

Full Length Research Paper

Defining the perceptive aspects of leader-member exchange: A grounded investigation in the People's Republic of China

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Although, the increasing research interest on the topic of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) among organizational researchers, there is a paucity of research on the perceptive aspects of LMX. The authors collected data from 258 supervisor-subordinate dyads in People's Republic of China and employed an inductive approach to explore the perception of LMX from both superior and subordinate perspectives. We found that LMX not only includes positive and ethical features but also involves negative and unethical practices in the Chinese workplace. On the positive side, LMX comprises positive reciprocal exchange, whereas its darker aspects include perceived unfairness and perceived LMX differentiation.

Key words: China, leader - member exchange, LMX perception, supervisor-subordinate relationship.

INTRODUCTION

In the past three decades, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) became one of the most popular topics of study among organizational researchers (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden et al., 2006; Ma and Qu, 2010; Naidoo et al., 2011). Most scholarly work on LMX has tended to extol its positive consequences (for example, increasing individual performance and organizational effectiveness, Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Gerstner and Day, 1997; Deluga and Perry, 1994). In recent years, there has been a growing interest among researchers to address the negative outcomes of LMX practices feature (for example, leading to LMX differentiation and relationship conflict (Hopper and Martin, 2008; Ma and Qu, 2010; Liden et al., 2006; Boies and Howell, 2006; Stewart and Johnson, 2009). However, little research has been conducted on the supervisor-subordinate relationship ties (that is, LMX) and their perceptive aspects (Robbins and Coulter, 2004; Wang et al., 2010).

According to LMX theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), management styles of supervisor will vary with the different management objects, while the established exchange relations will also differ due to different targets. Likewise, different subordinates' LMX perceptions will be different, even facing the same supervisor and subordinate relationship (Hassan and Chandaran, 2005; McClane, 1991; Liden and Maslyn, 1998). Previous research (Wang et al., 2010; Hopper and Martin, 2008; Atwater and Carmeli, 2009; Carmeli and Spreitzer, 2009) have also shown that starting with the cognition and mood of individuals (both supervisor and subordinate) can provide a good approach to the question "how to understand the internal effect mechanism of LMX".

As such, the present study posits the following questions: first, from both supervisor and subordinate perspectives, what is the prevailing ethical perception about LMX? Second, is LMX construed as positive (only) or does it include negative aspects too?

We provide first a comprehensive review of the exiting literature on LMX perception. Then, we adopt an inductive research approach to investigate the LMX perception in the Chinese context. By doing so, we aim to lay a theoretical foundation for follow-up study of LMX

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and LMX perception.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Why LMX perception?

The argument of LMX perception appears to fit into social cognition theory (Bandura, 1989). Social cognitive theory provides a causal conceptual framework within which to analyze the determinants and psychosocial mechanisms through which LMX influences subordinates' behavior or performance. Accordingly, LMX may not only directly influence subordinates' behavior or performance, but also through the mediating or moderating effect of LMX perception (Chen and Aryee, 2007; Atwater and Carmeli, 2009). Namely, the linkage between LMX, LMX perception, and subordinates' behavior or performance can be seen as a tripartite mutual interaction process. More importantly, there is a good reason to look at LMX perception, because it is consistent with the practice that understanding LMX's social function from the perspective of psychological mechanism (Chen and Aryee, 2007; Hopper and Martin, 2008; Wang et al., 2010).

Defining LMX perception

To the whole research area of LMX perception, a basic premise is (a) to establish its operational definition, (b) to define the specific content of the concept, and (c) to clear its extension. Therefore, it is imperative to define the concept of LMX perception from a more universal and general level. In this study, we defined the meaning of LMX perception from the areas of perception subject, perception object, perception nature, and perception outcome.

Perception subject

Perception subject is one of the basic elements to define LMX perception. In this study, we identified organization members as the perception subject of LMX perception, because they are one of the most concerned elements by organizations, and because they are also the most likely to be affected and controlled element in organizations.

Perception object

Another basic element to define LMX perception is perception object. It is the object of LMX perception, namely, the authorization, care, trust, respect and other LMX inducements results from the supervisor and subordinate relationship.

Perception feature

On the one hand, LMX perception must be the feelings of

organization members. This feature particularly emphasizes on the individuals' leading role and determines the differences of LMX cognition between individuals. This is the reason why the internal causes (that is, individual difference) serve as the basis for the change of a thing (that is, LMX perception), while the external factors (that is, supervisor-subordinate relationship) provide the condition.

On the other hand, to the performance form, the feature of LMX perception is tacitness and diversity. That is, LMX perception can only be known through processing and extraction process whereby expressing as emotional or behavioral results, because individuals' feelings are often embedded in their brain.

Perception outcome

Perception outcome is one of the main bases to judge LMX perception, which must be the organizational members' (both supervisor and subordinate) feelings or perceptions to the supervisor-subordinate relationship. The different perception outcomes not only determine the diversity of LMX perception, but also influence the effect of LMX on individual behavior or performance.

In summary, LMX perception can be defined as: subordinates' and supervisors' feelings or perceptions to the supervisor-subordinate relationship, namely, organizational members' social cognition to LMX. This cognitive process is not only affected by LMX quality (external factors), but also influenced by the individual's beliefs, self-efficacy, and value orientation (internal causes). As such, organizational members' LMX perceptions are determined by the mutual effects of internal and external factors.

LMX and its positive function

The basic notion of LMX theory addresses that employees in high-quality LMX relationship may get more trust, support, and job discretionary from their supervisor than those reporting low-quality LMX relationship (Liden and Graen, 1980). As such, LMX is considered as an important and salient generator to effective individual and organizational outcomes. For instance, high quality LMX relationships were found to be the contributor of high level of mutual trust between supervisor and subordinate (Liden and Graen, 1980; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995); a high level of organizational citizenship behavior and reduced turnover (Wayne and Green, 1993); a high level of job satisfaction, feelings of energy, perceived organizational justice, and cooperative communication (Green et al., 1996; Lee, 2001; Atwater and Carmeli, 2009). Empirical research also reported that high LMX quality facilitated perceived organizational support (Jawahar and Carr, 2007; Sluss et al., 2008) and perceived insider status (Wang et al., 2010; Stamper and

Masterson, 2002; Chen and Aryee, 2007).

LMX and its negative function

Meanwhile, LMX could have some negative consequences, because supervisor may develop differentiated relationships with their subordinates (Graen and Cashman, 1975; Graen and Scandura, 1987). This is to say, the degree to which members working with the same leader differs in terms of their LMX relationship quality with their leader, namely LMX differentiation (Ma and Qu, 2010: 733). Just as Scandura (1999) suggested, the variability in LMX relationships perceived by organizational members (termed perceived LMX differentiation) could contravene the equality principle of fairness, thereby resulting in organizational injustice. In the extant literature, scholars also believe that LMX differentiation impairs individual and organizational outcomes. For example, LMX differentiation was found to diminish the degree of employees' job satisfaction, affective commitment, wellbeing, and performance (Van Breukelen et al., 2002; Hooper and Martin, 2008; McClane, 1991; Schyns, 2006; Erdogan and Bauer, 2010). Some other studies (Liden et al., 2006; Stewart and Johnson, 2009; Naidoo et al., 2011) have also shown that LMX differentiation weakened the positive effect of mean LMX on team potency but strengthened the negative effect of mean LMX on team conflict.

In sum, although we know a great deal about the LMX and its organizational context, little is known what subordinates and their direct supervisors construe as the 'making-up' of the supervisor-subordinate relationship. Furthermore, since most studies have focused on LMX perception within a limited range, we still know little about the internal structure of LMX perception. This study should therefore contribute to the better understanding of the nature of LMX issue. The exploratory nature of this research dictates an inductive approach.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and procedures

Using an open-ended questionnaire survey, we collected data from employees in ten companies based in Shanghai, southeastern China. Participants were asked to describe one or more concrete perceptions that they looked at relationship between supervisor and subordinate in their work experience. More specifically, we asked subordinates the following question: "According to your past experience and knowledge, would you please give example(s) of your perceptions referring to supervisor-subordinate relationship (like yourself and your supervisor)?" The question for supervisor was "According to your past experience and knowledge, would you please give example(s) of your perceptions referring to supervisor-subordinate relationship (like yourself and your subordinate)?"

With the assistance of the firms' HR managers who prepared a list of randomly selected employees (307) and their immediate supervisors (57), we distributed questionnaires to participants with a cover letter outlining the research purpose and our promise of

confidentiality, as well as a return envelope. Overall, the usable sample was composed of 258 supervisor-subordinate dyads (41 supervisors and 217 subordinates' answers, respectively), giving a response rate of 71%. Table 1 shows the percentage of participants' demographics distribution and percentage in each type of enterprise. For the subordinate sample, 63% were male, 72% were aged 35 years or below, and 57% received university education or above. Among the supervisors, 68% were male, 47% were aged 35 years or below, and 65% received university education or above.

Analytical strategy and data auditing

We used semiotic cluster analysis as data analysis strategy (Eco, 1976; Feldman, 1995). According to Han and Altman (2009) coding steps, first, the researchers independently assessed all responses for two criteria: (a) the answer must refer to the perceptions of LMX by supervisor or subordinate, and (b) the answer must have a clear meaning. Second, the first author and the second author separately free-sorted answers into LMX perception categories and discussed discrepancies together. Third, the reliability of the coding procedure was checked by computing the inter-rater reliability score among the data auditors (Bryman and Bell, 2003; Tinsley and Weiss, 2000). Overall, in 258 completed qualitative questions, 212 in total were found to be relevant and valid.

RESULTS

We organized qualitative data into a table with three columns: competing meanings (refers to signs or denotative meanings; Feldman, 1995) (Table 2 presents the illustrative examples), connotative meanings (refers to "a pattern in the denotative meanings engendering a new meaning through some type of association between competing or denotative meanings"; Cunha, 2004: 131), and institutional concerns (refers to a structure underlying the data of the issues related to LMX perception; Han and Altman, 2009). The results of semiotic clustering for this study are shown in Table 3.

In short, the LMX perception could be categorized into 10 competing meanings, such as perceived trust (11%), perceived supervisor support (18%), perceived supervisor care (12%), perceived insider status (13%), perceived organizational justice (7%), perceived delegation (10%), recognition of subordinates (6%), inappropriate treatment (9%), perceived organizational injustice (4%), and perceived relationship variability (10%) (Table 2). They were further grouped into two broad categories including positive features of LMX perception (77% of total) and negative features of LMX perception (23% of total). More specifically, positive features of LMX perception included such aspects as perceived trust, perceived supervisor support, perceived supervisor care, perceived insider status, perceived organizational justice, perceived delegation, and recognition of subordinates. Whilst respondents described as negative features in LMX perception such aspects as inappropriate treatment, perceived organizational injustice, and perceived relationship variability. These were grouped into three "connotative

Table 1. Distribution of sample.

Demographic		Subordinate sample (N = 217)	Supervisor sample (N = 41)
		No. (%)	No. (%)
Gender	Male	137 (63)	28 (68)
	Female	80 (37)	13 (32)
Age	Below 25 years old	54 (25)	8 (20)
	From 26 to 35 years old	103 (47)	11 (27)
	From 36 to 45 years old	43 (20)	17 (41)
	Above 45 years old	17 (8)	5 (12)
Education	High school or under	37 (17)	6 (15)
	Vocational school	56 (26)	8 (20)
	University	107 (49)	17 (41)
	Graduate school	17 (8)	10 (24)
Ownership	State-owned	58 (27)	10 (24)
	Private-owned	113 (52)	22 (54)
	Joint venture	46 (21)	9 (22)
Industry	Manufacturing industry	56 (26)	11 (27)
	Service industry	77 (36)	12 (29)
	Information industry	39 (18)	9 (22)
	Retail industrial	30 (14)	6 (15)
	Others	15 (7)	3 (7)

meanings" (Table 3).

These "connotative meanings" suggest that the LMX may develop positive reciprocal exchange (77% of total); may cultivate perceived unfairness (13% of total); and may generate perceived LMX differentiation (10% of total). Table 4 reports the response frequencies in different categories. As shown in Table 4, first, the positive reciprocal exchange includes those aspects related to inducements such as perceived trust (11%), perceived supervisor support (18%), perceived supervisor care (12%), perceived insider status (13%), perceived organizational justice (7%), perceived delegation (10%), and recognition of subordinates (6%) from their supervisors. Second, inappropriate treatment (9%) and perceived organizational injustice (4%) can result in employees' perceived unfairness. Third, perceived relationship variability (10%) can lead to employees' perception of LMX differentiation.

The "institutional concerns" in Table 3 are related to the underlying structure of LMX perception. Specifically, category one (positive features of LMX perception) refers to meaningful and ethical LMX. It covers positive reciprocal exchange aspects related to inducements from their supervisors such as support, benefits, resources, and advancement opportunities (Stamper and Masterson, 2002). Category two (negative features of LMX perception) refers to negative, unfair, and unethical LMX.

It includes: inappropriate treatment, perceived organizational injustice, and perceived relationship variability. This is because supervisors may have a unique relationship to each of their subordinates ranging from low to high quality, and adopt different leadership approaches depending on LMX quality (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). In particular, compared with a high-quality LMX relationship, employees in low LMX quality may get fewer inducements from their supervisor (Liden and Graen, 1980). As such, practice of LMX may contravene the equality principle of fairness (Scandura, 1999).

DISCUSSION

In our research, the perception of supervisor-subordinate relationship (that is, LMX) was found to be grouped into two broad categories: (a) meaningful and ethical LMX (positive features of LMX perception); and (b) unfair and unethical LMX (negative features of LMX perception). On the one hand, meaningful and ethical LMX comprises aspects as perceived trust, perceived supervisor support, perceived supervisor care, perceived insider status, perceived organizational justice, perceived delegation, and recognition of subordinates. On the other hand, unfair and unethical LMX covers inappropriate treatment, perceived organizational injustice, and perceived

Table 2. Direct categories of LMX perception and illustrative examples.

Competing meanings	Illustrative examples
Perceived trust	When my supervisor assigned challenging and difficult task to me, he [the supervisor] told me that he believes me I can do it well.
Perceived supervisor support	When subordinates have problems, I [the supervisor] am willing to help them perform their job to the best of their ability.
Perceived supervisor care	My supervisor really cares subordinates' well-beings. For example, he [the supervisor] often asks me whether my daily life needs help.
Perceived insider status	My supervisor often brings me into contact with more critical information.
Perceived organizational justice	When decisions are made about subordinates' job, I [the supervisor] often treat them with kindness and consideration.
Perceived delegation	My supervisor is an empowering leader. For example, in a just completed project, he encouraged self-reward, teamwork, independent action, and self-development.
Recognition of subordinates	Being a supervisor means you should find merits and potentials of them [subordinates], even they are disliked or ignored by other managers or their coworkers.
Inappropriate treatment	Wang's supervisor selected A rather than B as the "best employee of the year" because A having a good relationship with him.
Perceived organizational injustice	Compared with A (having a good relationship with our supervisor), I feel that my level of pay and work load to be quiet unfair.
Perceived relationship variability	My supervisor always shows specific cares to some subordinates who have good relationships with him.

relationship variability.

The positive features of LMX perception involve positive reciprocal exchange between supervisor and subordinate. The positive reciprocal exchange perspective corresponds to the question of how the subordinates perceive the nature of LMX which is based on the norm of reciprocity (Yang, 1998). According to reciprocity theory, employees may be guided by positive reciprocity beliefs whereby they believe that when supervisor shows them support, trust, care, and recognition, it is acceptable to reciprocate in return (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). As such, employees with high LMX are more likely to feel meaningful, ethical, and obliged to reciprocate to supervisor-subordinate relationship - consistent with previous research (Gerstner and Day, 1997; Stamper and Masterson, 2002; Chen and Aryee, 2007; Atwater and Carmeli, 2009).

However, LMX can also be perceived as unfair and unethical, which indicates the negative features of LMX perception. Graen et al. (1972) suggested that there are differences between each subordinate's perceptions of supervisor-subordinate relationship. Meanwhile, supervisors may develop different treatment and give different inducements to each subordinate according to

LMX quality (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). It reflects the variability of LMX quality within a group whereby the perception of supervisor's differential treatment impacts on subordinates' attitudes and following behaviors (Henderson et al., 2009). Especially to those employees in low-quality LMX relationship, they can identify different treatments and injustice perceptions, and thus establish a negative, unfair, and unethical supervisor-subordinate relationship (Ma and Qu, 2010; Liden et al., 2006).

Theoretical implications

Although the nature of LMX has been widely investigated by previous studies (Jawahar and Carr, 2007; Chen and Aryee, 2007; Atwater and Carmeli, 2009; Henderson et al., 2009), this is the first research oriented to enhance the knowledge related to the internal structure of LMX perception. Therefore, this study contributes to the LMX literature by providing further empirical support in exploring the nature of LMX: meaningful and ethical aspects, unfair and unethical aspects. More importantly, our research adds to the literature in relation to the analysis of the unfairness and negativity aspects of LMX,

Table 3. Semiotic cluster analysis of the qualitative data.

Competing meanings (LMX means...)	Connotative meanings (LMX can...)	Institutional concerns (LMX is...)
Category one: Positive features of LMX perception		
1. Perceived trust	Develop positive reciprocal exchange	Meaningful and ethical
2. Perceived supervisor support	Develop positive reciprocal exchange	Meaningful and ethical
3. Perceived supervisor care	Develop positive reciprocal exchange	Meaningful and ethical
4. Perceived insider status	Develop positive reciprocal exchange	Meaningful and ethical
5. Perceived organizational justice	Develop positive reciprocal exchange	Meaningful and ethical
6. Perceived delegation	Develop positive reciprocal exchange	Meaningful and ethical
7. Recognition of subordinates	Develop positive reciprocal exchange	Meaningful and ethical
Category two: Negative features of LMX perception		
8. Inappropriate treatment	Cultivate perceived unfairness	Unfair and unethical
9. Perceived organizational injustice	Cultivate perceived unfairness	Unfair and unethical
10. Perceived relationship variability	Generate perceived LMX differentiation	Negative and unethical

Table 4. Response frequencies in different categories (N = 212).

Features of LMX	Categories of LMX	Percentage (%)
Meaningful and ethical LMX (77% of total)	Perceived trust	11
	Perceived supervisor support	18
	Perceived supervisor care	12
	Perceived insider status	13
	Perceived organizational justice	7
	Perceived delegation	10
	Recognition of subordinates	6
Unfair and unethical LMX (23% of total)	Inappropriate treatment	9
	Perceived organizational injustice	4
	Perceived relationship variability	10

that is, inappropriate treatment, perceived organizational injustice, and perceived relationship variability. In addition, this paper also provides evidence about organizational members' understanding of LMX in their particular workplace and with reference to specific inducements; and whether LMX is perceived as ethical or not.

Managerial implications

The findings of our study have several practical implications. First, managers should employ specific ways to cultivate meaningful and ethical LMX, such as developing mutual trust, respecting their contributions, and realizing their potentials. Second, it should be noted that all of unfairness and negativity aspects of LMX could harm individual performance and organizational effectiveness. Therefore, managers need to decrease their use of unfair treatment, and organizations need to create a fair working environment that discourages

injustice. Last, another managerial implication is related to the employee assistance plan that encourages those low LMX employees to better adapt to the unfair situations.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study also has some limitations. First, the generalizability of our findings may be contaminated by specific types of Chinese companies. It is generally believed that employees' attitudes or emotions may be influenced by organizational and cultural difference (Farh et al., 2004). In order to improve the external validity of our findings, future research should replicate our study employing multi-nation and cross-cultural surveys.

Second, the basic notion of content analysis is that "the words that are mentioned most often are the words that reflect the greatest concerns" (Stemler, 2001). Although this may be true in most cases, we are not certain about several counterpoints that may lead the researchers to

neglect or underestimate the importance of some concept (Weber, 1990). Future studies should therefore involve a scrutiny of the responses by a larger pool of experts to conduct a more rigorous qualitative study based on the grounded theory approach. This is because this methodology is most suitable for generating novel and accurate insights (Parry, 1998).

Another important research direction is to develop a measurement of LMX perception according to the exploratory results. Hence, further studies should employ a rigorous research design, to empirically verify the structure of LMX perception.

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