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Ambivalent bosses: An examination of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate task engagement

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Abstract: Supervisors often have to manage conflicting and contradictory demands in increasingly dynamic work environments. In the process of doing so, they may express emotional ambivalence observed by subordinates. Drawing on emotions as social information (EASI) theory and research on unpredictability and stress, we examine when and why supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence influence subordinate outcomes. In two studies, we find that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence is indirectly related to subordinate task engagement via supervisor unpredictability (Studies 1 and 2). In addition, supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress serially mediate the effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on task engagement (Studies 3 and 4). Furthermore, the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence moderates this indirect effect, such that the negative indirect effect is stronger for a subordinate when supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence is directed toward him/her as opposed to another subordinate (Study 4). We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

Keywords: Emotions, Emotional ambivalence, Unpredictability, Anticipated stress, Task engagement, Target of expressed emotional ambivalence

In modern organizations, the increasingly dynamic nature of work requires supervisors to cope with asymmetrical goals, and contradictory and conflicting work demands (Ashforth et al., 2014, Rothman and Melwani, 2017, Smith and Lewis, 2011). In the process of managing these tensions and complexities at work, supervisors inevitably experience and express emotional ambivalence, defined as the conflict and tension arising from the simultaneous experience of two emotional states that primarily differ in valence (Rothman, 2011). Given the significant impact that supervisor emotional displays have on subordinates' feelings, cognitions, and behaviors (George, 2000), it is important to examine when and why supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence—the simultaneous display of both positive and negative emotions by the supervisor—may influence subordinate outcomes.

As supervisors express emotional ambivalence due to the challenges they face at work, subordinates are highly likely to observe and attend to their supervisors' emotional ambivalent expressions. This is because these emotional expressions are salient in supervisor-subordinate work interactions and easily observed even when these expressions are not necessarily directed at the specific subordinate. Supervisor emotional expressions are particularly important because supervisors are a primary source of information for subordinates' sense-making, and they help to maintain

order and predictability by decreasing subordinates' subjective sense of uncertainty (Hogg, 2001, Humphrey, 2002). Specifically, subordinates perceive supervisor emotional ambivalent expressions as a critical information cue that may signal their supervisors' underlying attitudes and behavioral intentions, hence guiding them to react accordingly based on these inferences (Van Kleef, 2009).

We propose that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence has negative consequences on subordinates' job attitudes by influencing subordinates' perceptions of the supervisor and thus their subsequent psychological states. To date, research has almost exclusively focused on examining the effects of expressed emotional ambivalence in mutually interdependent contexts where both parties are peers who have equal power to influence outcomes (e.g., Belkin and Rothman, 2017, Rothman, 2011, Rothman and Northcraft, 2015). However, unlike peer expressed emotional ambivalence, we argue that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence is more likely to be threatening for subordinates because supervisor-subordinate relationships are structural and hierarchical in nature with high dependency of the subordinate on the supervisor for critical organizational resources (e.g., financial rewards, promotions etc.). Thus, our research highlights the importance of considering the power differentials between the expresser and the target (i.e.,

supervisor-subordinate relationships), which may heighten the significance and threat of supervisors expressed emotional ambivalence for subordinates, resulting in loss of control and increasing anticipated stress.

In this research, we endeavor to understand when and why supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence influences subordinate task engagement. We examine task engagement as our dependent variable because scholars and practitioners recognize it as a competitive advantage that can ultimately contribute to organization productivity (Christian et al., 2011; Gallup Management Journal, 2005). We draw on the emotions as social information (EASI) theory, which proposes that emotional expressions provide information to the observers about the expresser's attitudes and behavioral intentions (Van Kleef, 2009; Van Kleef et al., 2010). Integrating this theoretical perspective with research on unpredictability and stress, we argue that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence prompts subordinates to infer that their supervisor is unpredictable, which in turn increases anticipated stress and diminishes task engagement. Furthermore, we suggest that the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence, that is, whether supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence is directed toward the self or another subordinate, further impacts these relationships. Given that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence may be threatening for subordinates, the threat of ambivalence may be accentuated or attenuated depending on whether the subordinate is the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence. In particular, we propose that the negative indirect effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on task engagement is stronger when supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence is directed toward the self as opposed to another subordinate.

The contribution of our paper is threefold. First, by integrating EASI theory and the literatures on unpredictability and stress, our research contributes to the emotional ambivalence literature by clarifying why supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence negatively affects subordinate task engagement. In doing so, we identify and highlight perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress as key psychological mechanisms that drive the negative indirect effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate task engagement. Second, we provide theoretical insights to the emotional ambivalence literature by identifying the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence as a critical boundary condition underlying the relationship between supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence and supervisor unpredictability. By examining the target of expressed emotional ambivalence in the supervisor-subordinate context, as opposed to mutually interdependent contexts among peers, we are able to unpack the conditions under which supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence is more or less threatening and hence detrimental for the subordinate's task engagement. We demonstrate that when supervisors direct their emotional ambivalence toward a subordinate, this particular subordinate (compared to observers) is even more likely to view the supervisor as unpredictable, and in turn anticipate more stress, which negatively affects task engagement. Third, our research extends the body of work that examines the interpersonal implications of emotional ambivalence expressions by being one of the first empirical studies to demonstrate that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence can have a negative impact on subordinate outcomes. This stands in contrast to previous research that has documented the positive impact of expressed

emotional ambivalence on the recipient in mutually interdependent contexts, including decision-making and negotiations (e.g., Rothman, 2011; Rothman & Northcraft, 2015). Specifically, our research focuses on the supervisor-subordinate context, characterized by power differentials and dependency, where subordinates are more likely to feel threatened and perceive their supervisors to be unpredictable when their supervisors express emotional ambivalence. We summarize our theoretical model in Fig. 1.

1. Theoretical development and hypotheses

Emotional ambivalence is conceptualized as the conflict and tension that arise from the simultaneous experience of positive and negative emotional states (Rothman, 2011). This conceptualization highlights that the conflict and tension arise from two simultaneously occurring emotions that primarily differ in valence, that is, one is a positive emotion and the other is a negative emotion. However, conflict and tension may also arise when two simultaneously occurring emotions are of the same valence but yet differ in arousal, such as nervousness (high arousal) versus tiredness (low arousal), or differ in action tendencies, such as sadness (low action tendency) versus anger (high action tendency). While a sense of conflict and tension can arise from experiencing different emotions that contradict in valence, arousal, or action tendency, our research does not focus on the nature of emotional ambivalence, but rather focuses on emotional ambivalence that is being expressed outwardly, that is the expression of conflict and tension as perceived by an observer. In our study, we presume that supervisors who experience emotional ambivalence are highly likely to express it, and as such, these emotional expressions can be detected by subordinates. In addition, ambivalence is different from indifference (Rothman, 2011). Whereas indifference is characterized by a lack of emotional intensity and depth toward a particular subject or object, ambivalence is characterized by strong opposing feelings about a particular subject or object (see Methot et al., 2017; Rothman et al., 2017).

A handful of empirical studies have examined the consequences of expressed emotional ambivalence in mutually interdependent contexts where both parties have equal power to influence outcomes. For example, negotiators are more likely to dominate partners who express emotional ambivalence than partners who express happiness or anger because negotiators perceive the ambivalent partner as more submissive (Rothman, 2011). In another negotiation study, Rothman and Northcraft (2015) find that negotiators perceive partners who express emotional ambivalence as more submissive than partners who express happiness or anger and believe that they are more able to influence the ambivalent partner, which fosters integrative outcomes. In an experimental study on decision making, Belkin and Rothman (2017) report that observers perceive targets who express emotional ambivalence as less moral and competent, which reduces observers' trust toward them. Our current research moves beyond these mutually interdependent contexts by examining expressed emotional ambivalence in a supervisor-subordinate context where supervisors and subordinates have unequal power and dependency.

Drawing on the EASI theory, we propose that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence may prompt subordinates to infer that the supervisor is unpredictable – perceptions of supervisor behaviors being unexpected and unforeseen (Greer et al., 2013). The EASI theory

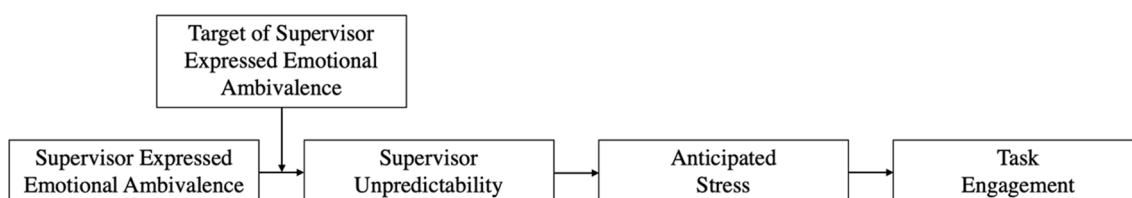


Fig. 1. Proposed theoretical model.

proposes that emotional expressions provide information to observers and shape their behaviors through inferential processes (Van Kleef, 2009, 2014; Van Kleef et al., 2012). Just as mood provides information to the self (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), emotional expressions provide social information to observers, which may influence their feelings, thoughts, and actions (Cheshin et al., 2011; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Van Kleef, 2009). When applied to a supervisor-subordinate context, subordinates may infer that their supervisor is indecisive and feels conflicted when he/she expresses emotional ambivalence (Rothman, 2011). Since subordinates do not have complete information about why and when supervisors express emotional ambivalence, they may perceive their supervisor to be unpredictable. Hence, subordinates may experience a sense of reduced control as they are less able to infer and make sense of their supervisors' thoughts and behaviors (Belkin & Rothman, 2017). Indeed, supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence can make it difficult for subordinates to anticipate their supervisors' future behaviors (Ellsberg, 1959; Frank, 1988). Supporting this argument, in an experimental study on negotiations, negotiators perceive their partners who express emotional inconsistency, as compared to those who express happiness or anger, to be more unpredictable, which reduces their sense of control over the outcome (Sinaceur et al., 2013).

We further propose that subordinates are likely to appraise supervisor unpredictability as a stressor, which evokes an anticipatory stress response. Anticipated stress is defined as an aversive psychological response to potential adverse work experiences, especially experiences that are uncertain or beyond the employee's control (Beehr & Bhagat, 1985; Hart & Cooper, 2001). Given that the need for predictability and control is a fundamental human need (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2012; Stevens & Fiske, 1995), people are likely to be negatively affected when they are confronted with unpredictability. Being unable to predict how someone would act in a situation is an aversive and alarming experience that reduces one's sense of control and increases anticipated stress. This notion may be more pronounced in a supervisor-subordinate context as it can be particularly stressful for subordinates to depend on supervisors for resources whose behaviors they cannot predict. Indeed, there is strong empirical evidence linking unpredictability with anticipated stress (Averill, 1973; Dugas et al., 2004; Sonnentag & Frese, 2003). For example, studies have shown that people anticipate more stress when they are awaiting unpredictable shocks as opposed to expected ones (Badia et al., 1966; Grillon et al., 2004). Another study involving athletes competing in a major sports tournament demonstrates that those who encounter more unpredictable experiences during the tournament report higher levels of anticipated stress than those who encounter less unpredictable experiences (Dugdale et al., 2002). Furthermore, organizational research shows that job-related unpredictability is related to perceived stress (Bordia et al., 2004; Mantler et al., 2005; Nixon et al., 2011). As such, we propose that, the more subordinates perceive their supervisors to be unpredictable, the more stress they anticipate.

In turn, subordinates with higher levels of anticipated stress are likely to respond with lower task engagement. Past research suggests that the effects of anticipated stress are comparable to the effects of actual experienced stress (Chen et al., 2009; Waugh et al., 2010), such as increased heart rate (Ditzen et al., 2007) and higher blood pressure (Spacapan & Cohen, 1983). Anticipated stress has also been linked with higher negative affect and increased worry (Neubauer et al., 2018; van Eck et al., 1998), which are likely to decrease task engagement (Bledow et al., 2011; Sonnentag et al., 2008). Furthermore, employees who anticipate more work stress are likely to perceive the workplace as more threatening and demanding (see Meurs & Perrewé, 2011, for a review), which also reduce task engagement (Breevaart & Bakker, 2018; Christian et al., 2011; Crawford et al., 2010; Halbesleben, 2010). Indeed, these studies are consistent with Harter et al.'s (2002) view that employees are less likely to be engaged to the extent that they anticipate more work stress. Taken together, we predict that perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and increased anticipated stress will result in lower task engagement. Overall, these arguments lead to the following

hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. Supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence relates positively to subordinate perceptions of supervisor unpredictability.

Hypothesis 2. Supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence indirectly negatively affects subordinate task engagement through subordinate perceptions of supervisor unpredictability.

Hypothesis 3. Supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence indirectly negatively affects subordinate task engagement through subordinate perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress sequentially.

1.1. The moderating role of target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence

Although supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence may increase perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and subsequently result in greater anticipated stress, we propose that the specific target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence may have a more intense experience. According to EASI theory, social-relational factors, such as how and to whom the emotion is expressed, may influence observers' inferential processes of others' emotional expressions (Van Kleef, 2009, 2014). For example, when people are targets of an anger expression, they may infer that they did something wrong and react accordingly based on their inference (e.g., apologizing) (Van Kleef, 2009). Building on the notion that the target of emotional expression matters and drawing on social psychological research on attributions, we propose that when supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence is directed toward a specific subordinate, as opposed to another subordinate, the target subordinate is more likely to perceive the supervisor to be higher on unpredictability as compared to the other observer.

Attribution theory proposes that people are motivated to assign causes to behaviors of themselves and others (Weiner, 1985). People use different explanations (internal/personal versus external/situational) for human behaviors, and there is an actor/observer difference in attributions (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). Generally, individuals tend to attribute others' behaviors to their dispositional factors and attribute their own actions to situational factors (Jones & Nisbett, 1972); however, their attribution differs depending on their involvement (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross, 1977). For example, when people experience negative events, they tend to attribute blame to others or the situation (i.e., situational factors); however, when others experience negative events, people tend to attribute personal blame to that person (i.e., internal factors).

Applying the actor/observer bias to our context, when a subordinate is the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence, he/she is more likely to attribute responsibility for the expression of emotional ambivalence to his/her supervisor and perceive him/her to be an unpredictable person. As a result, with this attribution, the subordinate may feel more threatened and anticipate greater stress. In contrast, as an observer, a subordinate examines both the supervisor and the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence (another colleague) to make sense of the situation. First, there are two parties involved (the supervisor and the target subordinate) and as such, the responsibility is likely to be diffused between the two. Second, attributing responsibility to the supervisor, as compared to the target subordinate, implies negative consequences for the self. Because of the discomfort arising from such attributions, subordinates are more likely to perceive that the other party involved (another colleague) as being responsible for their supervisor's expressed emotional ambivalence. As a result, with this attribution, the subordinate may feel less threatened and anticipate lower stress, compared to when one is the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence.

In summary, we propose that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence and target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence

interact to affect supervisor unpredictability. Specifically, the effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on supervisor unpredictability is stronger for the target of the expression as compared to observers. Overall, this also suggests a first-stage moderated serial mediation model. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4. Supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence and target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence interact to influence subordinate perceptions of supervisor unpredictability, such that the effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate perceptions of supervisor unpredictability is stronger for the target (self) as compared to observers (other).

Hypothesis 5. Target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence moderates the negative indirect effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate task engagement through subordinate perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress. In particular, the indirect effect will be more negative when supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence is directed toward the target (self) as opposed to observers (other).

2. Overview of studies

We test our hypotheses in four studies. Study 1 is a field survey with a time-lagged design involving employees in India. We examine whether supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence affects perceptions of supervisor unpredictability (Hypothesis 1), which then affects subordinate task engagement (Hypothesis 2). In Study 2, we seek to substantiate our primary findings by experimentally manipulating expressed emotional ambivalence in a laboratory setting. Study 3 is a conceptual replication attempt of Studies 1 and 2 and also investigates whether supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence indirectly negatively affects subordinate task engagement through subordinate perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress in a serial mediation model (Hypothesis 3). In Study 4, we examine the interactive effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence and the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate perceptions of supervisor unpredictability (Hypothesis 4) and test the full moderated serial mediation model (Hypothesis 5). All study data and analysis codes are available at the Open Science Framework web page associated with this project: https://osf.io/dajwn/?view_only=75cd3bc13e984b92a95a377ca1ecca43.

3. Study 1

In Study 1, we collected data from employees in India using a time-lagged design to establish the theoretical linkages among supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence, perceptions of supervisor unpredictability, and task engagement. We measured our dependent variable by having subordinates report their levels of engagement at work over time (i.e., over the past one month) in their roles working with their supervisors. Correspondingly, we used a more chronic measure of supervisor emotional ambivalence displays. Although emotional experiences, including felt emotional ambivalence, are generally short-lived and transient (Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Brief & Weiss, 2002), we argue that both episodic displays (i.e., the supervisor displays ambivalence at a time) and chronic displays (i.e., the supervisor tends to display ambivalence) can prompt the subordinate to perceive that the supervisor is unpredictable. In general, we expect expressed emotional ambivalence to have an enduring effect on observers as perceptions of emotional ambivalence displays prompt social cognitive processes that shape the observers' inferences about the expresser's attitudes and behavioral intentions (Kelley, 1972), which in turn influence the observers' attitudes and behaviors.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants and procedure

We recruited a market research firm, Maction, to collect field data in India. The research firm supports a panel of working adults who participate in market and academic research for monetary incentives. The firm independently authenticates the identity and employment status of panel members and adheres to a data collection procedure similar to that used by marketing research firms such as Qualtrics. Prior to the study recruitment, panelists have to answer a series of profiling questions pertaining to their age, gender, income, and employing organization. To ensure that high quality panelists are recruited, the firm conducts stringent recruitment checks, such as using invite-only surveys and verifying each panelist's social security number similar to that in the United States. We focused on recruiting employees working for supervisors who were in a position to influence their subordinates' rewards (e.g., salary increments, promotions etc.).

At Time 1, we collected ratings of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence and demographic data from 375 full time employees. Approximately four weeks later, at Time 2, we gathered data from 368 employees about their perceptions of supervisor unpredictability (98.13% participation). Finally, approximately four weeks later, at Time 3, 330 employees rated their task engagement (89.94% participation). The final employee sample was 74% male; employees averaged 30.94 years of age ($SD = 8.40$) and reported working an average of 4.47 years ($SD = 4.87$) in their organizations.

3.1.2. Measures

Participants reflected on their experiences and psychological states over the past one month for the measures of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence, supervisor unpredictability, and task engagement. Unless reported otherwise, all scales were seven-point scales that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Supervisor Expressed Emotional Ambivalence. Subordinates rated supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on a four-item scale (Belkin & Rothman, 2017; Priester & Petty, 1996). Specifically, subordinates rated the extent to which their supervisors expressed/displayed the following feelings at work: "ambivalence", "torn", "conflicted", and "mixed feelings" ($\alpha = 0.84$). All items were anchored on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *most of the time*).

Supervisor Unpredictability. Subordinates rated supervisor unpredictability on three items. These items were "I was unsure about what my supervisor wanted from me", "I found it hard to predict what my supervisor expected of me", and "I could not predict my supervisor's behaviors or decisions about me" ($\alpha = 0.60$).

Task Engagement. Subordinates rated their task engagement with eighteen items (Rich et al., 2010). Sample items include, "I work with intensity on my job", "I am enthusiastic in my job", and "At work, my mind is focused on my job" ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Control Variables. We included subordinate age, subordinate gender, subordinate tenure (the length of employment in the current organization), and subordinate working duration with his/her supervisor (the length of the working relationship) as control variables because they have been linked with task engagement (Avery et al., 2007). In addition, we controlled for supervisor's expressed positive affect ($\alpha = 0.58$) and negative affect ($\alpha = 0.87$) because we wanted to demonstrate the unique effects of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on perceptions of supervisor unpredictability over and beyond supervisor expressed positive and negative affective states. We also included feeling trusted by the supervisor as a control variable to show that perceptions of supervisor unpredictability could still mediate the effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate task engagement after accounting for relationship quality. Furthermore, feeling trusted by the supervisor has been positively linked to task engagement (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Haynie et al., 2016; Morton & Pellegrini, 2016). We measured feeling trusted by supervisor with four items (Mayer et al., 2016).

Sample items include, “My supervisor would be comfortable letting me have influence over issues that are important to him/her,” and “My supervisor would be willing to let me have control over his/her future” ($\alpha = 0.67$). We note that the direction and significance of the indirect effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on task engagement via perceptions of supervisor unpredictability reported in our main analysis remained the same with and without control variables. We report our analyses below with control variables included.

3.2. Results and discussion

To examine discriminant validity, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the six self-reported scales: supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence, supervisor unpredictability, task engagement, supervisor expressed positive affect, supervisor expressed negative affect, and feeling trusted by supervisor. Results showed that our hypothesized six-factor model fit the data significantly better than any alternative models, $\chi^2(215) = 747.50, p < .001, CFI = 0.86, TLI = 0.83, SRMR = 0.09, RMSEA = 0.09$. All factor loadings were statistically significant, $p < .001$. The best fitting alternative is a four-factor model combining supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence, supervisor expressed positive affect, and supervisor expressed negative affect, $\Delta\chi^2 = 322.86, \Delta df = 9, p < .001, CFI = 0.77, TLI = 0.74, SRMR = 0.13, RMSEA = 0.11$.

Although common method variance (CMV) does not bias data as much as commonly assumed by researchers (Fuller et al., 2016), we conducted a One-Factor Test (Harman, 1967) to assess our data. We performed an exploratory factor analysis to investigate all the indicators of each latent variable. If CMV was an issue, we expected one factor to explain most of the variance (greater than 50% of the variance). However, we found that the largest factor explained only 26% of the variance. Therefore, the data is unlikely to be biased by CMV. Furthermore, Harmon’s One-Factor Test is likely to produce a false positive conclusion that the data is biased by CMV when scale reliabilities are relatively high (Fuller et al., 2016), which is the case for the majority of our measures.

3.2.1. Main analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among all variables and Table 2 presents the regression results. Results from hierarchical linear regression analyses showed that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence was positively associated with perceptions of supervisor unpredictability, $b = 0.62, SE = 0.10, p < .001$ (see Table 2). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. To test Hypothesis 2, we followed procedures recommended by Hayes (2012) to examine the indirect effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate task engagement through perceptions of supervisor unpredictability. The results of the bootstrapping analyses with 5,000 iterations indicated that the 95% bias-confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero, $b = -0.05, SE = 0.02, 95\% CI [-0.09, -0.01]$, suggesting that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence was indirectly related to task engagement via perceptions of supervisor unpredictability.

Table 1
Study 1 descriptive statistics and correlations.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence	2.46	0.97	–								
2 Task engagement	6.16	0.57	–0.18*	–							
3 Supervisor unpredictability	3.05	1.32	0.50*	–0.25*	–						
4 Feeling trusted by supervisor	4.95	1.16	0.26*	–0.07	0.10	–					
5 Supervisor expressed positive affect	4.10	0.50	0.03	0.11*	–0.25*	0.51*	–				
6 Supervisor expressed negative affect	2.21	0.88	0.77*	–0.05	0.40*	0.26*	0.01	–			
7 Age (in year)	30.94	8.40	0.03	0.10	–0.10	0.05	0.07	0.07	–		
8 Gender	0.74	0.44	–0.02	–0.16*	–0.02	–0.01	–0.04	–0.08	–0.02	–	
9 Organizational tenure (in year)	4.47	4.87	–0.06	0.11*	–0.18*	–0.07	0.05	0.02	0.70*	–0.01	–
10 Length of time under current supervisor (in year)	3.63	3.54	–0.02	0.09	–0.18*	–0.04	0.11*	0.05	0.65*	–0.01	0.83*

Note. $N = 330$. Gender is coded as 0 for females and 1 for males. * $p < .05$.

Table 2
Study 1 regression analyses results.

	DV: Supervisor unpredictability		DV: Task engagement	
	b	se	b	se
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Age (in year)	–0.00	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Gender	–0.06	(0.14)	–0.18*	(0.07)
Organizational tenure (in year)	–0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.01)
Length of time under current supervisor (in year)	–0.03	(0.03)	–0.01	(0.02)
Supervisor expressed positive affect	–0.86*	(0.14)	0.15†	(0.08)
Supervisor expressed negative affect	0.03	(0.11)	0.15*	(0.05)
Feeling trusted by supervisor	0.16*	(0.06)	–0.06†	(0.03)
<i>Independent Variables</i>				
Supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence	0.62*	(0.10)	–0.14*	(0.05)
Supervisor unpredictability			–0.07*	(0.03)
Intercept	4.54*	(0.58)	6.08*	(0.32)

Note. $N = 330$. Unstandardized coefficients are reported in table. Gender is coded as 0 for females and 1 for males. * $p < .05, †p < .10$.

Hence, Hypothesis 2 is supported. Overall, our findings provided preliminary evidence of perceptions of supervisor unpredictability as the underlying mechanism driving the effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate task engagement. However, we note the low reliability of our supervisor unpredictability measure. We address this limitation by increasing the number of items of the supervisor unpredictability scale in our follow-up studies.

4. Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed to enhance the internal validity of our findings and to establish the causal relationships among our focal variables by experimentally manipulating expressed emotional ambivalence. In this study, we introduced a supervisor-subordinate context where the member (focal participant) was dependent on the leader (confederate) to decide the amount of financial compensation that each member would receive at the end of the task.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

We recruited participants who were registered in a community participant pool of a large private university in the US. These participants take part in research studies advertised by the university in exchange for monetary incentives. The research staff verified their identities beforehand. We recruited 150 (101 male) individuals for our online study in exchange for USD\$12. Their mean age was 33.84 years ($SD = 10.11$).

4.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to either the expressed emotional ambivalence or expressed neutral affect condition. They were informed that they would be taking part in an online team study on leader-member dynamics and that there would be one leader and two members per team. Participants first completed a short role assignment survey and were told that based on their responses on this questionnaire, they would be assigned the role of either the leader or the member. Unbeknownst to participants, all participants were assigned the role of the member. Next, participants were told that they would be receiving instructions on a team task via a live video feed from another participant who had been assigned the role of the leader. However, in reality, the video feed was recorded prior to the study.

We created the video content based on previous research on emotional ambivalence (e.g., Belkin & Rothman, 2017; Rothman, 2011; Rothman & Northcraft, 2015). Specifically, a female confederate who was an undergraduate student with a theater background was trained to express emotional ambivalence or neutral affect while describing the team task that participants would subsequently engage in. The team task was an anagram task in which participants (assigned the role of the member) would spend a couple of minutes to create words with a set of alphabets. Depending on the condition that they were randomly assigned to, participants viewed the same female confederate delivering the exact same scripted instructions about the team task and the only difference was whether the female confederate was expressing ambivalence or neutral affect while giving the instructions. In the *expressed emotional ambivalence* condition, the confederate in the videotape moved between inner brow raising and lowering. In terms of body movement, she tilted her head back and forth, fidgeted the hands in front of the body and shrugged her shoulders. Furthermore, her gaze shifted among having eye contact with the video camera, looking downward, and looking off into space (Rothman, 2011). In the *expressed neutral affect* condition, the confederate did not engage in any nonverbal gestures that communicated any form of emotion and stayed neutral throughout the videotape. After watching the video clip, participants filled in manipulation check items and a measure on leader unpredictability.

Next, participants completed the anagram task requiring them to create as many words as they could using seven alphabets provided. Specifically, participants were informed that there would be four rounds in total, including one trial round, and that they would be given thirty seconds per round to complete the anagrams. Participants were also told that they would receive additional financial compensation based on the overall performance of their team and that the leader would decide how much each member would receive at the end of the task. This is a common methodology to induce power and control over subordinates (e.g., Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky et al., 2003). After the anagram task, participants completed the task engagement measure.

4.1.3. Measures

Participants rated the leader's (confederate) expressed emotional ambivalence on three items from Study 1. Specifically, participants rated the extent to which the leader was expressing each of the following emotions in the video: "ambivalence", "torn", and "conflicted" ($\alpha = 0.78$). The items were anchored on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *most of the time*). Leader unpredictability was assessed using the same measure in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.88$) (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Participants also rated the extent to which they were engaged in the anagram task using the same task engagement measure in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.96$) (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

4.2. Results and discussion

4.2.1. Manipulation check

Participants in the leader expressed ambivalence condition ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.47$) rated the leader to be significantly more ambivalent than participants in the leader expressed neutral affect condition ($M =$

1.96, $SD = 1.19$), $t(148) = 2.97$, $p = .003$. Thus, our manipulation was successful.

4.2.2. Main analyses

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among all variables. Supporting Hypothesis 1, results showed that participants in the leader expressed ambivalence condition ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.66$) rated the leader to be significantly higher on unpredictability than participants in the leader expressed neutral affect condition ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.14$), $t(148) = 2.58$, $p = .011$. To test Hypothesis 2, we followed procedures recommended by Hayes (2012). The results of the bootstrapping analyses with 5000 iterations indicated that the 95% bias-confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero, $b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI $[-0.24, -0.01]$, suggesting that leader expressed emotional ambivalence condition was indirectly related to task engagement via perceptions of leader unpredictability. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported. In summary, Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 in a laboratory setting and provided causal evidence of our hypothesized relationships.

5. Study 3

Study 3 extended Studies 1 and 2 in three important ways. First, we developed a new manipulation where we directly manipulated supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence in a scenario, rather than rely on a confederate's behaviors that purportedly conveyed emotional ambivalence. Participants read a workplace scenario that asked them to assume the role of a subordinate and react to their direct supervisor's emotional displays. Second, we wanted to ensure that our manipulation of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence did not simply capture general negativity or convey perceptions that the supervisor was disengaged (see Martinko et al., 2018). To address these potential concerns, we included three control conditions (i.e., supervisor expressed positive affect, supervisor expressed negative affect, and supervisor expressed neutral affect) and additional manipulation check items. Third, we tested Hypothesis 3 by exploring the psychological mechanisms linking subordinate perceptions of supervisor unpredictability to subordinate task engagement. Specifically, we examined whether supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence negatively affects subordinate task engagement through subordinate perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress in a serial mediation model.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Participants

A total of 401 US-based workers from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) participated in this experiment in exchange for financial compensation. After excluding those who failed an attention check ($n = 85$), we had a final sample of 316 (206 male) participants.¹ The mean age of participants was 36.06 years ($SD = 10.28$).

5.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four between-participant conditions: *supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence*, *supervisor expressed positive affect*, *supervisor expressed negative affect*, and *supervisor expressed neutral affect*. All participants read a scenario (see Appendix A) that asked them to assume the role of a subordinate working at a mobile game development company, Paradise Inc, as a game programmer responsible for graphics and artificial intelligence. They also read that they were part of a team that had been designing a promising new mobile game. During this period, Chris (the direct

¹ Although there was a relatively high percentage of participants who failed the attention check, we note that the direction and significance of our results in general remained the same when we used the entire sample for our analyses.

Table 3
Study 2 descriptive statistics and correlations.

	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Leader emotional expression condition	0.50	0.50	–			
2	Task engagement	5.45	1.16	–0.05	–		
3	Leader unpredictability	2.50	1.45	0.21*	–0.22*	–	
4	Age	33.84	10.11	–0.12	0.16*	–0.13	–
5	Gender	0.67	0.47	–0.01	–0.10	0.04	–0.08

Note. $N = 150$. Leader emotional expression is coded as 0 for leader expressed neutral affect and 1 for leader expressed emotional ambivalence. Gender is coded as 0 for females and 1 for males. * $p < .05$.

supervisor) had been paying attention to the progress of the team and had been forthright in his assessments about the game development. Participants were then informed that they were involved in a regular weekly meeting with Chris and that all team members took turns to present and to showcase different aspects of the new mobile game.

Supervisor Emotional Expression Manipulation. In the supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence condition, participants read that Chris appeared ambivalent during the meeting. At times, Chris looked satisfied, while at other times, Chris looked unsatisfied. Chris also gave mixed (both positive and negative) remarks about the game during the presentations. In the supervisor expressed positive affect condition, participants read that Chris appeared positive during the meeting. At times, Chris looked satisfied. Chris also gave positive remarks about the game during the presentations. In the supervisor expressed negative affect condition, participants read that Chris appeared negative during the meeting. At times, Chris looked unsatisfied. Chris also gave negative remarks about the game during the presentations. In the supervisor expressed neutral affect condition, participants read that Chris appeared normal during the meeting. At times, Chris looked neutral. Chris also gave standard remarks about the game during the presentations. After reading the scenarios, participants completed manipulation check items and measures on supervisor unpredictability, anticipated stress, and task engagement.

5.1.3. Measures

Unless reported otherwise, all scales were seven-point scales that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Manipulation Check. Participants indicated the extent to which Chris expressed emotional ambivalence on five items, “ambivalent”, “torn”, “conflicted”, “mixed”, and “both positive and negative at the same time” (Belkin & Rothman, 2017) ($\alpha = 0.94$). Participants also rated the extent to which Chris expressed positive affect (“inspired”, “alert”, “excited”, “enthusiastic”, and “determined”) ($\alpha = 0.92$) as well as the extent to which Chris expressed negative affect (“afraid”, “upset”, “nervous”, “scared”, and “distress”) ($\alpha = 0.96$) (Mackinnon et al., 1999). In addition, participants rated the extent to which Chris expressed neutral emotions (“no emotion/neutral”) as well as the extent to which Chris was feeling disengaged. All items were anchored on a seven-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*).

Supervisor Unpredictability. We measured supervisor unpredictability using five items. In addition to the three items used in Studies 1 and 2, we included two more items, “It is difficult to know in advance how Chris will react” and “I feel that Chris has become unpredictable”, which we adapted and modified from Greer et al. (2013) ($\alpha = 0.94$). We note that the significance, pattern, and interpretation of our results remained the same when we used the original three items from Studies 1 and 2 in the analyses ($\alpha = 0.91$). Thus, we report our results using all five items.

Anticipated Stress. We assessed anticipated stress using five items (Kim, 2008). Participants indicated how much they anticipated experiencing stress at work. These five items were “Work will be difficult”, “Work will be stressful”, “I will not be able to cope with work”, “I will feel overloaded while working”, and “I will not feel in control while working” ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Task Engagement. We measured task engagement with the same eighteen items used in Studies 1 and 2 ($\alpha = 0.94$).

5.2. Results and discussion

5.2.1. Confirmatory factor analyses

Before testing our hypotheses, we conducted CFA in order to assess the discriminant validity of the three self-reported scales: supervisor unpredictability, anticipated stress, and task engagement. Results for the measurement model indicated that a three-factor model provide a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(62) = 248.08$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.09. All factor loadings were statistically significant, $p < .001$. Model fit is better for the three-factor model compared with a single-factor model: $\Delta\chi^2 = 1169.56$, $\Delta df = 3$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.63, TLI = 0.56, SRMR = 0.16, RMSEA = 0.26. Furthermore, the three-factor model fit the data better than alternative models that included a two-factor model that combined supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress, $\Delta\chi^2 = 438.44$, $p < .001$.

5.2.2. Manipulation check

One-way ANOVA analyses showed that there was a significant effect of supervisor emotional expression manipulation on ambivalence, $F(3, 312) = 23.42$, $p < .001$. Participants in the supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence condition ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 0.98$) rated Chris to be significantly more ambivalent than participants in the supervisor expressed positive affect condition ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 2.05$), $t(142) = 7.09$, $p < .001$, supervisor expressed negative affect condition ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.70$), $t(154) = 5.58$, $p < .001$, and supervisor expressed neutral affect condition ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.72$), $t(164) = 8.88$, $p < .001$. Thus, our manipulation was successful. Overall, our manipulation check results with the ratings of supervisor expressed positive affect, negative affect, neutral affect, and perceived supervisor disengagement showed that our manipulation was effective and did not merely capture general negativity or convey perceptions that the supervisor was disengaged (see Online Supplement for more details).

5.2.3. Main analyses

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among all variables. We conducted a one-way ANOVA and results indicated that there was a significant effect of supervisor emotional expression on supervisor unpredictability, $F(3, 312) = 16.83$, $p < .001$. Participants in the supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence condition ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.01$) rated Chris to be significantly more unpredictable than

Table 4
Study 3 descriptive statistics and correlations.

	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Task engagement	5.80	0.73	–			
2	Supervisor unpredictability	4.67	1.57	0.00	–		
3	Anticipated stress	4.41	1.54	–0.08	0.71*	–	
4	Age	36.06	10.28	0.02	0.01	–0.06	–
5	Gender	0.66	0.48	0.04	0.09	0.17*	–0.07

Note. $N = 316$. Gender is coded as 0 for females and 1 for males. * $p < .05$.

participants in the supervisor expressed positive affect condition ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.93$), $t(142) = 6.55$, $p < .001$, supervisor expressed negative affect condition ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(154) = 4.26$, $p < .001$, and supervisor expressed neutral affect condition ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.44$), $t(164) = 5.96$, $p < .001$. Therefore, **Hypothesis 1** is supported.

To test **Hypothesis 2**, we followed procedures recommended by Hayes (2012). The results of the bootstrapping analyses with 5000 iterations indicated that the 95% bias-confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on task engagement via perceptions of supervisor unpredictability was not significant when compared to the supervisor expressed positive affect ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.11]), supervisor expressed negative affect ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.05]), and supervisor expressed neutral affect ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.07]) conditions. Therefore, **Hypothesis 2** is not supported.

To test **Hypothesis 3**, we conducted serial mediation analyses with bootstrapped confidence intervals on the basis of 5000 samples. The indirect effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on task engagement through perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress was significant when compared to the supervisor expressed positive affect ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.19]), supervisor expressed negative affect ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.10]), and the supervisor expressed neutral affect ($b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.13]) conditions. Thus, **Hypothesis 3** is supported.

In summary, Study 3 replicated the primary findings of Studies 1 and 2 with a more direct manipulation. Although we did not find support for **Hypothesis 2**, we found support for **Hypothesis 3** whereby supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence had a negative indirect effect on task engagement via perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress sequentially.

6. Study 4

Besides replicating the findings of our previous three studies, we sought to establish a boundary condition of our findings in Study 4. In a supervisor-subordinate context, subordinates are likely to be threatened by supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence because supervisors are high-power actors whom subordinates depend on for material and non-material resources and outcomes. Hence, by examining the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence as a boundary condition, we would be able to determine when supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence is more or less threatening and thus detrimental for subordinate task engagement. Specifically, we tested Hypothesis 4 by examining whether supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence interacted with the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence to predict perceptions of supervisor unpredictability. We tested Hypothesis 5 by investigating whether the target of supervisor emotional ambivalence moderated the negative indirect effect between supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence and task engagement via perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress sequentially.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants

A total of 398 US-based workers from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) participated in this experiment in exchange for financial compensation. After excluding those who failed attention checks ($n = 27$), we had a final sample of 371 (176 male) participants. The mean age of participants was 40.30 years ($SD = 12.41$).

6.1.2. Materials and procedure

We had a 2 (supervisor emotional expression: supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence vs. supervisor expressed neutral affect) \times 2 (target of supervisor emotional expression: self vs. other) between-participant factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four between-participant conditions. We used the same

scenario and supervisor emotional expression manipulation as in Study 3 and included an additional manipulation of target of supervisor emotional expression (see Appendix A).

Target of Supervisor Emotional Expression Manipulation. Depending on the supervisor emotional expression condition that they were randomly assigned to, participants in the *self* condition read that Chris appeared either ambivalent or neutral toward them during the meeting. Chris also gave mixed (both positive and negative) or neutral remarks that were directed at them during the presentations. In the *other* condition, participants read that Chris appeared either ambivalent or neutral toward another team member, Pat, during the meeting. Chris also gave mixed (both positive and negative) or neutral remarks that were directed at Pat during the presentations.

After reading the scenarios, participants completed manipulation check items and measures on supervisor unpredictability, anticipated stress, and task engagement.

6.1.3. Measures

We used the same supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence manipulation check measure ($\alpha = 0.95$) and the neutral emotion single item measure as in Study 3. Participants also rated the extent to which Chris's behaviors and remarks were directed at them on three items (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). These three items were "Chris's emotional displays were directed toward me", "Chris's remarks about the game were directed at me", and "Chris's reactions were specifically targeted at me" ($\alpha = 0.97$). We assessed supervisor unpredictability ($\alpha = 0.94$), anticipated stress ($\alpha = 0.92$), and task engagement ($\alpha = 0.97$) with the same measures used in Study 3.

6.2. Results and discussion

6.2.1. Confirmatory factor analyses

To examine discriminant validity, we conducted CFA on the three self-reported scales: supervisor unpredictability, anticipated stress, and task engagement. Results for the measurement model indicated that a three-factor model provide a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(62) = 343.47$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, SRMR = 0.06, RMSEA = 0.11. All factor loadings were statistically significant, $p < .001$. Model fit is better for the three-factor model compared with a single-factor model: $\Delta\chi^2 = 1581.30$, $\Delta df = 3$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.61, TLI = 0.54, SRMR = 0.17, RMSEA = 0.28. In addition, the three-factor model fit the data better than alternative models that included a two-factor model that combined supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress, $\Delta\chi^2 = 531.51$, $p < .001$.

6.2.2. Manipulation check

Participants in the supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence condition ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.07$) rated Chris to be significantly more ambivalent than participants in the supervisor expressed neutral affect condition ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.99$), $t(369) = 31.58$, $p < .001$. There was no main effect of target of supervisor emotional expression or interaction effect. Participants in the supervisor expressed neutral affect condition ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.78$) rated Chris to be significantly more neutral than participants in the supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence condition ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.72$), $t(369) = -11.47$, $p < .001$. Participants in the self condition ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.04$) were more likely to indicate that Chris directed his/her behaviors and remarks at themselves as compared to those in the other condition ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 0.64$), $t(369) = -46.20$, $p < .001$. Overall, our manipulations were successful.

6.2.3. Main analyses

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among all variables. A two-way ANOVA on supervisor unpredictability revealed a significant main effect of supervisor emotional expression, $F(1, 367) = 174.81$, $p < .001$. Participants in the supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence condition ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.23$) perceived Chris to be significantly more unpredictable than participants in the supervisor

Table 5
Study 4 descriptive statistics and correlations.

	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Task engagement	5.96	0.80	–			
2	Supervisor unpredictability	4.53	1.56	0.01	–		
3	Anticipated stress	3.52	1.43	–0.12*	0.75*	–	
4	Age	40.30	12.41	0.18*	–0.06	–0.14*	–
5	Gender	0.47	0.50	–0.13*	–0.10	–0.02	–0.07

Note. $N = 371$. Gender is coded as 0 for females and 1 for males. * $p < .05$.

expressed neutral affect condition ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(369) = 12.90$, $p < .001$. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. There was also a main effect of target of supervisor emotional expression, $F(1, 367) = 19.97$, $p < .001$. Participants in the self condition ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.60$) were more likely to perceive Chris as unpredictable as compared to those in the other condition ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.47$), $t(369) = -3.72$, $p < .001$. Importantly, there was a significant interaction between supervisor emotional expression and target of supervisor emotional expression, $F(1, 367) = 11.47$, $p = .001$ (Fig. 2). Simple effects analysis showed that participants in the ambivalent-self condition ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.07$) perceived Chris to be significantly more unpredictable than participants in the ambivalent-other condition ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(188) = 6.23$, $p < .001$. In contrast, perceptions of supervisor unpredictability did not differ significantly between the neutral-self condition ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.29$) and the neutral-other condition ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.45$), $t(179) = 0.69$, $p = .49$. Hence, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

To test Hypotheses 2, 3, and 5, we followed procedures recommended by Hayes (2012) and conducted mediation analyses with bootstrapped confidence intervals on the basis of 5000 samples. Supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence was not significantly related to task engagement through perceptions of supervisor unpredictability ($b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI $[-0.13, 0.11]$). Hence, Hypothesis 2 is not supported. Supporting Hypothesis 3, the indirect effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on task engagement via perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress was negative and significant ($b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI $[-0.32, -0.09]$). Finally, results showed that the indirect effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on task engagement via perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress was moderated by target of supervisor emotional expression, as indicated by a significant overall index of moderated mediation ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI $[0.03, 0.18]$). The

overall negative indirect effect was stronger in the self condition ($b = -0.23$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI $[-0.38, -0.11]$) as compared to the other condition ($b = -0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.23, -0.06]$). Thus, Hypothesis 5 is supported.

Overall, Study 4 generally replicated the findings of Studies 1 to 3. Furthermore, our results showed that there was an interactive effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence and target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on perceptions of supervisor unpredictability. In particular, the effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on perceptions of supervisor unpredictability was stronger when supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence was directed toward the self as compared to when supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence was directed toward the other. Finally, we also found support for our hypothesized first-stage moderated serial mediation model.

7. General discussion

In organizations, supervisors not only encounter conflicting requirements and demands at work, but they also have to deal with complex work problems, interpersonal matters, and make difficult moral decisions. In the midst of managing these work tensions and demands, supervisors invariably experience and express emotional ambivalence. Although supervisor emotional displays can have a significant impact on subordinates' work-related attitudes and behaviors (George, 2000), there is surprisingly little empirical research examining the consequences of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate outcomes. Across two studies (Studies 1 and 2), our results show that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence negatively affects task engagement via increased perceptions of supervisor unpredictability. In Studies 3 and 4, we find that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence negatively affects task engagement via perceptions of supervisor

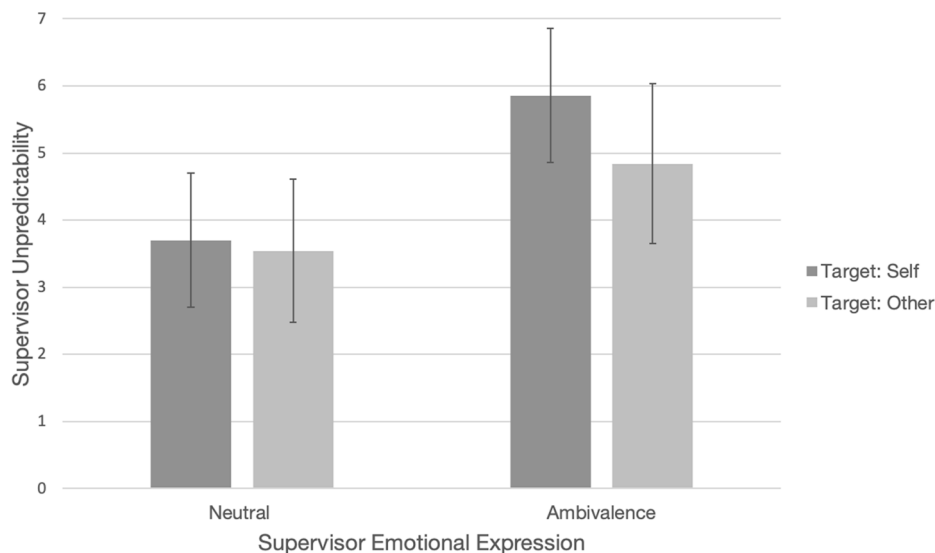


Fig. 2. Study 4: Interaction between Supervisor Emotional Expression and Target of Supervisor Emotional Expression on Supervisor Unpredictability.

Note. Mean score on supervisor unpredictability in respective supervisor emotional expression conditions (neutral, ambivalence). Error bars indicate standard deviations of the means.

unpredictability and anticipated stress sequentially. In Study 4, we demonstrate that the positive effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on perceptions of supervisor unpredictability is stronger when supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence is directed toward the self as compared to when it is directed toward another target. Furthermore, our overall moderated serial mediation model is also supported.

Although we found a significant indirect effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on task engagement through perceptions of supervisor unpredictability in Studies 1 and 2, we did not obtain this effect in Studies 3 and 4. One possible reason for the null effect is that there might be unmeasured variables with opposing effects on task engagement, which could have potentially muted the effect of perceptions of supervisor unpredictability on task engagement (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; see Yam et al., 2019, for an example). For instance, past research has shown that communicating emotional inconsistency and unpredictability reduce the recipients' sense of control over their outcomes (Sinaceur et al., 2013). Thus, we speculate that when subordinates perceive supervisors as unpredictable, evoked by the expression of emotional ambivalence, they may proactively attempt to regain a sense of personal control by seeking order and structure (see Landau et al., 2015, for a review). Specific behaviors include trying to improve their task performance, creating workplace situations that give them more job satisfaction (Ashford & Black, 1996), or even directly increasing their task engagement. In other words, this implies that attempts to regain personal control might have opposing effects on task engagement, which could have potentially suppressed the effect of perceptions of supervisor unpredictability on task engagement and masked the total direct effect.

In Studies 3 and 4, we observed high correlations between perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress. According to the cognitive activation theory of stress, anticipated stress precedes actual felt stress where people first appraise potential stressors as an anticipatory stress response before reporting the subjective physical, physiological, psychological, and emotional demands that exceed one's resources and capacities to cope as actual felt stress (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004). Given that unpredictability is central in the appraisal of a stressor (Koolhaas et al., 2011), we argue that the high correlations between perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress are likely inflated because we captured anticipated stress, rather than actual felt stress.

7.1. Theoretical implications

Our research expands the emotional ambivalence literature by examining the consequences of these expressions in the supervisor-subordinate context. Our focus on the supervisor-subordinate context departs from past research that has examined expressed emotional ambivalence in the contexts of negotiation and decision making that are characterized by mutually interdependent relationships (Belkin & Rothman, 2017; Rothman, 2011; Rothman & Northcraft, 2015). We explain how different contexts may account for why different mechanisms are at play and why expressed emotional ambivalence can lead to either positive or negative outcomes. For instance, in the negotiation context wherein parties involved are mutually interdependent and have equal power, a negotiator's expressed emotional ambivalence communicates submissiveness and prompts the negotiation partner to be more engaged and assertive by making higher demands or taking control of the negotiation (Rothman, 2011; Rothman & Northcraft, 2015). Expressed emotional ambivalence is likely to be specific to and contextualized in these settings, such that negotiation partners are likely to perceive the negotiator as submissive, rather than unpredictable. In contrast, in a supervisor-subordinate context, supervisors are ranked higher than subordinates and have formal power to influence group decisions and allocate resources and rewards (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Keltner et al., 2003). In other words, subordinates depend on their

supervisors for resources and hence are more attuned to and threatened by supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence. Overall, our research underscores the importance of context and suggests that expressed emotional ambivalence can trigger different perceptions under different contexts.

Our research also extends the EASI theory by identifying the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence as a critical boundary condition of the effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on perceptions of supervisor unpredictability. Drawing on EASI theory, past empirical research finds that the interpersonal effects of emotional expression depend on social-relational factors. For example, Van Kleef and Côté (2007) found that negotiators conceded to an angry (as opposed to a non-emotional) counterpart when the anger was perceived to be appropriate. However, negotiators retaliated when the anger was perceived to be inappropriate because it violated an emotional display rule. Extending this body of work, our findings highlight the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence as a key social-relational factor that influences the effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on perceptions of supervisor unpredictability.

Finally, our research also advances the broader leadership literature that examines the influence of leaders' affective displays on follower outcomes (e.g., Connelly & Ruark, 2010; Liu et al., 2017; Van Knippenberg & Van Kleef, 2016; Visser et al., 2013). Our research moves beyond empirical studies that have focused on the impact of followers' perceptions of either positive or negative emotional displays by the leader on work outcomes, such as creative performance (Visser et al., 2013), organizational citizenship behavior (Koning & Van Kleef, 2015), and voice behavior (Liu et al., 2017). Specifically, we consider the impact of subordinates' perceptions of simultaneous display of both positive and negative emotions by the supervisor—emotional ambivalent displays—as a critical emotional expression that has been relatively neglected in the literature thus far. Unlike positive or negative emotional displays that trigger relatively more straightforward inferences and attributions of the supervisor, our findings suggest that subordinates may find it difficult to decipher their supervisor's intentions and attitudes when supervisors express emotional ambivalence.

7.2. Practical implications

Given that complex organizational situations arise frequently, supervisors may find it difficult to avoid managing conflicting goals and the tension from complex work demands, and as a result, experience and express emotional ambivalence without being necessarily cognizant of it. Thus, management may want to focus on developing conditions to reduce the perceptions of unpredictability associated with supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence. For example, by developing an organizational culture or climate that highlights how emotional ambivalence is normal and expected rather than dysfunctional and harmful for employees, organizations can help employees manage their discomfort or even help them to learn to be comfortable with the unpredictability stemming from supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence (Rothman & Melwani, 2017) and reduce their anticipated stress. Furthermore, the ability to acknowledge and accept emotional ambivalent displays by supervisors is likely to be critical for employees in their development of a more measured and flexible response to their work environment. In addition, supervisors have to be mindful of expressing emotional ambivalence toward a particular subordinate because the subordinate is more likely to perceive them as unpredictable.

7.3. Limitations and future directions

Like all studies, our studies have limitations that point to promising ideas for future research. First, we relied on self-reported data to assess our focal variables in Study 1, thus raising potential concerns for common method variance (CMV) bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012). However,

these concerns were attenuated since we used a time-lagged design and controlled for various key variables, assuring us that the findings may not be solely attributable to CMV (see [Brannick et al., 2010](#), for a discussion). Furthermore, results from our confirmatory factor analysis and Harman one-factor test suggested that CMV was unlikely to be a major concern in our results. More importantly, we attempted to overcome this limitation by conducting three experimental studies to replicate our findings and establish causal relationships among our focal variables.

Second, we measured supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence somewhat differently across our studies. Specifically, whereas Study 1's expressed emotional ambivalence measure was frequency-based, our manipulation of emotional ambivalence in Studies 2 to 4 was intensity-based. While we did not capture how supervisors expressed emotional ambivalence (i.e., verbal and/or non-verbal) in Study 1, we attempted to address this concern by manipulating expressed emotional ambivalence nonverbally (i.e., facial expressions and bodily movements) in Study 2 and both non-verbally and verbally in Studies 3 and 4. Although we obtained consistent results across all four studies, future studies can compare and contrast the frequency and intensity of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence as well as verbal versus nonverbal emotional ambivalence expressions, and examine how they may potentially affect the strength or nature of the expressed emotional ambivalence effect on perceptions of unpredictability and anticipated stress. Relatedly, we encourage future research to utilize the experience-sampling method to examine the dynamic nature of the frequency and intensity of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence and the downstream implications for subordinates' psychological and behavioral reactions.

Third, we conducted a supplementary study (see Online Supplement for more details) to examine whether supervisor cognitive flexibility serves as an alternative mechanism and mediates the relationship between supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence and subordinate task engagement as theorized by [Rothman and Melwani \(2017\)](#). However, our results showed that supervisor cognitive flexibility did not mediate this relationship. Although our null findings appear to be inconsistent with the theorizing of [Rothman and Melwani \(2017\)](#), as we noted earlier, our context is different. We focused on the supervisor-subordinate context where there is a power difference and where the latter depends on the former for resources. In contrast, [Rothman and Melwani \(2017\)](#) focused on the leader-follower context where leadership is emergent and encompasses interdependent relationships established over time. In the leader-follower context, followers may perceive leader expressed emotional ambivalence as a sign of cognitive flexibility ([Rothman & Melwani, 2017](#)). When a leader is perceived to be cognitively flexible, it signals that he/she is open to multiple perspectives ([Rothman & Melwani, 2017](#)). Past research finds that when employees perceive leaders to be open to diverse viewpoints and ideas, they are more motivated to engage in creative behaviors ([Scott & Bruce, 1994](#); [Tierney & Farmer, 2004](#)) and voice behaviors ([Ng & Feldman, 2012](#)). Taken together, these findings suggest that supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence elicits different supervisor perceptions in different contexts that may drive different work outcomes.

Fourth, although we obtained consistent findings across different samples and settings, our field study data were collected from India. India is considered as a high power-distance culture where people value hierarchy in society and organizations ([Hofstede, 1991](#), also see <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/india/>). In organizational settings, this may manifest as high dependence on the supervisor for resources and directions. In our context, this suggests that subordinates are even more likely to pay attention to and be influenced by supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence. Taken together, these observations suggest that our effects in Study 1 may potentially be more pronounced due to the high-power distance culture. Although we replicated our findings with samples from the United States, we encourage future research to test our model across different cultures in order to determine the generalizability of our findings ([Ang et al., 2007](#);

[Gelfand et al., 2007](#)).

Finally, future research can also examine other potential moderators of the supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence-perceived supervisor unpredictability link or perceived supervisor unpredictability-anticipated stress link. For example, psychological safety climate may weaken the effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on perceptions of supervisor unpredictability ([Rothman et al., 2017](#)). Psychological safety climate refers to a shared belief held by group members pertaining to the safety of the group environment ([Edmondson, 1999](#)). When the group climate is psychologically safe, group members are comfortable being themselves and experience a sense of openness ([Edmondson, 2004](#)). In our context, this suggests that subordinates are likely to find out directly from the supervisor regarding the underlying reason for the expression of emotional ambivalence and perceive their supervisor to be less unpredictable. In contrast, when the group climate is not psychologically safe, it is interpersonally risky to find out directly from the supervisor about the reasons behind the expressed emotional ambivalence. As a result, subordinates may potentially ruminate and perceive their supervisor to be even more unpredictable. Another potential moderator that may attenuate the effect of perceptions of supervisor unpredictability on anticipated stress is tolerance for ambiguity. Tolerance for ambiguity refers to an individual's preference for clear-cut answers and expectations in uncertain situations ([Ashford & Cummings, 1985](#)). When subordinates have high tolerance for ambiguity, they are less likely to find supervisor unpredictability to be a source of psychological discomfort, and thus less likely to anticipate stress and reduce their task engagement.

7.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, our research takes a first step toward unpacking the consequences of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate outcomes. We demonstrate that as supervisors express emotional ambivalence, subordinates may infer that their supervisor is unpredictable and anticipate higher stress, and in turn reduce their task engagement. Furthermore, we find that the negative indirect effect of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate task engagement via perceptions of supervisor unpredictability and anticipated stress is moderated by the target of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence. Our theoretical and empirical approach informs future research on the complex effects and critical implications of supervisor expressed emotional ambivalence on subordinate outcomes.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jia Hui Lim: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft. **Kenneth Tai:** Writing - review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Maryam Kouchaki:** Writing - review & editing, Funding acquisition.

Appendix A

Study 3 Scenarios

You are an employee of Paradise Gaming, a mobile game development company, known as one of the most reputable Android and iOS app developers, having launched over 300 successful apps. Paradise Inc. has an impressive portfolio of clients, such as MDA and US Air Force, and has strategic ties with major gaming companies, including Sony and Activision Blizzard. You work as a game programmer responsible for graphics and artificial intelligence (AI). Over the past few months, you have been part of a team that is designing a promising new mobile game with the game development in its very initial stages. During this period, Chris, your direct supervisor, has been paying attention to the progress of the team and has been forthright in his assessments about the game development.

Last week, you were involved in a regular weekly meeting with Chris, your direct supervisor, about the new mobile game that you and your team have been working on. During the meeting, your team members, including yourself, took turns to present and showcase different aspects of the new mobile game.

Supervisor Expressed Emotional Ambivalence Condition

During the meeting, you noticed that Chris appeared ambivalent. In other words, Chris was feeling mixed (simultaneously positive and negative). At times during the meeting, Chris looked satisfied, while at other times, Chris looked unsatisfied. Chris made mixed remarks about the game during the presentations. For example, Chris remarked that, “Hey, the game character models look fuzzy and dull which make them feel lifeless and it is hard to connect with that. But yet at the same time, they also look detailed and lively which really make them stand out and easy for people to identify with.”

Supervisor Expressed Positive Affect Condition

During the meeting, you noticed that Chris appeared positive. At times during the meeting, Chris looked satisfied. Chris made positive remarks about the game during the presentations. For example, Chris remarked that, “Hey, the game character models look detailed and lively which really make them stand out and easy for people to identify with.”

Supervisor Expressed Negative Affect Condition

During the meeting, you noticed that Chris appeared negative. At certain times during the meeting, Chris looked unsatisfied. Chris also made negative remarks about the game during the presentations. For example, Chris remarked that, “Hey, the game character models look fuzzy and dull which really make them feel lifeless and it is hard to connect with that.”

Supervisor Expressed Neutral Affect Condition

During the meeting, you noticed that Chris appeared normal. At certain times during the meeting, Chris looked neutral. Chris made standard remarks about the game during the presentations. For example, Chris remarked that, “Hey, the game character models look fine and decent, which should get the job done.”

Study 4 Scenarios

You are Alex, an employee of Paradise Gaming, a mobile game development company, known as one of the most reputable Android and iOS app developers, having launched over 300 successful apps. Paradise Inc. has an impressive portfolio of clients, such as MDA and US Air Force, and has strategic ties with major gaming companies, including Sony and Activision Blizzard. You work as a game programmer responsible for graphics and artificial intelligence (AI). Over the past few months, you have been part of a team that is designing a promising new mobile game with the game development in its very initial stages. During this period, Chris, your direct supervisor, has been paying attention to the progress of the team and has been forthright in his assessments about the game development.

Last week, you were involved in a regular weekly meeting with Chris, your direct supervisor, about the new mobile game that you and your team have been working on. During the meeting, your team members, including yourself, took turns to present and showcase different aspects of the new mobile game.

Supervisor Expressed Emotional Ambivalence/Self-Directed Condition

During the meeting, you noticed that Chris appeared normal toward Pat, one of your team members. At certain times during the meeting, Chris looked neutral toward Pat. Chris made standard remarks that were directed at Pat during the presentations. For example, Chris remarked that, “Hey Pat, the game character models look fine and decent, which should get the job done.” You have also observed that Chris tends to

behave neutrally toward Pat in particular at work.

Supervisor Expressed Emotional Ambivalence/Other-Directed Condition

During the meeting, you noticed that Chris appeared normal toward Pat, one of your team members. At certain times during the meeting, Chris looked neutral toward Pat. Chris made standard remarks that were directed at Pat during the presentations. For example, Chris remarked that, “Hey Pat, the game character models look fine and decent, which should get the job done.” You have also observed that Chris tends to behave neutrally toward Pat in particular at work.

Supervisor Expressed Neutral Emotion/Self-Directed Condition

During the meeting, you noticed that Chris appeared normal toward you (Alex). At certain times during the meeting, Chris looked neutral toward you. Chris made standard remarks that were directed at you during the presentations. For example, Chris remarked that, “Hey Alex, the game character models look fine and decent, which should get the job done.” You have also observed that Chris tends to behave neutrally toward you in particular at work.

Supervisor Expressed Neutral Emotion/Other-Directed Condition

During the meeting, you noticed that Chris appeared normal toward Pat, one of your team members. At certain times during the meeting, Chris looked neutral toward Pat. Chris made standard remarks that were directed at Pat during the presentations. For example, Chris remarked that, “Hey Pat, the game character models look fine and decent, which should get the job done.” You have also observed that Chris tends to behave neutrally toward Pat in particular at work.

Appendix B. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2021.05.001>.

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