



Work–family effects of LMX: the moderating role of work–home segmentation preferences☆

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ABSTRACT

As leaders differentiate between their subordinates at work, subordinates vary in how much they can acquire from their leaders. Subordinates who have a high-quality relationship with their leaders have access to a valued resource channel. This channel benefits not only their work, but also their family. We investigated how the quality of leader–member exchange (LMX) relationships influences subordinates' family performance by focusing on the mediating role of work-to-family enrichment (WFE) and the moderating role of work–home segmentation preferences. A three-wave, multi-source survey was conducted using a sample of 198 dyads of frontline employees and their spouses in southwest China. The results of hierarchical multiple regression and bootstrapping analyses indicated that WFE mediated the positive relationship between LMX and family performance. The work–home segmentation preference weakened the LMX–WFE relationship and strengthened the WFE–family performance relationship. The theoretical and managerial implications of these findings are discussed.

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Introduction

Leaders in the workplace do not establish equally good exchange relationships with all of their subordinates (Culbertson, Huffman, & Alden-Anderson, 2010). Instead, they develop high-quality exchange relationships with a small fraction of their subordinates and only develop relatively low-quality relationships with the remainder. This distinction is denoted by different levels of leader–member exchange (LMX) in LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). According to LMX theory, subordinates in high LMX relationships are given greater influence, autonomy, and tangible benefits (Culbertson et al., 2010). High LMX has therefore been associated with positive work outcomes such as decreased turnover (Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982), increased team effectiveness (Boies & Howell, 2006), job satisfaction (Schyns & Croon, 2006), and organizational citizenship behavior (Harris, Li, & Kirkman, 2014; Rockstuhl, Dulebohn, Ang, & Shore, 2012).

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Despite these fruitful findings, little is known about the effect of leader–member relationships on follower family outcomes (Culbertson et al., 2010). Few studies have focused on the influence of LMX on follower work–family interface (e.g., work–family conflict, work–family facilitation, work–family interference) (Culbertson et al., 2010; Hill, Morganson, Matthews, & Atkinson, 2016; Tummers & Bronkhorst, 2014). Family-specific outcomes, however, have been largely overlooked in the LMX literature. To address this research gap, the first purpose of this study was to investigate the positive link between LMX and follower family performance. According to past research (Carlson, Grzywacz, & Kacmar, 2010), we define family performance as the fulfillment of the general responsibilities associated with the family.

We focus on family performance for several theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, work–family enrichment theory has suggested that experiences at work can provide resources that are transferrable to the home (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). These transferred resources are likely to enrich the quality of family life and, in turn, improve family performance (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). In other words, resources derived from the workplace and used in the family domain can help employees to improve their family performance. Choosing family performance as an outcome in our proposed model allows us to test work–family enrichment theory directly in the LMX context. The current field of LMX is poorly integrated with studies having investigated family consequences (Culbertson et al., 2010). The lack of a unified theoretical framework is impeding the accumulation of knowledge and the progress of empirical research. This study is the first to meaningfully theorize and examine the effects of LMX on family performance and, thus, may support the application of work–family enrichment theory in the LMX context, thereby encouraging future research to explore whether other leadership variables have effects on follower family performance.

In practical terms, along with the increasing dual-earner partners in the workforce and the blurring of gender roles, there has been an increasingly interdependent shift in employees' values and work and family roles (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). This phenomenon has presented a challenge for researchers and organizations in finding ways to promote employees' work–family balance. One way to achieve this work–family balance is to increase employees' family effectiveness (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). Because high levels of family performance reflect the successful fulfillment of family responsibilities, enhanced family performance should help employees facilitate their family effectiveness, and in turn improve their work–family balance.

To date, policymakers have implemented numerous formal human resource policies, such as the provision of direct or subsidized services for child care. However, these formal human resource policies do not necessarily improve employees' family lives because the policies are not tailored to the employees' personal needs (Kossek & Distelberg, 2009). Studies have indicated that formal human resource policies and other macro-level variables have inconsistent findings and limited implications for employees' personal lives (for a review, see Kossek & Lambert, 2005). Other reviews also conclude that human resource policies are not highly effective in promoting employees' well-being (Kossek, 2005). Recent research has provided evidence for the claim that supervisors are more important than formal human resource policies for employees to handle their work and family lives (Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2012).

Not surprisingly, studies have called for research on leader–follower dyads to determine appropriate ways to help employees fulfill their family responsibilities (Culbertson et al., 2010). In this study, we propose that followers who have strong LMX relationships with their leaders are likely to perform well in the family domain. A greater understanding of the relationship between LMX and follower family performance would enable organizations and managers to help their employees to better fulfill their work and family demands, and better identify intervention opportunities to promote LMX from heightening the follower's family performance.

In addition, if LMX is found to affect follower family performance, we still do not know how this process occurs. Work–family enrichment theory argues that work-to-family enrichment (WFE), which is defined as the extent to which work experiences improve the quality of family life (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), is an important mediating mechanism for explaining the positive effects of work resources on family performance. The second purpose of this study was therefore to investigate the mediating role of WFE in the relationship between LMX and family performance, allowing us to examine this theory from a fine-grained approach and to understand how and why LMX enhances family performance. Work–family enrichment is bi-directional: work resources can enrich family life (WFE) and family resources can enrich work life (family-to-work enrichment; FWE) (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). As LMX represents a dyadic relationship in the workplace, our study focuses on WFE, not FWE.

Moreover, we do not know if there are certain conditions in which the effects of LMX and WFE are more likely to arise. To explore the boundary conditions, we apply boundary theory, which suggests that work and family are distinct domains separated by a boundary (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). In particular, boundaries can be drawn differently in accordance with people's individual boundary preferences. To capture this preference difference, Kreiner (2006) coined the term “work–home segmentation preference,” which refers to the extent to which people prefer to create and maintain segmented boundaries between their work and family domains. Their work–home segmentation preference may influence whether individuals use or transfer work and family resources (Liu, Kwan, Lee, & Hui, 2013). It may therefore be a boundary condition for the effects of LMX and WFE. The third goal of this study was thus to investigate the moderating role of work–home segmentation preferences in the LMX–WFE–family performance relationship. By combining work–family enrichment theory with boundary theory, we propose a model (see Fig. 1) that represents the processes by which LMX positively influences subordinates' WFE and, in turn, promotes their family performance. These processes are moderated by the work–home segmentation preference.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, we extend the LMX literature by linking LMX with WFE and family performance, filling the gap on family-specific outcomes in the LMX literature (Culbertson et al., 2010) and testing work–family enrichment theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) more directly. Our findings enrich our knowledge that LMX is beneficial for follower family life. Second, this study contributes to work–family enrichment theory by considering LMX to be an important work resource channel and empirically testing the mediating effect of WFE on the LMX–family performance relationship.

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