



Review

Matters of demographic similarity and dissimilarity in supervisor–subordinate relationships and workplace attitudes



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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon similarity-attraction theory, self-categorization theory and leader–member exchange theory, this study investigates how dyadic relational demography affects the manner in which supervisors and subordinates evaluate relationships and key organizational outcomes (i.e., job satisfaction, affective commitment, in-role and extra-role performance). Responses are from a matched set of 28 managers and their 175 employees in a Malaysian organization. Results reveal that of five relational demographic variables examined, the strongest and most consistent are ethnic and gender similarities. Ethnicity and gender similarity in supervisor–subordinate relationships have a positive association with subordinate perceptions on leader–member exchange quality. Similar patterns are found on supervisor perceptions on leader–member exchange quality for ethnicity and gender similarity. Ethnicity and gender similarity in supervisor–subordinate relationships have a positive association with job satisfaction, commitment to work group, in-role performance and out-role performance. We discuss the implications of these findings within the context of Malaysian cultural norms.

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Today's increasingly complex organizations are implementing diverse workforces (including diverse teams) with greater frequency as they attempt to integrate worker knowledge across specializations and geographic locations, drive innovation, and enhance productivity. The effective management of cultural diversity is frequently associated with a firm's competitive advantage, and has been linked with organizational performance variables such as better decision making, greater innovation, and superior distribution of economic opportunities (Cox & Blake, 1991; for review, see Sultana, Rashid, Mohiuddin, & Huda Mazumder, 2013). Workforce diversity research also encompasses areas such as diversity's influence on the interpersonal dynamics of supervisor–subordinate relationships, diversity's impact on work group outcomes, and how diversity effects a wide range of critical group outcomes such as satisfaction with supervisors, trust, organizational citizenship behavior, absenteeism, commitment, loyalty, and many others (Loi & Ngo, 2009; Tsui, Porter, & Egan, 2002; Vecchio & Brazil, 2007; Wildman et al., 2012). As we will highlight, current explanatory theories and perspectives toward superior–subordinate interaction and work diversity (e.g., leader–member exchange theory [LMX]; relational demographic theories) require expansion and modification to better capture the increasing complexities in workplace diversity vis-à-vis supervisor–subordinate relationships and many of the aforementioned organizational outcomes. This research seeks to fill this lacuna by more comprehensively investigating and understanding the dynamics of one core aspect of workplace diversity – that of supervisory–subordinate dyadic relationships in work groups (Jones & Harter, 2005). This research directly contributes to the workplace diversity (and specifically supervisor–subordinate) literature in several ways. *First*, this research incorporates an in-depth relational demographic analysis between supervisor–subordinate dyads in a multiethnic organization. As stated by Tsui et al. (2002) and Elfenbein and O'Reilly (2007), the current literature has not yet analyzed the full potential of both demographic differences and similarities in vertical dyadic relationships as they relate to various organizational outcomes.

Second, most supervisor–subordinate dyad research has been conducted with respondents from North America, Europe, and to some degree China (PRC) and Taiwan. To extend, broaden, and complement this work, this study considers the correlations between LMX and relational demography in a multiethnic organization in the vastly understudied (and inherently ethnically diverse) Southeast Asian country of Malaysia. We strongly contend that that broadening the literature via *Asian based studies* such as this one are essential as we move toward more meaningful and deeply thought through comparisons and contrasts between people from nations located in various regions (see also Ota, McCann, & Honeycutt, 2012). So-called “Asia specific variables” such as *guanxi* may indeed share commonality with relational demography (Loi & Ngo, 2009), and perhaps can be considered as a special form of relational demography (Tsui & Gutek, 1999). While we are not suggesting that *guanxi* is central to our research in Malaysia (though it could be a consideration with Chinese Malaysians), it our hope that research such as this can ultimately move us toward better “deconstructing Asia” (and even the notion of so-called Asian collectivism). This type of research can achieve this goal by not only showing one of the unique faces of Asia, but also by highlighting inter-Asian similarities (i.e., between this and prior work in Asia).

Third, little is known about what underlies the leader–member relationship in a truly *multiethnic* society like Malaysia. Here too we have a unique opportunity for investigation as we are capturing workplace diversity in a society that is inherently diverse. Speaking about Malaysia's ethnic diversity, Dato' Sri Haji Mohammad Najib bin Tun Haji Abdul Razak (the sixth Prime Minister of Malaysia) made the following comments in a 2009 speech:

We are widely viewed as a multi-racial, multi-religious society that has managed its diversity with some success. We have some of the largest and most independent Indian and Chinese communities outside of China and India. We are a majority Muslim Malay country and a leading member of the Islamic world that has, within our national school system, the largest network of Chinese medium schools outside of Greater China. Our print, broadcast and online media are multilingual. We are Malay, Chinese, Indian, Orang Asli, Iban and Kadazan. We are Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu.

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