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Rethinking courage at work: a two-study investigation of how gender moderates the antecedents and outcomes of social courage

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Abstract

Purpose – This study tests the implicit theory that men are more courageous than women within the Turkish cultural context and investigates how gender moderates the antecedents and consequences of workplace social courage (WSC).

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted two cross-sectional studies with gender as a grouping variable in multigroup structural equation models. Study 1, with 268 participants from the finance sector, examined the relationship between organizational justice (distributive, procedural and interactional) and WSC. Study 2, with 383 participants from the healthcare sector, investigated the relationships between WSC, defensive silence and job performance.

Findings – Across both studies, results did not confirm the implicit theory that men report higher levels of WSC than women. However, the findings revealed a consistent moderating effect of gender. Specifically, the positive impact of interactional justice on WSC was stronger for women. Conversely, the impact of WSC was more substantial for men, resulting in a greater reduction in their defensive silence and a more significant increase in their job performance.

Social implications – The study highlights how gender moderates courageous behavior, providing evidence that challenges gender stereotypes and promotes equality in workplace dynamics.

Originality/value – These findings challenge simplistic notions of gender and courage, highlighting instead the complex ways in which gender shapes the enactment and outcomes of courageous behavior in the workplace. The study contributes to theory by integrating gender as a critical moderator in the nomological network of WSC, offering practical insights for fostering a courageous and equitable work environment.

Keywords Organizational justice, Interactional justice, Defensive silence, Job performance, Courage

Paper type Research article

Introduction

In today’s dynamic and interdependent workplaces, organizational success often hinges on employees’ willingness to engage in challenging interpersonal behaviors, such as speaking up about problems, providing constructive feedback to peers or questioning the status quo (Koerner, 2014; Detert & Bruno, 2017). Although organizationally beneficial, this engagement carries significant social risks for the individual, including potential damage to one’s reputation, relationships or career prospects. The willingness to accept these social risks for a noble or important goal (i.e. a prosocial or ethical objective that aligns with organizational or societal values, such as pointing out an error, challenging an unethical decision, or

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defending a colleague) constitutes the essence of workplace social courage (WSC) (Koerner, 2014; Schilpzand, Hekman, & Mitchell, 2015). Despite its importance in fostering innovation, ethical conduct and organizational effectiveness (Schilpzand *et al.*, 2015; Howard & Holmes, 2019; Magnano *et al.*, 2022), the dynamics of WSC, particularly how deep-seated societal factors such as gender shape them, remain underexplored. This gap is a significant concern for organizations, as a failure to understand and foster courage among all employees can lead to a culture of silence, stifled performance and an inability to adapt to change. This silence is the antithesis of employee voice (Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003; Morrison, 2014), defined as discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns or opinions about work-related issues. While WSC and voice are closely related, they are not interchangeable. Voice is the behavior of speaking up, whereas WSC is the psychological impetus, the willingness to accept social risks, that enables a behavior, particularly when the risk is high (Detert & Bruno, 2017). Thus, understanding the antecedents of WSC proves critical for organizations seeking to foster a "speak-up culture" and avoid the perils of silence.

One of the most persistent implicit theories of courage (specifically, the agentic, risk-taking behaviors associated with it) is that men are more courageous than women (Vugt, Cremer, & Janssen, 2007). This notion has its roots in ancient philosophy and epics that persist in modern culture (Zavaliy & Aristidou, 2014). However, empirical support for this stereotype in contemporary organizational contexts is weak and inconclusive (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2017; Howard & Fox, 2020; Tkachenko, Quast, Song, & Jang, 2020). Rather than a simple direct difference, social role theory (Eagly, 1987) suggests that the influence of gender is more nuanced and shapes behaviors through societal expectations and learned roles. Socialization processes often encourage men to exhibit agentic characteristics, i.e. assertiveness and dominance, while fostering communal characteristics in women, such as empathy and responsiveness to others' needs (Eagly & Carli, 2003). These differing socializations may not alter the capacity for courage, but could change how it is triggered and what consequences it yields.

Therefore, this study moves beyond the simplistic question of whether men are more courageous than women. Instead, we asked a more nuanced and practical question: How does gender shape the relationships between WSC and its key antecedents and outcomes in the workplace? To answer this, we tested the traditional implicit theory as a baseline hypothesis but focused our investigation on the moderating role of gender. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding, suggesting that while men and women may possess similar levels of WSC, the factors that promote their WSC and the outcomes of their courageous acts may differ significantly.

We situated our research in Turkey, a culture with distinct characteristics compared to Western contexts (e.g. higher power distance and collectivism), where most courage research originates (Hofstede, 2001). This specific cultural setting, with its unique perceptions of gender roles, offers a valuable and under-researched environment to test these dynamics.

We structured this investigation around two studies to enhance the robustness and theoretical breadth of our findings. We chose the two-study deliberately over a single, large-scale study for two key reasons. First, it allowed for a comprehensive examination of WSC's nomological network by distinctly testing its antecedents (organizational justice in Study 1) and its consequences (defensive silence and job performance in Study 2). This separation reduced participant fatigue and mitigated common method variance from a single lengthy questionnaire with many constructs. By studying finance in Study 1 and healthcare in Study 2, we tested whether gender's moderating effects were consistent across different organizational contexts. The goal of this design was not to compare the samples but rather to strengthen the conclusions' generalizability. If the hypothesized moderation patterns hold across these diverse sectors, it provides stronger support for the overarching theory.

Our research aimed to provide several contributions. Theoretically, we challenged a persistent implicit theory and wanted to offer a more nuanced moderation model that could be integrated into theories of gender, WSC and organizational behavior. We also strived to

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provide much-needed empirical evidence on the nomological network of WSC from a non-Western perspective. Practically, our findings can help organizations move beyond stereotypical interventions and develop more effective, gender-sensitive strategies to cultivate courage, promote voice and enhance performance for all employees.

This study consists of four main sections. The first section presents the theoretical background and research questions that form the context of the study, conceptualizing the effects of gender on WSC. The second section focuses on Study 1 (Study 1), which examines the relationships between sub-dimensions of organizational justice and social courage, as well as the moderating role of gender. The third section covers Study 2 (Study 2), which examines the effects of social courage on defensive silence and job performance from a gender perspective. The final section discusses the findings of both studies together, offering theoretical and practical implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical background and hypothesis development

To build a robust theoretical framework, we adopted an interactionist perspective that integrates multiple theories, each explaining a different part of WSC's nomological network. First, we addressed the nature of courage by conceptualizing WSC as a latent disposition (a trait) expressed as observable, intentional behavior in response to trait-relevant situational cues. Thus, we clarified a key point of ambiguity in the literature: we view WSC as an underlying willingness (a trait), while the scales used to measure it (e.g. Howard, Farr, Grandey, & Gutworth, 2017) capture its expression as self-reported behaviors. Therefore, in Study 1, we examined how a situational cue (justice) activates the trait, and in Study 2, we examined the outcomes (silence, performance) of its behavioral expression. This view was anchored in Trait Activation Theory, which provided the primary mechanism for our model's antecedent phase (Study 1). It posits that a just environment, particularly one high in interactional justice, acts as a powerful situational cue that activates an individual's latent courage. Second, to explain the consequences of enacting courage (Study 2), we drew on Approach-Avoidance Theory. As a character trait, courageous individuals strive to achieve valued goals despite risks, reducing fear-based avoidance like defensive silence and promoting better job performance. Through Social Role Theory, we explained how gender moderates this process, as men and women experience situational factors that activate courage and its outcomes differently due to social roles. This multi-theory approach goes beyond simple effects to explore how, why and for whom courage matters at work.

Workplace social courage

Researchers share varying thoughts on the definition and dimensions of the broader construct of courage. Based on these definitions, courageous acts have fundamental features: (1) free decision; (2) substantial risk; (3) rational assessment; (4) valuable aims and (5) fear (e.g. Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Rate, Clarke, Lindsay, and Sternberg (2007) showed that courage might not require fear. Regarding courage dimensions, Woodard and Pury (2007) empirically formed four factors of courage: (1) employment courage; (2) physical courage; (3) social-moral courage and (4) independent courage.

The current study defined courage as an individual's awareness of the risks associated with pursuing noble goals. This aimed to enhance the literature on WSC, a specific form of social courage. This type of courage is a vital strength that fosters socially valuable activities (Howard & Holmes, 2019). It enables individuals to assess whether their sense of self and community will support or hinder their participation in work. Fear of failure at work can impact both social and physical well-being (Detert & Bruno, 2017). Therefore, WSC is crucial for both researchers and practitioners.

Although the study of WSC is still in its early stages, recent studies have shed light on the concept and its embodiment (Koerner, 2014; Schilpzand *et al.*, 2015; Detert & Bruno, 2017;

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Howard & Holmes, 2019). Detert and Bruno (2017) categorized the antecedents of WSC as individual factors (e.g. confidence, responsibility, emotional state) and contextual factors (e.g. norms and leadership). They classified the consequences of WSC as direct (e.g. personal gain or damage) and indirect results (e.g. seen as higher executive potential or higher performers). They suggested that courage may provide a competitive advantage, encourage innovation and creativity, promote positive social change, increase civic engagement and help solve issues. Howard *et al.* (2017) characterized WSC by the complex risks that may potentially damage social esteem, including reporting adverse problems, telling colleagues about their mistakes and asking questions about issues they do not understand, even if it will embarrass them or make them seem unaware. Making suggestions requires courage (Detert & Bruno, 2017). Moreover, WSC is also required when taking on a task with a high probability of failure (Kilmann, O'Hara, & Strauss, 2010; Howard *et al.*, 2017). As previous research examining the antecedents or consequences of WSC remains limited, new literature lacks empirical evidence (Koerner, 2014; Detert & Bruno, 2017; Howard, 2019; Howard & Cogswell, 2019).

Gender's role in workplace social courage and cultural context

Philosophers and researchers across various fields have explored the historical subject of courage with regard to virtue, emotion and behavior (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). We may categorize courage theories as explicit and implicit, both of which are vital in psychology. Explicit theories depend on data gathered from those measuring the examined construct (Rate *et al.*, 2007). In contrast, implicit theories largely influence the decisions individuals make about others (Sternberg, 1985). Ardelt (2005) notes that explicit courage theories stem from implicit theories of courage. People assess each other's courage based on their own implicit definitions (Rate *et al.*, 2007).

One of the common implicit theories related to courage is that men are more courageous than women (Vugt *et al.*, 2007). Ancient Greek epics associate courage (ἀνδρεία) with being a (real) man (ἀνέρ) and cowardice with feminine characteristics. The word "courage" is central to the concept of a fulfilled male character in Greek epics and has an etymological connection to masculinity (Zavaliy, 2020). Contemporary Western popular non-academic literature reflects this relationship between courage and masculinity in ancient Greek epics (Howard & Fox, 2020). However, the relationship between gender and courage may be more complex and nuanced than expected. Howard and Fox (2020) examined the implicit theory that men are more courageous than women, but found that gender was not directly related to WSC. This finding suggests that the effect of gender on courage may not be direct, but rather may differ under certain conditions or in the context of specific outcomes. Therefore, testing this implicit theory in different cultural contexts and work environments can contribute to a better understanding of social courage and gender studies.

Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) posits that commonly held gender stereotypes influence individuals' societal roles and expectations. Differing socialization and expectations between the sexes and physical differences are adequate for such a belief. For instance, experimental studies showed that women have more empathic reactions to behavioral distress. Men tend to be more critical in their evaluations, potentially reducing neurocortical sympathizing responses (Craddick, Leipold, & Leipold, 1976; Singer & Lamm, 2009). As a social identity, we learn gender from the environment in response to societal expectations and reinforce it through social interactions. Society attributes roles such as earning money and ensuring the family's safety to men, while childcare and housework to women (Powell & Greenhaus, 2010; Koksal & Dulay Yangın, 2020). As a requirement for these roles, women often exhibit feminine social characteristics, such as kindness, affection, sympathy and sensitivity to the needs of others. On the other hand, men tend to exhibit masculine traits such as aggression, dominance, impulsiveness and assertiveness (Carver, Vafaei, Guerra, Freire, & Phillips, 2013). Researchers have investigated the role of gender in the organizational context across different cultures and professions, considering gender differences (Karatepe, Yavas, Babakus,

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& Avci, 2006; Avolio, Mhatre, Norman, & Lester, 2009; Kim, Murrmann, & Lee, 2009; Saewyc, 2017). In the socialization process of genders, people learn how to behave and how they should act in certain situations (e.g. work) in the community (Saewyc, 2017). While extant research suggests that women are more communal than men and men are more agentic than women (Eagly, 1987), according to empirical the influence of gender differences on courage was not definite and required further investigations (Pury, Kowalski, & Spearman, 2007; Avolio *et al.*, 2009; Osswald, Frey, & Streicher, 2011; Howard & Fox, 2020; Restika, Saleh, & Haskas, 2021).

Hofstede (2001) states that the culture in Turkey is higher power distance, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and lower masculinity than the average Western culture. Research in Turkey shows that the society views women as primarily responsible for housework, including childcare (94.4%), laundry and cleaning (85.4%), while men as mainly responsible for paying bills (74.1%) and minor repairs (65.2%). Notably, 62% of men and 50% of women believe women should not work outside the home (TUIK, 2023). This cultural perception creates additional challenges for women in the workforce, while men feel a strong responsibility to provide for the family, which may make them more assertive in their careers. Thus, men might be more courageous than women in the workplace to ensure family duration. Depending on the implicit theory about courage and the gender roles of men in Turkey, we hypothesized the following hypothesis:

H1. The mean of men's WSC (H1a for Study 1 and H1b for Study 2) is significantly higher than that of women.

Study 1

Organizational justice and workplace social courage

Ancient Greek philosophers viewed sustaining justice as a primary life goal, which sometimes requires courage (Zavaliy, 2020). Justice, a core virtue, is essential in organizations for instrumental, relational and deontic reasons, influencing employees' work attitudes and behaviors (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001). Scholars initially examined organizational justice through a distributive lens, focusing on the allocation of outcomes. Distributive justice refers to the fairness in the distribution of outcomes, including compensation and promotions. Procedural justice, the fairness of the decision-making process, constitutes another key aspect. Participation in decision-making increases satisfaction and perceived fairness (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001). We recognize providing input during assessment as "voice." Interactional justice, i.e. the third component, considers fairness based on treatment by organizational representatives (Eib & Soenen, 2017). In this study, we employed three dimensions of organizational justice, i.e. distributive, procedural and interactional.

Individual traits, personality and situational factors like organizational structure and culture shape organizational justice, influencing responses to justice or injustice. Since the link between justice and courage is rooted in cultural frameworks shaping fairness perceptions and willingness to act, we examined the relationship between organizational justice and WSC. In organizational settings, perceptions of injustice, whether distributive, procedural or interactional (Colquitt, 2001), can trigger strong moral responses. However, opposing perceived injustice often requires WSC, defined as the intentional, prosocial behavior undertaken despite the risk of negative social consequences (Rate *et al.*, 2007). This type of courage is especially critical in environments where hierarchical structures or social norms discourage open confrontation or whistleblowing. Individuals who speak out against unfair treatment often do so at significant personal risk, potentially facing retaliation, ostracism or career stagnation (Detert & Bruno, 2017). Thus, in such contexts, justice becomes a moral imperative that one can only pursue through the exercise of WSC.

The interplay between justice and courage is not culturally neutral. For example, in high power distance cultures (Hofstede, 2001), people may view challenging authority or exposing

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unfairness as insubordination rather than ethical responsibility. Consequently, employees in these cultural settings may be less likely to exhibit WSC, even in the face of blatant injustice, due to the cultural valorization of harmony, respect for hierarchy or collective conformity. Conversely, in low power-distance cultures that recognize egalitarian values and individual agency, the threshold for acting courageously in response to injustice may be lower, and such actions may even be socially rewarded. Therefore, the expression of justice-related courage is not merely an individual trait or organizational factor, but a culturally modulated behavior that reflects broader societal norms about authority, morality and risk.

Organizational justice and WSC are socially structured; they do not occur as facts across all times and places. Individuals discover the attributions about acts occurring in a specific time and place (Detert & Bruno, 2017). Hence, we considered that trait activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000) might explain the relationships between justice and courage. The theory suggests that the interaction of situations and a person's traits affects how people respond to specific conditions.

Research on cognitive processes suggests that there is also a neural basis for fairness that differs from self-interest and financial advantage. Fair/unfair treatment activates brain areas involved in processing rewards and negative affective systems (Dulebohn, Conlon, Sarinopoulos, Davison, & McNamara, 2009). Thus, the individual who encounters or witnesses a fair or unfair situation in the organization may act courageously to ensure justice or eliminate injustice. Conditions related to justice, which threaten the loss of economic, psychological and social benefits obtained from organizations, may trigger individuals to exhibit brave behavior, such as standing up against problems and displaying attitudes and behaviors that aim to eliminate injustice (Koerner, 2014; Mert, Sen, & Alzghoul, 2022).

The implicit theory of courage may suggest that the relationship between justice and courage is stronger for men than for women. However, organizational justice theory proposes that each dimension is related to specific needs. While distributive justice relates to the allocation of rewards, procedural justice regards social identity, self-worth and status; interactional justice, on the other hand, relates to respect, truthfulness and justification.

Gender's role in Turkey shows that men are responsible for ensuring the family's duration, and women have more relational roles (e.g. being kind, affectionate, sympatheticand sensitive to the needs of others). Simola (2015) suggests that interpersonal concerns motivate women more. Grounded in Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), this suggests that women, socialized toward communal and relational roles, will be more sensitive to interpersonal treatment. Therefore, the situational cue of high interactional justice (respect, dignity) is expected to be a more powerful activator of WSC for women. Conversely, men's agentic roles, tied to resource acquisition and status (TUIK, 2023), may make their WSC more sensitive to the fairness of outcomes (distributive) and rules (procedural). Hence, we considered that while men might act more courageously than women in the workplace regarding distributive and procedural justice, women might act more courageously than men regarding interactional justice. Under these arguments, we hypothesized:

H2. Organizational justice (H2a-distributive, H2b-procedural, H2c-interactional) is positively related to WSC.

H3. Distributive (H3a) and procedural justice (H3b) relationships with WSC are higher for men than women. The association between interactional justice and WSC is higher for women than men (H3c).

Method of study 1

Multigroup comparisons determine if associations hypothesized in a model will differ based on the value of the moderator (e.g. gender). We analyzed the model separately for women and men. Using AMOS 23.0, we applied multigroup comparisons in Study 1 to test research hypotheses. In a cross-sectional study, we investigated organizational justice sub-dimensions,

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WSC relationships and the moderating effect of gender in this relationship using multigroup structural analysis.

Participants and procedure. With convenience sampling, we contacted human resource managers at the selected banks, who then distributed the voluntary questionnaire link to employees from private banks in February 2022, as the women employment ratio in this sector is higher than in other sectors. Since organizational culture can impact results, we selected our sample from participants in branch offices of three large private banks. Next, we obtained informed consent from participants and explained that completing the questionnaire was voluntary. The questionnaire did not include any identifying information and was only for research purposes. The universe of the first study consisted of nearly 600 bank employees. We distributed questionnaire forms to 450 participants and collected 276 questionnaires. Since we calculated the required sample size for a population of 600 people to be 235 for the 95% confidence level, we considered that 276 participants were sufficient to represent the sample population. Before testing the hypotheses, we screened the data and checked for statistical assumptions. We excluded eight questionnaires from the analysis as we deemed them unsuitable due to a significant proportion of missing values (>10%) or invariant response patterns (e.g. selecting the same score for all items), which suggested a lack of diligent participation. We conducted analyses with the remaining 268 data.

Table 1 shows the demographics of the sample. Participants were predominantly women (66%) and aged 24–30 (64.1%). Most were undergraduates (85.4%) and worked at the box office (58.6%) with up to 10 years of experience (65.3%).

Measures. Organizational Justice Scale. We used the organizational justice scale developed by Niehoff and Moorman (1993) and adapted by Gurbuz and Mert (2009). The scale had three sub-factors: distributive (six items), procedural (four items) and interactional (eight items) justice. Participants responded on a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Example statements included, “I consider my workload to be quite fair,” and “All job decisions are applied consistently across all affected employees.” Higher scores show positive justice perceptions.

WSC. We measured participants’ perception of courage using the WSC scale developed by Howard *et al.* (2017) and adapted to Turkish by Mert and Koksal (2022). The scale has one dimension consisting of 11 items, and sample items are “Although it may damage our friendship, I would tell my superior when a coworker is doing something incorrectly,” and “Even if my coworkers could think less of me, I’d lead a project with a chance of failure.” Participants rated 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree) and high scores indicate high WSC.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participants of Study 1

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Variable	Frequency	Percent
Sex			Age		
Female	177	34	24–30	172	64.1
Male	91	66	31–37	65	24.3
Total	268	100	38–44	22	8.2
Position			45 or above	9	3.4
Box office	157	58.6	Total	268	100
Customer agent	111	41.4	Education		
Total	268	100	Undergraduate	229	85.4
Experience	42	11.0	Graduate	38	14.2
5 years or less	78	29.1	Doctoral	1	0.4
6–10 years	97	36.2	Total	268	100
11–15 years	28	10.4	Marital status		
16–20 years	64	23.9	Married	102	38.1
21 or above	1	0.4	Single	166	61.9
Total	268	100	Total	268	100

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Analysis strategy. Our primary analysis followed a two-step approach. To directly test the implicit theory that men are more courageous than women (Hypothesis 1a), we first conducted an independent samples *t*-test. We chose this method because it is the most direct and statistically appropriate way to compare the mean scores of two independent groups. Subsequently, to test our main hypotheses regarding the positive relationship between justice and WSC (H2) and the moderating role of gender (H3), we employed multigroup structural equation modeling in AMOS 23.0. We selected this technique as the most robust analytical strategy, because it is superior to alternatives such as moderated regression for three reasons: (1) it allows for the simultaneous testing of all hypothesized paths within a single, integrated model; (2) it accounts for measurement error by modeling constructs as latent variables, which provides more accurate parameter estimates; and (3) it is the established standard for testing moderation hypotheses with a categorical variable like gender, enabling a rigorous comparison of path coefficients between groups after establishing measurement invariance.

We hypothesized that organizational justice sub-dimensions are associated with WSC and that gender plays a moderating role in this relationship in Study 1. Before testing the hypotheses, we checked some assumptions. We examined normality using skewness and kurtosis values, reliability and validity through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), common method variance (CMV) with a common latent factor (CLF) and measurement invariance tests with multigroup analysis in AMOS.

We checked skewness and kurtosis values for standard distribution assumptions, and they were within the acceptable ranges (Sposito, Hand, & Skarpness, 1983). The CFA revealed the measurement model had convergent and discriminant validity (Table 1). Items' factor loadings (ranging from 0.705 to 0.944) and AVE scores were above the threshold (0.50). Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) correlation ratios ranged from 0.431 to 0.689, below the cut point (0.85). The fact that the square root of AVEs was greater than MSV (Table 2) and HTMT indicated discriminant validity. The above-the-threshold (0.70) CR and Cronbach values revealed that the scales were reliable. Moreover, CFA showed that the measurement model produced a good fit ($\chi^2 = 505.230$, df = 370, χ^2/df = 1.365, CFI = 0.985, SRMR = 0.036, RMSEA = 0.037) for the data (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

To check CMV, we used the CLF test, assessed standardized regression weights in the model with and without CLF, and checked the fit values of the single-factor model. The slight differences (<0.200) in regression weights (Serrano Archimi, Reynaud, Yasin, & Bhatti, 2018) and poor data fit ($\chi^2 = 3636.866$, df = 376, χ^2/df = 9.673, CFI = 0.628, SRMR = 0.346, RMSEA = 0.180) suggested that CMV was not a significant issue in the current study (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

To test our main hypotheses regarding the positive relationship between justice and WSC (H2) and the moderating role of gender (H3), we employed multigroup structural equation modeling in AMOS 23.0. This involved first establishing measurement invariance (configural, metric, scalar and strict) across the men and women groups to ensure that we measured the constructs in the same way for both. Once we established invariance, we compared the constrained and unconstrained structural models to test for significant differences in the path coefficients between genders.

Table 2. CR, AVE, MSV and Cronbach values of scales

	CR	AVE	MSV	Cronbach
WSC	0.963	0.702	0.464	0.963
Interactional justice	0.979	0.853	0.472	0.979
Distributive justice	0.966	0.828	0.461	0.966
Procedure justice	0.853	0.593	0.472	0.851

Note(s): CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted; MSV = Maximum shared variance

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Control variables. We examined the correlation between demographic variables (age, tenure, education and marital status) and the study variables. The preliminary analysis demonstrated that demographic variables did not exhibit significant correlations with the primary constructs of organizational justice or WSC. Consistent with the principle of model parsimony and the objective of maintaining focus on the theoretically articulated nomological network, specifically Trait Activation Theory, we excluded these variables from the SEM as control variables. The absence of significant correlations indicates that these demographic factors were unlikely to serve as meaningful confounders within this sample. Moreover, their inclusion could introduce unnecessary complexity into the structural model without contributing to enhanced theoretical clarity or predictive validity of the examined relationships.

Analysis and results. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of variables in Study 1. The means of the variables were slightly above the mid-point (WSC was scaled from 1 to 7), except for distributive justice. Notably, WSC was significantly and positively correlated with the sub-factors of organizational justice. Due to the high correlation between the independent variables, we examined collinearity using variance inflation factors (VIF) and condition indexes. VIF (changed between 2.206 and 2.965) and condition indexes (highest value 13.83) were below the cutoff points (Chatterjee & Hadi, 2006).

Independent sample *t*-test showed that the mean of men's WSC was not significantly higher than women ($M_{male} = 5.00$, $SD_{male} = 1.15$, $M_{female} = 4.75$, $SD_{female} = 1.39$, $t = 1.561$, $df = 214$, $p > 0.05$). These results indicate that WSC was not higher for men than women. Thus, we did not accept Hypothesis 1a. We found positive and significant correlations between WSC and organizational justice, supporting Hypothesis 2. These relationships suggest that organizational justice is a potential antecedent of social courage.

We conducted a multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA) with a maximum likelihood method to investigate the measurement model's invariance. We examined the fit of four nested models (configural, metric, scalar and strict) by adding constraints to each model in the hierarchical ordering of nested models (Meredith, 1993; Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). Insignificant chi-square differences between the specific nested models indicate the related measurement invariance. The fit indexes of the model, which consisted of two groups, emphasized the configural invariance of the measurement model. We constrained the factor loadings, intercepts and residuals for metric, scalar and strict invariance. Insignificant chi-square differences between each nested model showed that the measurement model had strict invariance for gender. Table 4 shows the fit values of the four invariance factor models.

Because the measurement model exhibited strict invariance, we conducted a multigroup structural model analysis to determine whether the relationship between organizational justice and WSC was stronger for men than for women. Results showed that only interactional justice had a significant and positive association with WSC, with a slightly higher impact for women than for men (Table 5). Due to the difference in sample size, we determined the effect size with the Hedges' *d* coefficient. The difference between genders had a large effect size (Hedge's $d = 0.84$). These results did not support Hypotheses 3a and 3b, but Hypothesis 3c. We performed the independent sample *t*-test of interactional justice to interpret the differences in

Table 3. Means, standard deviations and correlations

	M	SD	1	2	3
1. WSC	4.83	1.32			
2. Interactional justice	3.57	1.03	0.699**		
3. Distributive justice	2.92	1.24	0.438**	0.619**	
4. Procedural justice	3.41	1.05	0.486**	0.736**	0.729**

Note(s): **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

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Table 4. Fit indexes of invariance factor models

Nested models	χ^2 (df), p	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$ (df), p	ΔCFI
Configural invariance	972 (740), $p < 0.01$	0.974	0.034	0.056	–	–
Metric invariance	997 (769), $p < 0.01$	0.974	0.033	0.080	24 (29), $p > 0.05$	0.000
Scalar invariance	1038 (798), $p < 0.01$	0.973	0.034	0.080	41 (29), $p > 0.05$	0.001
Strict invariance	1074 (827), $p < 0.01$	0.972	0.034	0.082	35 (29), $p > 0.05$	0.001

Note(s): χ^2 = chi-squared test; df = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = Standardized root mean square residual

Table 5. The effect of organizational justice on WSC

Path	Men (n = 91) Effect	S.E.	p	Women (n = 177) Effect	S.E.	p	Hedges' g
WSC← interactional justice	0.620	0.153	0.001	0.747	0.150	0.001	0.84
WSC ← distributive justice	−0.056	0.122	0.639	0.062	0.108	0.482	
WSC ← procedural justice	0.110	0.170	0.452	−0.144	0.146	0.185	

the relationship between justice and WSC between genders. Results showed that men's interactional justice perception was significantly higher than women's (M_{male} = 3.78, SD_{male} = 0.94, M_{female} = 3.46, SD_{female} = 1.06, t = 2.537, df = 201, $p < 0.05$). This statistically significant effect had a minor practical significance (Hedges' g = 0.31).

Discussion of study 1

The results of Study 1 provided initial insights into the role of gender and justice in shaping WSC. We did not find support for the implicit theory that men are more courageous than women, as there was no significant difference in the mean levels of WSC between genders. This finding aligns with previous research in Western contexts (Howard & Fox, 2020) and suggests that, at least in this sample, gender stereotypes about WSC do not translate into self-reported behavioral differences.

However, the primary contribution of this study lies in the moderation analysis. While only interactional justice emerged as a significant predictor of WSC in the complete structural model, gender significantly moderated its effect. The impact of being treated with dignity, respect and honesty by one's superiors on fostering WSC was significantly more substantial for women than for men. This aligns with social role theory and previous findings suggesting that women, being socialized to be more communal and relational, may be more sensitive and responsive to the quality of interpersonal treatment at work. For women in this sample, fair and respectful treatment appeared to be a critical situational cue that enabled them to act courageously. This may be because, as social role theory suggests, a relationally supportive environment (high interactional justice) provides a form of "social insurance" that mitigates the perceived social risks of violating communal norms (e.g. being perceived as disruptive or "non-communal") when they do choose to speak up.

The significant positive correlation between sub-dimensions of organizational justice and WSC indicates that justice may be an antecedent of WSC. However, the multigroup structural analysis revealed that only interactional justice had a significant relationship with WSC. Positive and significant links between procedural and distributive justice and WSC became insignificant when the structural model included all dimensions of justice. We may explain this effect by the suppressive effect of interactional justice on the participants. This result may indicate that when managers demonstrate sufficient sympathy and interest toward employees,

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treating them with dignity and respect, those employees appear somewhat more willing to tolerate unfair distributions and procedures. Power distance is relatively high in Turkey. Thus, participants may accept perceptions of distributive and procedural justice. However, with a collectivistic structure, individuals may expect fair treatment for their contribution to society.

Study 2

Workplace social courage, organizational silence and work performance

Work social courage (WSC), defined as the willingness of an employee to take principled, prosocial risks in the face of potential negative personal consequences, serves as a direct counterbalance to employee silence and a critical precursor to enhanced organizational performance. The relationship is fundamentally rooted in the concept of employee voice, where WSC is the engine that drives individuals to speak up about concerns, offer suggestions for improvement or challenge unethical practices. This courageous behavior directly counteracts forms of employee silence, such as defensive silence (withholding input out of fear). When employees exhibit WSC, they actively choose to voice their opinions rather than remain silent, thereby enabling the organization to identify and rectify errors, foster innovation and improve processes (Dyne *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, this relationship extends to performance. Socially courageous acts often represent contextual performance, as they contribute beyond formal job descriptions to benefit the collective. More profoundly, an environment that fosters WSC displays high psychological safety, a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. In such climates, employees fear punitive responses to speaking up less, which not only reduces silence but also boosts engagement and learning behaviors, ultimately driving individual task performance.

Because the expression and consequences of WSC, and thus its relationship with silence and performance, are not universal but influenced by cultural context, we explored the relationship among WSC, silence and performance. As discussed in our main theoretical background, cultural dimensions such as power distance and collectivism create different implicit rules regarding the acceptability and value of speaking up (Hofstede, 2001). In high-power-distance or highly collectivistic cultures, we may perceive acts of WSC differently than in low-power-distance, individualistic cultures, thus altering the translation of courageous acts into performance outcomes or reductions in silence (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). We tested these outcomes within the specified Turkish cultural context.

Employee silence means that employees purposely keep work-related thoughts, information and ideas, which may limit managers' ability to detect and address complex issues. Researchers classified the three types of silence as acquiescent, defensive and prosocial (Dyne *et al.*, 2003). The current study investigated only the relationship between WSC and defensive silence, due to the typical conceptualization of general silence (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). Defensive silence refers to the withholding of information about problems due to fear and the disregard of facts to protect oneself. It includes self-protective motives that stem from the fear that speaking up will have undesirable consequences for the individual. Opinion and moral principles for deciding what to say and suppress are essential in working life. Expressing the truth always is not only unrealistic but also unreasonable. Instead, silence may be necessary because most employees choose not to know whenever a close coworker or friend has a negative or critical thought (Dyne *et al.*, 2003).

Approach-avoidance theory (Roth & Cohen, 1986) proposes that individuals are motivated to approach stimuli they perceive as beneficial and to avoid those they perceive as harmful. As a character trait, courageous individuals strive to achieve good even when conditions are painful and frightening, to gain self-respect and satisfaction (Balot, 2007). Dyne *et al.* (2003) state that voice is a compelling statement of challenge with the intent to develop rather than only complain about the situation. It depicts actions that are probably dangerous and worthy. Individuals can recognize the loss triggered by defensive silence and speak out boldly to benefit their organizations, gaining self-esteem and pride. Following the approach-avoidance

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theory and the implicit theory that men are more courageous than women, as well as the social role theory that men's roles often involve aggression, dominance, impulsiveness and command, we expected that the negative relationship between WSC and defensive silence would be stronger for men. That is, when men enact WSC (an agentic, approach behavior), it more strongly overrides their fear-based avoidance (defensive silence) than it does for women, for whom such assertive behavior may conflict with communal role expectations.

H4. WSC relates negatively to defensive silence.

H5. The negative relationship between WSC and defensive silence is higher for men than for women.

Our framework, grounded in Approach-Avoidance Theory (Roth & Cohen, 1986), suggests that WSC is an "approach" motivation. Courageous individuals are motivated to approach positive, valued goals (e.g. organizational improvement, ethical conduct) even in the face of risk (Balot, 2007). This proactive, approach-oriented stance is a key component of positive psychological constructs such as efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience, which are known predictors of performance (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007).

A generally accepted distinction in performance is that of task and contextual performance. Task performance refers to a person's proficiency in performing tasks that support the technical core of an organization. Contextual performance includes suggestions for facilitating activities and work processes, such as supporting coworkers or being a trusted employee. Contextual performance behaviors relate to social acts, such as helping colleagues and defending the organization (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Courage encompasses behaviors that benefit the community. Courage can sometimes enhance an individual's performance by enabling effective coping with stressors, such as achieving organizational goals (Schilpzand *et al.*, 2015). While an organization needs well-performing personnel to achieve its goals and gain a competitive edge, performance is also crucial for employees in terms of emotional satisfaction, pride and a sense of accomplishment. Researchers have stated that courage and performance are related (Maddi, 2004; Koerner, 2014) and employees with WSC are more likely to engage in challenging behaviors that benefit the organization (Howard *et al.*, 2017).

Following this approach-avoidance perspective, we considered courage's social benefits and risk-taking construct to be positive resources for dealing with the challenges of work aims. Thus, WSC may positively relate to work-contextual performance. According to the implicit theory about courage and the social role theory, which posits that men's roles encompass family responsibilities and earning income, we considered that a positive relationship between WSC and work performance would be higher for men than for women. This is because agentic and assertive acts, such as WSC, are more congruent with male gender roles (Eagly, 1987). Observers are more likely to recognize, value and translate men's role-congruent behavior into positive performance outcomes (Tkachenko *et al.*, 2020), whereas they may undervalue or even penalize women who display the same agentic behavior (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

H6. WSC positively relates to workplace performance.

H7. The positive relationship between WSC and workplace performance is higher for men than for women.

Method of study 2

Study 2 aimed to examine the moderating role of gender on the relationship between WSC (as an independent variable), organizational silence and performance.

Participants and procedure. Using the same procedure in Study 1, the authors contacted the hospital administration, who facilitated the distribution of the voluntary questionnaire to 500 employees from four hospitals in April 2022. This sector was chosen for two reasons: first, similar to the finance sector in Study 1, it has a high ratio of female employees, allowing for

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robust gender comparisons. Second, healthcare settings often involve high-stakes decisions and hierarchical structures, making WSC and defensive silence particularly salient constructs to study (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). They retrieved 383 questionnaires suitable for analysis. The universe of Study 2 consists of nearly 800 hospital employees. For this universe size, the number of participants that should be invited is 434, based on a 60% callback rate. In a population of 800, we calculated the sample size to be 260 for a 95% confidence level and determined that the 383 collected data were sufficient for the sample.

Table 6 shows the participants' demographics. Most participants were female, married, aged 31 or above, with at least a graduate degree and working as nurses.

Measures. WSC. We used the same courage scale in Study 1.

Defensive Silence. We measured defensive silence using the organizational silence scale by Dyne *et al.* (2003). We adapted the scale to Turkish by Arslan and Yener (2016). The defensive silence factor has five items. Example items are "I usually agree with the group because I am motivated by fear," and "I withhold relevant information due to fear." Participants rated 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree), and high scores indicate high defensive silence.

Performance. We used the short form of Kirkman and Rosen's (1999) self-perceived job performance scale. Çöl (2008) shortened the scale to four items and adapted it to Turkish. Example items are "I complete my tasks on time," and "When a problem arises, I find a solution as quickly as possible." Participants rated 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree), and high scores indicate high self-perceived performance.

Analysis strategy. We hypothesized that WSC is associated with defensive silence and performance, and gender has a moderating role in these relationships in Study 2. We used the same procedure for analyses in Study 1.

We verified the standard distribution assumptions and assessed the validity and reliability of the measurement model (Table 7). Skewness, kurtosis values and items' factor loadings (ranging from 0.725 to 0.956) were within the acceptable range. The measurement model demonstrated convergent and discriminant validity, yielding a good fit (χ^2 = 305.131, df = 167, χ^2/df = 1.827, CFI = 0.979, SRMR = 0.036, RMSEA = 0.047).

Using the same procedure in Study 1, we checked CMV. The slight differences (<0.200) in regression weights and poor data fit of the single-factor model (χ^2 = 2964.776, df = 170, χ^2/df = 17.440, CFI = 0.583, SRMR = 0.207, RMSEA = 0.180) suggested that CMV is not a significant issue in the current study.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of participants of Study 1

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Variable	Frequency	Percent
Sex			Age		
Female	251	65.5	20 and below	15	3.9
Male	132	34.5	21–30	103	26.9
Total	383	100	31–40	117	30.5
Position			41–50	120	31.3
Manager	28	7.3	51 and above	28	7.3
Administrative	35	9.1	Total	383	100
Doctor	42	11.0	Education		
Nurse	143	37.3	High school	35	9.1
Medical Secretary	58	15.1	Associate degree	108	28.2
Others	77	20.1	Graduate	159	41.5
Total	383	100	Postgraduate	81	21.2
Marital status			Total	383	100
Married	251	65.5			
Single	132	34.5			
Total	383	100			

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Table 7. CR, AVE, MSV and Cronbach values of scales

	CR	AVE	MSV	HTMT	Cronbach
WSC	0.956	0.663	0.172	–	0.955
Defensive Silence	0.958	0.819	0.172	0.414	0.957
Performance	0.895	0.681	0.159	0.403	0.891

Note(s): CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted; MSV = Maximum shared variance; HTMT = Hetotrait-monotrait; WSC = Workplace social courage

Control variables. We examined the correlation between demographic variables (age, position, education and marital status) and found that they did not significantly relate to the study variables. Like Study 1, the absence of significant zero-order correlations with the focal constructs suggests that these variables were unlikely to serve as pertinent confounding factors within the theoretical framework. Consequently, to maintain the parsimony of the structural equation model and to concentrate on the principal relationships posited by Social Role Theory and Approach-Avoidance Theory, we omitted these variables as control variables in the SEM.

Analysis and results. Table 8 shows the descriptive statistics of variables in Study 2. The means of the variables were slightly below the mid-point (WSC was scaled from 1 to 7), except for self-perceived performance. Notably, WSC was significantly and negatively correlated with defensive silence and positively correlated with performance.

Independent sample *t*-test showed that the mean of men's WSC was not significantly higher than women's ($M_{male} = 3.83$, $SD_{male} = 0.84$, $M_{female} = 3.75$, $SD_{female} = 0.83$, $t = -0.872$, df = 381, $p > 0.05$). We did not accept Hypothesis 1b. Negative and significant correlations between WSC and silence supported Hypothesis 4, and the positive relationship between WSC and performance supported Hypothesis 6. These relationships suggest that WSC is a potential antecedent of silence and performance.

We investigated measurement invariance with MGCFA using the same procedure in Study 1. When we examined fixed residuals of the measurement model, significant chi-square differences indicated that the model was not invariant. The differences in residuals for genders showed that performance items 1 and 4, and silence item 1 had different residuals. We achieved strict invariance by freely calculating these items. There were no differences for genders regarding the strict invariance of the social courage scale. Table 9 shows the fit values of the four invariance factor models.

The multigroup structural model analysis showed that the associations of WSC with silence and performance were slightly higher for men than women (Table 10). These results supported Hypotheses 5 and 7. The difference between genders had medium and large effect sizes (Hedge's g = 0.44 and 1.55, respectively).

Discussion of study 2

Consistent with Study 1, Study 2 found no significant mean-level difference in WSC between men and women, again challenging the traditional gender stereotype. However, the results did

Table 8. Means, standard deviations and correlations

	M	SD	1	2
1. WSC	3.78	0.84		
2. Defensive silence	1.90	0.90	−0.431**	
3. Performance	3.29	0.75	0.426**	−0.221**

Note(s): **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed), WSC = Workplace social courage

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Table 9. Fit indexes of invariance factor models

Nested models	χ^2 (df), p	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$ (df), p	ΔCFI
Configural invariance	485 (334), $p < 0.01$	0.977	0.035	0.040	–	–
Metric invariance	505 (354), $p < 0.01$	0.977	0.034	0.042	19 (20), $p > 0.05$	0.000
Scalar invariance	528 (374), $p < 0.01$	0.977	0.033	0.041	23 (20), $p > 0.05$	0.000
Strict invariance	554 (391), $p < 0.01$	0.975	0.034	0.044	26 (17), $p > 0.05$	0.002

Note(s): χ^2 = chi-squared test; df = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = Standardized root mean square residual

Table 10. Results of multigroup analysis for WSC predicting silence and performance

Path	Men (n = 132) Effect	S.E.	p	Women (n = 251) Effect	S.E.	p	Hedges' g
Silence ← WSC	−0.439	0.093	001	−0.404	0.070	0.001	0.44
Performance ← WSC	0.476	0.077	0.001	0.364	0.069	0.001	1.55

Note(s): WSC = Workplace social courage

show that WSC was a significant predictor of important workplace outcomes, negatively correlating with defensive silence and positively with job performance, thus supporting Hypotheses 4 and 6.

More importantly, Study 2 again revealed the nuanced role of gender as a moderator. The effects of WSC on reducing defensive silence and enhancing job performance were significantly stronger for men than for women. This finding supports Hypotheses 5 and 7 and aligns with research by Tkachenko *et al.* (2020). Drawing on social role theory, this may be because agentic behaviors, which include acting courageously to achieve outcomes, are more consistent with male gender roles. When men act courageously, people may perceive it as a more precise and more potent signal of their competence and drive, leading to a more substantial positive impact on their performance and a greater willingness to break the silence. In essence, the same act of WSC, when performed by a man, people may interpret it as "leadership" or "assertiveness" (agentic traits), while when performed by a woman, they might perceive it as "abrasive" or "disruptive" (communal norm violation). This perceptual bias could explain why men appear to reap greater instrumental rewards (higher performance, less fear of future silence) from their courageous acts. For men, courage appears to be a more powerful tool for achieving instrumental outcomes at work.

General discussion

Across two studies in different professional sectors in Turkey, this research sought to move beyond the simplistic implicit theory that men are more courageous than women. Our findings were consistent and clear: we found no evidence that men self-report more WSC than women. This repeated null finding provides a significant contribution, adding to a growing body of literature that debunks the pervasive gender stereotype in an organizational context.

However, the central contribution of our research lies in revealing gender's complex and significant moderating role. The story is not that one gender is more courageous, but that the triggers and consequences of that courage differ between them. In our first study, interactional justice, being treated with respect and dignity by superiors, more strongly facilitated women's path to WSC. This suggests that creating a relationally fair and supportive environment constitutes a particularly potent lever for enabling WSC in female employees (Simola, 2015).

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Conversely, our second study showed that when WSC is enacted, it yields stronger positive outcomes for men. For them, WSC was a more powerful driver of increased job performance and reduced defensive silence (Carver *et al.*, 2013).

Theoretical implications

Our findings have several important theoretical implications. First, they enrich social role and trait activation theories by demonstrating a tangible interaction between them. Specifically, the situation (interactional justice) more strongly activates the behavioral trait (WSC) for women, aligning with their communal social roles. Conversely, the expression of that trait yields outcomes (performance, reduced silence) that are more potent for men, consistent with their agentic social roles. Our study clarifies that gender roles do not necessarily dictate the presence of a trait but fundamentally moderate the process by which it is activated and the consequences it produces.

Second, we contribute to the nascent literature on WSC by providing a more nuanced understanding of the nomological network. We confirm that interactional justice is a key antecedent and that performance and silence are key outcomes. However, we qualify these relationships by showing that they are not uniform.

Any future theory on WSC must account for gender not just as a potential control variable but as a critical boundary condition shaping the entire process. Furthermore, our findings contribute directly to ongoing scholarly debates surrounding gender stereotyping, diversity and inclusion in organizations. By repeatedly finding no mean-level difference in courage, our research challenges a persistent and damaging stereotype that can create unfair barriers and evaluation biases against women in roles requiring proactive, risk-taking behaviors. More subtly, our moderation findings speak to the literature on second-generation gender bias, which describes how ostensibly neutral workplace practices can inadvertently favor one gender over another.

The finding that women's WSC is more contingent on relational fairness (interactional justice) suggests that lacking such an environment disproportionately silences female employees, hindering inclusion. The fact that men reap greater performance and voice benefits from the same courageous acts highlights how reward systems for these behaviors may be implicitly biased, reinforcing agentic male stereotypes. Thus, our model provides a clear theoretical illustration of how to move beyond "fixing the women" and instead focus on fixing the systemic conditions and biases that produce inequitable outcomes.

Finally, by conducting this research in Turkey, we answer the call for more culturally diverse studies and provide an important non-Western data point. While one may interpret the moderating patterns we found through universal theories, such as social role theory, the specific cultural context of high-power distance and collectivism likely amplifies the importance of respectful treatment (interactional justice) for all employees, particularly for women navigating these structures. This opens avenues for future cross-cultural research on courage.

Practical implications

Our findings provide several concrete, evidence-based recommendations for managers, HR professionals and organizational leaders. The fact that we found men not to be more courageous suggests that organizational initiatives should not focus on trying to make women "braver." Instead, leaders should focus on creating a psychologically safe and just environment that enables courage for all.

First, our findings regarding interactional justice provide a clear directive for managers seeking to cultivate WSC, particularly among female employees. Since the relationship between interactional justice and WSC was significantly stronger for women, organizations should prioritize training for managers on exhibiting exemplary communication behaviors, such as providing personalized, respectful and timely explanations for decisions and listening

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actively to employee concerns, as these specific actions serve as powerful "courage triggers" for women (e.g. in weekly one-on-one meetings or specific post-decision debriefings).

Second, while WSC generally benefits the organization, the stronger outcomes observed for men (greater reduction in defensive silence, higher performance) suggest that male employees may more easily recognize and use courage in the workplace for career growth. To ensure fair reward and recognition for WSC across genders, organizations should proactively design communication channels and team environments that legitimize and explicitly reward speaking up, regardless of gender. For example, managers could introduce a "challenge accepted" protocol where they formally document all critical feedback and credit it to the person who offers it, and they could implement "low-stakes" speaking opportunities, such as anonymous suggestion boxes or designated "safe-to-disagree" time slots in meetings, especially in male-dominated teams, to make the behavior more normal.

Third, the differing impact of WSC on outcomes based on gender highlights the need for bias-aware performance management systems. Organizations must go beyond basic performance review training and implement targeted modules that focus on recognizing and reducing "courage-gender bias," i.e. the tendency to favor attributing positive outcomes of courage to men. Practically, this involves using structured evaluation checklists that separate the content of the courageous act (e.g. the quality of the suggested improvement) from the demeanor of the person delivering it, thereby ensuring that performance evaluation is based on what was said, not who said it.

Finally, for Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) operating in cultures with high power distance or traditional gender roles, like Turkey, our findings are particularly salient. Expatriate and local managers must receive training to understand that fostering an environment of high interactional justice is critical and may be even more effective in enabling employee voice and courage than in a low-power-distance, individualistic home culture.

Limitations and future research

This study has limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, our reliance on self-report, single-source data warrants a critical discussion of potential biases. Although our statistical checks for common method variance did not suggest it was a significant issue in our models, the influence of social desirability bias requires deeper consideration. This is particularly salient for a construct like WSC, as courage is a highly valued social virtue, and participants may be inclined to report levels of courage that align with their ideal self-image rather than their actual behavior. While this bias may have inflated the overall reported means of WSC in our samples, it is difficult to ascertain whether it would systematically differ by gender. One could argue that social expectations for men to be agentic may lead to greater social desirability pressure on them to report high levels of courage. Conversely, women might feel pressure to report courage to counteract prevailing stereotypes. Since we found no mean-level gender difference, it is possible these effects either cancelled each other out or were not substantial enough to create a difference. Nonetheless, this remains a key interpretative challenge. Therefore, future research should move beyond simple self-reports and employ more robust designs to mitigate this bias. For instance, experimental studies using carefully designed vignettes could assess behavioral intentions in response to specific workplace scenarios. Additionally, future survey research could incorporate a measure of social desirability (e.g. the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale) to statistically control for this tendency. Validating our findings with multi-source designs, such as collecting peer or supervisor ratings of an employee's courageous behavior and objective performance data, also remains a critical next step.

Second, the cross-sectional design prevented us from making definitive causal claims. While our model was grounded in theory, the relationships could be reciprocal. For example, high performance may embolden an employee to act more courageously. Longitudinal or experimental studies are necessary to untangle the causal ordering of these variables.

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Third, while we used two different sectors to enhance generalizability, we did not directly measure organizational culture. Future research should explicitly measure cultural variables (e.g. psychological safety, ethical climate) to test whether they mediate or moderate the relationships we observed.

Fourth, our study provides an important non-Western data point but does not include a direct cross-cultural comparison. Future research should aim to empirically test the boundary conditions we have identified by conducting comparative studies across cultures with different value profiles (e.g. comparing a collectivistic, high-power-distance culture, such as Turkey, with an individualistic, low-power-distance culture, like a Scandinavian country or the USA). Such research could directly examine how cultural dimensions moderate the gendered pathways to courage, providing a richer and more comprehensive understanding of this vital workplace behavior.

While the moderating patterns we found are interpretable through universal theories, such as social role theory, the specific cultural context of high-power distance and collectivism in Turkey likely amplifies the importance of respectful treatment (interactional justice) for all employees, particularly for women navigating these structures. Conversely, one might speculate that in cultures with low power distance and high individualism, courageous acts may be more common. However, people may judge them more on their merit or alignment with agentic ideals, potentially strengthening the performance link for both genders while reducing the differential impact of interactional justice we observed. This highlights the need for a culturally contingent model of courage and opens new avenues for future cross-cultural research.

Finally, future studies should explore other antecedents and consequences. For example, how do individual differences like personality or self-efficacy interact with gender to predict WSC? Furthermore, how does WSC impact other outcomes like employee well-being, burnout or career progression and does gender moderate these relationships as well?

Conclusion

This research challenged the implicit theory that men are more courageous than women in the workplace. While the results did not support this stereotype, our findings revealed a more complex reality: gender significantly moderates the WSC process. Women's enactment of courage was more contingent on receiving fair and respectful interpersonal treatment, while men's WSC translated more powerfully into improved performance and reduced silence. Moving the conversation from "who is more courageous in a workplace?" to "how does WSC work differently for men and women?" provides a more nuanced and actionable understanding for both theory and practice. Ultimately, organizations should aim to create an environment where everyone, regardless of gender, feels empowered to act courageously for the collective good.

Ethical approval

This research was approved by the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Antalya Bilim University (Decision No: 2023/51, dated November 1, 2023). All procedures performed in this study were conducted in accordance with institutional and national research ethics guidelines.

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