

Too Naïve to Lead: When Leaders Fall for Flattery

Benjamin A. Rogers¹, Ovul Sezer², and Nadav Klein³

¹Department of Management and Organization, Carroll School of Management, Boston College

²Nolan School of Hotel Administration, SC Johnson College of Business, Cornell University

³Organizational Behavior, INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France

Flattery is one of the oldest and most commonly used impression–management tactics in everyday life. Though it often brings benefits to the flatterer, less is known about how it affects the target. In the present research, we explore when and why being flattered can be costly for leaders—common targets of flattery—depending on how they respond to it. We suggest that leaders who are observed rewarding flatterers risk appearing naïve to others. Across seven studies and six supplementary studies ($N = 4,612$), we find evidence that leaders who grant favors to flatterers are often perceived to have naively “fallen for flattery,” which shapes observers’ impressions of the leaders and the organizations they represent. A first set of studies (Studies 1–4) detail the variety of factors that lead observers to conclude their leader has fallen for flattery and the resulting impacts to the leaders’ reputation and their organization (e.g., competence, warmth, commitment to the leader, organizational fairness). The second set of studies look at the contextual factors that impact what costs leaders pay for being perceived to have fallen for flattery, including the type of flattery (Study 5), who is harmed by the favor (Study 6), and the leader’s apparent awareness of the motives underlying flattery (Study 7). Whereas previous research highlights positive consequences of flattery for the flatterer, we find that flattery comes with costs for leaders and their organizations. We discuss theoretical and practical implications for leaders who are frequently flattered.

Keywords: flattery, naiveté, impression management, commitment, fairness

[similar findings as that of Macro paper](#)

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The Crow, anxious to prove to him that she did possess a voice, began to caw vigorously, of course dropping the cheese. The Fox pounced upon it and carried it off, remarking as he went away, “My good friend Crow, you have every good quality: now try to get some common sense.”

—Aesop’s Fables (trans. 1883, p. 3)

Flattery is one of the oldest and most commonly used impression–management tactics in everyday life. Cultural, historical, and literary texts are filled with examples of its uses. In Aesop’s fable “The Fox and the Crow,” a sly fox heaps praise upon a naïve crow until she lets down her guard and accidentally drops her dinner into the fox’s waiting paws. Similarly, prior research provides evidence that people struggle to maintain skepticism in the face of flattery. Flattery recipients evaluate their flatterers positively due to their desire to believe the good things they hear about themselves (Gordon, 1996; Vonk, 2002). Various studies have shown that flattery, defined as the use of compliments and praise (whether accurate or not) designed to evoke interpersonal liking for personal gain (e.g., Wortman &

Linsenmeier, 1977), yields material and social rewards flatterers, such as positive evaluations from others, favorable treatment, and increased upward mobility (Gordon, 1996; Higgins et al., 2003; Jones, 1964; Kumar & Beyerlein, 1991; Stern & Westphal, 2010; Vonk, 2002; Westphal & Stern, 2006). In sum, flattery, even when it is insincere, works (Chan & Sengupta, 2010).

However, compared to those being flattered, flattery’s appeal differs dramatically for those observing it from a distance. From the recipients’ perspective, flattery is egocentrically validating (Bless et al., 1992; Chan & Sengupta, 2010; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Vonk, 2002). By comparison, observers tend to focus on the perceived instrumental motives underlying flattery, seeing such behavior as strategic and used only to curry favor (Crant, 1996; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). Insults such as “sucking up to the boss” or “boot-licker” reveal the perceived strategic nature of flattery attempts. As such insults suggest, people in high-ranking positions are among flattery’s most frequent targets (Westphal & Shani, 2016), although

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Benjamin A. Rogers  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9565-5998>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Benjamin A. Rogers, Department of Management and Organization, Carroll School of Management, Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Avenue, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, United States. Email: benjamin.rogers@bc.edu

flattery can be used across hierarchical levels. Lacking formal control over organizational resources (e.g., Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974), nonleaders must use informal means to influence powerful stakeholders and secure favorable positions. Thus, followers often attempt to shape how leaders see them with flattery—offering compliments and praise aimed at pleasing the leader—along with other ingratiation behaviors such as performing favors and opinion conformity to strengthen the leader–follower relationships and seek resources for themselves (Gordon, 1996; Higgins et al., 2003; Westphal & Stern, 2006; also see Bolino et al., 2016, for a review).

Flattery's persuasiveness presents a unique challenge to leaders. They are expected to be fair when making decisions that affect followers (Offermann & Coats, 2018), but it can be difficult to remain objective when receiving flattery due to the validation it provides (Fogg & Nass, 1997). Because people tend to assume that others share their attitudes and feelings (Krueger & Clement, 1994; Ross et al., 1977), observers likely believe that a savvy leader shares their skepticism about ingratiation's motives and "knows better" than to reward flattery (Crant, 1996; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). As a result, if observers witness leaders when they treat flatterers favorably, they may come to believe that the leader has "fallen for flattery," specifically that the leader must be naïve, lacking the sophistication (Heidhues & Kőszegi, 2010) and real-world knowledge (Thompson, 1990) needed to notice flatterers' self-interested motives. The present research suggests that how leaders navigate this challenge—whether to reward flattery with favorable treatment or not—is pivotal in shaping not only their followers' perceptions of them but also followers' view of and commitment to the organizations to which they belong.

We argue that when leaders are perceived to have "fallen for flattery," they risk damaging their own and their organizations' reputation. Across seven studies and six supplementary studies ($N = 4,612$), we find that observers view leaders who reward flattery less favorably, seeing them as naïve about the potential untoward motives of flatterers. Observers extend this distaste to other impressions they have of the leader, as well as their feelings toward the broader organization. We explore the underlying mechanism—perceived naïveté of the flattery recipient—and various boundaries of this effect. We also examine when observers might look somewhat favorably on leaders who reward flattery and conclude that, unlike established leaders, unfamiliar leaders can benefit in terms of warmth perceptions due to the surface-level generosity that accompanies favor granting (e.g., Foulk & Long, 2016; Klein & Epley, 2014). Overall, our results show consistent negative consequences of being perceived to have fallen for flattery for leaders and organizations, with mixed perceptions of leader warmth.

These findings make important contributions to our understanding of ingratiation, social influence, and impression management. First, by focusing on observer perceptions of flattery recipients—typically leaders—rather than flatterers, we broaden the ingratiation literature and highlight the potential cascading consequences of flattery in organizations. Prior work has mainly made the flatterer the "focal actor," but has yet to explore how people react to targets of flattery who usually wield power in organizations (Zellers & Kacmar, 1999). In the present research, we examine how observers make inferences about leaders' responses to flattery and when these inferences lead to a loss of faith in the leader and the organization as a whole.

We also contribute to work on social influence in organizations by looking beyond the impact of a leader's receptivity to persuasion for the flatterer (e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). We instead focus on

how the leader's receptivity to flattery—as revealed by the granting or refusing of favors—becomes social information for others in the organization. Inferences of naïveté that accompany favor granting have consequences for organizations and for leaders in particular and this work provides an empirical investigation of the role of naïveté in the judgment of leadership effectiveness and discretion (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990; Grusky, 1963).

Finally, we extend research on impression management by disentangling how the specific components of impressions are affected when leaders are perceived as falling for flattery. Whereas we find that being seen as rewarding flattery consistently harms competence perceptions of leaders, we find that the impact of rewarding flattery on warmth perceptions varies based on an observer's prior relationship with the leader. Our research shows that leaders' interactions with followers cannot be fully understood without the careful consideration of the conflict between warmth perceptions (appearing likable) and competence perceptions (appearing capable). Building on prior research by Foulk and Long (2016), our work provides clarity about when rewarding flattery may carry some benefits—such as when a leader is observed by newcomers—and when it is likely to broadly harm a leader's reputation.

Why Flattery Recipients Reward Flatterers

While the act of complimenting another person can be purely prosocial (X. Zhao & Epley, 2021), flattery, as a type of ingratiation tactic, represents the intentional use of kind words to elicit liking and favorable treatment (Bolino et al., 2016). As a tactic, flattery is often successful. Flatterers are conferred more credibility (Vonk, 2002), are more likely to be hired (H. Zhao & Liden, 2011), receive higher performance ratings (Gordon, 1996; Higgins et al., 2003), and are more likely to receive board appointments (Westphal & Stern, 2006). Flattery is successful because it is pleasant to hear (Jones, 1964; Wayne & Ferris, 1990) and increases a recipient's self-esteem and social status (Foulk & Long, 2016; Park et al., 2011). Due to norms of reciprocity, people find it difficult not to like those who think highly of them (Jones, 1964). Flattery also triggers feelings of psychological indebtedness, whereby recipients seek to "repay" compliments via favorable treatment (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Gray et al., 2014). Additionally, flattery recipients see ingratiation as aligned with their usually positive self-image (Taylor & Brown, 1988) and thus often fail to scrutinize flatterers' motives.

Flattery also succeeds because leaders find it difficult to refuse the explicit or implicit requests for favorable treatment that can often follow. Refusing direct requests for help feels uncomfortable (Flynn & Lake, 2008), triggers a desire to avoid being viewed as uncaring (Klein & Epley, 2016), and high-status leaders might feel pressured to compensate for the stereotype of being perceived as cold (Swencionis & Fiske, 2016) and grant favors in response to flattery to appear sociable. Moreover, as compared to the indirect and uncertain costs of granting requests (such as potential criticism from observers), the benefits of granting favors—positive evaluations from flatterers—are immediately salient (Abele & Bruckmuller, 2011; Willis & Todorov, 2006).

When Leaders Are Perceived to Have "Fallen for Flattery"

In contrast to flattery recipients, third-party observers are less likely to view flattery positively. Observers tend to be suspicious of

ingratiators (Fein, 1996; Keeves et al., 2017; Vonk, 1998) and view them cynically (Carrier et al., 2019; Critcher & Dunning, 2011; Miller & Ratner, 1998). As flattery in organizations is often targeted at leaders, it is frequently viewed as a tactic to improve social exchange relationships with people who control access to valued resources (Pfeffer, 1981). Therefore, observers may scrutinize interactions involving their superiors for cues of improper influence.

Since observers do not experience the psychological benefits of flattery, they are more likely than recipients to attribute cynical motives to flatterers (Vonk, 2002). Moreover, observers are likely to judge the situation from their own more skeptical perspective (Epley et al., 2004). As such, they are likely to see the flatterer as insincere and the flattery attempt as unpersuasive. Thus, when a leader accommodates the flatterer's request, theories of social influence (e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004) suggest that an observer will likely conclude that the leader was unduly receptive to persuasion; otherwise, the leader, too, would have seen through the unpersuasive flattery and rejected the favor request. In other words, to a skeptical observer, favorable treatment toward flatterers indicates a leader who must not fully grasp the self-serving motives behind flattery, regardless of whether the leader is actually unaware or not.

We argue that the leader's apparent lack of skepticism to flattery and the motives behind it will manifest as perceptions that they are naïve—defined as lacking knowledge, experience, and sophistication, in this case about the potential motives or strategic considerations of others (e.g., Barasch et al., 2016; Thompson, 1990). Naïve individuals are thought to be easily exploited, too quick to trust, and likely to fail to appropriately consider others' self-serving motives (Forgas & East, 2008; Teunisse et al., 2020; Tsay et al., 2011). While it is possible that the leader is aware of the flatterer's motives and may be granting a favor nonetheless, in the eyes of a cynical observer, acceding to flattery may indicate that a leader has fallen for flattery by failing to see the transparent instrumentality of an ingratiation's efforts. Importantly, this attribution of naïveté has potentially broader consequences for organizations and especially for leaders, given the central role they play in distributing valuable resources.

The Consequences of Falling for Flattery

We suggest that there are two types of downstream consequences from being perceived to have fallen for flattery. First, there are *impression–management consequences*, defined as observers' impression of the flattered leader's character (i.e., perceptions of competence, warmth). Second, there are *organizational consequences*, or impact on observers' relationship to the broader organization (i.e., commitment to the leader, perceptions of organizational fairness).

If an observer views a leader who rewards flattery as acting naïvely, their perceptions of the leader's other characteristics may fundamentally change. Because naïveté is not a valorized trait among leaders, accommodating flattery may result in reduced perceptions of a leader's competence. To be effective in their roles, leaders are expected to be adept at handling interpersonal interactions (Toegel et al., 2013), making good decisions (Offermann & Coats, 2018), and resisting persuasion (Cialdini & Mirels, 1976). As naïve individuals are viewed as gullible and overly trusting (Forgas & East, 2008; Rotter, 1980), being seen rewarding flattery will likely undercut leaders' perceived competence.¹

We also explore how witnessing a leader reward flattery affects warmth perceptions. Here, we did not expect clear-cut results. Specifically, appearing to naively reward flattery is likely to elicit two contrasting inferences related to the friendliness and sincerity that typically underly perceptions of warmth (Fiske et al., 2007). On the one hand, granting a favor is a prosocial act aimed at helping the flatterer. Despite their skepticism, observers may view a positive social interaction between leader and flatterer as indicative of sociability or generosity (Fouk & Long, 2016; Klein & Epley, 2014), particularly since naïve individuals are perceived as happy and friendly (Barasch et al., 2016). On the other hand, warmth encompasses how well one treats others (e.g., Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Fiske et al., 2002); thus, accommodating flattery can be considered as uncaring to those who have not flattered the leader (Wojciszke et al., 1993)—the observers themselves being the most salient members of this group.

Given that perceiving a leader to have fallen for flattery has contrasting implications for warmth perceptions (unlike our straightforward prediction for perceived competence), we anticipate that the surrounding context will shape whether a leader who rewards flattery is seen as more friendly (and increase perceived warmth) or more unfair (and not increase perceived warmth). In particular, we examine leader familiarity. Building on recent work suggesting that positive surface-level social cues are more important to newcomers to organizations (Fouk & Long, 2016), we hypothesize that observers' warmth perceptions of unfamiliar favor-granting leaders would increase, but favor granting by established leaders is likely to be assessed within a richer context that raises the salience of the favor's harm, mitigating any warmth benefit.

Aside from the special circumstance of unfamiliar leaders, we predict largely negative consequences for observers' impressions of leaders seen as falling for flattery. We further suggest that this has important organizational implications. As the linchpin that connects individuals to the organization (Sparrowe & Liden, 2005), a leader's relationship with followers is a proxy for the followers' connection to the organization itself (Ashforth & Rogers, 2012). We first focus on commitment to the leader, which represents the attachment and desire to remain in an exchange relationship with the leader (Flint et al., 2013; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Strong attachments between followers and leaders are important both for follower well-being and for organizational functioning (Meyer et al., 2002). When leaders grant favors for unmeritocratic reasons, observers may see such actions—and, by extension, their relationship with the leader—as obstructing their own future success in the organization, making it unworthy of continuation or additional investment. Further, by attributing favor granting in response to flattery to a leader's naïveté, individuals may conclude that their leader will be exploited by ingratiation in the future. This perception may undercut observers' beliefs that they are engaged in a stable, high-quality exchange relationship with the leader.

Finally, we suggest that negative perceptions of leaders can spillover into broader concerns about the organization's fairness. Observers can be expected to focus on the unfairness of favor

¹ Naïveté, which represents a general lack of awareness about the real world, is conceptually and empirically distinct from competence (Barasch et al., 2016), which reflects efficacy within a domain; for example, consider the stereotype of an intelligent and Prolific Academic who is unaware of happenings beyond their domain of expertise.

granting in response to flattery, particularly the extent to which benefits are distributed meritocratically (distributive fairness) and result from fair processes (procedural fairness; Colquitt, 2001). Individuals see leaders as steward of organizational intent (Levinson, 1965; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), particularly in their allocation of valued resources (Liden & Mitchell, 1988; Shoss et al., 2013). Flattery-based favors, and the resulting attributions of leader naïveté, are particularly likely to reduce observers' faith in the overall organization's ability to operate in a just manner. In this way, individuals who witness leaders rewarding flattery with favors are likely to conclude that the organization itself is, and will continue to be, unfair.

Overview of Present Research

Across seven studies and six supplementary studies ($N = 4,612$), we examine the consequences of being seen as falling for flattery across a range of domains and using a variety of methodological approaches. In doing so, we provide a comprehensive analysis of flattery and favor-granting situations in organizations. After a pilot study that establishes the commonness of observers witnessing flattery and favor granting in organizational life, we present a series of studies to test observers' reactions to leaders who are seen granting favors to flatterers. Our empirical exploration consists of two primary sections. In the first section, four studies assess the factors that lead an observer to perceive their leader has naïvely fallen for flattery, as well as the downstream consequences of this attribution for leaders. In the second section, consisting of three studies, we document the contextual factors that either magnify or reduce the downstream consequences of observers' beliefs that their leader has fallen for flattery.

Across all studies, we chose our sample size in advance, and we report all of the variables and conditions we collected either in the main article or [Supplemental Materials](#). For our first study, we chose a sample of 75 per condition, which would allow us sufficient power (i.e., $\geq .80$) to detect a small-to-medium effect size of at least .4 for our target α level ($\alpha = .05$). The first study yielded main effect sizes ranging from $d = .42$ to $d = 1.47$. Thus, we continued to target a sample size of 75–100 participants per cell in our main studies to account for potential exclusions due to poor data quality or attrition. Power analyses conducted in G*Power on our achieved sample sizes revealed that we had sufficient power (i.e., $\geq .80$) in all studies to detect a main effect size of at least .42. All data, syntax, and materials are available through the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/wuc5k/?view_only=5839d24dea4b425186253b9f28dc2e8d.

power analysis

Pilot Study

Method

Participants and Procedure

We recruited 105 individuals from a sample of working professionals in Singapore ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.18$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.48$; 49.52% female) to complete a brief survey about their observations of interactions between their leader and coworkers. Participants' occupations included auditors, architects, information technology consultants, and film producers. The average work experience of the sample was 9.16 years ($SD = 7.74$); participants had worked with their leader an average of 3.35 years ($SD = 3.68$). All participants

were asked if they had ever witnessed their supervisor receive compliments, praise, or flattery. If so, participants were also asked about specific types of flattery they may have seen using an adapted measure from Stern and Westphal (2010). Specifically, participants were asked if they had seen coworkers compliment leaders' personal characteristics, appearance, clothing or personal belongings, insight on a strategic issues, success, and contributions to the company.

Participants then reported whether flattery ever resulted in favors to the flatterer (dichotomous choice: yes or no), and if so, to describe it. Additionally, using an adapted measure by Hinkin and Schriesheim (1989), we asked what type of favors participants were granted: a pay raise or bonus, special benefits, and promotions (dichotomous choices: yes or no). Finally, we also inquired about whether participants' leader seemed aware that flattery might be done to secure professional favors (dichotomous choice: yes or no) and the extent to which their leader generally rewarded flattery with preferential treatment (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*).

Results

Observing Flattery

Witnessing flattery of leaders was quite common. Seventy-two out of 105 participants (69%) recalled witnessing their leader receive flattery from a coworker. The flattery took a variety of forms, both professional and personal: The highest percentage of workers witnessed their coworkers flatter the leader by complimenting their personal characteristics or strategic insights (48% for each), followed by their professional judgment (42%), organizational contributions (39%), personal appearance or professional success (38% each), and clothing or personal belongings (24%). Importantly, 39% of the workers who witnessed flattery felt their leader was unaware that the compliments were aimed at securing favorable treatment.

Frequency of Rewards to Flatterers

Many leaders seemed to reward the flattery they received. Of the participants who saw flattery, a substantial portion (39%) reported seeing their leader grants favors to the flatterer. Favors took a variety of forms and often included multiple aspects: 61% included pay raises or bonuses, 68% included assistance securing a promotion, and 61% included other special benefits.

Section 1: Outlining the Predictors and Consequences of Falling for Flattery

The results of the pilot study showed that witnessing leaders receive flattery and respond with a range of professional favors is common, with many observers believing their leaders had "fallen for flattery" by being naïvely unaware about their flatterer's motives. In this section, we look at the variety of factors that lead observers to shape this belief—whether the leader grants (or refuses to grant) a favor after being flattered (Studies 1–2), whether the flattery is isolated or recurring (Study 3), and whether the favor occurs in response to flattery or for other reasons (Study 4)—and the various costs to leaders that result when observers conclude they have fallen for flattery. Importantly, we look at how the attribution of falling for flattery affects unfamiliar leaders (Studies 1–2) and established leaders (Studies 3–4) and find that both types of leaders suffer the

same general costs in terms of reduced perceived competence and commitment from observers but that established leaders, unlike unfamiliar leaders, do not receive any reputational silver lining in the form of increased warmth perceptions.

Study 1: Falling for Flattery in a Networking Context

Study 1 tests how people react to different responses to flattery. We conducted this study at an academic conference, an appropriate setting as candidates for faculty positions often use conferences to develop social ties and find professional opportunities, and senior faculty are seen as occupational leaders (Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Welch, 1980). We asked academics how they would react if they saw a job applicant flatter a senior faculty member and then witnessed the faculty member either granting or refusing to grant a professional favor.

Method

Participants

Prior to data collection, we targeted recruitment of at least 150 individuals (75 per condition). We recruited 209 individuals ($M_{\text{age}} = 32.40$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.22$; 46.89% female) for this experiment: 172 participants from a conference for decision making and behavioral science scholars (110 from the conference itself and 62 from an email follow-up via a listserv associated with the conference), and 37 participants from Twitter.^{2,3} We excluded 28 individuals (21 from the conference sample, six from the listserv, and one from Twitter) who did not hold academic positions as faculty or PhD students due to their lack of familiarity with the PhD student job market, resulting in a final sample size of 181.

Design and Procedure

Participants read a hypothetical scenario about a conference similar to the one they were attending or had attended recently (for online participants). In the scenario, a PhD student on the job market pointedly flatters a senior faculty member and asks whether the faculty member would be willing to review their research statement and put in a good word to their hiring committee. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the *grant favor* condition, participants read that the senior faculty agreed to do the favor for the PhD student. In the *refuse favor* condition, participants read that the senior faculty member refused.

Dependent Measures

Perceived Naiveté. After reading one of the two scenarios, participants evaluated the senior faculty member's naiveté (four items: naive, gullible, ignorant, unaware, $\alpha = .91$; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*; Barasch et al., 2016).

Impression–Management Consequences. Next, participants assessed how their evaluations of the senior faculty member would change (−3 = *become much more negative*, +3 = *become much more positive*) in terms of competence (three items: smart, competent, intelligent, $\alpha = .88$) and warmth (two items: caring, nice; $\alpha = .93$).

Organizational Consequences. As the faculty member in our scenario was unassociated with the participant, we did not assess commitment in this study, but instead focused on the downstream

impacts to academia. Participants assessed academia overall with three items (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*): “How fair do you think academia is?” “How meritocracy-based do you think academia is?” and “Do you think academia is where the best scholars are the ones who receive job offers?” ($\alpha = .85$).

Results

Table 1 provides means for all dependent measures by condition. Results for ancillary variables are reported in supplemental analyses for Study 1 in the Supplemental Materials.

Perceived Naiveté

Supporting our prediction, we found a significant effect of favor granting on perceived naiveté, $t(178) = 2.75$, $p = .007$, $d = .42$. Participants viewed faculty who granted a favor as more naïve ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.44$) than the faculty who refused ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 1.09$).⁴

Impression–Management Consequences

We found a significant effect of favor granting on perceptions of competence, $t(174) = -3.23$, $p = .001$, $d = -.49$, such that participants viewed faculty who granted a favor to be less competent ($M = 0.07$, $SD = 0.71$) than those who refused ($M = 0.41$, $SD = 0.69$). Bootstrap mediation analysis revealed that granting favors decreased perceptions of competence through its effect on perceived naiveté (*indirect effect* = $-.07$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [−0.15, −0.02]; 5,000 samples), suggesting a significant indirect effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Kelley, 2011).⁵

We found a significant effect of favor granting on warmth perceptions, $t(176) = 9.85$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.47$, as favor granting increased perceptions of warmth ($M = 1.02$, $SD = 1.00$) as compared to refusing ($M = -0.49$, $SD = 1.05$). Additionally, we explored whether perceived naiveté mediated the relationship between favor granting and perceptions of warmth. We did not find that the increased perceptions of warmth were mediated by naiveté (*indirect effect* = $-.05$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [−0.18, 0.01]).

Organizational Consequences

Following our predictions, participants perceived academia as less fair when the faculty member granted a favor ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.11$) than when the faculty member refused ($M = 3.89$,

² We recruited Twitter participants using an invitation to the second author's Twitter followers, who were employed in Academia, to participate in a survey about the academic job market.

³ To assess whether the different data source impacted our results in any meaningful way, we ran the analyses, including data source as a covariate, which did not change the pattern and significance of our effects.

⁴ As the means for both conditions were below the scale midpoint (4), we wanted to validate that favor-granting leaders were being perceived as naïve rather than simply more naïve compared to nonfavor grantors. We present Supplemental Study 1, which shows that leaders are implicitly perceived to be generally low in naiveté ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.05$) and significantly less naïve than both nonleaders ($diff = 1.13$, $p < .001$) and the average person ($diff = 1.46$, $p < .001$). This suggests that results in this study (and our other studies) show that favor-granting leaders are seen as naïve within the more restricted range people use for judging leaders.

⁵ Note: All subsequent mediation analyses in the article used the same bootstrapped analytical approach.



Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for All Measures in Study 1

Variable	Grant favor	Refuse favor	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>df</i>
Perceived naïveté						
Perceived naïveté	2.44 [2.14, 2.74]	1.91 [1.68, 2.14]	2.75	.007	.42	178
Impression–management consequences						
Perceived competence	0.07 [−0.08, 0.21]	0.41 [0.26, 0.56]	−3.23	.001	.49	174
Perceived warmth	1.02 [0.81, 1.23]	−0.49 [−0.72, −0.27]	9.85	<.001	1.47	176
Organizational consequences						
Organizational fairness	3.17 [2.93, 3.40]	3.89 [3.66, 4.13]	−4.36	<.001	.65	176

Note. The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

$SD = 1.12$), $t(176) = -4.36$, $p < .001$, $d = -.65$, an effect mediated by perceived naïveté (indirect effect = $-.14$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [-0.28 , -0.04]).

Discussion

The results of Study 1 show that being seen rewarding flattery is risky for faculty leaders, whom academics expect to be not easily swayed by compliments. In contrast, nonleaders do not carry the same implicit expectations of being able to resist influence (as suggested by Supplemental Study 1, see Footnote 4). We conducted Supplemental Study 2 to test whether this leads observers to penalize favor-granting nonleaders less. As presented in the Supplemental Materials, results showed that leaders and nonleaders alike appeared more naïve when granting favors to flatterers ($t > 2.77$, $p < .006$, $d > 2.01$). However, participants rated leaders who rewarded flattery as less competent than those who refused, $t(184) = -4.13$, $p \leq .001$, $d = .49$, but did not penalize nonleaders for the same behavior, $t(177) = -.42$, $p = .674$, $d = .23$. Thus, while all flattery recipients who reward flattery appeared more naïve to observers, being a leader was associated with additional reputational costs from rewarding flattery.

Study 2: Falling for Flattery in the Lab

We next explore whether our predictions extend to real-time observations of flattery and favor granting. Study 2 engages lab participants in a competitive task in which they see their competitor flatter and seek favorable treatment from the experimenter, the authority figure in the lab. We investigate whether participants—working on a real task, with outcomes determined by the experimenter—react negatively to favorable responses to flattery and whether they will decrease their commitment to the experimenter (i.e., the leader in this context) as a result.

Method

Participants

We recruited 170 adults⁶ ($M_{\text{age}} = 23.89$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 7.01$; 56.14% female) and paid them \$15 to participate in an hour-long lab session at a large Southeastern University. We removed five participants who expressed awareness that their simulated competitor (see next section, for more details) was fake,⁷ as well as one participant who completed the experiment twice, resulting in a usable sample of 164.

Design and Procedure

Participants were tasked with preparing a 1-min video presentation on the business topic of first offers in negotiations. To help them do so, we provided them with a set of slides containing relevant materials. Participants were told they would be competing against another participant for a chance to earn a \$10 bonus and that they would be judged based on their presentation performance. During their preparation, participants could communicate with the lab experimenter via instant messaging to ask clarification questions.

Before delivering their presentations, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In both conditions, under the premise of ensuring equal task knowledge prior to presenting, participants were shown presentation materials purported to be from their competitor. The competitor's materials included an instant-messaging transcript between them and the lab experimenter. In the transcript, the competitor flattered the lab experimenter (e.g., "I have never had an experimenter explain things so clearly. You must be really smart!"); for full text, see Supplemental Materials) and then asked for specific tips on how to make it to the next round. In the grant favor condition, participants read that the experimenter agreed to grant the favor and provided some suggestions to the competitor. In the refuse favor condition, participants read the same materials but with the experimenter instead refusing to provide tips. Participants also saw their competitor's speaking notes, which reinforced the manipulation with a comment that included more flattery for the experimenter and a note either thanking the experimenter for their helpful tips or expressing understanding about why the experimenter refused to help.

Dependent Measures

Perceived Naïveté. After reading the materials from their competitor and prior to delivering their presentation, participants used the same measures as Study 1 to evaluate the lab experimenter's naïveté (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely; $\alpha = .97$; Barasch et al., 2016).

Impression–Management Consequences. We collected the measures of competence and warmth from Study 1 ($\alpha_{\text{competence}} = .95$; $\alpha_{\text{warmth}} = .92$) adapted to an absolute scale (1 = not at all,

⁶ COVID-19 facility closures prevented us from collecting our full target sample of 200 participants.

⁷ We also ran the analysis with suspicious participants and saw no change in the pattern or significance of results.

7 = *extremely*), rather than a change scale ($-3 =$ *become much more negative*, $+3 =$ *become much more positive*), as participants were likely unfamiliar with the experimenter and the lab context and thus did not have meaningful prior perceptions of the experimenter's competence or warmth.

Organizational Consequences.

Organizational Fairness. We collected the same measures of organizational fairness as in Study 1. For example, we asked participants if they thought the lab was "fair" or "meritocracy-based" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*; $\alpha = .81$).

Commitment to the Leader. In line with conceptualizations of commitment as a willingness to continue in an exchange relationship (Flint et al., 2013; Meyer et al., 2002), we assessed commitment by asking participants how willing they would be to sign up for another study run by the same lab experimenter (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*; single item).

Leader Fairness. In addition to the measures collected above as part of our core theoretical model, we also collected a measure of experimenter fairness to support secondary mediation analyses. We asked participants to rate their perceptions of the experimenter's fairness using a single item: "How fair she/he is" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Results

Table 2 provides means for all focal measures by condition. Results for ancillary variables are described in supplemental analyses for Study 2 in the Supplemental Materials.

Manipulation Check

As a manipulation check, we asked, "How helpful was the lab evaluator toward your competitor?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). As expected, participants in the grant favor condition rated the experimenter as more helpful to their competitor ($M = 6.03$, $SD = 1.08$) than refuse favor condition participants ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.43$), $t(162) = 7.08$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.11$.

Perceived Naiveté

Supporting our predictions, participants viewed an experimenter who granted the favor as more naïve ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.67$) than an experimenter who refused ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(162) = 3.55$, $p < .001$, $d = .56$.

Impression–Management Consequences

As Table 2 shows, in this study, we did not find the predicted effect of favor granting on perceived competence, $t(162) = -0.32$, $p = .749$, $d = .05$, but we find support for the indirect effect of granting favors on competence via the perceived naïveté mechanism (indirect effect = $-.34$, $SE = .11$, 95% CI [-0.59 , -0.14]), suggesting that naïveté had the predicted negative effect on competence. We speculate that the lack of a negative main effect of favor granting on perceived competence stemmed from a countervailing effect of the favor granting in our lab context, which may have made the lab experimenter appear more decisive (autonomously choosing to provide inside information) and knowledgeable (detailing suggestions) and thus bolstered how competent they seemed (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2011) compared to the favor-refusing experimenter, who simply stated they were unable to provide assistance.

In terms of perceived warmth, results were consistent with Study 1 and Supplemental Study 2, as the unfamiliar lab experimenters who granted favors received higher warmth ratings ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.05$) than those who refused to grant a favor ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.38$), $t(162) = 2.75$, $p = .007$, $d = .43$. We again did not find that the effect of favor granting on perceived warmth was mediated by perceived naïveté (indirect effect = $-.07$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [-0.20 , 0.01]).

Organizational Consequences

In this study, we assessed both types of organizational consequences from our theoretical model: commitment to the leader and perceptions of organizational fairness. Participants who witnessed the lab experimenter grant a favor after flattery were less committed to the experimenter, as shown by a decreased willingness to do another study with the experimenter ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.83$), as compared to those who witnessed the experimenter refusing to grant a favor ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.44$), $t(162) = -3.35$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.52$. Additionally, participants perceived the lab to be less fair when the experimenter granted a favor ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.42$) than when the experimenter refused ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.13$), $t(162) = -5.35$, $p < .001$, $d = .84$.

We next assessed whether naïveté mediated these effects. We found that the relationship between favor granting and participants' willingness to do another study with the experimenter was mediated by perceived naïveté (indirect effect = $-.38$, $SE = .13$, 95% CI [-0.68 , -0.15]), as was the relationship between experimenter favor granting and organizational fairness (indirect effect = $-.22$, $SE = .09$, 95% CI [-0.45 , -0.08]). These results replicated our findings from

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for All Measures in Study 2

Variable	Grant favor	Refuse favor	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Perceived naïveté					
Perceived naïveté	2.69 [2.32, 3.07]	1.89 [1.64, 2.15]	3.55	<.001	0.56
Impression–management consequences					
Perceived competence	4.80 [4.49, 5.11]	4.87 [4.61, 5.12]	−0.32	.749	0.05
Perceived warmth	5.11 [4.88, 5.35]	4.58 [4.28, 4.89]	2.75	.007	0.43
Organizational consequences					
Organizational fairness	4.10 [3.78, 4.42]	5.17 [4.93, 5.41]	−5.35	<.001	0.84
Willing to do another study	4.98 [4.57, 5.38]	5.83 [5.52, 6.15]	−3.35	.001	0.52

Note. *df* = 162; The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

previous studies and offer further evidence that our mechanism—perceived naiveté—drives these effects.

Secondary Mediation Analyses

To provide further support for our conceptual model, we tested an additional mediation model, including an alternative mechanism. Specifically, one alternative explanation for our downstream effects may be that they are driven solely by perceptions of leader unfairness rather than by perceived naiveté. To test this possibility, we conducted secondary mediation analyses, including both perceived naiveté and perceptions of leader fairness as simultaneous mediators from favor granting to our downstream outcomes. We present the full table of indirect effects in supplemental analyses for Study 2 in the Supplemental Materials. In brief, we found that when leader fairness was included as a simultaneous mediator, the results continued to show significant indirect effects via perceived naiveté for both competence (*indirect effect* = $-.14$, *SE* = $.08$, 95% CI [-0.34 , -0.02]) and willingness to complete additional studies (i.e., commitment to the leader; *indirect effect* = $-.19$, *SE* = $.10$, 95% CI [-0.45 , -0.04]), although there was not a significant indirect effect for organizational fairness (*indirect effect* = $-.03$, *SE* = $.06$, 95% CI [-0.17 , 0.07]). Overall, these results suggest that viewing the experimenter as naïve explains variance above and beyond simply viewing the experimenter as unfair.

Discussion

Beyond providing support for our theoretical model using an in-person task, this laboratory experiment adds two key insights. First, we find that the negative consequences of rewarding flattery are not limited to perceptions of leaders or their organizations, but extend to observers' willingness to work with such leaders in the future. Second, it shows the unique role of perceptions of naiveté when observers witness leaders reward flattery, above and beyond negative evaluations of leader fairness.

Study 3: Falling for Flattery in the Field

The prior studies feature one-off instances of flattery and favor granting with leaders who are either somewhat unfamiliar to the observer (Study 1 and Supplemental Study 2) or are completely new (Study 2). To broaden beyond this context,⁸ we next assess real-world experiences of flattery and favor granting by asking MBA students to describe their existing leader and evaluate the leader's response to flattery via a recollection task.

By doing so, we generalize our model beyond initial impressions of leaders to established leader–follower relationships. This is an important step, as we have posited that whether or not the observer has an existing relationship with the leader may mitigate the positive effect of flattery-based favor granting on warmth, since witnessing a leader act favorably toward a flatterer has contrasting implications for the leaders' friendliness and fairness, which underly warmth perceptions. In particular, while prior work indicates that newcomers may—absent other relevant knowledge—perceive leaders who grant favors as friendly and warm (Fouk & Long, 2016), observers with established relationships with such leaders may assess the behavior beyond its surface-level appearance and thus be

more critical. We preregistered our study at <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=9pp3ng>.⁹

Method

Participants

A cohort of 148 students from an MBA program in Western Europe took part in this study. Of the 148, 21 students reported not having witnessed flattery, and three provided open-ended responses irrelevant to the context; they were thus excluded, leaving a final sample of 124 ($M_{\text{age}} = 29.00$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.12$; 38 females, 80 males, six did not self-identify). The average work experience of the sample was 5.87 years ($SD = 1.79$). Importantly, the average length of the relationship with their leader was 3.32 years ($SD = 1.80$).

Design and Procedure

We first asked participants to think of their current or most recent supervisor and report the length and quality of their relationship with them.¹⁰ Next, we informed participants that we were interested in instances when they may have witnessed the leader receive flattery from followers or peers that appeared aimed at currying favor. Participants were asked to describe the event(s) in a few sentences before completing the measures.

Measures

Rewarding Flattery. We asked to what extent participants' leaders "generally rewarded flattery with some sort of preferential treatment or favors" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*).

Perceived Naiveté and Impression–Management Consequences. Due to time constraints, we collected single-item versions of the naiveté and impression–management measures as our prior studies.¹¹

⁸ Another aspect of our experimental paradigm that may vary in the real world is whether a favor is observed to be explicitly requested by the flatterer. We explored this in Supplemental Study 3, presented in the Supplemental Materials, and found that whether or not the favor was explicitly requested had relatively little impact, with the exception that leaders who grant favors without an explicitly requested favor are perceived to be less warm.

⁹ For conciseness, we report the results for one preregistered variable, overall impression of the leader, in the Supplemental Materials as supplemental analyses for this and the other studies in this article. We conceptualized this variable as an alternate leadership outcome representing the holistic perception a subordinate has of their leader. We note that, as expected, results followed predictions, showing a significant negative effect of being seen rewarding flattery on overall impression, mediated by naiveté. The results of Studies 4–7 also followed our predictions and were consistent with the results pattern for the other organizational consequences variables.

¹⁰ We used the two relationship variables in supplemental analyses to Study 3 presented in the Supplemental Materials. Results showed that the variables did not significantly interact with favor granting in predicting our outcomes and that controlling for them did not impact the pattern or significance of results. Thus, while results from this study suggest that the impact of rewarding flattery on warmth differs for established leader–follower relationships (compared to unfamiliar leaders), the characteristics of the relationship appear less impactful.

¹¹ Given this limitation, we conducted Supplemental Study 4, an identical version of this study on Amazon MTurk using multi-item validated measures of all dependent variables ($N = 135$) as a robustness check. As presented in the Supplemental Materials, focal results and conclusions were consistent with the results of Study 3.

Organizational Consequences. As with the impression–management measures, we used shortened versions of scales in this study. For commitment to the leader, we adapted an item from Grant et al.’s (2008) measure of affective commitment. Participants indicated whether they would be happy to spend the rest of their career working with the supervisor (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*). Finally, we assessed how rewarding flattery with favors impacts views of organizational fairness on two important dimensions related to the allocation of rewards: procedural fairness and distributive fairness. Using items adapted from Colquitt (2001), we had participants rate how the leader’s response affected their views of how fair their organization was in using bias-free procedures (procedural fairness) and rewarding individuals appropriately for their work (distributive fairness; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*). We averaged the two items to create a measure of organizational fairness ($\alpha = .80$).

Results

Perceived Naiveté

As predicted, leaders who were recalled as more strongly rewarding flattery were seen by participants as more naïve ($b = 0.44$, $SE = .09$), $t(120) = 4.96$, $p < .001$.

Impression–Management Consequences

Supporting our predictions, we found that the more leaders were perceived as rewarding flattery, the less competent they seemed ($b = -.47$, $SE = .07$), $t(120) = -6.52$, $p < .001$. As with our prior studies, we found that perceived naiveté mediated the effect of leaders’ rewarding flattery on perceived competence (*indirect effect* = $-.09$, $SE = .05$, 95% $CI_{BC} [-0.21, -0.02]$).

As predicted and in contrast to the prior studies, where unfamiliar leaders were seen as warmer after rewarding flattery, established leaders did not gain a warmth benefit from the same behavior. The relationship between rewarding flattery and warmth for established leaders was nonsignificant and was directionally negative ($b = -.14$, $SE = .08$), $t(120) = -1.85$, $p = .067$.

Organizational Consequences

As predicted, recollections of leaders rewarding flattery were negatively associated with commitment to the leader ($b = -.49$, $SE = .09$), $t(120) = -5.33$, $p < .001$, and perceptions of organizational fairness ($b = -.35$, $SE = .07$), $t(120) = -4.91$, $p < .001$. We also assessed whether naiveté perceptions mediated the effect of leaders’ rewarding flattery on organizational outcomes. In partial support of our predictions, perceived naiveté mediated the effect of rewarding flattery on commitment (*indirect effect* = $-.09$, $SE = .05$, 95% $CI_{BC} [-0.20, -0.02]$), but not organizational fairness (*indirect effect* = $-.04$, $SE = .04$, 95% $CI_{BC} [-0.12, 0.03]$).

Secondary Analyses

By testing our model with established leader–follower relationships, we can also generalize our findings beyond one-off instances of flattery and favor granting. As presented in supplemental analyses for Study 3 in the Supplemental Materials, two coders who were blind to hypotheses rated participants’ descriptions of leaders’

response to flattery and identified 80 instances of recurring flattery and 36 instances of one-off flattery (eight responses were unclear). We tested flattery frequency as a moderator variable (0 = *one-off*, 1 = *recurring*) to see if flattery frequency impacted the relationship between favor granting and our outcomes. Analyses revealed no significant interactions between favor granting and flattery frequency, nor was flattery frequency a significant predictor for any outcome. These results suggest that reactions to leaders falling for flattery are similar whether the observed flattery is isolated or recurring.

Discussion

Using participant recollections of their own leaders rewarding flattery, we find that the negative consequences of observing a leader reward flattery also occur in established leader–follower relationships, but that appearing warm—the one possible benefit of rewarding flattery—appears to be limited to unknown or new leaders as shown in our prior studies. To directly test this result, we also conducted Supplemental Study 5, in which we assessed the effects of favor granting while varying whether the leader was newly introduced or was the participant’s existing leader. As presented in the Supplemental Materials, the results were supportive of an effect of leader familiarity on warmth (but not on any other outcomes), with favor granting increasing warmth for new leaders ($b = .38$, $SE = .18$, $p = .034$), but not for established leaders ($b = .00$, $SE = .13$, $p = .991$). The combined results of Study 3 and Supplemental Study 5 provide a clear picture of the risk that established leaders take when they reward flattery: In the eyes of others, this behavior likely leads to negative consequences without the benefit of appearing warmer.

Study 4: The Unique Effect of Flattery

There are many potential reasons for leaders to grant favors to followers. Are flattery-based favors different from other types of unfair favors? Study 4 tests the unique role of flattery comparing it to another context in which followers can perceive leaders as granting favors unfairly: nepotism (Burhan et al., 2020). In the case of flattery, followers believe leaders are naïve because they are unaware of flatterers’ self-serving motives. In contrast, observers of nepotism are unlikely to attribute naiveté to leaders who are clearly aware that they are granting favors to family members (Bellow, 2003). Thus, while both flattery and nepotism involve the unfair allocation of resources, naiveté should be unique to the former.

We also sought to contrast flattery with a context in which observers might view favor granting as fair. Meritocracy is often a socially acceptable justification for unequal outcomes (e.g., Hook & Cook, 1979), and people generally favor granting bonuses to those who have earned them (Shaw et al., 2018). By systematically testing contexts in which leaders’ favors are fair or unfair, we gain a more precise understanding of the processes unique to flattery.

Method

Participants

We recruited 803 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) who were employed at an organization other than MTurk.

One participant was excluded for failing both attention checks, leaving a final sample of 802 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.31$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.11$; 345 females, 450 males, three nonbinary/third gender; four did not self-identify).

Design and Procedure

We first asked participants to recall a leader in their organization and to report the length and quality of their relationship with that leader.¹² All participants were then asked to imagine they observed another individual (the “approacher”) approach the leader at an office social event and ask for a major professional favor. To enhance realism (and to continue testing our model with actual leaders, following Study 3), we programmed the survey to insert the name or initials of the participants’ leader into the scenarios. We used a 4 (request context: flattery vs. nepotism vs. meritocracy vs. control) \times 2 (leader response: grant favor vs. refuse favor) between-subjects design (see Supplemental Materials, for scenario text).

In the *flattery* condition, participants read that the approacher began by flattering the leader before asking for an introduction to the hiring manager of a desirable position and a recommendation for the promotion. In the *nepotism* condition, participants read that the approacher was the leader’s nephew and that the two discussed a recent family gathering before the approacher asked for the same favor. In the *meritocracy* condition, participants read that the approacher accurately detailed their strong qualifications before asking for the favor. Finally, in the *control* condition, participants read that the approacher simply asked for the favor.

After the requests, participants in the *grant favor* condition read that the leader granted the favor, introducing the approacher to the hiring manager and recommending them for the position. In the *refuse favor* condition, participants read that the leader did not grant the favor.

Dependent Measures

Perceived Naiveté. We collected the same naiveté measure as previous studies ($\alpha = .96$).

Impression–Management Consequences. Participants assessed how their impression of the leader’s competence and warmth would be affected by what they read using four items each ($\alpha_{\text{competence}} = .92$, $\alpha_{\text{warmth}} = .92$; $-3 = \text{become much more negative}$, $3 = \text{become much more positive}$) from Cuddy et al. (2008; competent, skillful, confident, able; warm, nice, friendly, sincere).

Organizational Consequences.

Commitment to the Leader. Participants indicated how committed they would feel to their leader if the scenario were to happen using a five-item adapted version of the affective commitment measure in Grant et al. (2008; e.g., “I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career working with [my leader]”; $\alpha = .93$).

Organizational Fairness. Participants assessed their perceptions of their organization’s fairness with the full six-item version of the Colquitt (2001) scale used in Study 3 ($\alpha = .96$).

Results

We conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) on all our dependent variables, using request context: (flattery vs. nepotism vs.

meritocracy vs. control) and leader response: (grant favor vs. refuse favor) as between-subjects factors. Means by condition are presented in Table 3 and Figures 1 and 2A–D.

Manipulation Checks

As manipulation checks, participants were asked to what extent the approacher flattered the leader, to what extent the two were biologically related, to what extent the approacher provided details about their qualifications, and to what extent the leader performed a favor (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). As expected, participants in the grant favor conditions observed favor granting to a greater extent ($M = 5.91$, $SD = 1.23$) than participants in the refuse favor conditions ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.75$), $F(1, 794) = 1,365.53$, $p < .001$.¹³ The results for the request context (i.e., flattery, nepotism, meritocracy, or control) manipulation checks, reported in the supplemental analyses for Study 4 in the Supplemental Materials, confirmed that participants correctly observed the request context to which they were assigned by condition.

Perceived Naiveté

An ANOVA testing the effects of request context and favor granting on perceived naiveté indicated a significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 794) = 35.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .043$, and a significant interaction, $F(3, 794) = 9.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .035$. There was no significant effect of request condition, $F(3, 794) = 2.45$, $p = .063$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$. As shown in Table 3 and Figure 1, granting a favor in response to flattery led to increased perceptions of naiveté as compared to refusing, $t(200) = 6.76$, $p < .001$, $d = .95$. In contrast, favor granting had no effect in either the nepotism or meritocracy conditions ($t < 1.61$, $p > .110$, $d < .23$). While favor granting in the control condition also followed the same pattern as flattery, $t(197) = 3.65$, $p < .001$, $d = .52$, planned contrasts showed that observers viewed leaders who granted favors as more naïve in the flattery condition than favor-granting leaders in the nepotism, $t(395) = 4.35$, $p < .001$, meritocracy, $t(395) = 4.45$, $p < .001$, and control conditions, $t(395) = 2.87$, $p = .004$. Naiveté was an attribution unique to flattery and did not emerge to the same extent in other unfair favor-granting contexts, such as nepotism.

Impression–Management Consequences

Perceived Competence. An ANOVA on perceived competence indicated a significant main effect of favor granting, $F(1, 794) = 42.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .051$, and a significant interaction, $F(3, 794) = 21.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .076$. There was no significant effect of request context, $F(3, 794) = 1.13$, $p = .336$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$. As presented in Table 3 and Figure 2A, favor granting diminished perceptions of competence in the flattery and nepotism conditions as compared to refusing ($t < -6.76$, $p < .001$, $d > .95$). In contrast, there was no significant effect of favor granting on competence in either the

¹² Following Study 3, we present supplemental analyses for this study in the Supplemental Materials controlling for these relationship variables, which show that the pattern and significance of our focal results were unchanged.

¹³ This effect was qualified by a significant interaction between favor granting and request context, $F(3, 794) = 4.91$, $p = .002$. Post hoc tests showed a significant effect of favor granting in all request contexts ($t > 13.99$, $p < .001$).

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for All Measures in Study 4

Variable	Flattery		Nepotism		Meritocracy		Control		f^d
	Grant favor	Refuse favor	Grant favor	Refuse favor	Grant favor	Refuse favor	Grant favor	Refuse favor	
Perceived naïveté	$M = 3.33$ [2.97, 2.68]	$M = 1.80$ [1.52, 2.08]	$M = 2.31$ [2.01, 2.62]	$M = 1.96$ [1.65, 2.27]	$M = 2.33$ [2.06, 2.60]	$M = 2.40$ [2.07, 2.73]	$M = 2.66$ [2.31, 3.01]	$M = 1.85$ [1.58, 2.12]	3.65 ($p < .001$)
Impression-management consequences	$M = 0.17$ [-0.07, 0.42]	$M = 1.31$ [1.12, 1.49]	$M = 0.42$ [0.21, 0.63]	$M = 1.41$ [1.21, 1.61]	$M = 1.06$ [0.87, 1.25]	$M = 0.78$ [0.56, 0.99]	$M = 0.79$ [0.57, 1.01]	$M = 0.86$ [0.66, 1.05]	-0.46 ($p = .646$)
Perceived competence	$M = 0.41$ [0.17, 0.65]	$M = 0.57$ [0.38, 0.76]	$M = 0.42$ [0.18, 0.66]	$M = 0.80$ [0.59, 1.01]	$M = 1.25$ [1.04, 1.45]	$M = 0.11$ [-.16, 0.39]	$M = 1.03$ [0.82, 1.24]	$M = 0.26$ [0.03, 0.50]	4.79 ($p < .001$)
Organizational consequences	$M = 3.95$ [3.59, 4.30]	$M = 4.54$ [4.26, 4.81]	$M = 4.13$ [3.82, 4.43]	$M = 4.87$ [4.60, 5.13]	$M = 4.33$ [4.05, 4.60]	$M = 4.24$ [3.94, 4.54]	$M = 4.54$ [4.26, 4.83]	$M = 4.20$ [3.90, 4.50]	1.65 ($p = .101$)
Commitment to leader	$M = 3.65$ [3.31, 4.00]	$M = 5.49$ [5.26, 5.72]	$M = 3.66$ [3.35, 3.96]	$M = 5.66$ [5.45, 5.87]	$M = 4.86$ [4.62, 5.10]	$M = 4.80$ [4.50, 5.10]	$M = 4.11$ [3.81, 4.41]	$M = 5.20$ [4.96, 5.44]	-5.66 ($p < .001$)

Note. The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.
^a $df = 200$. ^b $df = 201$. ^c $df = 196$. ^d $df = 197$.

meritocracy or control conditions ($t < 1.95, p > .053, d < .28$). Planned contrasts showed that favor granting led to lower perceived competence in the flattery condition than in the meritocracy, $t(395) = -5.73, p < .001$, or control conditions, $t(395) = -3.94, p < .001$, while not differing from the nepotism condition, $t(395) = -1.59, p = .113$. Thus, while the flattery and nepotism contexts differed in terms of their effect on naïveté attributions, they both led to the same negative distal outcome. By highlighting the attributional process of reactions to unfairness, we highlight important differences in observers' reactions that otherwise would appear similar based solely on downstream outcomes.

Perceived Warmth. Consistent with our previous results, an ANOVA on perceived warmth indicated a significant main effect of favor granting, $F(1, 794) = 17.11, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .021$, and a significant interaction, $F(3, 794) = 20.23, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .071$, but no significant effect of request context, $F(3, 794) = 0.93, p = .424, \eta_p^2 = .004$. The results in Table 3 and Figure 2B showed that favor granting did not impact warmth perceptions in the flattery condition, $t(200) = -1.05, p = .297, d = -.15$, which is consistent with Study 3 and Supplemental Study 5 in showing that observers do not perceive established leaders as warmer when they reward flattery. In the nepotism condition, favor granting reduced warmth perceptions as compared to refusing, $t(201) = -2.37, p = .019, d = -.33$. In contrast, granting a favor led to higher perceptions of warmth in the meritocracy and control conditions as compared to refusing ($t > 4.79, p < .001, d > .68$). These results support our contention that favor granting boosts warmth perceptions when it does not appear to unjustly disadvantage others.

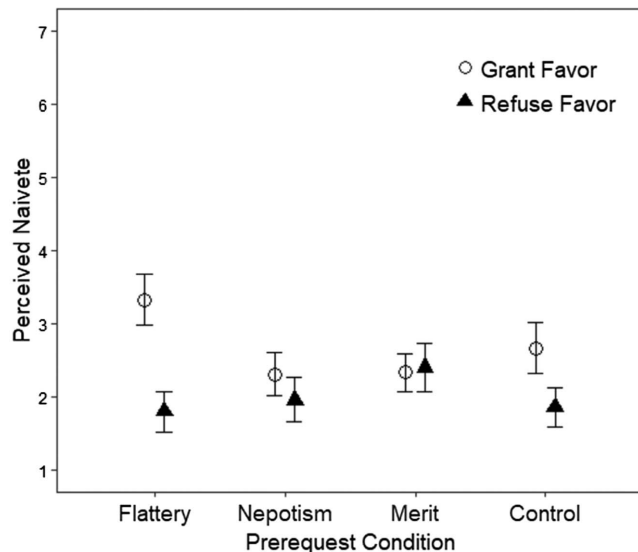
Organizational Consequences

Commitment to the Leader. Similar to prior results, an ANOVA on commitment indicated a significant main effect of favor granting, $F(1, 794) = 4.69, p = .031, \eta_p^2 = .006$, and a significant interaction, $F(3, 794) = 6.11, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .023$, but no significant effect of request context, $F(3, 794) = 1.01, p = .389, \eta_p^2 = .004$. The results in Table 3 and Figure 2C demonstrate that observers in the flattery and nepotism conditions were less committed after witnessing favor granting ($t < -2.63, p < .010, d > .37$), but there was no impact in the meritocracy or control conditions ($t < 1.65, p > .101, d < .23$). As with the impression-management consequences, these results indicate that granting favors for unjust reasons harms observers' relationship with their leader in contrast to favors granted due to merit.

Organizational Fairness. Finally, an ANOVA on organizational fairness followed the same pattern and indicated a significant main effect of favor granting, $F(1, 794) = 160.73, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .170$, and a significant interaction, $F(3, 794) = 23.40, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .082$, but no significant effect of request context, $F(3, 794) = 1.24, p = .294, \eta_p^2 = .005$. The results in Table 3 and Figure 2D show that participants rated their organization as less fair when observing favor granting as compared to refusing in the flattery, nepotism, and control conditions ($t < -5.66, p < .001, d > .80$), but favor granting did not affect fairness perceptions in the meritocracy condition, $t(192) = 0.32, p = .746, d = .05$. Planned contrasts indicated that favor granting by leaders led participants to perceive the organization as less fair in the flattery condition than participants in the control, $t(389) = -2.13, p = .034$, or meritocracy conditions, $t(389) = -5.63, p < .001$, while not differing from the nepotism

Figure 1

Study 4: Perceived Leader Naivete as a Function of Request Context (Flattery vs. Nepotism vs. Meritocracy vs. Control) and Favor Conditions (Grant Favor vs. Refuse Favor)



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

condition, $t(389) = -0.02, p = .988$. As with commitment, flattery and nepotism exacerbate the negative impact of favor granting on observers' views of the organization as compared to the meritocracy and control conditions.

Secondary Mediation Analyses

The results for naivete highlight it a mechanism that is unique to the flattery context. Supporting this conclusion, supplemental mediation analyses for this study presented in the [Supplemental Materials](#) showed that naivete did not mediate the effect of favor granting for the nepotism, meritocracy, and control conditions on any outcome. In contrast, naivete mediated the effect in the flattery condition for competence (*indirect effect* = $-.17, SE = .09, 95\% CI [-0.365, -0.027]$) and organizational fairness (*indirect effect* = $-.30, SE = .11, 95\% CI [-0.543, -0.115]$), although it did not mediate the effect on commitment (*indirect effect* = $-.10, SE = .09, 95\% CI [-0.302, 0.051]$). In sum, although favors granted due to nepotism led to many of the same outcomes, inferences of naivete appear specific to the flattery-based attributional process.

the role of naive

Discussion

Results from Study 4 illustrate the role that context—flattery, nepotism, or meritocracy—plays in shaping observer reactions when leaders grant favor. Additionally, the results from the *meritocracy* condition suggested that an approacher's deservingness may allow favors to be seen less negatively. We conducted [Supplemental Study 6](#) to test if observers' negative reactions to leaders rewarding flattery would be magnified if the flatterer was incompetent because not only the favor results from disingenuous flattery, but it aided the career of an undeserving person.¹⁴ Results presented in the [Supplemental Materials](#) supported our prediction.

When a flatterer was incompetent, observers viewed favor-granting leaders as even more naïve, less competent and warm, and the organization as even less fair. These results confirm that observers consider both the flattery and the approacher's deservingness when witnessing a leader reward flattery.

Section 2: Contextual Factors That Shape Downstream Impacts of Falling for Flattery

In Studies 5–7, we look at the contextual factors that magnify or reduce what costs leaders pay for being perceived to have fallen for flattery. Specifically, we examine the type of flattery used (Study 5), the extent to which the favor directly harms the observer (Study 6), and whether the leader indicates awareness that the flattery they receive is not genuine (Study 7).

Study 5: The Various Forms of Flattery

Flattery can take numerous forms (Stern & Westphal, 2010), varying in terms of its excessiveness, as well as its referent domain (e.g., work related or personal). While our model would suggest that all types of flattery are likely to lead observers to make attributions of falling for flattery, the nature of the flattery should shape observers' subsequent reactions. In particular, excessive flattery should create a more negative context within which favor granting would be assessed and incur higher costs, while rewarding more benign or seemingly genuine flattery may lead to benefits, such as observers seeing leaders as warmer. Moreover, we also tested how these forms of flattery compare with neutral platitudes (i.e., "have a nice day") in a control condition.

specific predictions

We also used this study to further unpack the attribution that a favor-granting leader is naïvely falling for flattery by measuring observers' belief that the leader sees the flattery as genuine (vs. instrumental). Our theory suggests that observers' perceptions that a leader believes flattery is genuine will mediate the effect of favor granting on perceptions of naivete. We preregistered our study and analysis plan at https://aspredicted.org/GQD_N97.

leaders perceive flattery as genuine

Method

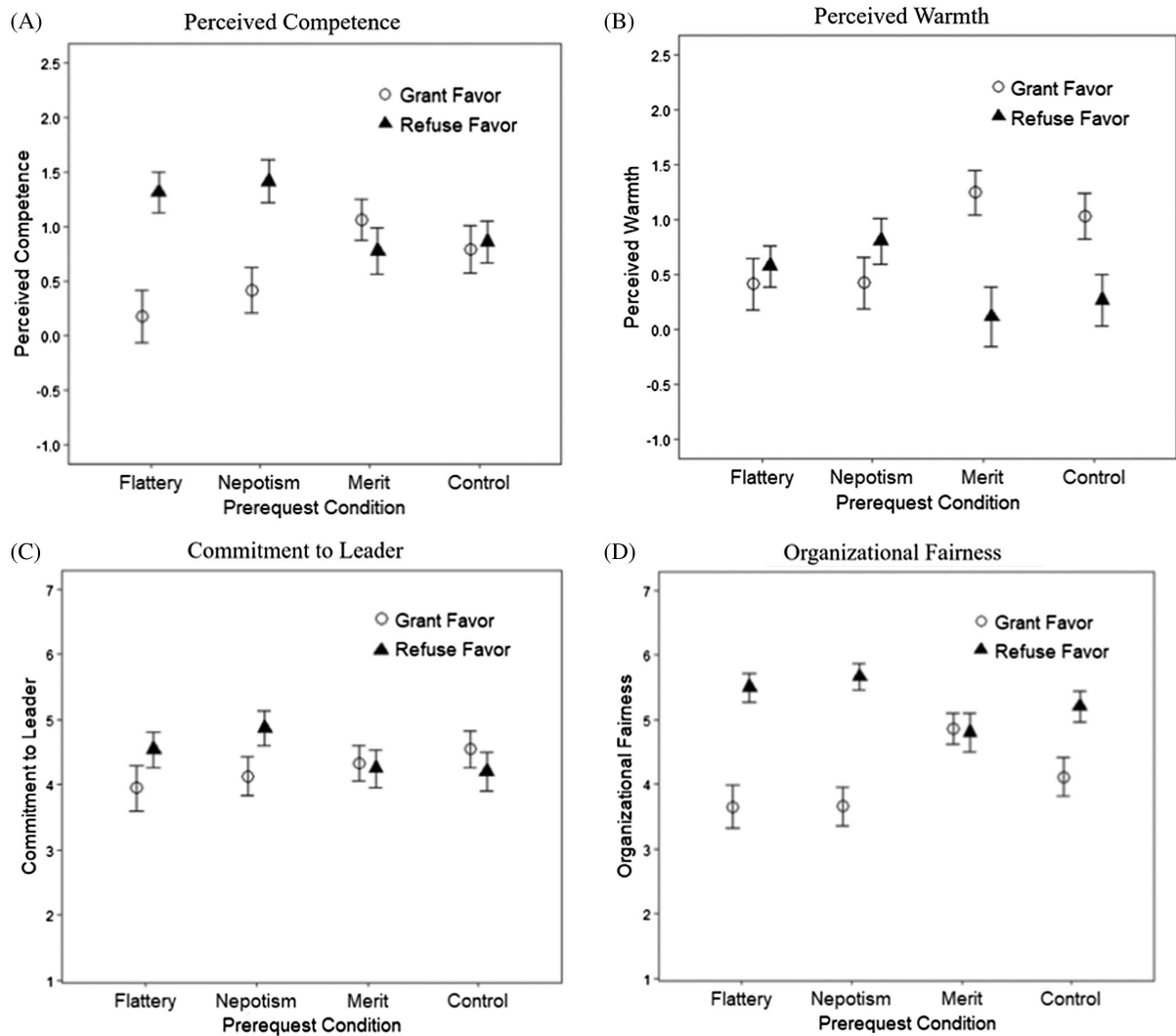
Participants

We recruited 604 participants from Amazon MTurk who were employed at an organization. Fourteen participants were excluded based on our preregistered exclusion criteria (i.e., either answered both attention checks incorrectly or provided a nonsensical response to what they do for work), leaving a final sample of 590 participants ($M_{age} = 39.76$ years, $SD_{age} = 11.14$; 256 females, 325 males, one nonbinary/third gender; eight did not self-identify). Participants had worked with their leader for an average of 7.30 years ($SD = 7.77$).

¹⁴ We also explored in [Supplemental Study 6](#) whether observers' reactions to favor granting after flattery would vary based on observers' prior perceptions of the leader's general competence. As shown in secondary analyses for the study, the leader's general competence seemed to have little impact on reactions to favor granting after flattery.

Figure 2

Study 4: Downstream Consequences as a Function of Request Context and Favor Conditions



Note. Impression-management consequences (competence and warmth) and organizational consequences (commitment to leader and organizational fairness) as a function of request context (flattery vs. nepotism vs. meritocracy vs. control) and favor conditions (grant favor vs. refuse favor). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Design and Procedure

Using a design similar to Study 4, we first asked participants to recall a leader in their organization and report the length of their relationship. Participants were then asked to imagine that they observed another individual (the “approacher”) approach the leader at an office social event and flatter the leader. The scenario differed slightly from Study 4 by stating that the observer did not see the approacher ask for a favor (e.g., a personal introduction and recommendation to a hiring manager for a new promotion) until a week later rather than immediately. We made this change to test whether the time interval between flattery and favor requests mattered. We used a 4 (flattery type: excessive work related vs. merited work related vs. excessive personal characteristics related vs. control) \times 2 (leader response: grant favor vs. refuse favor)

between-subjects design (see Supplemental Materials, for scenario text).

In the *excessive work-related* condition, participants read the same scenario from Study 4, in which the approacher excessively flattered the leader for their work (“act in an extremely fawning way ... complimenting them on their work, buttering them up, and repeatedly mentioning how they admire [the leader’s] work”). In the *merited work-related* condition, participants read that the approacher complimented the leader on a recent organizational initiative but noted that the observer was aware this initiative was indeed a big success and due to the leader’s efforts. In the *excessive personal characteristics-related* condition, participants read that the approacher excessively flattered the leader on their appearance (“act in an extremely fawning way ... complimenting them on their outfit and

repeatedly mentioning how they liked [the leader's] new haircut"). Finally, in the *control* condition, participants read that the approacher simply asked the leader about their week and said, "I hope you had a great day."

After the requests, participants read that the leader either granted the approacher's favor (*grant favor* condition) or refused to do so (*refuse favor* condition). As with the modification to the scenario for the timing of the approacher's request described above, we also had the approacher eventually find out about the favor granting or refusal, rather than witnessing it immediately, again to test whether the time interval mattered.

Dependent Measures

Perceived Belief That Flattery Was Genuine. Prior to rating their leader's naiveté, participants indicated the extent to which the leader seemed to believe the approacher's compliments were genuine with a single item (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*).

Perceived Naiveté and Downstream Consequences. We collected the same measures as in Study 4 of naiveté ($\alpha = .96$), competence ($\alpha = .93$), warmth ($\alpha = .90$), commitment ($\alpha = .91$), and organizational fairness ($\alpha = .97$).

Results

Providing support for our overall predictions, the results demonstrated significant interactions of flattery type and favor granting for the majority of focal outcomes. Results by outcome are presented in Table 4 and Figures 3 and 4A–D, and discussed further below.

Manipulation Check

Participants were asked to what extent the leader performed a favor for the approacher (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). Participants in the grant favor condition witnessed favor granting to a stronger extent ($M = 6.03, SD = 1.07$) than participants in the refuse favor condition ($M = 1.74, SD = 1.36$), $t(588) = 42.64, p < .001$.

Perceived Naiveté

An ANOVA testing the effects of flattery type and favor granting on naiveté revealed a significant effect of granting favors, $F(1, 582) = 140.73, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .195$, and a significant effect of flattery type, $F(1, 582) = 2.62, p = .050, \eta_p^2 = .013$, but did not show a significant interaction as predicted, $F(1, 582) = 1.38, p = .247, \eta_p^2 = .007$. As shown in Table 4 and Figure 3, favor granting increased perceptions of naiveté regardless of the type of flattery and, while there was not a significant interaction, planned contrasts suggested that perceptions of naiveté were most strongly related to favor granting in response to excessive flattery (whether related to work or personal characteristics). Rewarding flattery for excessive work-related flattery led to significantly higher perceived naiveté than in the merited work-related flattery condition, $t(582) = 2.19, p = .029$, and marginally higher than in the control condition, $t(582) = 1.79, p = .074$. Similarly, rewarding flattery in the excessive personal characteristics condition led to higher perceived naiveté than in the merited work-related flattery, $t(582) = 2.73, p = .007$, and control conditions, $t(582) = 2.33, p = .020$. These results show that flattery

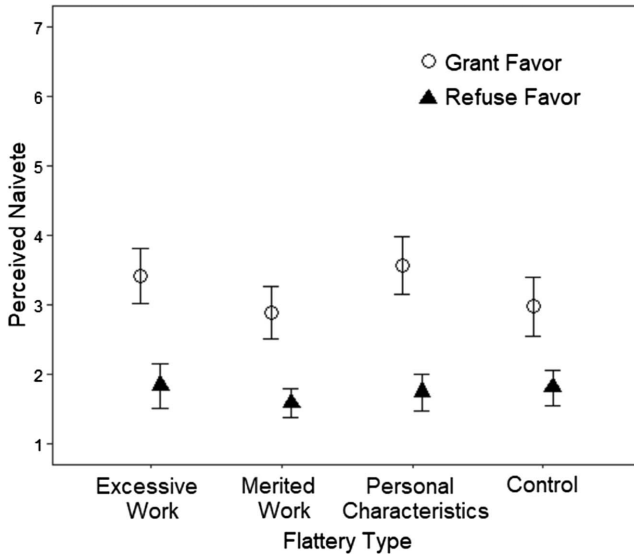
Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for All Measures in Study 5

Variable	Excessive work related		Merited work related		Personal characteristics related		Control		f^d
	Grant favor	Refuse favor	Grant favor	Refuse favor	Grant favor	Refuse favor	Grant favor	Refuse favor	
Perceived naiveté	$M = 3.42$ [3.01, 3.82]	$M = 1.83$ [1.51, 2.15]	$M = 2.88$ [2.49, 3.27]	$M = 1.58$ [1.37, 1.78]	$M = 3.56$ [3.13, 3.98]	$M = 1.73$ [1.46, 2.01]	$M = 2.97$ [2.54, 3.40]	$M = 1.80$ [1.54, 2.07]	4.85 ($p < .001$)
Impression–management consequences	$M = -0.10$ [-.35, 0.15]	$M = 1.23$ [0.97, 1.49]	$M = 0.55$ [0.23, 0.86]	$M = 1.24$ [1.03, 1.46]	$M = 0.10$ [-.15, 0.35]	$M = 1.45$ [1.22, 1.68]	$M = 0.63$ [0.37, 0.90]	$M = 0.74$ [0.50, 0.98]	-0.60 ($p = .549$)
Perceived competence	$M = 0.21$ [-.02, 0.45]	$M = 0.31$ [0.05, 0.58]	$M = 0.97$ [0.68, 1.26]	$M = 0.15$ [-.08, 0.39]	$M = 0.52$ [0.29, 0.75]	$M = 0.34$ [0.11, 0.57]	$M = 1.00$ [0.75, 1.25]	$M = -0.11$ [-.34, 0.13]	6.45 ($p < .001$)
Perceived warmth	$M = 3.23$ [2.92, 3.53]	$M = 3.99$ [3.72, 4.26]	$M = 4.21$ [3.87, 4.56]	$M = 3.83$ [3.51, 4.14]	$M = 3.53$ [3.19, 3.86]	$M = 4.23$ [3.93, 4.53]	$M = 4.19$ [3.84, 4.55]	$M = 3.69$ [3.38, 3.99]	2.19 ($p = .030$)
Organizational consequences	$M = 3.24$ [2.91, 3.57]	$M = 5.20$ [4.89, 5.50]	$M = 3.97$ [3.57, 4.38]	$M = 5.28$ [5.02, 5.55]	$M = 3.42$ [3.07, 3.77]	$M = 5.55$ [5.26, 5.84]	$M = 3.90$ [3.52, 4.28]	$M = 4.94$ [4.66, 5.22]	-4.53 ($p < .001$)
Commitment to leader									
Organizational fairness									

Note. The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals. ^a $df = 200$. ^b $df = 201$. ^c $df = 196$. ^d $df = 197$.

Figure 3

Study 5: Perceived Leader Naiveté as a Function of Flattery Type (Excessive Work Related vs. Merited Work Related vs. Personal Characteristics Related vs. Control) and Favor Conditions (Grant Favor vs. Refuse Favor)



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

of all types, as well as normal pleasantries, leads to perceived naiveté when leaders grant favors but that the apparent excessiveness of the flattery is an important factor in observers' attributions of leader naiveté.

Our theorizing suggests that observers' attributions of naiveté stem from the inference that the leader must believe the flattery to be genuine and not manipulative. This should particularly be the case when the observer views the flattery as excessive and thus obviously disingenuous in their eyes. To test this, we conducted secondary mediation analyses to assess if observers' perceptions that the leader believed the flattery to be genuine mediate the effect of favor granting on naiveté across our conditions. We expected that the belief would mediate the effect of favor granting in the excessive flattery conditions. In contrast, we did not expect the belief to mediate the effect in the merited work-related and control conditions, where the approacher's comments to the leader were less fawning and likely to spark the inference that a favor-granting leader must have naively believed the flattery to be genuine to choose to reward it with a favor. Results followed our expectations as the perceived leader's belief that the flattery was genuine mediated the effect of favor granting on naiveté for the excessive work-related (*indirect effect* = .40, *SE* = .41, 95% CI [0.10, 0.83]) and personal characteristics-related conditions (*indirect effect* = .75, *SE* = .18, 95% CI [0.41, 1.13]), but did not for the merited work-related (*indirect effect* = -.09, *SE* = .15, 95% CI [-0.38, 0.20]) or the control conditions (*indirect effect* = .16, *SE* = .18, 95% CI [-0.17, 0.56]). In line with our theory, perceived naiveté stems from observers' inferences that a favor-granting leader must unwittingly believe the flattery is genuine, otherwise they would have not rewarded manipulative behavior.

Impression–Management Consequences

Beginning with perceived competence, ANOVA results indicated a significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 582) = 93.65, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .276$, a significant effect of flattery type, $F(1, 582) = 2.79, p = .040, \eta_p^2 = .014$, and a significant interaction, $F(1, 582) = 10.73, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .052$. As shown in Table 4 and Figure 4A, favor granting led to reduced perceptions of competence for all types of flattery but not in the control condition. Additionally, following our predictions, planned contrasts showed that competence perceptions were lowest for the excessive work and personal characteristics-related flattery conditions compared to the merited work and control conditions ($t > 2.50, p \leq .013$), although competence perceptions did not differ between the two excessive flattery conditions themselves, as had been expected, $t(582) = 1.16, p = .245$. Thus, as with naiveté, flattery excessiveness magnifies the negative reaction that observers have of favor-granting leaders' competence.

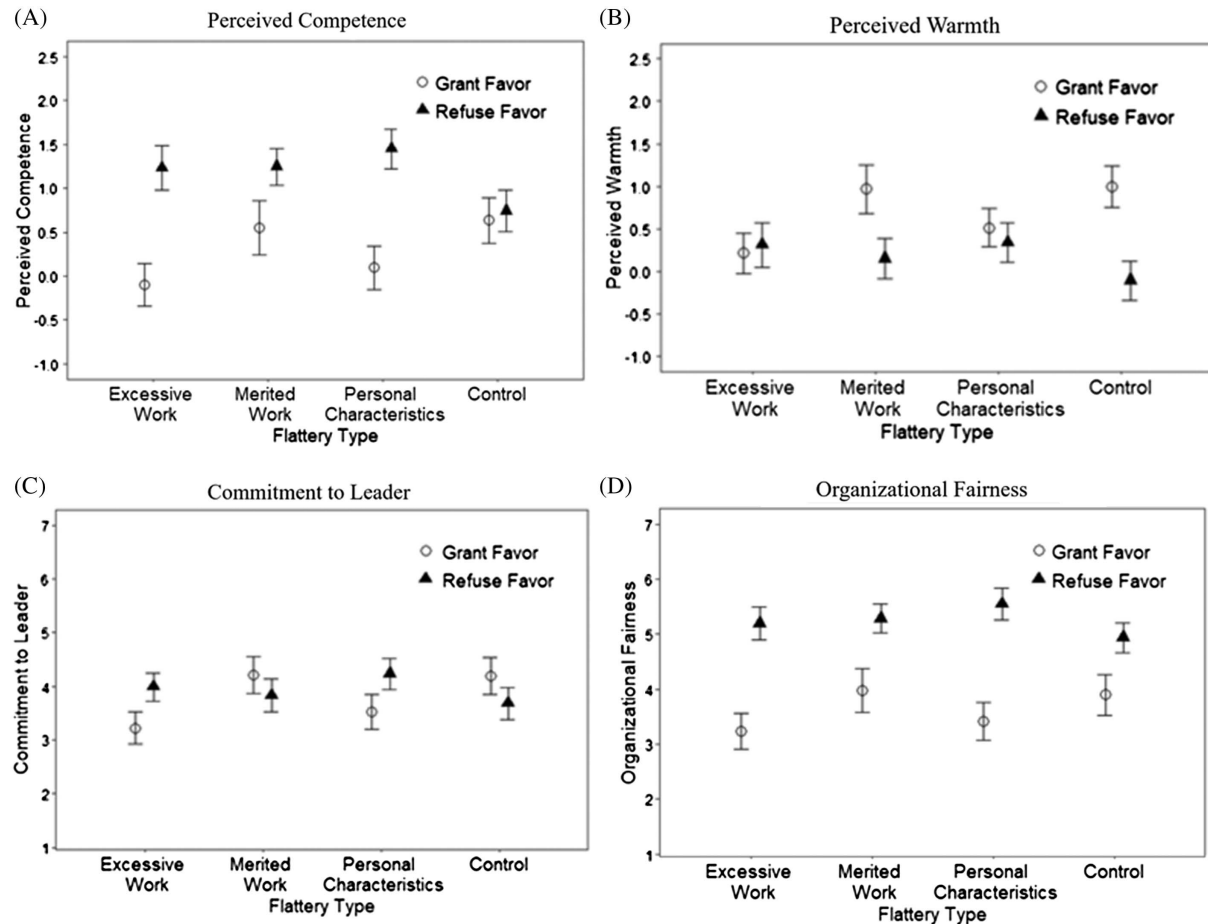
An ANOVA on perceptions of warmth revealed a significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 582) = 31.87, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .052$, and a significant interaction, $F(1, 582) = 10.04, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .049$, but no significant effect of flattery type, $F(1, 582) = 2.19, p = .089, \eta_p^2 = .011$. As Table 4 and Figure 4B show, favor granting had no impact on warmth when done in response to excessive work-related flattery—in line with our prior studies with established leaders—or personal characteristics-related flattery, but increased warmth for merited work-related flattery and in the control condition. While warmth perceptions in response to favor granting did not significantly differ between excessive work and excessive personal characteristics-related flattery, $t(582) = 1.82, p = .070$, warmth results otherwise followed predictions, with favor granting in both conditions leading to lower perceived warmth than the merited work-related flattery and control conditions ($t \geq 2.57, p \leq .011$). These results suggest that, while rewarding excessive flattery does not benefit perceived warmth, rewarding merited flattery or neutral platitudes can increase how warm a leader seems.

Organizational Consequences

An ANOVA on commitment to the leader showed a significant interaction of flattery type and favor granting, $F(1, 582) = 9.11, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .045$, but no significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 582) = 1.63, p = .202, \eta_p^2 = .003$, or flattery type, $F(1, 582) = 2.60, p = .051, \eta_p^2 = .013$. As Table 4 and Figure 4C illustrate, favor granting had no impact on commitment for the merited work-related and control conditions but decreased commitment when done for excessive work-related or personal characteristics-related flattery. Following the results for perceived competence and in line with our predictions, granting a favor decreased commitment in the excessive work-related and personal characteristics-related flattery conditions as compared to the merited work-related flattery ($t \geq 3.04, p \leq .0024$) and the control conditions ($t \geq 2.91, p \leq .004$), although commitment did not differ between excessive work and personal characteristics-related conditions, $t(582) = 1.40, p = .163$.

Finally, results for an ANOVA on organizational fairness showed a significant interaction of flattery type and favor granting, $F(1, 582) = 4.91, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .025$, and a significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 582) = 191.80, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .248$, but no effect of flattery type, $F(1, 582) = 2.26, p = .081, \eta_p^2 = .012$. As

Figure 4
Downstream Consequences as a Function of Flattery Type and Favor Conditions



Note. Impression-management consequences (competence and warmth) and organizational consequences (commitment to leader and organizational fairness) as a function of flattery type (excessive work related vs. merited work related vs. personal characteristics related vs. control) and favor conditions (grant favor vs. refuse favor). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Table 4 and Figure 4D show, favor granting led to lower perceptions of fairness regardless of flattery type, with planned contrasts showing that, as with our other negative downstream consequences, rewarding excessive work-related or personal characteristics-related flattery harmed perceptions of fairness more than doing so for merited work-related flattery ($t \geq 2.05$, $p \leq .041$) or in the control condition ($t \geq 2.39$, $p \leq .017$). In sum, we see that the negative organizational consequences of observers witnessing leaders reward excessive flattery are greater compared to merited compliments.

Discussion

This study reveals that the type of flattery can matter. In particular, flattery viewed as excessive (whether work related or personal) exacerbates the tension in observers' minds between the obviousness of the flattery and their leader seeming to have bought into it, leading to heightened perceptions of naiveté¹⁵ and worse downstream consequences compared to merited and normal workplace pleasantries (e.g., "have a nice day").

Study 6: When Falling for Flattery Hurts the Observer

Witnessing a leader reward flattery can be particularly poignant when the favor granted to the flatterer negatively affects observers themselves. Study 6 manipulates whether or not a leader's favor in response to flattery harms participants' own standing. In line with work on outcome dependency (see Fiske & Neuberg, 1990), we predict that the negative consequences (e.g., naiveté, competence, decreased commitment) will be exacerbated when participants' own

¹⁵ In addition to the study's primary focus, we wanted to provide further evidence as to the central role that naiveté plays in mediating the effect of favor granting on outcomes. In supplemental analyses presented in the Supplemental Materials for this study, we assessed whether naiveté would remain a significant mediator when including two alternate mechanisms: perceptions of the leaders' self-absorption and cynicism in the excessive work-flattery condition. The pattern and significance of results largely did not change with the inclusion of the other mechanisms, the only exception being leader commitment, where the indirect effect associated with naiveté became nonsignificant. These results underscore naiveté as a key mechanism by which falling for flattery harms reputations.

outcomes are worsened as a result of a leader rewarding flattery. In contrast, as warmth reflects “other profitability” (Peeters, 1992), favor granting that directly harms the observer should be seen as less “profitable” to them—and thus less warm. We also again investigate the behavioral consequences of such treatment by asking participants to commit to additional work with the leader and by text analyzing their evaluations of the leader. We preregistered our study and analysis plan prior to data collection at <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=2fv9j3>.

Method

Participants

We recruited 504 participants from MTurk to participate in a two-part experiment with the surveys separated by 1 day. We excluded 36 participants who did not complete both parts of the study and removed four participants who expressed suspicion that the simulated evaluator was fake,¹⁶ leaving a final sample of 464 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.29$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.55$; 247 females, 214 males, one nonbinary/third gender; two did not self-identify).

Design and Procedure

This was a 2 (impact of favor: favor harm vs. no harm) \times 2 (leader response: grant favor vs. refuse favor) between-subjects design. The study was composed of two parts, completed sequentially. In the first part of the study, we instructed participants to complete the “Finding E’s task” (Ariely et al., 2008), which involves quickly finding the letter “e” within a series of ten 10×10 grids that contain other letters. Participants were told that another experienced MTurk (the “evaluator”) would assess their work and could—at the evaluator’s discretion—nominate them for a promotion to be an evaluator on future studies, a position that would earn them a higher pay rate. After completing the grids, participants were given an optional comment box in which to communicate anything they wanted to their evaluator regarding their performance before completing demographic measures.

In the second part of the study, participants were told that prior to seeing their results, they would be reviewing the evaluation of another participant for comparison so that they could provide feedback on the study evaluators. In the *favor harm* condition, participants read that they would be reviewing another participant’s evaluation from the same evaluator who assessed their own performance and that the evaluator’s decision would have strongly impacted their own potential nomination, as evaluators could only nominate one participant per study. In the *no harm* condition, participants read that they would be reviewing an evaluation from a different evaluator and that the evaluator’s decision thus had no impact on them.

Participants were shown materials purported to be about another participant (see [Supplemental Materials](#), for full text). Participants saw that the other participant was an objectively average performer and had left a comment to their evaluator containing flattery (e.g., “I’m super impressed that you did well enough on this task to become an evaluator”) and asking to be nominated for the advanced role (e.g., “If you’d be willing to suggest me, that be amazing.” [*sic*]). In the *grant favor* condition, participants read that the evaluator decided to nominate the participant for the promotion, while in the *refuse favor* condition, the evaluator did not. Participants then

completed measures about their perceptions of the evaluator, as well as two behavioral measures of commitment (signing up for additional studies with the evaluator and an open-ended response about how committed they felt to the evaluator) before being debriefed. These behavioral measures improve on our prior lab study (Study 3) by directly assessing ongoing commitment to the evaluator rather than simply a willingness to work with them again.

Dependent Measures

Perceived Naiveté and Impression–Management Consequences. We collected the same scales as Studies 4 and 5 of naiveté ($\alpha = .94$), competence ($\alpha = .94$), and warmth ($\alpha = .93$).

Organizational Consequences—Commitment to the Leader. Participants indicated their commitment to the evaluator with two behavioral measures. First, participants were invited to register for up to 10 additional studies with the evaluator. Second, as an exploratory measure, we asked participants to provide an open-ended review of the evaluator—particularly, how happy they would be to participate in future studies and how connected they felt to the evaluator (key aspects of commitment). We text analyzed their responses using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count application (Pennebaker et al., 2015). Specifically, we focused on the emotional tone variable wherein a high number reflects a positive and upbeat response. For this study, we did not assess perceptions of organizational fairness due to the nature of the MTurk setting, where participants frequently complete studies from a variety of different institutions.

Results

Providing support for our predictions, the results demonstrated significant interactions of favor harm and favor granting for all focal outcomes, with the exception of perceived naiveté. Results by outcome are presented in [Table 5](#) and [Figures 5](#) and [6A–D](#).

Manipulation Checks

As manipulation checks, participants were asked to what extent the evaluator performed a favor for another participant and to what extent their nomination was impacted (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). Participants in the favor harm condition perceived the favor to more strongly impact their nomination ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.95$) as compared to those in the no harm condition ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 2.12$), $t(462) = 7.59$, $p < .001$. Participants in the grant favor condition witnessed favor granting to a stronger extent ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.60$) than participants in the refuse favor condition ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(462) = 23.26$, $p < .001$.

Perceived Naiveté

Beginning with perceived naiveté, an ANOVA testing the effects of favor impact and favor granting revealed a significant effect of

¹⁶ As we did not preregister an exclusion for suspicion, we also ran the analyses including the participants and did not see any substantive change in the pattern or significance of results, with the exception of a marginally significant interaction for perceived competence, $F(1, 464) = 3.74$, $p = .054$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Given that the goal of this study was to demonstrate behavioral outcomes in a realistic context, we present the results excluding suspicious participants.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for All Measures in Study 6

Variable	Favor harm				No harm			
	Grant favor	Refuse favor	<i>t</i> ^a	<i>p</i>	Grant favor	Refuse favor	<i>t</i> ^b	<i>p</i>
Perceived naïveté								
Perceived naïveté	3.21 [2.91, 3.51]	1.86 [1.63, 2.10]	7.10	<.001	2.99 [2.70, 3.28]	1.75 [1.51, 1.98]	6.54	<.001
Impression–management consequences								
Perceived competence	0.66 [0.43, 0.91]	1.80 [1.64, 1.97]	-7.79	<.001	0.94 [0.69, 1.19]	1.63 [1.41, 1.86]	-4.06	<.001
Perceived warmth	1.38 [1.18, 1.59]	0.70 [0.49, 0.91]	4.60	<.001	1.83 [1.67, 2.00]	0.50 [0.25, 0.76]	8.71	<.001
Organizational consequences—commitment to leader								
Study sign-ups	6.93 [6.25, 7.61]	8.45 [7.99, 8.91]	-3.70	<.001	7.80 [7.18, 8.42]	7.93 [7.34, 8.52]	-0.31	.759
Emotional tone	78.91 [73.49, 84.32]	88.08 [84.18, 91.98]	-2.75	.006	87.61 [83.43, 91.79]	88.15 [83.95, 92.35]	-0.18	.857

Note. The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

^a *df* = 231. ^b *df* = 229.

granting favors, $F(1, 460) = 93.03, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .17$, but did not show a significant effect of favor impact nor an interaction ($F < 1.59, p > .208, \eta_p^2 < .001$). As shown in Table 5 and Figure 5, participants perceived leaders who granted a favor in response to flattery as more naïve than leaders who refused, regardless of whether the favor harmed them. These results are in line with findings across our studies demonstrating consistent attributions of naïveté for favor grantors, independent of contextual factors.

Impression–Management Consequences

Consistent with our predictions, the ANOVA revealed significant interactions of favor impact and favor granting for both impression–management outcomes ($F > 3.87, p < .050, \eta_p^2 > .008$). Beginning with perceived competence, the ANOVA results indicated a significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 460) = 66.61, p < .001,$

$\eta_p^2 = .126$, and a significant interaction, $F(1, 460) = 3.87, p = .050, \eta_p^2 = .008$. There was no significant effect of favor impact, $F(1, 460) = 0.19, p = .665, \eta_p^2 = .000$. As shown in Table 5 and Figure 6A, while the effect of favor granting on perceived competence was negative regardless of favor impact, participants who were directly harmed by the favor reacted more negatively to favor granting versus refusing, $t(231) = -7.79, p < .001, d = -1.02$, than those who were not harmed, $t(229) = -4.06, p < .001, d = -.53$.

An ANOVA on perceptions of warmth revealed a significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 460) = 89.14, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .162$, and a significant interaction, $F(1, 460) = 9.29, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .020$, but no significant effect of favor impact, $F(1, 460) = 1.34, p = .247, \eta_p^2 = .003$. As Table 5 and Figure 6B show, while favor granting increased warmth perceptions as compared to refusing favors across impact conditions, planned contrasts showed that granting a favor that harmed participants led to lower warmth perceptions as compared to granting a favor that did not impact participants, $t(229) = -3.36, p < .001$. In sum, negative reactions to favor granting, in terms of perceived competence, were magnified when participants were directly harmed, while positive reactions in the form of warmth perceptions were dulled.

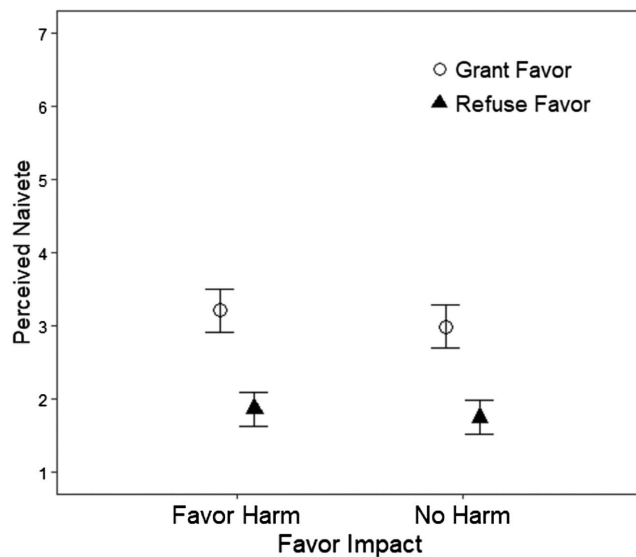
Organizational Consequences

As with our impression–management outcomes, an ANOVA on the number of study sign-ups demonstrated a significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 460) = 7.73, p = .006, \eta_p^2 = .017$, and an interaction, $F(1, 460) = 5.41, p = .020, \eta_p^2 = .012$. There was no significant effect of favor impact, $F(1, 460) = 0.33, p = .568, \eta_p^2 = .001$. As Table 5 and Figure 6C show, participants harmed by the favor signed up for fewer studies after witnessing favor granting than those who witnessed the evaluator refuse, $t(231) = -3.70, p < .001, d = -.48$. In contrast, participants unharmed by the favor did not differ in study sign-ups when the evaluator granted or refused, $t(229) = -0.31, p = .759, d = -.04$.

Our exploratory measure—the emotional tone of open-ended commitment responses—also provided support for our predictions. An ANOVA on emotional tone showed a significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 460) = 4.73, p = .030, \eta_p^2 = .01$. However, the results did not demonstrate an effect of favor impact, $F(1, 460) = 3.79, p = .052, \eta_p^2 = .01$, nor a significant interaction, $F(1, 460) = 3.71, p = .055, \eta_p^2 = .01$, although both effects approached significance. Despite the nonsignificant interaction, results in Table 5 and Figure 6D, as well as post hoc tests, illustrate a similar pattern of

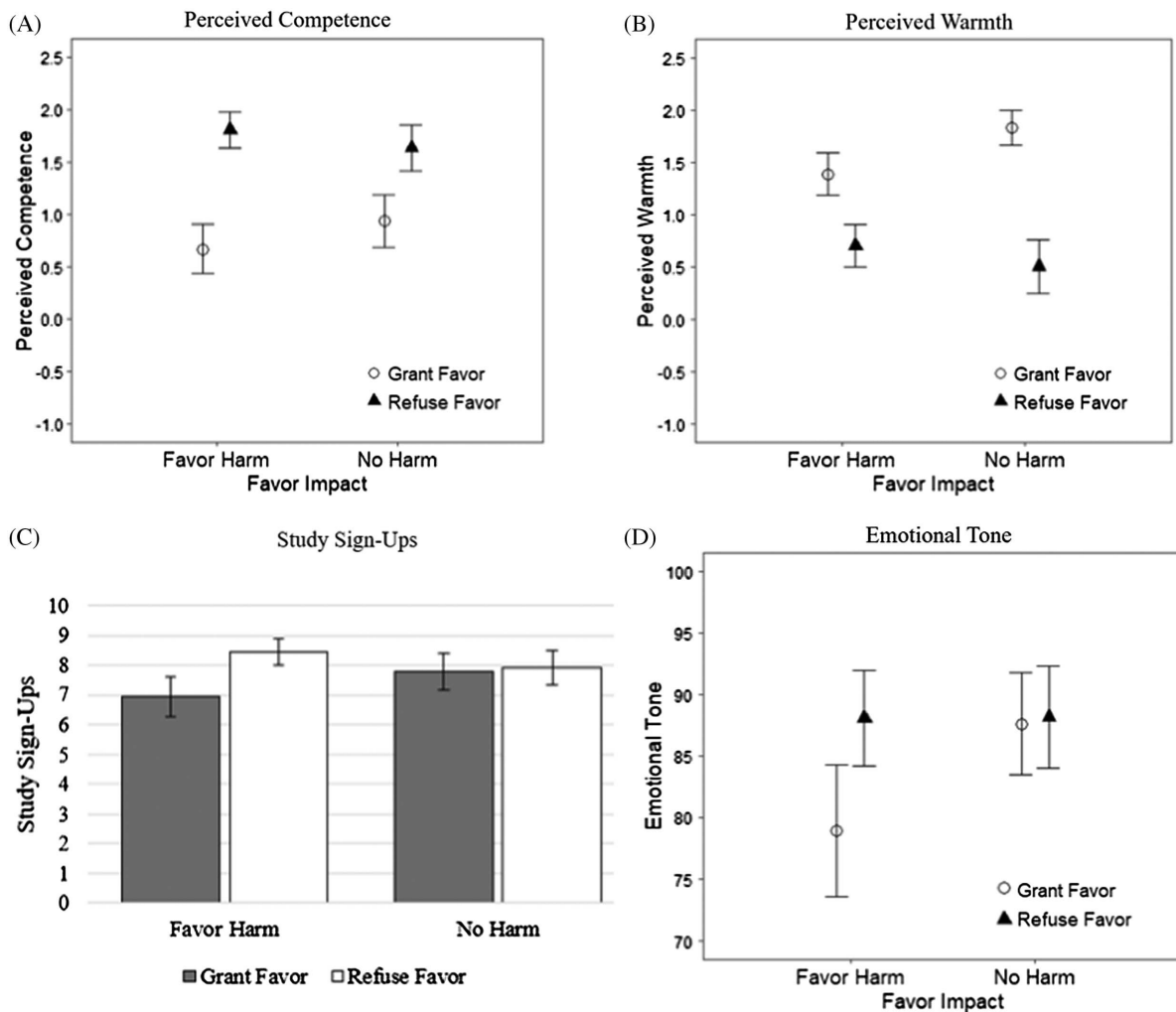
Figure 5

Study 6: Perceived Leader Naïveté as a Function of Impact (Favor Harm vs. No Harm) and Favor Conditions (Grant Favor vs. Refuse Favor)



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 6
Downstream Consequences as a Function of Impact and Favor Conditions



Note. Impression-management consequences (competence and warmth) and behavioral measures of commitment to the leader (study sign-ups and emotional tone) as a function of impact (favor harm vs. no harm) and favor conditions (grant favor vs. refuse favor). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Bar chart format used for study sign-ups measure as measurement represents cumulative total of studies selected.

results as our other behavioral measure of commitment. Participants harmed by the favor reviewed favor-granting evaluators less favorably than participants who saw the evaluator refuse, $t(231) = -2.75, p = .006, d = -.36$. On the other hand, participants who were not impacted by the favor did not differ in the emotional tone of their reviews when they evaluator granted or refused, $t(229) = -0.18, p = .857, d = -.02$.

Discussion

This study provides insight about how observers' reactions to witnessing their leaders reward flattery change if they are directly harmed by the favor. Results illustrated when the leader's decision to reward flattery directly harms observers, this magnifies their negative reactions while minimizing reputational benefits.

Study 7: The Impact of Leader's Awareness They Are Being Flattered

Can leaders mitigate the reputational risk of falling for flattery?

Study 7 tests whether leaders can use demonstrated awareness of flattery motives to benefit their reputations in conjunction with refusing to reward the flattery with favors.

Method

Participants

We recruited 389 participants from MTurk who were employed at an organization other than MTurk. Following the exclusion criteria used in our other studies, we excluded 72 participants who either failed our attention check or provided a nonsensical answer to an open-ended

response question, leaving a final sample of 317 ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.15$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.22$; 194 women, 182 men, one did not self-identify).

Design and Procedure

This study employs a 2 (leader's demonstrated awareness: aware vs. unaware) \times 2 (leader response: grant favor vs. refuse favor) between-subjects design (see [Supplemental Materials](#), for scenario text). Following a design similar to many of our studies, participants recalled a leader in their own organization and then were asked to imagine they observed someone approach this leader, excessively flatter the leader, and request a favor, which the leader either granted (*grant favor* condition) or refused to grant (*refuse favor* condition). After the flattery but prior to the favor being granted or refused, participants were asked to imagine that the leader made a remark to the observer that either signaled awareness that the approacher was flattering them because of their position or suggested a lack of awareness. In the *aware* condition, the leader commented, "Wow, that person never gave me the time of day before I was promoted to manager." In the *unaware* condition, the leader stated, "Wow, that person seemed really interested in my work!"

Measures

Perceived Naiveté. We collected the same measures of naiveté as prior studies ($\alpha = .93$).

Impression–Management and Organizational Consequences. Using the same measures as Study 1, participants rated the leader's competence ($\alpha = .94$) and warmth ($\alpha = .85$), as well as the organization's fairness ($\alpha = .82$).

Results

As predicted, results demonstrate that favor granting and leader's demonstrated awareness of the motives underlying flattery are both important in shaping reactions to leaders falling for flattery. Results by outcome are presented in [Table 6](#) and [Figures 7](#) and [8A–C](#).

Manipulation Checks

Participants were asked to what extent the leader believed the approacher treated them kindly solely because of their position in the organization (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). Participants in the *aware* condition rated the leader as more strongly believing the

flattery was due to their organizational position ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.28$) compared to participants in the *unaware* condition ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.67$), $t(315) = 4.81$, $p < .001$.

Perceived Naiveté

Beginning with perceived naiveté, an ANOVA testing the effects of leader's demonstrated awareness and favor granting revealed a significant effect of granting favors, $F(1, 313) = 60.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .158$, a significant effect of demonstrated awareness, $F(1, 313) = 7.05$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .022$, and a significant interaction, $F(1, 313) = 3.91$, $p = .049$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$. As shown in [Table 6](#) and [Figure 7](#), observers perceived leaders who granted favors as more naïve regardless of their demonstrated awareness. However, planned contrasts showed that aware leaders who refused to grant a favor appeared less naïve than unaware leaders who also refused, $t(313) = 3.28$, $p = .001$. Thus, we see that both the favor granting and the leader's demonstrated awareness contribute to naiveté perceptions, such that leaders can appear the least naïve if they refuse to grant favors and demonstrate awareness of the motives behind flattery.

Impression–Management Consequences

For perceived competence, ANOVA results indicated a significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 313) = 60.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .161$, and a significant effect of demonstrated awareness, $F(1, 313) = 8.33$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .026$. There was not a significant interaction, $F(1, 313) = 0.31$, $p = .578$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$. As shown in [Table 6](#) and [Figure 8A](#), despite the lack of interaction, these results parallel the naiveté results by showing the role of both favor granting and demonstrated awareness in shaping competence perceptions, and particularly that aware leaders who refuse to grant a favor appear more competent than unaware leaders who similarly refused to grant the favor, $t(313) = 2.44$, $p = .015$.

An ANOVA on perceived warmth did not reveal a significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 313) = 0.03$, $p = .864$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$, which is aligned with our prior established leader studies, but show a significant effect of demonstrated awareness, $F(1, 313) = 4.10$, $p = .044$, $\eta_p^2 = .013$. There was not a significant interaction, $F(1, 313) = 0.09$, $p = .765$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$. The results in [Table 6](#) and [Figure 8B](#) suggest that while favor granting does not impact warmth perceptions, leaders can appear warmer by indicating their awareness of the motives underlying flattery.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for All Measures in Study 7

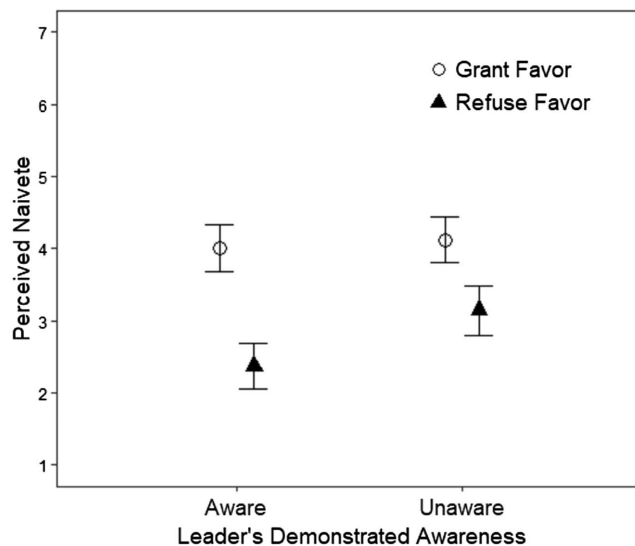
Variable	Aware leader				Unaware leader			
	Grant favor	Refuse favor	t^a	p	Grant favor	Refuse favor	t^b	p
Perceived naiveté								
Perceived naiveté	4.01 [3.68, 4.34]	2.37 [2.05, 2.69]	7.02	<.001	4.12 [3.80, 4.44]	3.14 [2.79, 3.49]	4.10	<.001
Impression–management consequences								
Perceived competence	0.26 [–0.02, 0.54]	1.37 [1.14, 1.60]	6.13	<.001	–0.05 [–0.33, 0.22]	0.91 [0.64, 1.18]	4.93	<.001
Perceived warmth	0.73 [0.49, 0.98]	0.75 [0.52, 0.97]	0.10	.924	0.53 [0.28, 0.77]	0.47 [0.24, 0.70]	0.33	.743
Organizational consequences								
Organizational fairness	3.91 [3.61, 4.21]	4.89 [4.66, 5.11]	5.22	<.001	3.81 [3.54, 4.07]	4.58 [4.30, 4.86]	4.02	<.001

Note. The values in square brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

^a $df = 153$. ^b $df = 160$.

Figure 7

Study 7: Perceived Leader Naiveté as a Function of Leader's Demonstrated Awareness (Aware vs. Unaware) and Favor Conditions (Grant Favor vs. Refuse Favor)



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Organizational Consequences

Finally, ANOVA results for organizational fairness show a significant effect of favor granting, $F(1, 313) = 42.18, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .119$, but no significant effect of demonstrated awareness, $F(1, 313) = 0.87, p = .353, \eta_p^2 = .002$, nor a significant interaction, $F(1, 313) = 5.05, p = .025, \eta_p^2 = .010$. In contrast to the results related to leader perceptions, the results presented in Table 6 and Figure 8C suggest that a leader's demonstrated awareness of flattery motives does not impact evaluations of the overall organization's fairness and that only whether the leader grants a favor or not matters for observers.

Post Hoc Exploratory Analyses: Observer's Belief That the Leader Is Aware of Motives

The preceding results indicate a limited effect of leaders' stated awareness of flattery's motives on observers' impressions when they reward flattery, but it is possible that observers' personal beliefs about the leader's awareness matter more. Post hoc exploratory analyses testing the effect of observers' beliefs about the leader's awareness, as captured by our manipulation check, predicted perceptions of the leader according to our theory (e.g., lower naiveté, higher competence). Mirroring secondary results of Study 5, leader who were believed to be aware of flattery's motives appeared less naïve ($b = -0.24, SE = .06, p < .001$) and more competent ($b = .26, SE = .05, p < .001$), although there was no significant effect of these beliefs on warmth ($b = .07, SE = .04, p = .082$). These results show that, while leaders' stated awareness of motives may have a limited impact on observers' reactions to rewarding flattery, the observers' own beliefs about the leaders' awareness underly the inference of naiveté seen in our prior studies.

Discussion

The results of Study 7 provide several insights. First, both the favor-granting behavior and a leader's stated awareness of the flatterer's true motives shape observer attributions that a leader is falling for flattery and the downstream consequences for the leader. Second, while refusing to reward, flattery is seemingly the more powerful tool leaders have to avoid negative reactions to witnessed flattery, demonstrating awareness of flatterers' ulterior motives can help. Finally, rather than trust the leader's stated beliefs, observers appear to rely on the behavior of the leader and their own inferences when forming their impression of the leader. Thus, leaders cannot rely simply on saying the right thing (i.e., that they are aware of flattery's motives) to save their reputation when their behavior contradicts their statements (i.e., by rewarding flattery).

General Discussion

Across seven studies and six supplementary studies, we document the impression-management and organizational consequences of being perceived to have "fallen for flattery" using a variety of paradigms, across a range of stimuli, and across both attitudinal and behavioral measures. In a first set of experiments conducted at an academic conference and in the lab (Studies 1–2), we show that rewarding flattery caused leaders to appear more naïve, which harmed their followers' impressions of their competence, their commitment to the leader, and their view of the organization, although favor granting makes the leader seem warmer. A recollection study exploring people's own experiences witnessing their leaders reward flattery (Study 3) showed similar costs of falling for flattery as the first two studies with unfamiliar leaders, but also revealed that established leaders do not receive the same warmth benefit as their actions are judged within a richer relationship context. Next, in Study 4, we examined observer reactions to favor granting in other contexts (nepotism, meritocracy, control) to show that our focal mechanism—perceived leader naiveté—is unique to flattery as compared to other contexts.

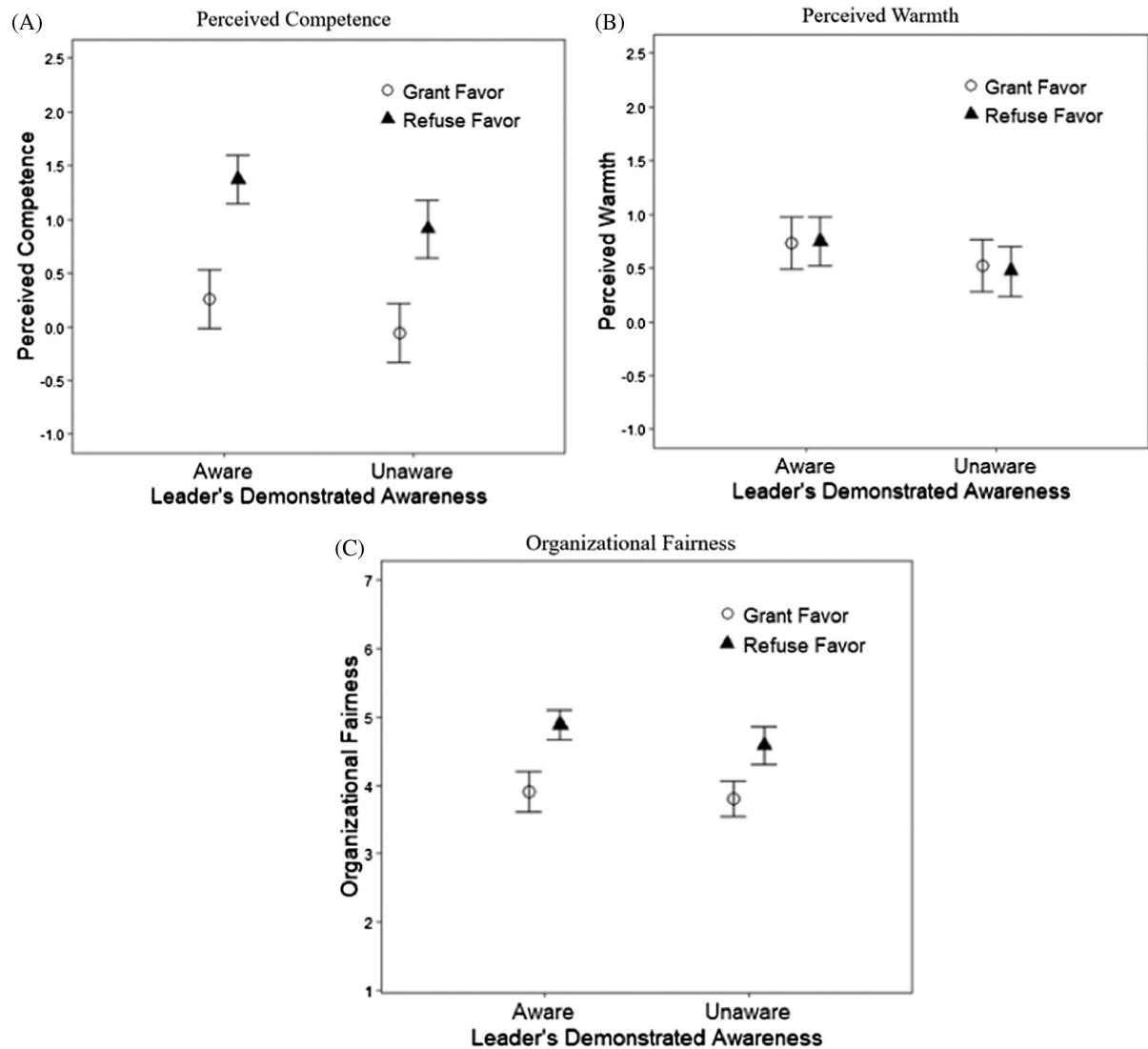
In the final set of studies, we found that the consequences of falling for flattery were exacerbated by contextual factors such as the flattery's excessiveness (Study 5) and the favor's harm to the observer (Study 6), although leaders could reduce reputational costs if they signaled awareness of flatterers' motives while refusing to grant a favor (Study 7).

Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

Our work has important theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to work on how reputations are shaped by responses to influence attempts (Cialdini & Mirels, 1976) by documenting the inherently cynical perspective with which observers view influence attempts such as flattery, and easily come to the attribution that leaders have naively "fallen" for it. This latter point extends research on behavioral attributions (Eastman, 1994; Halbesleben et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2002) by finding that attributions of naiveté are specific to flattery and not found in other persuasion contexts. Second, our work extends our understanding of ingratiation by finding that observers' distaste for ingratiation applies not only to ingratiators (Vonk, 2002) but also to recipients of flattery and the organizations they represent (when flattery is rewarded).

Figure 8

Study 7: Impression–Management Consequences (Competence and Warmth) and Organizational Fairness as a Function of Leader’s Demonstrated Awareness (Aware vs. Unaware) and Favor Conditions (Grant Favor vs. Refuse Favor)



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Third, we extend prior work on the costs of appearing naïve for low-power individuals (Berry & McArthur, 1985; Zebrowitz et al., 1991) by providing a comprehensive view of the reputational and organizational costs of being perceived as naively “falling for flattery” for high-power and high-status individuals, who are often formal leaders (e.g., Westphal et al., 2012), but may also be those with situational power (e.g., Goodwin et al., 1998). Fourth, we add nuance to work on newcomer perceptions of ingratiation (Fouk & Long, 2016) by showing that established leaders fail to reap any benefit from rewarding flattery in the form of warmth perceptions. Fifth, we contribute to research on impression management, which has mainly focused on positive outcomes of flattery for flatterers (e.g., Pfeffer, 1981; Westphal, 1998). Focusing on targets of flattery in organizations, we link impression management with the expectation that those who hold organizational authority or power

should detect ulterior motives (e.g., Offermann & Coats, 2018; Toegel et al., 2013).

Finally, our work highlights the importance of studying naïveté in group contexts. Naïveté does not reflect general inability (Thompson, 1990) or unintelligence (Fox & Spector, 2000), but rather vulnerability to exploitation (Forgas & East, 2008) and a lack of tacit knowledge (Sternberg, 1998). Given leaders’ positions of power, they are more likely to be targets of influence tactics, and their perceived naïveté would make them even more vulnerable to deception. Understanding perceived (and actual) naïveté in groups is therefore important.

Our work also has practical implications in helping leaders make informed decisions in their treatment of followers. Our findings complement recent work on the contextual nature of ingratiation (Kim et al., 2022) and underscore the need for leaders to consider

how flattery creates a climate that may cast rewards and benefits in a negative light. Rather than conducting the classic ethicality test of considering what would happen if their actions were published on the front page of a newspaper (Kidder, 1995), leaders could reflect on how their actions would be evaluated if simply observed by another follower. Moreover, rather than simply suffering the reputational costs of acceding to flattery, leaders or people with situational power can shape their reputations by refusing to grant favors to flatterers without appropriate justification.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As with any research, our studies include several limitations that allow for fruitful future directions. First, while our experimental approach enables strong claims of causality, our study designs do not allow us to assess how durable such effects may be after the initial negative reaction fades (Brans & Verduyn, 2014). Longitudinal- or experience-sampling methodologies can help demonstrate the consequences of falling for flattery over time and avoid limitations of common method bias or concerns of reverse causality that our single time-point studies are unable to address (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 2003). One particularly interesting avenue to pursue is whether perceiving a leader as naïve leads to greater competition among followers for personal advancement through additional flattery (e.g., Kim et al., 2022). Thus, naïve leaders might ironically increase the amount of (instrumentally-minded) compliments they receive.

Next, while we uncover several contextual factors that shape the effect of rewarding flattery on warmth, particularly whether the leader is unfamiliar, our studies point to a complex relationship between naïveté and warmth. Building on Carrier et al.'s (2019) work on the impact of goal relevancy on interpersonal perceptions, further research is needed to explore the processes by which naïveté does or does not lead to warmth perceptions.

Finally, our studies primarily looked at situational factors that impacted the costs and attributions of falling for flattery, but a variety of individual differences are likely to be important as well. One example is the experience level of the observer—if the observers themselves are leaders who face similar flattery attempts, this might help reduce the “empathy gap” between observer and recipient (Ruttan et al., 2015). Similarly, while nonleaders may assume a favorable response to flattery is genuine (Keeves et al., 2017), other leaders may view such a reaction as simply an impression-management tactics used to navigate an uncomfortable social situation (Yukl et al., 1995) and thus judge the manager less harshly, although other work might suggest this might actually magnify harsh judgments (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2008). Beyond leadership experience, observer reactions may depend on observers' values or beliefs, such as their belief in a just world where people get the treatment they deserve (Lerner, 1980; Rubin & Peplau, 1975). Observers who score high on this belief may be more comfortable when their leaders receive flattery and may be less likely to scrutinize these leaders' responses.

Conclusion

Leaders who receive flattery experience strong pressure to grant ingratiation requests for favors. Our work shows that it pays to know who else is watching. Observers might well conclude that a leader has naively “fallen for flattery” and put the leader and

organization's reputation at risk. We suggest that leaders can view ingratiation attempts as opportunities to solidify their reputations by refusing to provide unmeritocratic rewards to flattery. To observers, such an action will be the litmus test that affirms faith in their leadership and organization.

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