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Affect and leader-member exchange in the new millennium: A state-of-art review and guiding framework

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ABSTRACT

The idea that affect plays a key role in leader-member exchange (LMX) processes is not new, but it has become a subject of considerable research attention since the turn of the Millennium. This interest has, however, resulted in a multiplicity of views that have tended to obfuscate rather than clarify the affect-LMX nexus. To deal with this lack of clarity, we conducted a systematic integration of affect-LMX literature published in leading journals since 2000, including the role of personal affectivity, discrete affect, emotional intelligence, emotional labor, and affective climate. We structured our review using a multilevel framework of affect that encompasses five levels of analysis: (1) within-person, (2) between persons, (3) interpersonal, (4) team, and (5) organizational levels; as well as consideration of cross-level effects. We address in particular three fundamental issues that we argue may have hampered the development of the affect-LMX nexus in the literature: theoretical diversity, problems of data analysis, and measurement issues. We conclude by discussing opportunities for future research across the different levels and develop a set of research questions that we hope will help to promote research into the role of affect in LMX.

Introduction

The idea that affect plays a role in the development of leader-member exchange (LMX) processes is not new. It was first mentioned or studied by Vecchio, Griffith, and Hom (1986) and Dienesch and Liden (1986), and subsequently tested in field research by Day and Grain (1992) and Bauer and Green (1996). Four years later, Ashkanasy and his colleagues (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000) took this notion a step further, proposing that affect is in fact of central importance in LMX development and maintenance processes (see also Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Daus, 2002). Since then – and especially since the turn of the Millennium – scholarly interest in this idea has grown exponentially. Concomitant with this interest, however, the emergent theoretical frameworks and methodologies have created a confusing diversity of thoughts concerning the affect-LMX relationship, which often involve different timespans and organizational levels (e.g., Day & Miscenko, 2015; Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010; Gooty, Serban, Thomas, Gavin, & Yammarino, 2012; Tse, Troth, & Ashkanasy, 2015; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005).

These new theories and methodologies cover both micro and macro perspectives on LMX and affect. More micro processes include

momentary affective variations, dyadic affective experiences, and individual perceptions at the within-person, between persons and interpersonal levels of analysis (Fisher & To, 2012; Tse & Ashkanasy, 2015; Tse, Lam, Lawrence, & Huang, 2013). More macro processes include shared perceptions, collective schemas, and social-relational contexts at team and organizational levels of analysis (Ashkanasy, 2003; Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanasy, 2008). Over the last decade, however, scholars have also proposed new theories that integrate across macro and micro processes to study the intersection of affect and LMX (Tse et al., 2015) that may provide a way forward for LMX researchers wishing to study the role played by affect.

Consistent with this aim, it seemed timely for us to review the emerging literature in this field, and especially to attempt to synthesize the different research streams in this topic. In particular, we aimed to examine the central role played by affect in determining the nature of dyadic leader-follower relationships at different levels of organizational analysis. To accomplish this, we conducted a state-of-the-art qualitative review of the literature on LMX published between 2000 and 2017, focusing on the role of affect at five levels of analysis: (1) within-person, (2) between persons, (3) interpersonal, (4) team, and (5) organizational levels, as well as potential effects across multiple levels of analysis.

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Specific topics within our review include the role of affect-related constructs such as personal affectivity, discrete affect, emotional intelligence (EI), emotional labor (EL), and affective climate in LMX development and maintenance processes. As such, our review examines multiple mediating and moderating factors (e.g., Gooty et al., 2010, 2012), including the notion that such effects might evolve over different time intervals (Fisher & To, 2012).

We argue that our review makes two key contributions to the growing literature on the role of affect in LMX. First, we respond to calls by scholars (e.g., see Gooty et al., 2010; Rajah, Song, & Arvey, 2011; Tse et al., 2015) to unify the diversity of ideas on the connection between LMX and affect-related phenomenon and to highlight the central role played by affect in interpersonal interactions between leaders and followers. Second, we do this across multiple levels of analysis (cf. Ashkanasy, 2003; Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). Both of these contributions enable us to identify emerging patterns regarding the role of affect-related constructs in LMX processes at different levels of analysis and also across levels. In this regard, although several qualitative reviews or meta-analyses have been undertaken that focus on LMX (e.g., Gerstner & Day, 1997) or affect research (e.g., Rajah et al., 2011), no comprehensive scholarly reviews to date seem to have examined literature solely intended to capture the relationship between affect and LMX. As such, we argue that our review is the first to consolidate theory, methodology, and findings concerning the role of affect-related constructs in LMX processes across different levels of analysis (e.g., Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012; Gooty et al., 2010, 2012; Rajah et al., 2011; Martin, Guillaume, Thomas, Lee, & Epitropak, 2016; Tse et al., 2015).

More specifically, we provide a conceptual definition of two key constructs - LMX and affect and also a summary each major theoretical framework linking affect and LMX constructs, and discuss the appropriate use of each theory at each of five levels of analysis. We then discuss how LMX researchers might deal with some of the traditionally difficult issues in the field. For example, Gooty and Yammarino (2011), point out that LMX studies usually fail to conceptualize, to measure, or to analyze data at the dyadic level of analysis properly. As such, these researchers risk ignoring a critical aspect of the dyadic nature of constructs (which constitute an important basis for broader social contexts, e.g., teams and organizations). In particular, LMX researchers rarely collect reciprocal data on affect-related variables (e.g., emotional intelligence or emotional experience in response to the LMX process within a social context, see Gooty & Yammarino, 2011; Krasikova & LeBreton, 2012; Tse & Ashkanasy, 2015) from both the leader and follower.

Conceptual definition of key constructs

Leader-member exchange (LMX)

Dansereau, Graen, and Haga (1975) first introduced the notion of LMX (originally called “vertical dyad linkage”) as a means to recognize that leaders adopt different leadership styles to form relationships with individual subordinates based on their different needs, attitudes and personalities. In essence, LMX suggests that leaders and subordinates develop unique dyadic relationships over time as they influence each other and negotiate their roles in their ongoing interactions (Dansereau et al., 1975). LMX can be viewed as either a process of reciprocal social exchange (Blau, 1964) or as a continuous role making process (Katz & Kahn, 1978) influenced by the expectations and needs of both leaders and subordinates in their relationships (Dansereau et al., 1975). Thus, both social exchange and role theory perspectives underpin the evolution of LMX theory and research.

Affect, emotion, and mood

This construct can be conceptualized as trait affect (i.e., enduring

affective characteristics or core affect) or state affect (i.e., current mood and emotions), depending on duration. According to Russell and Barrett (1999), trait or core affect embodies “the most elementary consciously accessible affective feelings that need not be directed at anything” (p. 806). State affect, on the other hand, varies over time within-person. Similar to Kelly and Barsade (2001) and Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), we define affect as a subjective feeling state. This broad definition includes both emotion (i.e., more intense, object-oriented) and mood (i.e., more diffuse, not object-oriented). This definition is also supported in affective events theory (AET), where Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) include emotional reactions and mood changes within their affective response framework. Thus, the terms mood, emotion, and affect may all be seen to represent the broader notion of “affect” in this review.

Method

To conduct our review, we first ran a search for LMX and relevant affective constructs in a variety of databases, including Web of Science, PsycINFO, Scopus, ABI-Inform, and Google Scholar. We restricted our search to articles published since 2000 and only included those in quality journals that conjointly looked at LMX and affect (i.e., specifically rejecting any article that dealt with either LMX alone and/or looked at an affective construct only peripherally). We added both empirical and theoretical articles to our database sequentially, searching first for “emotion” (130 articles identified), then “affect” (30), “affective events theory” (21), “appraisal theory” (6), “emotions as social information” (5), “emotional contagion” (1), “affective tone” (0), and “affective climate” (6). This resulted in the identification of 199 relevant articles. After filtering for “A*” or “A” journals (as ranked by the Australian Business Deans Council; ABDC) with a *Clarivate Analytics Web of Science* 2-year impact factor > 1.50, we ended up with a final set of 80 peer-reviewed articles dealing with LMX and affect that were published in top-tier journals between 2000 and 2017. See Table 1 for a summary of journal titles, showing the number of articles published in each journal.

Theoretical frameworks

In this section, we review five key theoretical frameworks that we used to understand the relationships between LMX and affect-related constructs across five levels of analysis: (1) affective events theory (AET), (2) the affect theory of social exchange (ATSE), (3) emotional contagion theory (ECT), (4) the appraisal theory of emotion (ATE), and (5) the emotions as social information theory (EASI). Each of these theoretical frameworks has its own focus, assumptions, functions, and characteristics that guide the development of major propositions and hypotheses in relation to LMX-affect phenomena across multiple levels of conceptualization and analysis. See Table 2 for a summary of articles using each of the theoretical frameworks we identified.

Affective events theory (AET)

First proposed by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) AET, at its core, describes within-person changes in affective states that arise in response to aspects of the organizational environment; conceptualized as either positive or negative affective events (Cropanzano et al., 2017). According to this theory, the accumulation of positive and negative affective events leads over time to affective states in individuals that, in turn, have consequences for their attitudinal states and behavioral responses (Butts, Becker, & Boswell, 2015; Dasborough, 2006).

LMX researchers have tended to use AET as a conceptual framework to understand the emotional experiences that arise from leader-follower relationships, and in particular the nature of subsequent emotional expressions and behaviors that arise from LMX events (Ashkanasy, 2002; Ashkanasy, Humphrey, & Huy, 2017; Butts et al., 2015;

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