



A team level investigation of the relationship between Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) differentiation, and commitment and performance

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ABSTRACT

Although the differential treatment of team members by their leader is at the heart of Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, empirical studies exploring the role of within-team LMX differentiation in relation to team outcomes are still relatively scarce. This study among 269 Dutch secondary school teachers from 33 different teams tested the hypotheses that the relationship between LMX differentiation and team commitment, and team performance is moderated by LMX-quality median. Moreover, we hypothesized that team members' perceived dissimilarity regarding work values and orientations would be positively related to within-team LMX differentiation. Teachers completed questionnaires on LMX-quality, dissimilarity, and team commitment, whereas team performance was rated by school principals. Results indeed showed that LMX differentiation is positively related to both outcome variables in teams with a low LMX-quality median only. As expected, more perceived dissimilarity between team members was related to more within-team variability in LMX-scores. These results contribute to knowledge on hypothetical antecedents and consequences of LMX differentiation at the team level.

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1. Introduction

Leader Member Exchange (LMX)-theory contends that leaders develop differential types of relationships with each of their subordinates through a series of work-related exchanges (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987). The so-called quality of these leader–member exchange (LMX) relationships is assumed to reflect the extent to which leader and subordinate mutually exchange resources and support. Whereas low quality LMX-relationships are based on exchanges directly specified by the employment contract, high quality LMX relationships include exchanges of both material and non-material goods beyond what is required by the formal employment contract. In the latter type of relationships, LMX-partners generally show high levels of mutual respect, trust, affection and obligation (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen, 1976; Graen & Schiemann, 1978; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993). The development of differential relationships among leaders and the subordinates who report directly to them in their work groups is referred to as LMX differentiation (Liden, Erdogan, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2006, in: Henderson, Liden, Glibowski, & Chaudry, 2009). High differentiation within a work-group or team suggests that there is a broad range in (the perceptions of) overall LMX-quality, whereas low differentiation refers to a context in which the range of overall LMX quality within a work-group or team is small (Henderson et al., 2009).

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Given its explicit focus on the quality of the exchange relationship that develops between a leader and each follower, the vast majority of empirical research on the LMX-theory has concentrated on testing relationships between LMX-quality and work-related outcomes at the dyadic (i.e., leader–member) level. Over the past decades, many studies have supported the positive effects of high LMX-quality on individual employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, job involvement, in-role performance, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior and decreased propensity to quit (see e.g., Duarte, Goodson, & Klich, 1993; Epitropaki & Martin, 1999; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; LePine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002; Vecchio, 1982). However, the prevailing individual level focus in research on LMX is surprising, given that the LMX model was originally advanced to account for how leaders' differential treatment of multiple subordinates in a work group influences activity within the group (Henderson et al., 2009). Though individual-level perceptions of LMX-quality are reflective of interpersonal social exchange behaviors and motives in the leader–member dyad, they do not capture how within-group patterns in LMX-quality may create a social context that influences employee attitudes and behaviors (Henderson et al., 2009; Mayer & Piccolo, 2006). As Day and Schyns (2010) note, the different relationships a leader has with each follower can influence other relationships in the collective, and thus affect the results of leadership at the work group level.

LMX differentiation can be considered the core element of the LMX-model (Henderson et al., 2009). However, empirical research on the role of LMX differentiation at the (work) group or team level is still scarce and its results are inconsistent. Recently, two studies tested the interaction effect between LMX differentiation and mean or median LMX-quality at the team level (Boies & Howell, 2006; Liden et al., 2006). Whereas Liden et al. (2006) found a significant interaction effect on team performance that showed the expected sign, Boies and Howell (2006) found a significant interaction effect on team potency and team conflict that showed a sign contrary to what was expected. So, the role of LMX differentiation at the team level is still far from clear, and more research on this construct is needed in order to advance LMX-theory. This research will contribute to moving this theory into its fourth stage of development as identified by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), in which leader–member relationships are studied within their respective work unit. Therefore, the main goal of the present study is to examine the relationship between LMX differentiation and two relevant team outcomes (team performance and affective team commitment). As we will show later, we hypothesize that this relationship is moderated by LMX-quality median. Taking into account the central role that LMX differentiation has within LMX-theory, it is also theoretically important to identify its antecedents, so that its nomological network becomes clearer. Thus, we will also examine whether perceived dissimilarity among team members is related to LMX differentiation.

Besides being important from a theoretical perspective, as outlined above, an increased understanding of the role of LMX-differentiation is also relevant from a practical point of view. Nowadays many organizations are organizing work around teams as the basic unit of their structure. Thus, the examination of leadership effects at the group level might be particularly relevant for organizations where leaders lead teams rather than single individuals, and where the work is organized around whole units (Boies & Howell, 2006). Gaining more detailed insight into the circumstances under which LMX differentiation is either functional or dysfunctional, may be useful to design strategies for managing teams based on LMX propositions. For instance, if LMX differentiation is found to be functional when the general (median) level of LMX-quality within a team is low, team managers should learn to build differentiated leader–member relationships with specific team members.

2. LMX differentiation, team performance and affective team commitment

The present team-level study investigates the relationships between within-team LMX differentiation and two team-level outcomes, i.e. team performance and affective team commitment. These outcomes were selected based on their empirically supported relationships with LMX-quality at the individual, i.e., dyadic, level (e.g., Dunegan, Duchon, & Uhl-Bien, 1992; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen, Scandura, & Graen, 1986; LaGrace, 1990; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Nystrom, 1990; Seers & Graen, 1984; Vecchio, 1987) as well as their relevance for team functioning.

As regards our first outcome variable, team performance, it may be argued that this is actually the key criterion for leadership effectiveness. Liden et al. (2006) argue that LMX will be seen as an incomplete theory of leadership to the extent that it is unable to offer an account of how leaders affect the performance of their groups.

Analogous to affective organizational commitment, affective team commitment can be defined as the individual's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the team. In contrast to continuance and normative commitment, affective commitment is governed by free choice. Individuals with a strong affective commitment continue employment because they *want* to do so, and not because they *should* do so (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Therefore, we expect this dimension of commitment to be particularly related to employees' (perceived) LMX-quality. Moreover, in a meta-analysis on the antecedents, correlates and consequences of the three subdimensions of commitment, Meyer, Stanley, Herscovich, and Topolnysky (2002) showed that affective commitment has the strongest, positive correlation with desirable work outcomes (i.e., attendance, job performance and organizational citizenship behavior). We argue that affective commitment plays a particularly important role at the team level, because team functioning implies a great deal of concerted action that is facilitated when team members share a high level of affective attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the team.

2.1. LMX-median as a moderator

According to Henderson et al. (2009, p. 529), current research should explore the relationship of LMX differentiation and median LMX quality as joint determinants of group performance. Previous studies (Boies & Howell, 2006; Liden et al., 2006) were not

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