acutely to hassles they experience, leading to negative feelings. Employees do recall more negative incidents, and they describe these incidents with greater intensity. Given the negativity bias in employee recollection of emotional interactions with their leaders, leaders should attempt to manage these incidents with care. Specifically, during everyday face to face interactions with employees, leaders should aim to minimize negative employee emotional responses at work and maximize positive emotional responses by showing awareness and respect; providing motivation, empowerment, recognition and accountability; and, above all, communicating effectively.

4.1. Theoretical implications

This research makes several contributions in terms of theoretical development and practical applications. The major theoretical contribution of this study is the linking of affective events theory and the asymmetry effect of emotions, and the application of the two theories to the context of the emotional process of leadership. Affective events theory and the asymmetry effects of emotions provide two theoretical lenses through with we can learn more about the emotional process of leadership (see also Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002). It is hoped that the promising exploratory findings presented here using these lenses will promote more research of this nature so more can be learned about the complex emotional processes that exist in the workplace.

Although employees did not explicitly mention transformational leadership, the findings suggest that, to evoke positive employee emotions, leaders may display transformational leadership behaviors (individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence: Bass, 1998). In this study, the leader behaviors identified as having emotional consequences are “awareness and respect” (individualized consideration), “empowerment” (intellectual stimulation), “motivation and inspiration” (inspirational motivation), “reward and recognition” (individual consideration). These transformational leadership factors were mentioned implicitly by the nature of the coding process used in this investigation. The most prominent leader emotion-evoking behavior in this study, “communication”, can assist with individual consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual consideration – perhaps this explains why communication is so important to employees. The other leader behavior identified in this study as having emotional implications for employees, “accountability” is associated with transactional leadership.

Employees did not explicitly mention the transformational leadership dimension of idealized influence ( charisma). Although this dimension has been shown to have strong effects on followers (e.g. Conger & Kanungo, 1998), perhaps employees are not consciously aware of this influence unless they are specifically asked about it in a survey. Further, one could argue that charisma is a rare quality of leaders, and may not be present unless there are certain situational factors, such as a crisis (see Yukl, 2002). Although employees in this study did not explicitly mention charisma, they did however report feeling admiration for their leaders, which does capture an outcome of charismatic transformational leadership.

Implicitly, the research methodology in this study was about the dyadic relationships between leaders and followers. Thus, this research also informs the leader–member exchange (LMX) field. Prior research on LMX
quality has found that high leader–member relationship quality is related to increased job performance, satisfaction with supervision, overall satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intentions (see Gerstner & Day, 1997). In this research, it was found that interactions between leaders and their employees were emotional in nature. In LMX terms, during the leader–member exchanges, the leader behaviors evoked positive and negative member emotions. Based on affective events theory, it is argued that these emotional responses contribute to the positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes associated with high quality LMX relationships. Thus, future LMX research should consider emotional aspects of the specific exchange relationships that exist between leaders and employees.

4.2. Practical implications

Given that this research was conducted in the field with face-to-face organizational leaders (managers and supervisors) and employees, it is argued that the findings also point to some important practical applications. To promote positive employee emotions, leaders should acknowledge individual efforts and achievements. Successful leaders instill and develop a sense of appreciation for work within the organization (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000). Through individualized consideration for each employee, leaders develop a sense of gratitude for the work their employees do, which adds to the sense of each one feeling special and instills a sense of trust in the leader (George, 2000). Employees feel they are valued, which in turn motivates them to perform at their optimum level for the leader and the organization. Praising employees for a job well done can lift the spirits of not only the individual receiving the reward, but also of other employees looking on through emotional contagion (see Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992). Through leaders evoking such emotional responses from employees, the organization should benefit from increased organizational commitment.

Yukl (2002) has noted that leaders can inspire and encourage their employees to be creative, pushing them beyond their comfort zones to solve problems. Effective leaders empower their employees, enabling them to use their skills and abilities to their full potential. When employees are empowered, they feel inspired, motivated, and excited about new possibilities (see Amabile et al., 2004 for a discussion on creativity). Based on the findings of this study, it is proposed that leaders can deliberately arouse each of these emotional states in their employees to assist in achieving organizational goals.

In this regard, leaders are encouraged to display behaviors associated with emotional intelligence. Caruso et al. (2001) define emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive and express emotions, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotions in the self and others. Emotional intelligence is seen to contribute to effective leadership; in particular, it has been linked to transformational leadership (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; George, 2000). In the case of transformational leaders, Ashkanasy & Tse (2000) attribute these leaders’ power to the exercising of control over their own emotions, as well as control over employees’ emotions. George (2000) has specifically suggested that leaders high on emotional intelligence are likely to be better at influencing genuine employee excitement, enthusiasm, confidence, and optimism (p. 1642). Thus, based on the findings of this study regarding positive employee emotions, emotional intelligence is viewed as a highly valued leadership trait and for those leaders who do not use emotionally intelligent behaviors naturally, training in this area may be highly beneficial (Jordan, Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Hooper, 2002).

4.3. Limitations

Some important limitations must be acknowledged. In the first instance, qualitative research does not allow definitive testing of theory (see Bryman, 2004). In addition, although attempts were made to prevent this from occurring, the interpretation of qualitative data is inherently subjective, so researcher biases can intrude.

For the purpose of this study, “leaders” were defined as individuals who have influence over employee’s daily tasks, otherwise known as a supervisor or manager. Although it is common to use managers or supervisors to empirically examine leadership (Yukl, 2002), people in these positions may not necessarily show “leadership” behaviors or traits. There are many arguments for distinguishing between leadership and management (for example, see Kotter, 1990). Future research on organizational leadership should therefore focus on individuals at higher levels in the organization, such as CEOs, who play more of a leadership role than a managerial role (see Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003).

Further, focus group interviews and individual interviews are social situations; hence, interviewees might feel that they must comply with social norms, resulting in positive bias of results (Alvesson, 1996). As Conger (1998) has
discussed, the study of leadership is highly prone to presentational data. Often when asked about their leaders, employees will answer in a socially desirable manner to protect themselves. On the other hand, when leaders themselves are asked about their own behaviors, they often attempt to enhance their own image, using various forms of impression management (Conger, 1998). Taking this into account, perhaps the finding of a slight negativity bias is actually underrepresented. Despite this potential misrepresentation, overall, the findings presented here provide a useful exploratory glimpse of the role of leaders as managers of affective events, and provide a springboard for future more rigorous quantitative theory testing.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to provide a preliminary understanding of employee emotional responses to leadership behaviors. While it has previously been argued that leaders evoke emotional responses in their employees, little is known about this emotional process and the negativity bias that exists. To learn more about this phenomenon, a qualitative study was employed to examine what leader behaviors evoke emotional responses in employees, and further, to discover which types of emotional responses were cognitively most salient to the employees. The discovery of support for affective events theory, and the asymmetry effect of emotions, suggests that the management of emotions is a crucial skill practiced by effective leaders. Such leaders will exhibit emotionally intelligent behaviors to positively influence the emotions of employees and to overcome the negativity bias. As a result, they will attract the admiration and trust of employees, and ultimately promote achievement of organizational goals through supplying constant positive emotional uplifts for their employees.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Neal Ashkanasy who assisted with the design of the study and provided valuable comments on earlier drafts. The author also acknowledges the valuable suggestions put forward by Jerry Hunt, and the three anonymous reviewers.

This research was supported in part by an Australian Postgraduate Award.

Appendix A

Leader behavior coding scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader behavior code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reward and recognition</td>
<td>Recognizing individual employee efforts. Rewarding individual employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation and inspiration</td>
<td>Providing motivation for employees. Inspiring employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Inviting employees to participate in decision-making. Empowering employees. Enabling employees to control tasks or projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Determining who will be responsible. Clarifying roles, level of autonomy, work distribution, and time management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Listening to employees. Providing directions for employees. Providing feedback to employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness and respect</td>
<td>Awareness of employee issues. Concern for employees. Respect for employees.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coding scheme allows each leader behavior to be positive or negative; e.g. Motivation and inspiration: a positive example is “My leader is so motivating... he is just fantastic...”; a negative example is “My leader does not give us any reason to be motivated about work...”.

References


