



Gender differences in the impact of leadership styles on subordinate embeddedness and job satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

It is not surprising that subordinates generally prefer high-quality relationships with their supervisors. However, gender may influence the *specific characteristics* subordinates use to make this judgment, thereby impacting important downstream workplace processes and outcomes. Drawing from Social Role Theory, we use moderated mediation analyses across two independent samples to show that communally oriented leader–member exchange (LMX) dimensions (i.e., Affect and Loyalty) positively influence the job embeddedness of female (but not male) subordinates, whereas agentically oriented LMX dimensions (i.e., Professional Respect and Contribution) influence both genders equally. We found these effects despite strong LMX facet intercorrelations (ranging from $r = .68$ to $.81$), thereby highlighting the utility of testing theoretically driven dimensional effects, even when facets overlap significantly.

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Introduction

The supervisor–subordinate relationship influences a myriad of important organizational outcomes. This is the case because leaders are more than just managers of work-related information and behavior – they also guide, support, and inspire their subordinates (Cable & Judge, 2003; Falbe & Yukl, 1992). Indeed, subordinates perceive supervisors as their most immediate organizational representatives, and use exchange quality as an indicant of organizational acceptance (Collins, Mossholder, & Taylor, 2012). As such, quality relations with supervisors contribute to embedding employees into their jobs (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Harris, Wheeler, & Kacmar, 2011; Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004).

One of the most common ways to conceptualize supervisor–subordinate relation quality is Leader Member Exchange Theory (LMX), which posits that each supervisor–subordinate dyad is unique. As such, leaders form different types of relationships with their subordinates, ranging from those focused on contractual obligations (i.e., “out-group”) to those based on mutual trust and admiration (i.e., “in-group”) – Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975). Not surprisingly, meta-analytic evidence (Gerstner & Day, 1997) suggests that LMX quality is associated with key outcomes including subordinate job satisfaction ($r = .50$), organizational commitment ($r = .42$), and turnover intent ($r = -.31$).

Although leaders are responsible for enacting a broad range of behaviors, LMX is frequently treated as a unitary construct (e.g., Dulebohn et al., 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; Kang, Stewart, & Kim, 2011; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002). For example, Harris et al. (2011) showed that job embeddedness mediates the relationship between

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high quality LMX relationships and positive workplace outcomes (e.g., increased job satisfaction, decreased turnover intent, and decreased actual turnover), but these authors implicitly assumed this process was consistent across the various facets of LMX and among different types of subordinates. An alternative approach, however, predicts that “explicitly treating LMX as a multidimensional construct may provide theoretical clarity as well as greater precision in empirical research” (Dienesch & Liden, 1986, p. 624). Consistent with this perspective, we posit that there are *a priori* reasons to believe that the process outlined by Harris et al. is not consistent across LMX facets.

The present investigation tests this prediction, using a two-fold rationale for doing so: (1) the facets of LMX evaluate fundamentally different aspects of leader–member relationships (Carver, 1989; Liden & Maslyn, 1998) and (2) disparate socialization experiences lead men and women to expect different types of relationships with their supervisors (Eagly, 1987). We first describe how and why job embeddedness connects LMX to job satisfaction. After establishing this linkage, we then explain how extant theory, coupled with a facet-based understanding of LMX, helps shed new light on gender as a critical boundary condition of this process. We then utilize a rigorous analytic framework (i.e., moderated mediation) to examine how subordinate gender influences perceptions of four LMX dimensions, thereby affecting the underlying process identified by Harris et al. (2011).

Job embeddedness as a mediating mechanism

One mechanism shown to mediate leader–member relationships and valued workplace outcomes is job embeddedness (Harris et al., 2011), broadly conceptualized as the extent to which employees feel connected to their job or organization (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Erez, 2001). More specifically, Mitchell and colleagues advanced this concept to explain how individual linkages (i.e., connections to valued aspects of one’s work) collectively reinforce employees’ willingness to remain in their jobs. As such, job embeddedness represents a web of influences that enmesh individuals in their workplace. Job embeddedness has been related to organizational outcomes such as voluntary turnover, actual turnover, work attitudes, and job performance (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006; Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2001).

Harris et al. (2011) showed that the LMX–job embeddedness link “increases job satisfaction and decreases turnover intentions and behaviors” (p. 277). The explanation for this mediated relationship centers on Conservation of Resources Theory (CoR; Hobfoll, 1989), which states that employees seek to accumulate, protect, and allocate a diverse array of resources. Ultimately, then, working with supervisors who compliment their preferred working style reduces the energy subordinates must exert to maintain this relationship. In the following section, we outline why subordinate gender likely influences the attractiveness of the various dimensions of LMX, thereby differentially affecting employees’ embeddedness and subsequent downstream outcomes.

The moderating role of gender

Extant research suggests that men and women respond differently to various aspects of social relationships, which can be categorized as either communal or agentic (Bakan, 1966; Eagly, 1987; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). The communal dimension is interpersonally oriented and broadly described as a concern for the welfare of others (e.g., nurturing, sympathetic, friendly), with women scoring higher on this dimension than men (Eagly, 1987, 2009; Spence & Buckner, 2000). The agentic dimension is task-oriented and defined by independent, masterful, and assertive tendencies (e.g., competitive, ambitious, dominating), with men scoring higher on this dimension than women (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Spence & Buckner, 2000).

Social Role Theory undergirds the proposed moderator effects, positing that differences in societal roles lead men and women to demonstrate and value different types of interpersonal behaviors (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Because men traditionally occupy more managerial and executive roles, they tend to value and engage in more agentic behaviors, whereas, because women traditionally occupy more caretaking roles, they tend to value and engage in more communal behaviors (Eagly, 1987; Koenig et al., 2011). Consistent with this notion, Eagly and colleagues (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Hesselbart, 1977) found small or no gender differences in the agentic behaviors of men and women who occupy leadership roles.

In addition, they found stereotypical gender differences in laboratory settings (where leaders have not been selected, trained, or socialized), thereby neutralizing the effects of occupational roles and increasing the salience of socially influenced gender roles (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Further, even in leadership roles, gender differences exist along the communal dimension (Moskowitz, Suh, & Desaulniers, 1994) as female leaders show empathy and build relationships more readily than their male counterparts (Fletcher, Jordan, & Miller, 2000). Taken together, these findings suggest that both genders internalize the agentic component of their leadership roles, but female leaders also enact socially influenced, communal behaviors (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001) (Fig. 1).

Hypotheses

Harris et al. (2011) took steps to explain how job embeddedness intervenes between LMX and various outcomes but, again, they treated LMX as a unitary construct. By examining LMX in this manner, the Harris et al. study precluded a fine-grained test of the aforementioned gender-based effects on subordinates’ preferred leader behavior (i.e., agentic *versus* communal). To extend the findings of Harris et al., while simultaneously testing the utility of the LMX facet-based approach, we use Liden and Maslyn’s (1998) LMX model, which specifies four facets of leadership behavior. Affect and Loyalty represent the communal dimension of leader behavior and Contribution and Professional Respect comprise the agentic.

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