

# Leader–member exchange in a Chinese context: Antecedents, the mediating role of psychological empowerment and outcomes

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## Abstract

This study examines organizational antecedents of LMX and the mediating influence of empowerment on the relationships between LMX and the work outcomes of job satisfaction, task performance and psychological withdrawal behavior. Data were obtained from employees of a listed Chinese company in Guangdong Province, People's Republic of China. The results revealed that: (a) supervisor control of rewards and work unit climate were related to LMX and (b) empowerment fully mediated the relationship between LMX and the work outcomes as hypothesized.

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As a foundational aspect of organizational dynamics, the leader–subordinate relationship has witnessed a steady stream of research activity. Over the years, leader–member exchange (LMX) has emerged as an alternative framework to the average leadership style (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 1989), in research on the leader–subordinate relationship (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen and Cashman, 1975). The central premise of LMX is the recognition that leaders develop different relationships with each subordinate, ranging from low to high quality. LMX quality has been reported to be related to task performance (Dansereau et al., 1975; Hui et al., 1999), citizenship behavior (Hui et al., 1999; Wayne et al., 1997), turnover (Graen et al., 1982), organizational commitment (Green et al., 1996) and job satisfaction (Dansereau et al., 1975; Green et al., 1996).

Given the importance of the demonstrated outcomes of LMX quality, it is not surprising that much research effort has been devoted to uncovering its antecedents. While

research has examined subordinate and leader characteristics like competence and extroversion (Phillips and Bedeian, 1994), interactional variables like perceived similarity (Liden et al., 1993; Phillips and Bedeian, 1994) and influence processes (Wayne and Ferris, 1990), organizational antecedents have been relatively neglected (Cogliser and Schriesheim, 2000; Green et al., 1996). This is particularly unfortunate given the organizational context of the leader–subordinate relationship and the recognition that leadership processes are influenced by their larger context (Stewart, 1982). To address this imbalance, recent reviews of the LMX literature (Gerstner and Day, 1997; Liden et al., 1997) have echoed Dienesch and Liden's (1986) call for research to focus on organizational influences on the LMX process. Consequently, the first objective of this study is to examine some organizational antecedents of LMX quality.

Much of the research that has examined the work outcomes of LMX quality has adopted a main effect approach in that, this research has failed to explicate how and why LMX quality is related to the work outcomes examined (Liden et al., 2000). Keller and Dansereau (1995) noted that supervisors utilize leadership techniques with

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high quality LMX subordinates and supervision techniques with low quality LMX subordinates. Central to these leadership techniques are the support, decisional influence and task challenge enjoyed by high quality LMX subordinates. Such leadership techniques may result in these subordinates experiencing meaningful work, self-determination, self-efficacy and competence all of which constitute the defining elements of psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995a). Consequently, the demonstrated work outcomes of LMX quality may be indirect through the intrinsically motivating work experience of psychological empowerment. The second objective of this study is to examine the mediating role of psychological empowerment in the relationship between LMX quality and the work outcomes of job satisfaction, task performance and psychological withdrawal behavior.

Much of the research on LMX, its antecedents and outcomes has been based on US samples. Although the scant research on LMX based on non-US samples in collectivistic cultures has shown LMX to be a relevant construct (Hui et al., 1999; Law et al., 2000), research in such cultures has yet to examine antecedents of LMX and the mechanisms through which LMX influences its demonstrated outcomes (Erdogan and Liden, 2002). The LMX construct is particularly important in the collectivistic culture of China because the person-oriented nature of Chinese societies and the absence of impersonal notions of authority make personalism an important basis for decision making. Personalism describes a tendency to use personal criteria and relationships as a basis for decision making and action (Westwood, 1997). This makes a subordinate's inclusion in a supervisor's in-group important as it determines whether he or she enjoys the patronage of the supervisor. Further, the only study that examined the mediating influence of empowerment on the LMX–work outcome relationship (Liden et al., 2000) was conducted in the US. Given that empowerment has implications for the distribution of authority and control, its effectiveness in explicating the LMX–work outcome relationship may be contingent upon the cultural variable of power distance. Hofstede (1991, p. 28) described power distance as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally”. In contrast to a low power distance culture like the US where individuals are accustomed to delegation and participative leadership, in the high power distance culture of China, individuals are accustomed to centralized and paternalistic leadership (Chen and Farh, 2001). Does empowerment mediate the relationships among LMX and the work outcomes of job satisfaction, task performance and psychological withdrawal behavior in a Chinese context? Understanding the mechanisms through which managerial techniques are effective across cultures may provide knowledge useful for global firms seeking to increase performance of their culturally diverse workforce.

## 1. Organizational antecedents of LMX

LMX describes a dyadic relationship occurring within an organizational context. To the extent that contextual influences may either constrain or facilitate the development of LMX, they will impact on the leader's ability to differentiate between his or her subordinates. Two organizational influences suggested by Dienesch and Liden (1986) and examined in this study are: (1) a leader's power (operationalized as supervisor control of rewards) and (2) perceived organizational climate (operationalized as work unit climate).

Pertaining to supervisor control of rewards, Sparrowe and Liden (1997) note that by virtue of their position in the organizational hierarchy (linking pin), leaders enjoy the power to decide how to distribute valued resources and key opportunities among subordinates. This is necessary if the leader is to be able to treat subordinates in a differentiated manner (Dienesch and Liden, 1986). Green et al. (1996) report the amount of financial resources available within the organization to be positively related to LMX quality. This is because resource availability provides leaders with more discretion and latitude in terms of initiating a high quality relationship with subordinates. They, however, note the difficulty of estimating how well managers in their study could convert these funds into positional resources and use as part of their exchange with dyad members. Our measure of positional resources differs from Green et al.'s (1996) in that our measure focuses on reward power or supervisor control of rewards. Cogliser and Schriesheim (2000) report the five leader power bases (including reward power) they examined related significantly with LMX quality. Individuals who perceive the leader as controlling resources will be motivated to initiate a high quality LMX relationship with the supervisor. Alternatively, a leader who controls resources will be able to differentiate between his or her subordinates as he or she may have more say in organizational decisions especially in a high power distance culture like China's (Erdogan and Liden, 2002). Thus, subordinates' perceptions of the supervisor's control of rewards will be critical in the development of LMX quality.

**HI.** Supervisor control of rewards relates positively with LMX quality.

Work unit climate is the second contextual influence on LMX quality examined in this study. Climate has been defined as ‘shared perceptions of organizational policies, practices and procedures, both formal and informal’ (Reichers and Schneider, 1990, p. 22). In spite of their observation that the relationship between climate and LMX quality is unclear in the literature, Cogliser and Schriesheim (2000) reported the dimensions of work group climate (role stress and lack of harmony, job challenge and autonomy, and work group orientation and friendliness) to be related to LMX quality. A work unit climate as employed here, emphasizes a

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