

An Investigation of the Differential Impact of Supervisor and Subordinate-Rated Leader-Member Exchange on Career Outcomes

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Using a sample of 229 employees and their 109 immediate supervisors from 63 organizations in Northern Malaysia, we tested the hypothesis that the quality of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) would have differential impact on career outcomes depending on whether it was rated by the supervisor or the subordinate. As expected, we found that the employees' perceptions of the quality of exchanges differed from those of their supervisors. Interestingly, supervisor-rated LMX significantly predicted salary progression and promotability, whereas subordinate-rated LMX significantly predicted career satisfaction. The results also revealed that supervisor-rated LMX and subordinate-rated LMX did not interact significantly to impact career outcomes. Rather, they singly and distinctively contributed to career outcomes, thereby suggesting the salience of their independent effects. Implications of the findings in the light of potential limitations are discussed.

Introduction

In the past 25 years or so, substantial research has been done to understand the nature of exchanges in employee-supervisor relationships, now known as Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Graen *et al.*, 1982; and Graen *et al.*, 1982). The mountain of research has shown that LMX is related to a number of important work outcomes such as organizational commitment (Gagnon and Michael, 2004; Martin *et al.*, 2005; and Schyns *et al.*, 2005); job satisfaction and work-related well-being (Martin *et al.*, 2005; Harris and Kacmar, 2006; and Breland *et al.*, 2007); individual performance and extra-role behaviors (Sriesheim *et al.*, 1999; and Hackett and Lapierre, 2004); delegation and occupational self-efficacy (Schyns *et al.*, 2005); turnover intentions, supervisory ratings of job performance and promotions (Liden and Maslyn, 1998).

While the breadth of LMX research has been remarkable, studies in this domain still suffer from one obvious limitation. With a few exceptions (e.g., Schriesheim *et al.*, 1998; Bhal and Ansari, 2000; and Paglis and Green, 2002), researchers mostly tend to measure the quality of LMX from the subordinate's perspective alone, and as a result might not have provided a comprehensive examination of the impact of LMX, particularly on career outcomes. Seeking a remedy for these literary deficiencies, we advance a model that aims to investigate the differential effects of supervisor and subordinate ratings of LMX on career outcomes.

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Specifically, our study is a follow-up to the research on LMX and career outcomes and contributes to these literatures in several ways: (a) LMX ratings were obtained from the employees and their supervisors to compare the possibly different perspectives, (b) career outcomes too were conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, and as such contrasting the effect of supervisor and subordinate-rated LMX on different outcome dimensions, and (c) most studies on LMX have been conducted in the western setting and add to the literature by testing the differential impact of LMX in the Malaysian context, thus providing some empirical cross-cultural validity to leadership theory.

Theoretical Framework

The criterion variable in the proposed model—career outcomes—was measured on both objective and subjective dimensions. Quality of LMX, as rated by the employees and their supervisors, represents the predictor variables, which have been discussed in greater detail in this paper.

Career Outcomes

Various conceptualizations of work outcomes can be found in organizational research. The recent trend has seemingly moved towards the use of a set of objective and subjective measures (e.g., Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990; Judge *et al.*, 1995; and Wayne *et al.*, 1999). Career scholars have argued that the two components of outcomes, though related, are distinct constructs such that they differ in terms of their antecedents (Wayne *et al.*, 1999; and Ng *et al.*, 2005). Past studies have, in fact, reported that variables that predict the objective dimension, do not similarly explain the subjectively-defined dimension (e.g., Judge *et al.*, 1995; Ang, 2000; Ng *et al.*, 2005; and Tu *et al.*, 2006). Thus, following the current conceptualization of career outcomes construct, we conceptualized career outcomes to be consisting of objective and subjective career success.

The objective dimension is best represented by salary progression, since pay increases as one's career progresses (Gerhart and Milkovich, 1992; and Maume (Jr.), 1999). On the other hand, subjective outcomes refer to an individual's subjective reactions to his or her own career and are more commonly conceptualized as career or job satisfaction (Judge *et al.*, 1995). Career satisfaction seems to be the most significant aspect of subjective work outcomes, since those who are dissatisfied with their career or current jobs would not be regarded as experiencing positive work outcomes. Research has also shown that an individual's work outcomes can be judged by relevant others (Jaskolka *et al.*, 1985), such as the supervisor's judgment of the subordinate's promotion potential or promotability (Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990). Hence, promotability represents the second subjective indicator of work outcomes (Wayne *et al.*, 1999).

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) has been defined as the quality of the exchange relationship between an employee and his or her immediate superior (Dienesch and Liden, 1986). The LMX theory attests that superiors develop different quality of work

relationships with different subordinates (Graen and Scandura, 1987; and Scandura and Scriesheim, 1994). High LMX members enjoy LMX relationships that are characterized by a high level of liking, trust, fairness, loyalty, professional respect, contributory behaviors, and support (Liden *et al.*, 1997; Liden and Maslyn, 1998; Yukl, 1998; and Avolio, 1999), which may in turn contribute to significant career outcomes. Clearly, developing and maintaining high quality relationships between a supervisor and subordinate is vital to dyad members—and especially the subordinates (Sagas and Cunningham, 2004).

Consistent with the exchange theory, the support given to an employee is likely to create an imbalance in the exchange between the employee and the source of support (i.e., the supervisor). Consequently, the employee will attempt to maintain balance between the support received and the effort expended (Randall *et al.*, 1999). In other words, upon receiving support the employee will tend to reciprocate to fulfill his or her feelings of indebtedness, for instance, by displaying positive work behaviors.

Alternatively, the support given may directly empower the employee to perform better or exhibit positive work attitudes (Randall *et al.*, 1999; and Gagnon and Michael, 2004). His or her good performance or work attitudes will subsequently be rewarded through favorable career outcomes that include salary increment (Scandura and Schriesheim, 1994; and Wakabayashi *et al.*, 1988); career satisfaction (Schriesheim *et al.*, 1998; Liden *et al.*, 2000; Masterson *et al.*, 2000; and Martin *et al.*, 2005), lower levels of stress (Harris and Kacmar, 2006), and promotions (Wakabayashi *et al.*, 1988; Scandura and Schriesheim, 1994; and Liden and Maslyn, 1998).

In this study, we broadly hypothesize that the higher the quality of LMX, the higher is the likelihood of employees enjoying more favorable career outcomes. Furthermore, we opine that LMX can influence not only the objective career outcomes (i.e., salary progression), but also the subjective outcomes (i.e., career satisfaction and promotability). We further speculate that supervisor-rated LMX will be more strongly related to salary progression and promotability, since these two outcome indicators are clearly within the control of the supervisor. On the contrary, subordinate-rated LMX will better predict career satisfaction because career satisfaction is a subjective reaction and a self-report measure.

Given that the two perspectives—supervisor and subordinate—do not strongly correlate ($r = 0.26$; $p < 0.01$, see Table 1), we expect some kind of interaction between the two LMX ratings in predicting work outcomes. Based on the above discussions, we formed the following hypotheses:

H_1 : Supervisor-rated LMX (LMX-L) will be more strongly related to salary progression and promotability than to career satisfaction;

H_2 : Subordinate-rated LMX (LMX-M) will be more strongly related to career satisfaction than to salary progression and promotability;

H_3 : Supervisor-rated LMX (LMX-L) and subordinate-rated LMX (LMX-M) will interact with each other in predicting salary progression, career satisfaction, and promotability.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Zero-Order Correlations and Cronbach's Coefficients Alpha

Factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Control Variables								
1 Gender	SIM	SIM	–	–	–	–	–	–
2 EL	0.05	–0.00	SIM	–	–	–	–	–
3 DT	0.13*	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Predictor Variables								
4 LMX-M	0.14*	0.14*	0.08	(0.87)	–	–	–	–
5 LMX-L	0.12	0.12	0.08	0.26**	(0.92)	–	–	–
Criterion Variables								
6 SP	–0.09	0.47**	0.11	0.15*	0.30**	SIM	–	–
7 CS	0.00	–0.11	0.16*	0.24**	0.07	0.06	(0.73)	–
8 PR	–0.01	0.19**	0.04	0.27**	0.62**	0.39**	–0.03	(0.86)
M	–	–	5.00	4.92	5.02	12.73	4.44	4.22
SD	–	–	4.26	1.30	1.03	7.22	1.09	1.45
<p>Note: $N = 229$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; Diagonal entries in parentheses indicate Cronbach's coefficients alpha; SIM = Single Item Measure; EL = Educational Level; DT = Dyadic Tenure; LMX-M = Subordinate-Rated LMX; LMX-L = Supervisor-Rated LMX; SP = Salary Progression; CS = Career Satisfaction; PR = Promotability.</p>								

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

Participation in this study was completely voluntary. In a face-to-face interview setting, employees gave data on LMX, salary progression, and career satisfaction. On the other hand, their supervisors provided information on LMX and promotability by means of a survey questionnaire. Eventually, complete data was obtained from 229 employees and their 109 supervisors, representing 63 private organizations in Northern Malaysia.

Of the 229 subordinates, 118 (51.5%) were males. A total of 109 (47.6%) subordinates were employed in diverse manufacturing facilities, whereas the remaining 120 (52.4%) were from various service entities. They ranged in age between 17 and 64 years ($M = 35.03$, $SD = 9.49$). Chinese respondents (103 or 45.0%) formed the majority of the sample, followed by Malays (90 or 39.3%), Indians (34 or 14.8%), and other ethnic groups (2 or 0.9%). Majority (204 or 89.1%) had obtained at least a high school qualification, whereas only 6 (2.6%) had tertiary education. Their average organizational, job, and dyadic tenure were 8.75 years ($SD = 6.36$), 2.03 years ($SD = 1.22$), and 5 years ($SD = 4.26$), respectively. A total of 216 (94.3%) employees were concentrated at low organizational level, while the rest (13 or 5.7%) occupied the middle level.

There were more men (57 or 52.3%) than women (52 or 47.7%) in the supervisor group. Span of control was between two and 268 employees. Supervisors' ages ranged from 24 years to 71 years ($M = 40.72$, $SD = 9.16$). Forty-nine (45.0%) supervisors identified themselves as Chinese, 33 (30.3%) as Malays, 24 (22.0%) as Indians, and 3 (2.7%) as of

foreign origin (1 Thai and 2 Bangladeshis). The majority of the supervisors (102 or 93.6%) had obtained a diploma or at least a high school qualification. Five (4.6%) held bachelor's or had master's degrees, and 2 (1.8%) had some other professional qualifications.

Measures

Except for the measures of demographics and salary progression, we used 7-point scales to assess all the constructs employed in the present study.

Control Variables

The careers literature suggests that demographic characteristics explain more variance in career outcomes than other sets of influences. Among these are gender (Stewart and Gudykunst, 1982; Gattiker and Larwood, 1989; and Wayne and Liden, 1994); age; educational level (Jaskolka *et al.*, 1985; Gattiker and Larwood, 1989 and 1990; Whitely, 1991; Tharenou *et al.*, 1994; and Judge *et al.*, 1995); hierarchical level (Stewart and Gudykunst, 1982); and organizational tenure (Whitely *et al.*, 1991; and Judge *et al.*, 1995).

Accordingly, we treated three demographics as control variables—gender, educational level, and dyadic tenure. We controlled for dyadic tenure, based on the possibility that the quality of LMX might change across the course of an employee's work history such as when there is a change in supervisors (Graen and Scandura, 1987). Age, was not included as a control variable because its effect would have been accounted for, in the computation of the salary range-age ratio. Organizational tenure and organizational level were also not controlled for in the current study, since we deem the two to be likely correlated with age. As a matter of fact, the correlation between organizational tenure and age was found to be substantial ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$), a finding that is congruent with that from a recent meta-analytical study by Ng *et al.* (2005). On the other hand, organizational level and age were only weakly correlated ($r = 0.12$, $p < 0.10$).

Criterion Variables

The criterion measures comprised three variables, namely salary progression, career satisfaction, and promotability. The three measures were obtained from two different sources (i.e., the employees and their supervisors).

In this study, salary range-age ratio was used to measure salary progression on the assumption that compensation is related to general performance. This criterion has been reported to be a reliable index of salary progression (see, e.g., Watson and William, 1977; and Ansari *et al.*, 1982). Since respondents might be reluctant to disclose their actual income, salary range was preferred over actual income.

To gauge employees' level of career satisfaction, we used a modified version of Greenhaus *et al.*'s (1990) and Turban and Dougherty's (1994) measures. Previous studies in Malaysia have used this 8-item scale, documenting high internal consistency reliabilities of 0.83 (Ang, 2000) and 0.94 (Ong, 2001). A representative item is, "I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my overall career goals". A varimax rotated principal components analysis resulted in five items.

The supervisor was asked to assess the subordinate's promotion potential with four items on a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree). A sample item is, "I believe this employee has what it takes to be promoted". This measure was taken from Wayne *et al.* (1999) who combined two modified items from Landau and Hammer (1986) with two of their own. All four items were retained under one single construct after exploratory factor analysis.

Predictor Variables

Several researchers (e.g., Scandura *et al.*, 1986; Graen and Scandura, 1987; Schriesheim *et al.*, 1998; Bhal and Ansari, 2000; and Varma and Stroh, 2001) have stressed the importance of obtaining LMX perspectives from both the supervisor and the subordinate, both of whom can provide very useful information about the dynamics of LMX. Hence, in heeding research calls, this study employed two sources of LMX data (i.e., from the employees and their supervisors). Moreover, having two different LMX ratings would ensure that common-rater and self-serving biases could be partially alleviated.

Using Liden and Maslyn's (1998) measure, LMX ratings were obtained on a 7-point scale (1 = Not at all; 7 = Very much) from the employees and their supervisors. The 12-item scale was accordingly modified to reflect supervisory perceptions. A sample item is: "He/she is the kind of person one would like to have as a friend". Although Liden and Maslyn's (1998) construct captures four distinct dimensions—affect, professional respect, loyalty, and contribution—we chose to use an overall measure of LMX. The main contention is that the proponents (Liden and Maslyn, 1998) have themselves suggested that these four components fall under a second-order factor, hence making the scale appropriate for measurements of the overall LMX as well as LMX dimensions (Erdogan *et al.*, 2004; and Pellegrini and Scandura, 2004). To test this observation, we performed a specified Principal Components Analysis (PCA) on all the 24 items. Interestingly, all the 12 items measuring supervisors' LMX perceptions loaded cleanly on one factor, whereas the remaining 12 items representing subordinates' LMX ratings converged as a second factor. For each LMX rating, all the 12 items in the scale were averaged to capture overall LMX quality.

Additionally, we ran another specified PCA on all the 24 items again, but this time along with the inclusion of the eight career satisfaction items. Interestingly, three clean factors emerged from the analysis. This result provides some evidence for the construct validity of the measures, while partially ruling out the possibility of method variance.

Findings

Descriptive statistics, intercorrelations, and internal consistency reliabilities for the study variables are displayed in Table 1. As is evident, the study variables were discriminatory, since standard deviations were near to or greater than 1.0. The internal consistency reliabilities of all scales were between 0.73 and 0.92, exceeding the recommended value of 0.60 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994), and therefore acceptable.

Table 1 also shows that there is only a slight overlap ($R^2 = 0.07$) between subordinate-rated LMX (LMX-M) and supervisor-rated LMX (LMX-L), thereby indicating that supervisors and subordinates differ in terms of their perceptions of the quality of their exchange relationships. Moreover, descriptive statistics for LMX suggests that subordinates

($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.30$) discriminate more between the higher and lower-quality LMX than their supervisors ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.03$).

The correlations between the three outcome indicators are also worthy of mention. While salary progression and promotability were very much related with each other, the correlations between career satisfaction and the other two outcomes indicators (i.e., salary progression and promotability) were negligible. This finding could be attributed to the fact that a different sample type has been studied in this research. Unlike managerial sample in the past research (e.g., Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990; Schriesheim *et al.*, 1998; and Ang, 2000), the subordinate sample of the current study was predominantly operative workers, with 89.1% of them having only high school qualifications. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that, given these employees' low qualifications, which in turn implies low bargaining power, they may have lower expectations regarding career attainments (such as salary progression and promotability). Consistent with this logic, these employees will feel satisfied so long as they are employed.

We tested our hypotheses using a three-step hierarchical regression analysis. Specifically, a separate set of analysis was performed for each outcome variable (i.e., salary progression, career satisfaction, and promotability). The three demographic control variables (i.e., gender, educational level, and dyadic tenure) were first entered in Step 1. In Step 2, the outcome variable was regressed on the predictor variables. Finally in Step 3, the interaction term (LMX-M x LMX-L) was included after centering the relevant variables. The analysis for salary progression indicates that gender and educational level significantly predicted salary progression, justifying the decision to regard them as control variables. Supervisor-rated LMX was also significantly and positively related to salary progression (H1) (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Results:
The Differential Impact of LMX-M and LMX-L on Career Outcomes**

	Std. Beta (Model 1)			Std. Beta (Model 2)			Std. Beta (Model 3)		
	SP	CS	PR	SP	CS	PR	SP	CS	PR
Control Variables									
Gender	-0.13*	-0.01	-0.02	-0.16**	-0.05	-0.09	-0.15**	-0.05	-0.09
Educational Level	0.48**	-0.11	0.19**	0.44**	-0.15*	0.11*	-0.42*	-0.16*	0.10
Dyadic Tenure	0.13*	0.16*	0.04	0.11	0.14*	-0.01	0.11	0.14*	-0.01
Predictor Variables									
LMX-M	-	-	-	0.04	0.28**	0.09	-0.31	0.10	-0.24
LMX-L	-	-	-	0.25**	0.10	0.61**	-0.02	-0.13	0.37
Interaction Terms									
LMX-M x LMX-L	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.50	0.27	0.45
R ²	0.25	0.04	0.04	0.31	0.12	0.43	0.32	0.12	0.43
Adjusted R ²	0.24	0.02	0.03	0.30	0.10	0.41	0.30	0.09	0.42
R ² change	0.25	0.04	0.04	0.06	0.08	0.39	0.01	0.00	0.00
F Change	24.56**	2.87*	2.96*	10.40**	9.94**	75.21**	1.70	0.38	1.69
Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; SP = Salary Progression; CS = Career Satisfaction; PR = Promotability; LMX-M = Subordinate-Rated LMX; LMX-L = Supervisor-Rated LMX.									

Regression results for career satisfaction show that two of the three control variables (educational level and dyadic tenure) significantly predicted career satisfaction (see Table 2). However, the impact of educational level on career satisfaction was in the opposite direction. Interestingly, the outcome variable was also significantly predicted by subordinate-rated LMX (H2).

In testing the direct impact of LMX on promotability, two significant relationships were found (see Table 2). First, educational level (control variable) significantly contributed to promotability. Second, supervisor-rated LMX positively predicted promotability (H1).

Finally, the analysis revealed no significant interaction between the two LMX ratings in influencing any career outcomes (H3) (see Table 2). Taken together, the above findings lend partial support to the hypotheses.

Conclusion

Five noteworthy findings emerged from the present study. First, we found that employees do not perceive their LMX relationships in the same manner as their supervisors do. This finding is consistent with a recent study by Xin (2004) who found that Asian American managers' perceptions of LMX quality are not in harmony with those of their supervisors. An important implication here is that the quality of exchange relationships could be more reliably measured using both the perspectives—supervisor and subordinate.

Second, our findings generally support those from earlier research (e.g., Schriesheim *et al.*, 1998; Masterson *et al.*, 2000; and Sagas and Cunningham, 2004), which has demonstrated significant associations between the quality of LMX relationships and important outcomes. And since, LMX can indeed lead to desirable work outcomes, it becomes imperative for employees to develop and maintain quality exchanges with their supervisors. Further, organizations which are serious about helping their employees experience favorable work outcomes should be more cognizant of the importance of encouraging the development of high quality LMX relationships.

Third, LMX appears to impact career outcomes differently, depending on whether it is viewed by the supervisor or subordinate. Specifically, we found that supervisor-rated LMX significantly predicted salary progression and promotability, but did not contribute to employees' career satisfaction. On the contrary, subordinate-rated LMX significantly predicted career satisfaction. Clearly, the supervisor's perception of the exchange relationship is more instrumental to employees, when the goal is to attain salary increases and favorable promotion ratings. However, when the central issue is to experience greater level of career satisfaction, the subordinate's view of LMX becomes more paramount. Hence, employees need to be in tune with and be aware of their supervisors' LMX perceptions. As far as the attainment of salary progression and favorable promotability ratings are concerned, it does not matter how employees feel about their relationships with their supervisors but rather how their supervisors regard them and value their work contribution.

Next, this study has also reaffirmed past researchers' (e.g., Judge *et al.*, 1995; Wayne *et al.*, 1999; and Ang, 2000) contention on the multidimensionality and distinctiveness

of the outcomes construct. Specifically, we found the career outcomes construct to consist of both objective and subjective dimensions, with each dimension having unique antecedents. In reiteration, salary progression and promotability are predicted by supervisor-rated LMX, whereas career satisfaction is influenced by subordinate-rated LMX. Finally, since no interactive effects of the two LMX ratings on work outcomes was found, it can be concluded that supervisor-rated LMX and subordinate-rated LMX are likely to influence career outcomes independently.

As with all organizational researches, the current study is not without potential limitations. First, the LMX dimensions recorded respondents' perceptions. While these are as important as perceptions, they may not be an accurate reflection of the reality and may have also inflated the correlation. Second, this study has rallied primarily on a sample drawn only from manufacturing and service industries in Northern Malaysia. Further, the respondents were predominantly concentrated at low hierarchical level. As such, generalizing the present findings to other settings is, to some degree, constrained.

In future, the line of research may be replicated using diverse as well as a bigger sample size so that the differential impact of LMX on career outcomes could be further clarified from the supervisor as well as the subordinate standpoint. We also recommend that future research examine a broader range of outcome variables to assess the extent to which the relationships we observed would generalize to other outcomes such as performance, turnover intentions, extra-role behaviors, and organizational commitment.

It is hoped that the findings of this study have, to some extent, added to the research stream by substantiating the importance of measuring the quality of dyadic exchanges from the employee and supervisor perspectives. The differential impact of LMX on career outcomes can be meaningfully examined only by doing so. ✪

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