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Kiss-Up-Kick-Down to Get Ahead: A Resource Perspective on How, When, Why, and With Whom Middle Managers Use Ingratiatory and Exploitative Behaviours to Advance Their Careers

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ABSTRACT There are myriad organizational anecdotes about middle managers who advance their careers by ingratiating themselves with their superiors while exploiting and abusing their subordinates. We formally define this behavioural combination as the Kiss-Up-Kick-Down (KUKD) phenomenon and develop a resource-focused framework that not only explains when middle managers will engage in KUKD, but also how such behaviour helps their career progression via three resource-related pathways: One path involving sponsorship resource gains from superiors, another path involving productive resource gains from subordinates, and an intra-individual path related to middle managers' own psychological resources. Staying within the resource framework, we theorize that superiors and subordinates become likely targets of KUKD when the former is resource-poor and the latter is resource-rich. Finally, we deliberate on the role of time as a crucial boundary condition: not only in terms of when middle managers engage in KUKD behaviours, but also how such actions involve diminishing returns.

Keywords: conservation of resources, exploitative leadership, ingratiation, Kiss-Up-Kick-Down, middle managers, time

INTRODUCTION

> 'These people [i.e., middle managers] are costing the company huge amounts of money through running their own agendas, and doing the kiss-up kick-down style of leading. They may have the very senior leaders fooled, but not the teams who are doing the actual work and responsible for the numbers'.

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Fabiola H. Gerpott and Niels van Quaquebeke contributed equally but order was established based on who got kissed more than kicked.

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A former Walmart senior manager on a company review website (Glassdoor, 2017).

The introductory quote captures the feelings of many disgruntled employees witnessing an often described career strategy at workplaces: Middle managers who use flattery in interactions with superiors (i.e., 'kiss-up'), but become exploitative and abusive when interacting with their subordinates (i.e., 'kick-down'). Indeed, anecdotes and practitioner discussions (e.g., Lipman, 2019; Minor, 2019; Parker and Parker, 2017) have repeatedly suggested that some middle managers regularly engage in Kiss-Up-Kick-Down (KUKD) behaviours – a phenomenon that, although apparently prevalent in practice, has not received any scholarly attention. While KUKD may be used in different scenarios, one of its most instrumental use is to further career progression – the process via which a person moves upward through a series of positions that allow for greater responsibility, mastery, financial returns, or prestige (Hüttges and Fay, 2015; Perlmutter and Hall, 1992) – amidst resource struggles that particularly manifest at the middle management level. With the present paper, we spotlight this phenomenon and develop theory around it (Fisher et al., 2021; Van de Ven, 2007) to better understand how, when, why, and with whom middle managers may engage in it.

In our analysis, we focus on middle management, i.e., the decision-makers who link the strategic apex with the operating core (Mintzberg, 1989) because their role entails extensive vertical code switching – i.e., the act of regularly alternating between behavioural patterns that are directed toward higher-power and lower-power interaction partners (Anicich and Hirsh, 2017), and, as such, logically affords more opportunity to engage in KUKD than the other organizational hierarchy levels. At the same time, middle managers are also particularly under pressure. Middle management is often described as the bottleneck of corporate careers, with middle managers finding themselves on a potentially promising yet highly competitive career trajectory (Hassard et al., 2012). Middle management stretches from lower to higher level middle management, with advancement opportunities dwindling as one moves higher in the organizational strata. This characteristic dictates that people are motivated to move through these ranks rather quickly because, if they do not, they may find themselves 'stuck in the middle' with excessive workloads and long working hours (Osh, 2015; Styhre and Josephson, 2006; Wolfson, 2020) – all while feeling pressure from lower-level managers trying to push their way up. This pressure further intensifies as organizations seek to generally decrease their internal levels of hierarchy or replace them through technology (Gratton, 2011; Safak and Farrar, 2021; Tschang and Almirall, 2021). Accordingly, the pressure to outdo others can be considered particularly strong in middle management and therefore creates a fertile breeding ground for the KUKD phenomenon.[1]

So, what is KUKD? We define KUKD as a bidirectional dynamic behavioural pattern in that (1) it involves two behavioural strategies, namely kissing-up *and* kicking-down, which are (2) directed toward upper and lower hierarchical levels (3) in a dynamic way that is contingent on the resources available to the focal middle manager and the managers around them over time. As such, KUKD describes strategic vertical code switching (Anicich and Hirsh, 2017) in which middle managers alternate between kissing-up (when addressing upper hierarchical levels) and kicking-down (when addressing lower hierarchical levels).[2] Neither strategy alone is sufficient to qualify

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for our KUKD definition (i.e., multidimensional construct; Law et al., 1998). In focusing on this combination, our theorizing goes beyond extant research streams that have touched upon both behaviours (i.e., kissing-up and kicking-down) in isolation rather than treating them as a combined phenomenon. That is, when kissing-up and kicking-down are studied separately, the broader picture of why people might engage in these behaviours as well as the broader organizational dynamics get lost. In other words, the conceptual combination can explain more than the sum of its behavioural parts (Yukl, 2012).

To approach the phenomenon as a whole, we contend that career progress is fundamentally tied to the availability of different resources (Ng and Feldman, 2014). Against this background, our framework builds on the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 1990) and draws from its central tenet that people are motivated to obtain, retain, foster, and protect resources that provide instrumental benefits (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Several principles follow from this basic tenet: for example, that resource loss is more salient than resource gain; that people must invest resources in order to gain new ones, and that resource-poor individuals are more vulnerable to resource losses and less capable of resource gains than resource-rich individuals (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Drawing from these notions, we derive propositions regarding middle managers' decision to engage in KUKD behaviours – and specifically, how it stems from the interplay of available resources among the relevant parties (middle managers and their superiors/subordinates).

Our conceptual framework seeks to make three contributions to the literature. First, scholars have repeatedly called for research that realistically specifies the processes through which the middle management logic enables both functional and dysfunctional dynamics in contemporary organizations (e.g., Rouleau, 2005; Yang et al., 2010). Our study does exactly that by going beyond the prevalent (functional) notion that promotions are always based on the meritocratic ideal (Cable and Murray, 1999; Judge et al., 2004). Instead, we paint an alternative, yet equally realistic picture of how some middle managers cope with the career pressure to get ahead, and thereby illuminate dysfunctional dynamics in organizations. Second, while our theorizing is grounded in COR theory, in line with previous calls (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018), we also extend COR theory itself by considering the distribution of resources across a web of different actors (i.e., those above and below the focal middle manager) and across time. This allows us to identify not only which middle managers will engage in KUKD, but also who are going to be their most likely targets (Busse et al., 2017). In that same vein, we further add to COR theory by differentiating between non-zero-sum resource relationships with superiors and zero-sum resource relationships with subordinates. Lastly, we contemplate the role of time as an organizational context factor – both in the lead-up to KUKD and in response to it. Our consideration of developments over time addresses the call to offer a more realistic outlook beyond the prevalent (usually static) snapshot accounts of middle managers' perceptions and behaviour (Harris and Ogbonna, 2020) by clarifying how career progress behaviours morph dynamically in response to resource shifts (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The remainder of the present paper is structured as follows: We begin by briefly reviewing the established link between resources and career progress from the perspective of COR theory. Afterward, we outline how KUKD increases a middle manager's

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resources through three pathways. Two pathways respectively concern the gain of external resources from those above (i.e., the upper path) and those below (i.e., the lower path), which are constrained by not only superiors' and subordinates' own resources, but also the passage of time. The third pathway captures the middle managers' intra-individual psychological resource dynamics that underlie KUKD. We then use the COR perspective to discuss how a middle manager's initial resource situation interacts with the temporal distance to the next promotion to explain when some middle managers may engage in KUKD. Our complete conceptual framework is depicted in Figure 1.

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF RESOURCES FOR MIDDLE MANAGERS' CAREER PROGRESS

Promotion decisions are of the utmost importance, both for the middle manager who strives for career progress and for the organization that tries to preserve a competitive advantage by developing the best people and shaping a culture of excellence (Bagdadli et al., 2006). From the middle manager's perspective, a promotion comes with tangible and intangible resources (Bagdadli et al., 2006), but requires them to first invest resources to gain these advantages. As such, a promotion marks the turning point from resource-depletion (before the promotion) to resource-replenishment and -extension (after the promotion).

Due to the close link between a middle manager's acquisition of career-relevant resources and their next promotion, COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 1990) offers a useful lens for studying promotions. This theoretical perspective suggests that individuals possess a natural tendency to preserve their current resources and strive to gain new resources. They do so through two main operating principles (Hobfoll, 1989): First, individuals try to avoid losing resources. Even if it is possible to regain a lost resource, an initial loss will be psychologically experienced as more harmful than the resource's potential regain (*primacy of resources loss*, Hobfoll, 2001). Second, individuals invest resources when there is a chance that such an investment will protect them against resource loss or help them gain new resources in the future (*resources investment*, Hobfoll, 2001). That is,

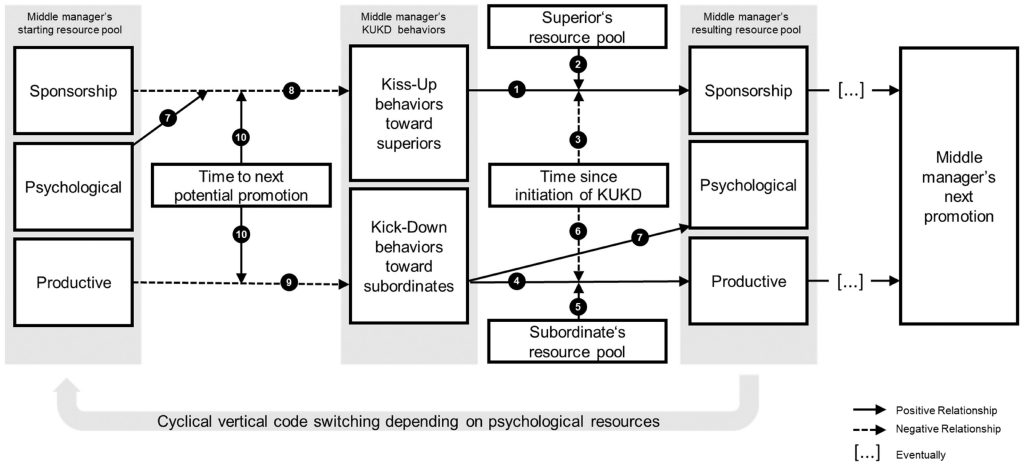


Figure 1. Conceptual model: A resource-focused account of the KUKD phenomenon

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individuals try to enter positive spirals in which resources accumulate and grow. In line with the two principles of the COR theory (i.e., primacy of resource loss and resource investment), research has established that losing resources is negatively linked to career success (Ng and Feldman, 2014). By contrast, gaining resources is positively related to objective (i.e., salary, number of promotions) and subjective career progress markers (i.e., personal judgements about career attainments) (Hirschi et al., 2018; Ng et al., 2005).

Against this background, COR defines a resource as 'anything perceived by the individual to help attain his or her goal' (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1338). In this sense, an individual's context-dependent resource pool is the sum of available resources that contribute to achieving a certain goal. In the context of work and career progress, this entails that relevant resources need to contribute to the goal of attaining the next promotion (Hirschi et al., 2018). To map valuable resources in the work context, Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012) suggest a two-by-two grid: On the one hand, resources can stem from outside the person (i.e., *external* sources) or reside from within the individual (i.e., *intra-individual* sources); on the other hand, they can be classified as being either *volatile* or *stable*. In line with our conceptualization of KUKD as a bidirectional dynamic behavioural pattern, we will focus on volatile resources from external and intra-individual sources that can contribute to career progress. Later in the discussion, we will return to stable resources from external and intra-individual sources, which are related to the organizational context and the middle managers' personality traits.

Volatile resources from external sources refer to resources that tend to fluctuate over time and are obtained through social relationships with others at work (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). For middle managers, these stem from their direct reporting line above and below, including *sponsorship* resources from superiors and *productive* resources from subordinates. *Sponsorship* encompasses informal networks and information, career sponsorship (i.e., obtaining exposure and visibility, receiving protection and coaching), emotional and work-related social support, as well as training and skill development opportunities (Ng et al., 2005). These types of resources are well established as accelerators for promotions, and thus career progress, in both the social capital literature (Kwon and Adler, 2014; Seibert et al., 2001) and in research grounded in the sponsored-mobility perspective (Ng et al., 2005; Turner, 1960; Wayne et al., 1999). *Productive* resources, which are sometimes referred to as service resources (i.e., labour performed for another individual; Kim et al., 2018), refer to any type of labour that has utility for the recipient. Specifically, extracting productive resources from employees can help the middle manager make a bigger impact for the organization, which is a prerequisite for being considered for a promotion (Desjardins, 2012; Kraut, 1975).

Meanwhile, volatile resources from intra-individual sources refer to a person's energies or *psychological* resources, which fluctuate within and between days (Halbesleben et al., 2014). They pertain to the available cognitive, motivational, and emotional forces that an individual can use to achieve their goals (Baumeister et al., 1994; Johnson et al., 2006). Several studies have investigated such psychological resources from a COR lens and found they predict managers' behaviours. Specifically, scholars have demonstrated that a manager's engagement in positive behaviours, such as transformational or ethical leadership, requires psychological resources (Byrne et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2019). In contrast, managers who are in a depleted state are more likely to

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engage in negative leader behaviours, such as exploiting and abusing their subordinates (Byrne et al., 2014; Mawritz et al., 2017). Correspondingly, sufficient psychological resources are often needed to fuel career-relevant, yet depleting behaviours (i.e., kissing-up to superiors) (Brouer et al., 2016). As such, psychological resources do not directly predict career success, but – metaphorically speaking – serve as the fuel to keep the engine running, even for less pleasurable tasks.

To summarize, resources are critical ingredients in middle managers' pursuit of the next promotion. As outlined above, scholars have sufficiently established positive relationships between sponsorship, productive resources and a manager's likelihood of a promotion, which is why we do not formulate separate propositions for them (see right side of our model/Figure 1). Instead, we focus on a topic that has received much less attention so far: namely, the inherently volatile and dynamic nature of these two career-relevant resources as connected via psychological resources, and their corresponding influence on the manager's resource management behaviours. Accordingly, our theorizing focuses on how KUKD, as a bidirectional dynamic behavioural pattern, may help some middle managers benefit from the volatility of these external career-relevant resources when managing them via their psychological resource availability to achieve the next promotion.

Importantly, this is not to say that KUKD is the middle managers' default strategy for climbing the career ladder. Evidently, many middle managers can rely on socially accepted contest-mobility strategies (i.e., utilizing their own performance to 'win' in a meritocratic system; Turner, 1960). However, some middle managers may judge themselves as not productive enough against the career pressure that the middle management ranks exert (Roth, 2016). Judging their own resources as insufficient, they may be motivated to preserve their remaining resources and instead try to extract further resources from external sources (Burton et al., 2012; Hobfoll, 1988). With this baseline established, we next elaborate on KUKD's resource-fuelling function and outline why KUKD is conceptually interwoven with a middle manager's initial resource poverty.

KUKD: STRATEGIC VERTICAL CODE SWITCHING TO GAIN RESOURCES

As introduced earlier, KUKD describes a bidirectional dynamic behavioural pattern in which middle managers episodically switch between kissing-up (when addressing superiors) and kicking-down (when addressing subordinates). By conceptualizing KUKD as a multidimensional construct (cf. Law et al., 1998), we focus exclusively on the subgroup of middle managers who score high on *both* behaviours. High KUKD scores are achieved when middle managers flexibly switch between engaging in kiss-up behaviours in interaction episodes – i.e., time-bound, interpersonal exchange processes (Schurr et al., 2008) – with their superiors and showing kick-down behaviours in interaction episodes with their subordinate. Such a dynamic pattern of behaviour is also referred to as frequent vertical code switching due to its hierarchical contextualization (Anicich and Hirsh, 2017). Our theorizing next outlines how the middle manager's strategic vertical

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code switching is fundamentally tied to the resources of superiors and subordinates, as well as changes over time.

The Kiss-Up Path: Gaining Sponsorship Resources From Superiors

The first component of KUKD, kiss-up behaviours, encompasses a class of strategic ingratiation behaviours (see Table I) through which managers provide superiors with sponsorship, productive, and psychological resources for the purpose of currying favour with those above in the hierarchy who control significant resources (Bolino et al., 2016; Tedeschi and Melburg, 1984). Such favour-doing behaviours include offering extra-role support, displaying conformity with the superior, and engaging in other-enhancing behaviours such as complimenting or flattering the superior (Bolino et al., 2008).

Our conceptualization of kiss-up behaviours integrates literature streams across a wide range of traditions. Indeed, scholars have described kiss-up behaviours as part of leaders' behavioural repertoire, albeit by different names (see jangle fallacy). For example, ingratiation has been included in studies on socially bold influence techniques, which also include displays of charisma and confidence (Dufner et al., 2013). Furthermore, research on supervisor-targeted impression management has found that employees strategically engage in flattery to create, maintain, or alter a positive image of themselves in superiors' minds (Bolino et al., 2006, 2016). In this regard, kiss-up behaviours represent the other-focused part of impression management that excludes self-promotion and exemplification (Crawford et al., 2019). Relatedly, in the domain of political influence, studies have introduced ingratiation as a political tactic 'in which there is an attempt by individuals to increase their attractiveness and upward

Table I. Behaviours comprising the KUKD phenomenon

Kiss-up behaviours	*Kick-down behaviours*
Favour-doing behaviours (e.g., deliberately doing kind and helpful acts for superiors in the work context and beyond)	Pressuring behaviours (e.g., explicitly stating a threat / asking for high performance by using dominance or force to push to employees to productivity)
Extra-role support (e.g., asking whether there is anything else one can help with; offering to work over-time)	Intimidating behaviours (e.g., vaguely mentioning detrimental consequences of low performance to manipulate subordinates to reach own goals)
Behaviours focused on enhancing superiors in front of others (e.g., expressing favourable opinions and evaluation of superiors, making public statements of admiration)	Behaviours focused on playing subordinates off against each other (e.g., putting them down in front of each other to increase performance; isolating subordinates)
Private flattery behaviours (e.g., brown-nosing, offering compliments)	Blaming behaviours (e.g., blaming subordinates for own mistakes and/or low performance)
Conformity behaviours (i.e., expressing or behaving in a manner that is consistent with the opinions or activities of superiors)	Impulsive emotional behaviours (e.g., expressing anger at the subordinate when being mad; screaming at subordinate for minor mistakes)

Note: The behavioural anchors (displayed in the brackets) are examples and not exhaustive.

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influence in the eyes of other organizational members (management)' (Appelbaum and Hughes, 1998, p. 85).

The outlined research streams share a common thread: the argument that kiss-up behaviours are beneficial for a manager's career progress through their positive effect on the perceptions of – and subsequent amount of resources provided by – their superiors (Blake et al., 2022; Higgins et al., 2003; Ng et al., 2005; Seibert et al., 2001). This is because kissing-up improves the superior's attitude toward the manager (Bolino et al., 2006) and helps to turn the superior into an ally who overlooks some of the manager's less desirable features (Brumbaugh et al., 2014). Accordingly, as the middle manager in question comes to seem more likeable and competent, the superior perceives the middle manager as more capable of effectively using the provided resources, which increases the superior's willingness to provide sponsorship. Formally:

Proposition 1: A middle manager's kiss-up behaviours will elicit sponsorship resources from their superiors.

With Whom Kissing-Up Works Best: The Role of Superiors' Resources

Of course, not every person in a position of power is equally susceptible to ingratiation. In other words, the relationship between a manager's kiss-up behaviours and the gain of sponsorship resources may be stronger for some superiors than for others. In line with our resource-focused lens, we consider the superior's own resource availability as a crucial boundary condition. Specifically, we propose that superiors who possess a rich resource pool themselves (i.e., sponsorship, productive, and psychological resources) are less susceptible to a middle manager's kiss-up behaviour than those who are resource-poor.

Within the logic of COR theory, resource-rich superiors have likely already entered a gain spiral that makes it easy for them to accrue additional resources (Brouer et al., 2016; Hobfoll, 2001). As a result, they are relatively independent and can easily extend their career-relevant resource pool via many different sources. This phenomenon is also referred to as the ingratiators' dilemma (Westphal and Shani, 2016), which states that the most attractive targets of kissing-up (i.e., resource-rich individuals with high social status) are also the most suspicious toward kiss-up behaviours. At the very least, these superiors' resource wealth means they have less need for additional resource offers via the kissing-up manager. First, if superiors already possess a saturated degree of sponsorship (e.g., through a lot of time spent with their own mentors and at networking events), any additional sponsorship (particularly of those below) is of minor value (i.e., diminishing marginal utility) and may even be seen as a burden on one's time. Second, superiors who already belong to the high-performers can follow a contest-mobility career strategy that is grounded in their own productive resources to get ahead (instead of having to rely on the productive resources from the brown-nosing middle manager). Lastly, superiors with a rich psychological resource pool cannot 'overfill' it once they are already experiencing a cognitive, emotional, and physical steady state (Sonnentag et al., 2012). In fact, such resource-rich superiors may not

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even need any additional psychological resources as they are in a resource-rich gain spiral that is not that demanding on their inner energies (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

In contrast, resource-poor superiors stand to profit more from a middle manager's kiss-up behaviours. Indeed, it can help them to escape the vicious cycle of resource loss, which is rather difficult to exit through one's own resources (Hobfoll, 2001). In line with this notion, research has outlined that resource gains garner potency after a person has undergone a 'dry spell' characterized by the absence of resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Vinokur and Schul, 2002). First, in terms of sponsorship resources, superiors can profit from a middle manager who publicly displays appreciation, support, and admiration, as this helps to improve their standing with those around them. Put differently, kissing-up is a signal to those above that the superior is held in high regard, which not only adds interpersonal status, but can also contribute to the superior's own career advancement through positive word-of-mouth (Kim et al., 2018). In line with this argument, Foulk and Long (2016) showed that the extent to which an organizational leader is the target of subordinates' kissing-up behaviours positively influences observers' evaluations of the superior's qualities, particularly without first-hand information. Second, a superior's standing in the organization can be bolstered by delivering more output, which a middle manager can provide through additional productive resources (Zhou and Martocchio, 2001). Lastly, a middle manager's kiss-up behaviours can help targets feel better emotionally and experience less cognitive strain, which is particularly important when the superior is resource-poor and desperately needs energy to re-enter a gain spiral. In other words, kissing-up helps to replenish superiors' psychological resources, which in turn should equip them with enough energy to provide the middle manager with sponsorship. Evidently, this is a promising deal for superiors, as merely offering sponsorship in return is not that resource-taxing relative to what they may gain from the manager's kiss-up behaviours. Indeed, sponsorship represents a rather scalable resource that one can invest generously (as long as one does not overdo it) without having to put much own energy into sharing them (i.e., non-zero-sum resource investment). In short, resource-poor superiors stand to profit more from kissing-up managers than resource-rich superiors and should thus be more likely to respond with a provision of sponsorship resources:

Proposition 2: A middle manager's kiss-up behaviours will elicit more sponsorship from resource-poor superiors than from resource-rich superiors.

The Diminishing Returns of Kissing-Up Effectiveness Over Time

As Bluedorn and Jaussi (2008, p. 657) phrased it, 'because relationships between leaders and followers occur over time, it is difficult, if not impossible, to consider leadership without time playing a role'. This is particularly true when considering that volatile resources quite naturally change with the passing of time (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Although Hobfoll (1988) already emphasized that the length of time over which resources can be gained or lost matters for the underlying interaction patterns, such dynamics are regularly overlooked in COR research (Halbesleben et al., 2014). We spotlight this logic

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and propose that the effectiveness of KUKD, in terms of gaining superiors' sponsorship resources, wears out over time.

From a conceptual perspective, the argument is that superiors habituate to the middle manager's kiss-up behaviours, thereby rendering them a less effective method of gaining sponsorship resources. Framed differently, the marginal returns of receiving kiss-up behaviours diminish as a superior becomes resource-richer (Scandura and Graen, 1984). This is because the most challenging part for resource-poor individuals is to gain some momentum to break the loss spiral and instead enter a gain spiral (Demerouti et al., 2004; Halbesleben et al., 2014). Once a resource-poor superior is being kissed-up to by a middle manager (and thus replenished with resources), this may (over time) provide the superior with the required level of resources to finally be able to switch gears (Halbesleben et al., 2014). If the superior transitions from a loss to a gain spiral, then attaining additional resources via the middle manager becomes less relevant. This is because the change from being in a state of resource loss to possessing resources is relatively more valuable for individuals than the subsequent additional resource gains (Freund and Riediger, 2001).

The available empirical evidence on such time-related dynamics, while meagre, supports this reasoning. Specifically, Bolino et al. (2014) ran a field study with 45 new employees and their superiors and found that the link between an employee's usage of impression management tactics and the superior's evaluation of their likability and performance attenuated over time. As the authors put it, kissing-up behaviours 'might be charming initially, but they may lose some of their charm or be less appreciated as they continue' (Bolino et al., 2014, p. 280). This entails that the advantage of being on good terms with a superior for own sponsorship resource gains likely diminishes with the duration of the relationship because the initial excitement of the superior about receiving resources through kissing-up decreases, which goes hand in hand with reducing the amount of sponsorship offered to the kissing-up middle manager. Thus, kissing-up behaviour should produce a weaker effect the longer a manager uses them. Accordingly, we propose that the time since the initiation of KUKD is a crucial qualifying factor for a manager's resource gain through KUKD:

Proposition 3: The positive relationship between a middle manager's kiss-up behaviours and the gain of sponsorship resources is time contingent, such that the relationship diminishes over time.

The Kick-Down Path: Gaining Productive Resources from Subordinates

The second component of KUKD, kick-down behaviours, reflects a class of exploitative and abusive behaviours (see Table I). These include pressuring behaviours, intimidating activities, blaming behaviours, playing subordinates against each other to increase performance, and taking emotional impulses out on subordinates. Managers mainly utilize these actions to gain productive resources from those below while minimizing their own investment of sponsorship, productive, and psychological resources. Our conceptualization of kick-down behaviours is rooted in behavioural anchors stemming from a wide range of literature that has described kick-down behaviours as a part of destructive

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leadership concepts (for an overview, see Krasikova et al., 2013; Schmid et al., 2019; Schyns and Schilling, 2013).

In order to gain productive resources from their subordinates, kicking-down managers engage in strategic behaviours such as pressuring subordinates to work overtime and being extremely demanding in terms of performance requirements (Tepper et al., 2012). This squeezing of subordinates for effort can result in (above-average) productive resources for the manager, at least in the short-term (Kim et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2021; Oh and Farh, 2017; Tröster and Van Quaquebeke, 2021). Put differently, exploitative behaviours allow managers to realize peak performance episodes that pay into their own productive resource pool while draining subordinates' resources (Ferris et al., 2007; Liang et al., 2018). For example, kick-down managers may intimidate subordinates, which can prompt subordinates to display high performance to redeem themselves in the eyes of the kicking-down manager. Scholars have described this behavioural tendency as the self-presentational reaction to abusive behaviours (Vogel and Mitchell, 2017) and demonstrated that disrespected individuals engage with higher performance efforts if they feel this contributes to recuperating their social standing (Sleebos et al., 2006). Along similar lines, subordinates sometimes respond to abusive supervision they experience with a vague sense of self-blame for the abuse, followed by guilt, and a need to try to make it up to the abusing supervisor in the form of extra help (Tröster and Van Quaquebeke, 2021). These extra efforts are construed as a way of regaining the superior's approval, which is particularly important for lower-level middle managers who evidently decided for a management career but now depend on the focal middle manager's good grace to get ahead and thus continue to provide productive resources (akin to the dynamic for kiss-up). To summarize, we propose that a manager's kick-down behaviours represent a short-term strategy for galvanizing performance among subordinates. Formally:

Proposition 4: A middle manager's kick-down behaviours will elicit productive resources from their subordinates.

With Whom Kicking-Down Works Best: The Role of Subordinates' Resources

Following the logic of kiss-up behaviours, we expect that kicking-down does not work equally well for all subordinates. More specifically, we propose that differences in subordinates' resource availability will attenuate the positive link between kick-down behaviours and subordinates' productivity. However, the moderating relationship is opposite to the one proposed for kiss-up behaviours. That is, subordinates who possess *more* resources are more exploitable because they can expend more resources before they suffer from intense resource depletion. This proposition directly aligns with the COR theory, which claims that individuals with a high volume of resources have more stamina for dealing with demands (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Moreover, according to the stress adaption syndrome (Selye, 1946, 1956), they would do so first by ridding themselves of the stressor. That is, with no immediate escape at work and an interest in successfully continuing their current career-track, resource-rich subordinates would work more in the hopes of alleviating the

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kicking-down experience. In contrast, and as likewise outlined in the stress adaption literature (Selye, 1946, 1956), subordinates who are low in resources may directly enter an unproductive and emotionally exhausting depletion stage. As a consequence, resource-rich subordinates on the lower middle management levels still have the self-confidence that they can make it further in the career track, while resource-poor subordinates may have lost faith and are more likely to jump ship rather than expend extra effort. Lastly, siphoning resources from resource-rich subordinates has the collateral benefit of decreasing the subordinate's likelihood of becoming a threat to the middle manager's future status (Khan et al., 2018; Reh et al., 2018); low-resource subordinates present no such threat.

Parallel to the situation for superiors, all three resource factors play a role in why resource-rich vs. resource-poor subordinates (initially) respond differently to kicking-down behaviours. First, in terms of sponsorship resources, resource-rich subordinates have a robust support network that they can call upon when challenges arise. That is, they can draw on the social capital they possess in their network and ask for favours to deal (in the short-term) with the challenges imposed by their middle manager. In line with this notion, research has demonstrated a substitution effect, whereby subordinates who possess high social capital through good relationships with others can still achieve relevant organizational outcomes despite a bad relationship with their supervisor (Koopman et al., 2015). In contrast, resource-poor subordinates do not have such a network (and thus the extra resources) to call upon and are thus left alone to deal with their supervisor's overwhelming demands (Tepper et al., 2009). Accordingly, it is much more difficult for resource-poor subordinates to increase their resource output in an initial stress response to the kicking-down middle manager.

Second, in terms of productive resources, subordinates who perform well are more likely to experience a conflict with their self-image when being kicked-down by their manager, which should trigger increased efforts to redeem their value as a relational partner. And at least initially, the often-ambiguous nature of exploitative behaviours may lead resource-rich subordinates to reappraise the event as having 'no intent to harm' (Meier and Gross, 2015) and believe they brought it upon themselves (Bowling and Michel, 2011; Burton et al., 2014), and thus maybe even see it as motivational (Eschleman et al., 2014). In contrast, a subordinate who already exhibits low productive contributions may feel that the kicking-down behaviour is warranted and thus react with learned helplessness (i.e., no attempt to prove the reverse) or construe the abuse as adding insult to injury (i.e., personal), which further degrades their motivation (Eschleman et al., 2014).

Lastly, in terms of psychological resources, subordinates high in such resources can mobilize more energy and effort when confronted with challenges (such as a tough manager) than resource-poor subordinates. Indeed, the management literature emphasizes that employees can respond positively to stress as long as they have some psychological resources left (Hargrove et al., 2013). Overall, resource-rich subordinates should be able to invest more energy in response to a manager's kick-down behaviours than their resource-poor counterparts – at least in the short-run, as we qualify in the next section. To summarize:

Proposition 5: A middle manager's kick-down behaviours will elicit more productivity from resource-rich subordinates than from resource-poor subordinates.

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The Decay of Kicking-Down Effectiveness Over Time

Similar to our temporal argument about superiors on the kiss-up path, we propose that the ability to squeeze resources from subordinates through kick-down behaviours also diminishes over time. Again, this aligns with COR theory, which presumes that stressful episodes invite adaptational processes (Hobfoll, 1988). More specifically, when confronted with high demands at work (such as dealing with a kicking-down superior), mobilizing additional resources is a common initial response (assuming that one is not already in a state of resource depletion, as is the case for resource-poor subordinates). While this may be an adaptive behavioural strategy in the short-term, it is detrimental if sustained over longer time periods because resources are increasingly overtaxed (Demerouti et al., 2004; Meijman and Mulder, 1998). This argumentation is likewise echoed in the general adaption symptom research (Selye, 1946, 1956), which argues that people respond to a stressor by giving in and mobilizing resources – if they have them – to deal with it. While this helps employees work more for some time, they will eventually become exhausted. By and large, employees cannot scale their provision of productive resources: The energy expended will evaporate if the KUKD manager uses said resources without replenishing them (i.e., zero-sum resource relationship). After some time, the subordinate will simply have no resources left to fight the stressor or to continue to be productive. Accordingly, their productivity will inevitably decrease over time (Meier and Spector, 2013; Selye, 1956). In other words, once subordinates' resources are depleted, their productivity will stall and further kick-down behaviours will fail to mobilize additional productive resources. Furthermore, while subordinates may initially interpret abuse and disrespect as signals of a strained relationship, and thus work to repair the situation (Sleebos et al., 2006; Tröster and Van Quaquebeke, 2021), the persistence of those signals may lead to resignation and a desire to exit the relationship.

In line with our argument, research on other leadership behaviours also shows that negativity in leadership requires some time before it manifests in declines in subordinates' satisfaction (Winkler et al., 2014). For instance, the consequences of abusive leadership become more negative as time passes, ultimately resulting in lower employee commitment and higher burnout (e.g., after a four-month interval in Liang et al., 2018). Hence, in the long-term, the negative consequences of kicking-down behaviours exhaust the subordinate and their productive resources (Aryee et al., 2008). Overall, the time-lagged reduction of subordinates' resources will manifest in fewer resource-gaining opportunities for the middle manager:

Proposition 6: The positive relationship between a middle manager's kick-down behaviours and the gain of productive resources is time-contingent, such that the relationship diminishes over time.

The Intra-Individual Path: Kicking-Down to Preserve Psychological Resources for Kissing-Up

So far, we have focused on the additional volatile resources that middle managers can gain from external sources (i.e., sponsorship from superiors and productivity from

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subordinates). The third path concerns a middle manager's volatile intra-individual psychological resources. As we will illustrate below, this type of resource constitutes the link between the middle manager's resource-maintaining kick-down behaviours and the resource-consuming kiss-up behaviours over time. In the words of COR theory, the intra-individual path represents the mechanism wherein managers need to invest resources (i.e., psychological resources for kissing-up) to continuously be able to gain resources (i.e., sponsorship); this entails that managers also need to replenish such resources or at least avoid having them further siphoned (i.e., by kicking down). As such, psychological resources constitute the dynamic and highly volatile intra-individual resource underlying the KUKD vertical code switching.

In terms of resource investments, maintaining positive relationships with others at work is a resource-depleting endeavour for managers (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Lin et al., 2019), especially if such behaviours are strategically motivated and out of sync with inner convictions, as may be the case with kiss-up behaviours. Indeed, kissing-up may consume psychological resources due to not only expressing something that one would usually not, but also simply inhibiting urges and impulses (Yam et al., 2016). In other words: While middle managers may be motivated to engage in kiss-up behaviours because of their need for a superior's sponsorship, they still require psychological resources to do so. Without own psychological resources to invest, the motivation for kissing-up may be there but not the resources to actually and effectively do so.

This is when the resource maintenance function of kicking-down behaviours comes into play. Kicking-down can preserve psychological resources that allow the middle manager to engage in the depleting activity of kissing-up. For example, if a manager is frustrated or angry, they may not invest psychological resources in preventing these states from manifesting as abusive behaviours against their subordinates. By instead taking their mood out on subordinates, managers may more quickly recover from their own setbacks and frustration (Qin et al., 2018). In line with this notion, empirical evidence demonstrates that managers who exploit and abuse their subordinates often do so because they are too depleted to regulate their own behaviour (Byrne et al., 2014; Courtright et al., 2016). By taking out their depleted psychological state on subordinates, frazzled managers can give in to their urges and impulses (Yam et al., 2016). As another example, resources can also be maintained when managers blame their own failures on subordinates. Not only does this emotionally alleviate the middle manager's sense of responsibility and guilt (which is psychologically depleting), but it also delegates the problem and its potential solution to the subordinate.

In sum, kicking-down helps middle managers 'conserve' their psychological resources when interacting with subordinates. This resource-saving strategy allows middle managers to more quickly replenish their available psychological resources – and the recovery will be further hastened if they are not already too depleted (Sonnentag, 2018). As such, psychological resources bring an inherent dynamic to our model that explains the within-person vertical code switching inherent in KUKD, such that more kicking-down allows for more kissing-up, but more kissing-up also requires more kicking-down (Klotz et al., 2018). Formally:

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Proposition 7 Kick-down behaviours preserve a middle manager's psychological resources, which can be used to sustain the resource-depleting engagement in kiss-up behaviours.

Notably, the diminishing returns of KUKD over time (as stated in propositions 3 and 6) imply that middle managers need to engage in even more kiss-up behaviours to still receive sponsorship resources from superiors (i.e., the middle managers' need for psychological resources increases), while at the same time the middle managers receive increasingly less productive resources from subordinates through their kick-down behaviour. As middle managers then kick down even harder, subordinates may become less accessible because they call in sick or suffer from burnout (Liang et al., 2018). In sum, the general dynamic results in a downward spiral. Because this is logically inherent in our model, we refrain from formulating an additional proposition specifying this argument.

WHY MIDDLE MANAGERS ENGAGE IN KUKD: THE ROLE OF THE STARTING RESOURCE POOL

Having outlined the downstream consequences of KUKD, we now turn to what drives middle managers to engage in KUKD. Once again, COR provides a useful perspective on who would be motivated to engage in what behaviour and when. Specifically, COR outlines that individuals' current state of resources against the anticipated resource need for a specific objective drives their resource-protecting or resource-fuelling behaviours (Hobfoll et al., 2018). For our case, this means that whether a middle manager engages in KUKD depends on their own available resource pool relative to their objective of attaining a promotion. More specifically, middle managers with a richer starting resource pool are more likely to have already entered a resource gain spiral, which will allow them to secure a promotion without external resource support. In contrast, those middle managers who recognize that they do not yet have a strong network and are not greatly productive may find themselves in a situation of resource poverty. This likely fuels their anxiety that they cannot accomplish their promotion based on their own resources. As a result, these managers may choose to engage in KUKD as a behavioural strategy that Provides them with additional volatile resources from external sources. More specifically, a poverty in sponsorship resources should particularly trigger kissing-up behaviours, while a lack of productive resources should boost the middle manager's engagement in kick-down behaviours.

Sponsorship Resource Poverty as a Driver of Kissing-Up

First, a middle manager's sponsorship resource poverty constitutes one of the main antecedents of engaging in kiss-up behaviours. As Appelbaum and Hughes (1998, p. 90) phrase it, 'when sources are relatively scarce, subordinates will increase their use of ingratiatory behaviors to increase their attractiveness to their superiors in order to receive more organizational rewards'. This orientation toward superiors is hardly surprising, given that middle managers need sufficient sponsorship in order to be

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promoted (Kwon and Adler, 2014; Ng et al., 2005; Seibert et al., 2001). Overall, we thus expect that the middle manager's amount of initial sponsorship resources negatively influences how likely they are to engage in kissing-up behaviour toward their superiors:

Proposition 8: A middle manager's sponsorship resource poverty motivates their kissing-up toward superiors.

Productive Resource Poverty as a Driver of Kicking-Down

Second, a middle manager who lacks productive resources is not able to deliver the high performance that contributes to reaching organizational goals. This situation not only results in stress but can also – according to COR – produce further resource losses over time. To exit such a loss spiral, the middle manager may try to tap into external sources and push subordinates for high performance. Indeed, when middle managers feel that their personal goals (i.e., promotion) cannot be achieved using their own productive resources, it is not uncommon for them to engage in exploitative behaviours toward subordinates (Erickson et al., 2015). This is not necessarily intentional in the sense of contributing to self-serving goals; it could also reflect a middle manager's desperate attempt to fulfil organizational goals against their own failing productivity (Watkins et al., 2019). Such a link between managers' lack of resources and the tendency to engage in kicking-down behaviours toward subordinates has been illustrated in the context of COR theory, as well as in the leadership literature (e.g., Courtright et al., 2016; Liang et al., 2016; Mawritz et al., 2017; Yam et al., 2016). In contrast, when middle managers are rich in productive resources, they can more easily engage in positive behaviours and refrain from pressuring activities (Byrne et al., 2014). We thus propose that a middle manager's amount of initial productive resources negatively influences how likely they are to engage in kicking-down behaviours toward their subordinates:

Proposition 9: A middle manager's productive resource poverty motivates their kicking-down on subordinates.

The Accelerating Effect of Temporal Distance to the Next Promotion on KUKD

A low starting resource pool, so we argue, is particularly detrimental for middle managers if they are close to the next promotion. This situation represents high evaluation event proximity and low temporal distance, that is, a situation with very limited time left until the event of interest occurs (McFarland et al., in press; Trope and Liberman, 2003). Low temporal distance is linked to more concrete cognitive representations (i.e., low-level construal), which means that resources see a change in their value as a function of their temporal distance. The closer a near-future reward (e.g., a promotion), the more subjective value that people should attribute to the maintenance and gain of immediate resources that can be used to obtain said reward (Trope and Liberman, 2003). As a promotion nears, middle managers

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gain a more concrete cognitive map of the tangible and intangible resources that said promotion entails. Thus, they are more aware of the resource-related gain spirals that they can potentially enter through KUKD. Correspondingly, the links between middle managers' low sponsorship and productive resources and their engagement in KUKD should be stronger as they near the next promotion because (a) there is an increase in the subjective value of immediate resources to be gained from KUKD (Trope and Liberman, 2003) and (b) the gap between the resources they have and those they need for the promotion becomes more salient (Garcia et al., 2013). To conclude:

Proposition 10: The shorter the temporal distance to the next promotion, the stronger the link between a middle manager's sponsorship/productive resource poverty and their engagement in KUKD.

DISCUSSION

With the present paper, we took the practical phenomenon of middle mangers' kissing-up and kicking-down central stage and developed a theory around it (Fisher et al., 2021). Specifically, applying and extending the resource-focused view of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 1990), the present paper is able to explain the antecedents, mechanisms, and boundary conditions that characterize the KUKD phenomenon in its career-related effects.

Theoretical Implications

Beyond establishing theory around the KUKD phenomenon itself, our theorizing extends the existing literature in several ways. To begin with, our definition of a specific type of code-switching, bidirectional, dynamic behavioural pattern, namely KUKD, contributes to a recent discourse around the struggles of those in positions of middle power (e.g., Anderson and Brion, 2014; Anicich and Hirsh, 2017). Here, we add critical nuance to the literature, which has largely focused on middle managers' positive leader behaviours (e.g., Rouleau, 2005; Yang et al., 2010). Instead, we moved closer to the realities of organizational life that are often much more complex, especially when it comes to behaviour under competition (Reh et al., 2018) as is the case in career progression (Currie et al., 2006). As such, our theory does what theories are supposed to do, i.e., to stylistically map the complexity in a way that empirical studies (so far) have a hard time capturing.

Second, our theorizing expands COR theorizing (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 1990) in that our analysis identifies volatile resources of different natures. Indeed, by broadening the theoretical lens beyond the focal actors, we have shown that resources are not equal in their cost/benefit nature. Some may come at disproportionately low cost to the sender when compared to the benefit given to the receiver (e.g., sponsorship resources), while others affect both sender and receiver in a largely proportional manner (e.g., productive resources). To illustrate this logic, a superior may write a short email to introduce the focal middle manager to a crucial stakeholder or drop a comment in an executive meeting to make others aware of the middle manager's ability. In contrast, subordinates do not have access to such a replenishable or easily scalable resource. Instead, they invest

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their productive resources to the benefit of the kicking-down manager until they are depleted, at which point they become the ones who suffer from this zero-sum relationship. This more comprehensive analysis of resource types between different stakeholders – and, by extension, the idea that resource exchanges are not necessarily zero-sum – has not been considered in COR theory to date, but it provides novel research avenues. For instance, one of the underlying instrumental motives for career advancement (or job crafting) might be to shift the 'resource game' in such a way that one's resource spending is disproportionally positively valued.

Third, and related to the above, while the idea that leaders and followers may exchange different currencies has been considered in the leader-member exchange (LMX) literature (van Gils et al., 2010), the notion that these may come at different cost/benefit ratios has not (to our knowledge) been developed. This is somewhat surprising, given that the initial LMX theory revolves around the distinction of low- (vs. high-) quality relationships as more transactional (vs. transformative) (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Correspondingly, one may argue that low-cost relationships are characterized by zero-sum exchanges, while the trust that comes with high-quality relationships allows for reciprocal gain spirals (based on exchanges that create more benefit for the receiving party than they cost the sending party). Based on these implications, this logic could be used to explain why high-quality LMX leads to higher performance – beyond the usually mentioned issues of increased efficiency and psychological safety – when working with a trusted other (Gottfredson and Aguinis, 2017).

Fourth, and taking a more speculative stance within the LMX literature, the idea of different cost/benefit ratios could also help to explain more recent research that points toward instrumental gains through abusive and exploitative management (Kim et al., 2020; Tröster and Van Quaquebeke, 2021; Watkins et al., 2019). Indeed, one would expect subordinates who are maltreated by their superiors to leave the organization, but that is often not the case (Breevaart et al., 2022; Minor, 2019). Along the reasoning outlined above, the calculus of these exploited subordinates may be that disproportionally suffering at lower managerial ranks is part of the 'implicit contract' to move up to the higher ranks where the resource dynamics change. As such, especially subordinates who are set on their career track through the middle management bottleneck of the organization might see their suffering as part of the deal – maybe even hoping that it resembles a 'final initiation rite' before getting to the next level where things will hopefully get better. Notably, despite its emotional resonance (see 'hope is a desperate man's currency'), this 'hope' perspective has not, to our knowledge, been adopted in the literature to explain why people tolerate abusive and exploitative leadership.

Lastly, and circling back to our contributions to COR theory, our framework is also among the first to more fully consider the questions of time in resource exchanges: This is a gap that, in all fairness, is a shortcoming of most management theories (Castillo and Trinh, 2018; George and Jones, 2000; Mitchell and James, 2001). It is especially striking in COR theory because resources are inherently dynamic in nature: They can be depleted or replenished, and they are exchanged with others who also hold their own dynamic stock of resources. In sum, our theorizing emphasizes the importance of not only considering time in resource-related theorizing, but also paying particular attention to trajectories of loss or gain spirals at different levels. Such

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considerations foster a richer view of dynamism in leadership and career research (cf. McClean et al., 2019).

Future Research

The role of stable internal resources for middle managers. Going beyond our focus on volatile intra-individual resources, it will be interesting for future research to consider individual differences (i.e., stable intra-individual resources) that influence how managers react when they find themselves in a situation of resource scarcity. More specifically, we see two promising research directions in terms of how middle managers' individual differences may influence how likely they are to (a) engage in KUKD and (b) successfully translate KUKD into resource gains.

In terms of individual differences and the likelihood of engaging in KUKD, not every manager will react with KUKD if they are close to their promotion and recognize that their career-relevant resource pool is rather empty. To further develop this notion, scholars could rely on trait activation theory, which argues that specific situational characteristics can activate specific traits (Tett and Burnett, 2003). For the situation in question (i.e., low resources and low temporal distance to the next promotion), it is reasonable to assume that individuals will react differently depending on how they see themselves and others. As such, middle managers with a generally positive view of themselves (i.e., positive *core self-evaluations*: favourable chronic beliefs about the self, control, and outcomes; Cozzarelli, 1993) should feel less pressured in this situation because they are confident that they can reliably summon the required resources in due time (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009). Such self-evaluations may also help middle managers cope with demands upon their resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009). Likewise, middle managers' views of others may further influence the proposed relationships (Farmanara, 2021). For instance, those who are very empathetic toward others may not gain any resources from kicking-down on subordinates, but instead experience such behaviours as resource-draining over time (Qin et al., 2018; Watkins et al., 2019). Overall, connecting our resource-oriented view with an individual difference perspective may be a promising route for qualifying why specific sub-groups of managers engage in KUKD.

Individual differences may also impact whether a middle manager's enacted KUKD actually translates into resource gains. More specifically, scholars have shown that ingratiation can backfire when it is recognized or interpreted as insincere, unauthentic, or strategic (Bolino et al., 2016; Jones and Pittman, 1982; Liden and Mitchell, 1988). In that regard, it is particularly problematic when middle managers believe they are acting genuinely in their kiss-up behaviour, but the superior views the manager as ingratiatory (Crawford et al., 2019). Due to this incongruence, superiors may develop a negative attitude toward the focal middle manager and the kiss-up behaviour may fail to secure resource gains (Crawford et al., 2019). Previous studies have identified *political skills* (i.e., the ability to understand others' needs and use this information to adapt one's behaviours in ways that enhance personal objectives; Ferris et al., 2005) and *self-monitoring* (i.e., attentiveness and responsiveness to situational cues as guides to behaviour; Fandt and Ferris, 1990) as suitable predictors of how successful middle managers will

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be when ingratiating themselves (Fandt and Ferris, 1990; Kim et al., 2018). Managers who are high in political skills and self-monitoring may be able to find an 'optimal level' of kissing-up that mitigates incongruent perceptions and thus allows them to excel in the organization. To conclude, our model currently assumes that kiss-up behaviours are perceived in the same way by the actor (i.e., middle manager) and target (i.e., superiors), but future research could add nuance by studying situations of incongruence and their antecedents.

The role of stable external resources. We have emphasized that KUKD and its accompanying resource exchange relationships are situational and inextricably linked to time. That said, there are opportunities for future research to explore additional external stable resources within COR theory, which are also referred to as *macro resources* (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). Macro resources are elements in the social context that accelerate or decelerate individuals' resources; these include concepts such as a company's culture (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Correspondingly, certain organizational environments may either nourish or impede KUKD behaviours. In other words, context factors could speed up the proposed moderation effects of time in our model. As such, the following four factors might help to identify those organizations (or organizational parts) where KUKD is more or less likely to occur.

First, in organizations where regular promotions are a central part of the career concept, the culture may strengthen the positive influence of temporal distance to promotion on the link between middle managers' resource pool and their engagement in KUKD. This might be the case in an *'up or out' culture*, in which organizational members must leave the organization if they do not get promoted in time (Malhotra et al., 2010).

Second, *traditional incentive systems* that focus on the 'hard numbers' achieved by individual middle managers who are ranked against each other may (unintentionally) increase the attractiveness of KUKD as a go-to strategy for career progress. This is because in such systems, middle managers are competing directly with each other and subordinates' assessments are rarely considered – because the output is all that matters, kicking-down can easily result in competitive advantages. If the middle manager's superior is at all involved in the incentive distribution process, then kissing-up pays off such that the brown-nosing middle manager will receive more positive evaluations that engender higher rewards in the incentive system. Providing further support for the perverse incentives of traditional competitive ranking systems, Reh et al. (2018) found that people reacted to co-workers who showed a better past development than themselves with social undermining behaviour – however, they only did so in a competitive environment.

Third, there is the issue of *power distance*, which refers to the degree to which employees can bypass or challenge management authority and organizational hierarchies in order to raise concerns (Hofstede et al., 1990). It is possible that high power distance will amplify the positive influence of time on the link between middle managers' engagement in KUKD and their resource gains. Future research may want to study whether lower power distance shrinks middle managers' available time frame for progressing their career through KUKD. In such cases, it is more likely that a middle manager's subordinates and superiors will interact and develop a realistic (i.e.,

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disreputable) view of the middle manager's behaviour (Aryee et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2010).

Lastly and relatedly, our work aligns with recent developments about *remote* or *hybrid work* by adding nuance to studies that positively view the middle manager as a 'connecting leader' (Jaser, 2021). In remote or hybrid work settings, middle managers have even more chances to strategically channel communication to specific target groups, while also experiencing a lower risk of informal conversations between their subordinates and superiors that could reveal the KUKD behaviours.

Recommendations for Testing the Theory Empirically

For a theory to generate evidence-based recommendations, it needs to be rigorously tested (Antonakis, 2017). Surveys are a common empirical tool in leadership studies, but such designs pose challenges for investigating KUKD. There are three reasons: (1) the middle manager's self-ratings may be biased because KUKD represents a socially undesirable activity; (2) in cases where the focal manager is efficient at exhibiting KUKD, the superiors are not a suitable source for assessing kiss-up behaviours because they do not recognize the use of ingratiation, and (3) both superiors and subordinates are likely unable to report on the middle manager's behaviours toward the other group (at least in the short-term) because middle managers exhibiting KUKD try to keep each group from seeing the discrepancy. As a result, scholars need to rely on subordinates to assess kick-down behaviours and the focal managers' colleagues to get a glimpse into kiss-up behaviours (based on the assumption that peers often see the manager in many different interactions with superiors, and perhaps also with subordinates, and may thus be able to provide an accurate judgement of both kiss-up and kick-down behaviours). Given the speculative validity of such survey-based approaches – both in general (Fischer et al., 2020) and specifically for assessing KUKD – we highly encourage scholars to instead prioritize finding creative ways of capturing middle managers' *actual* behaviour toward different target groups (see Hemshorn de Sanchez et al., 2022). For example, researchers could engage in shadowing or passive observations of middle managers, as well as their superiors and subordinates, across different situations and timespans. The obtained observations could be analysed using interaction coding procedures to categorize everything that is said into predefined coding categories (Gerpott et al., 2019), which can then be used to produce a kiss-up and kick-down score for each meeting. Such datasets may be enriched with large-scale data from electronic communications (Wenzel and Van Quaquebeke, 2018). To illustrate, scholars could parse a focal manager's emails – and specifically their emotional colour toward those above versus those below – by using unobtrusive linguistic marker analysis (i.e., machine-based content-coding of affective word usage; Pennebaker et al., 2007). This would allow scholars to gain a realistic impression of how middle managers actually behave toward different target groups.

Practical Implications

As we emphasized at the beginning of the article, the practitioner literature has devoted ample discussion to dealing with KUKD behaviours (e.g., Lipman, 2019; Minor, 2019;

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Parker and Parker, 2017). In the vein of phenomenon-based theorizing (Fisher et al., 2021; Van de Ven, 2007), our framework offers useful insights for organizations that want to go beyond anecdotal evidence and avoid promoting KUKD managers. Specifically, we posit that a central problem of KUKD derives from resource-poor middle managers who are particularly close to their promotion (Garcia et al., 2013): Such managers presume that their KUKD behaviour will pay off in terms of resource gains that are relevant for their promotion. Accordingly, organizations can try to reduce KUKD by (a) changing middle managers' time horizon for their promotion track, or (b) making superiors more aware of what is being done to them and others in order to circumvent middle managers' efforts.

First, regarding the role of time, organizations differ in the time frames they allocate to internal career paths. Traditional organizations often predefine such paths, which entails that employees must spend a certain minimum time at each career stage before they can be promoted. In contrast, younger companies tend to accelerate and individualize their employees' career trajectories. Consequently, it is more likely that traditional companies will notice KUKD behaviours before a manager is able to advance their career to the next hierarchical level. National armies are a clear example of traditional organizations where KUKD can become more obvious due to the long time horizon of their career paths. This means that contemporary, faster-paced companies with little formalized career development provide a more fertile ground for KUKD because managers can move fast within and between those companies.

Second, organizations are well advised to increase transparency about how middle managers behave toward different targets to make KUKD more visible. This is especially true against the backdrop of increasing remote or hybrid work set-ups, as well as for the fast-paced companies mentioned above. One easy first step could be to introduce institutionalized and continuous upward feedback systems, which can help to improve middle managers' behaviour (Cai and Wang, 2020). For example, managers at Google are regularly evaluated by their subordinates in an upward feedback survey (Fessler, 2017), and they can only progress their careers when the results indicate that they treat their employees respectfully. Likewise, managers at General Electric are evaluated almost in real-time through an in-house app that gathers insights from relevant organizational members at all levels, including subordinates (Baldassarre and Finken, 2015; Sloan et al., 2017). The survey results are then made available not only to managers and their teams but also to the superior, who will have a candid discussion with the manager if the scores are out of bounds. In addition to implementing these regular feedback systems, organizations may want to provide employees with a safe platform (e.g., a counsellor, a psychologist, an ombudsman, or an anonymous reporting system) where they can report unfair treatment and have the company intervene to mitigate the negative consequences of a KUKD manager (Oh and Farh, 2017; Vogel and Bolino, 2020).

Lastly, it may even be possible to identify the 'warning signs' of KUKD managers by parsing the emotional tone of managers' digital communication (if the privacy laws in the respective country allow such automated parsing). As our analysis has shown, it is crucial that company policies and institutionalized processes work alongside feedback and reporting systems. Otherwise, some middle managers may exploit oversight gaps in

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order to transform resources from kicking-down behaviours into a successful promotion (Breevaart et al., 2022). After all, promotions are one of the most salient artefacts of organizational culture. As such, many people will emulate successful career strategies – and if those are destructive, then there is an increased chance that KUKD will be institutionalized and undermine the meritocratic ideal.

CONCLUSION

Among practitioners and the popular literature, there is a common concern over middle managers who kiss-up to superiors and kick-down on subordinates in order to accelerate their own promotion. In fact, the classic literature (*The Captain of Köpenick*, Zuckmayer, 1931; *Man of Straw*, Mann, 1918) already described this phenomenon by referring to the motion sequence of a cyclist who crawls to the bigwigs and bullies the underlings in order to further his own career. With the present paper, we are the first to establish a theoretical basis for this phenomenon (Fisher et al., 2021). In doing so, we offer a model that more closely matches reality compared to what the extant literature has provided for each behaviour class (i.e., kiss-up or kick-down) in isolation. By providing a resource-based account for the full bidirectional dynamic behavioural pattern, we are able to recommend interventions that may help to subvert the KUKD phenomenon.

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NOTES

[1] Importantly, we do not mean to imply here that middle managers who engage in KUKD are inherently jerks. Instead, we posit that the tension between their own resource-deprivation and their striving for career progress amidst the pressure of the middle management layer may drive some middle managers to engage in KUKD – primarily in the hopes of entering a resource gain spiral that will allow them to get ahead and secure a promotion.

[2] For the remainder of the paper, we refer to superiors as everyone who is higher than the focal middle manager in the organizational hierarchy and relevant in terms of career progression, while subordinates refer to everyone who is instructed by the focal middle manager due to being below them in the organizational hierarchy.

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