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Social influence of a coworker: A test of the effect of employee and coworker exchange ideologies on employees' exchange qualities

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ABSTRACT

Integrating social comparison and social influence perspective within a social exchange theoretical framework, we examine how the exchange ideologies of employees and their coworkers affect the quality of the employees' social exchanges. Drawing from social exchange theory, we hypothesize that the exchange ideology of a focal employee has a negative relationship with the quality of his/her social exchange with the organization (i.e., felt obligation) and the quality of his/her social exchange with a leader (i.e., leader–member exchange), both of which are related to task performance. Furthermore, we propose that a coworker close to the employee acts as a social referent and provides cues to exert influence on these relationships. Using data collected from 374 (employee–coworker–manager) triads in Hong Kong, we find support for the aforementioned relationships as well as the moderating roles of a coworker's exchange ideology.

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Introduction

The social exchange perspective provides an overarching theoretical framework for investigating relationships among various concepts such as leader–member exchange (LMX), felt obligation, and perceived organizational support (e.g., Aryee, Budhwar, & Chen, 2002; Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007; Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, & Chen, 2005). Although scholars have emphasized the importance of individual differences in the workplace (e.g., Hertz & Donovan, 2000; Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002; Orvis, Dudley, & Cortina, 2008), the role of exchange ideology—defined as “the strength of an employee's belief that work effort should depend on treatment by the organization” Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa (1986, p. 503)—has not been examined in detail (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Understanding the role of exchange ideology is critical as individuals are likely to have different beliefs regarding which reciprocity norms are appropriate, based on their predisposition toward these types of exchanges. Even if a norm of reciprocity is a human universal, Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) emphasized that not all individuals value reciprocity to the same degree. Thus, assuming that everyone has reciprocity norms of equal strength (i.e., a similar level of exchange ideology) may lead to incorrect conclusions about the quality of social exchange and its

consequences (cf. Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Flynn & Brockner, 2003). Ignoring an individual's exchange norm makes the examination of social exchange in the workplace incomplete. Recognizing this issue, this study examined the role of exchange ideology, i.e., individual differences regarding exchange norms, in determining the quality of social exchange in the workplace and its consequences.

Social exchange theory thus comprises the underpinnings of this study, explicating (a) the relationship between employee exchange ideology and the quality of social exchanges with the organization and with the leader and (b) the mediating role this social exchange quality plays in the relationship between employee exchange ideology and employee behaviors (task performance). We select exchange ideology because it is a key individual difference construct, considered important to social exchange in the workplace (cf. Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Scott & Colquitt, 2007). Furthermore, we investigate the role of one coworker, especially a coworker's exchange ideology, as an important contextual factor that is likely to influence an employee's perception of social exchange quality as well as the consequences of that quality. According to social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), an individual's attitude is not only determined by his/her own needs but is also strongly shaped by the environment. When employees evaluate their exchange relationships with the organization, they are likely to be influenced by social comparison and social information cues given by immediate referents (Ho & Levesque, 2005). A coworker can be a critical source of information and an important immediate referent. We conceptualize and test

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the moderating effects of a coworker's exchange ideology on the relationship between employee exchange ideology and the quality of an employee's exchange relationships at work (felt obligation and LMX) as well as the consequences of that quality—i.e., the relationship between social exchange quality and task performance.

This study, thus, contributes to the social exchange literature and the coworker influence literature in several ways. First, we highlight the important (direct as well as indirect) roles an individual employee's exchange ideology plays in determining the quality of social exchange in the workplace and its consequences in terms of employee task performance, issues that have not been investigated to date. Second and perhaps more importantly, we develop theoretical arguments for the moderating roles of coworker exchange ideology.

Specifically, we illustrate two different manners in which a coworker can exert influence on the focal employee: (1) as a social referent for the focal employee to compare his/her own standing with and (2) as a social referent for the focal employee to evaluate the appropriate amount of reciprocation. The first mechanism explains the moderating effects of coworker exchange ideology on the relationship between the focal employee's exchange ideology and the quality of his/her social exchanges [LMX and felt obligation to the organization] and the second mechanism explains the moderating effects of coworker exchange ideology on the relationship between the focal employee's social exchange quality and his/her task performance. In this study, we collected data from 376 Chinese employee–coworker–manager triads using questionnaires to test these hypotheses. Fig. 1 illustrates our proposed model and the relationships we hypothesize.

Theoretical overview and hypotheses development

Researchers have investigated the role an individual's exchange ideology plays during social exchange processes because exchange ideology is one important individual difference that affects reciprocity norms (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Exchange ideology captures “both an employee's expectation of and likely behavioral response to exchange relationships within a given organization or organizational member” (Scott & Colquitt, 2007, pp. 295–296). For instance, Scott and Colquitt (2007) found that exchange ideology acted as a significant moderator of several justice–outcome relationships, and its moderating impact was more powerful than the Big Five personality traits. However, research on exchange ideology is still limited. For instance, we know little about the main effects of exchange ideology, although it is expected that people's exchange ideologies have a direct effect on the quality of their social exchanges. Considering that researchers have paid great attention to the main effects of individual differences such as the Big Five personality traits on various outcomes and that an individual's

exchange ideology is likely to influence his/her exchange relationships in the workplace, it would be fruitful to examine the main effects of exchange ideology in this context. In this study, we thus investigate the main effects of an employee's own exchange ideology on the perceived quality of his/her social exchanges (i.e., leader–member exchange and felt obligation) and the associated task performance.

Furthermore, we focus on a coworker as the key social referent in this study for several reasons. First, coworkers are not only a crucial part of the social environment at work but can actually define the environment (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Recently, Chiaburu and Harrison (2008, p. 1089) found that the influence of coworkers is critical, making “a case for greater attention to lateral relationships in organizational research.” Second, according to equity theory (Adams, 1965), an employee's job satisfaction and job performance are potentially influenced by his/her social comparison with the outcome–input ratio of other employees. Generally, within the organization, coworkers should be the most relevant referent for social comparisons to be made against. The social comparison literature has shown that social comparisons influence an individual's evaluation in multiple ways (Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004). Third, employee–coworker relationships have become more important, as an increasing number of organizations have adopted flatter organizational and team-based structures. As a result, there is a real possibility that coworkers do influence fellow employees in the workplace (cf. Jackson & LePine, 2003; LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; Umphress, Labianca, Brass, Kass, & Scholten, 2003). All of the above suggest that a coworker plays a significant role as a social referent in the workplace. Reflecting changes in the work environment, scholars have paid increasing attention to the role of coworker (e.g., Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). In line with this research endeavor, we suggest that a coworker has critical influence on a focal employee's interpretation of his/her workplace, which in turn influences the employee's exchange relationships, attitudes, and behaviors. Among the many characteristics of a coworker, we suggest that a coworker's exchange ideology can influence a focal employee since this characteristic can be considered one of the central aspects of the social exchange perspective (Scott & Colquitt, 2007).

The direct effects of employee exchange ideology

Exchange ideology as an individual difference trait was first examined by Eisenberger et al. (1986). Employees with a strong exchange ideology focus more on what they receive than on what they give, and prefer quid pro quo exchanges with a quick turnaround (Eisenberger et al. 1986). While a limited number of studies that examined the main (Pazy & Ganzach, 2010) as well as moderating effects of exchange ideology (e.g., Andrews, Witt, & Kacmar,

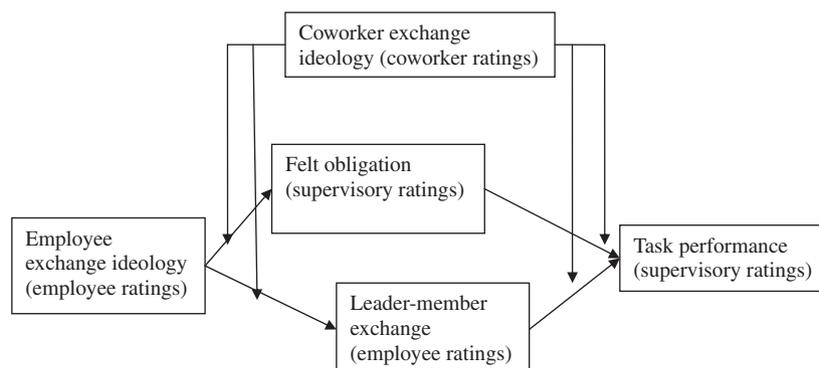


Fig. 1. Coworker social referent influence model.

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