



The subjective well-being of group leaders as explained by the quality of leader–member exchange

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ABSTRACT

Although a great deal of research explores the ramifications of leader–member exchange (LMX) quality for the well-being of followers, leader well-being is largely overlooked. To address this gap, we investigate whether leaders' well-being, in the form of positive affect and job stress, can be explained by LMX quality at the group level of analysis. We analyzed data from 1297 group members within 162 groups matched with individual leaders. Results showed that leaders' positive affect and job stress were uniquely explained by LMX differentiation (group-member data), even after several relevant variables, including fundamental leader attitudes and average LMX (group-member data), were taken into account. A subsequent analytical step revealed a significant interaction between average LMX and LMX differentiation for leader job stress, yet not for leader positive affect. Specifically, the positive relationship between LMX differentiation and leader job stress was discovered to be greater at low average LMX than at high average LMX. Overall, the findings highlight leaders' well-being as a promising avenue for future LMX research and a group level of analysis as useful in studying social exchange.

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Introduction

Being a formal leader is appealing to many employees. This is because achieving positions of leadership is considered a principal indicator of objective career success (Pachulicz, Schmitt, & Kuljanin, 2008). In fact, the pursuit of hierarchical advancement into roles of leadership is considered a traditional career motivation (Chan et al., 2015). Leadership roles are alluring for many reasons including personal impact, social status, and financial income (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Steers & Braunstein, 1976). So much so that many professionals are willing to invest the numerous years and long work weeks conducive to achieving leadership positions (see Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Pachulicz et al., 2008). Yet there is also recognition that leadership roles are inherently quite stressful (Day, Sin, & Chen, 2004; Fiedler, 1993), especially when managing collective change in response to imposed circumstances (Quick, Cooper, Gavin, & Quick, 1992). One reason for the potential stress is that leadership is construed as “social problem solving” (Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001, p. 8). To be effective, leaders must solve social problems and thereby advance group achievement, in part by maintaining productive relationships with followers (Bennis, 2007). Unfortunately, this is not easy to do.

For this reason, the social-exchange relationships of leaders with their followers garner much attention. Over the 40 plus years of research devoted to LMX, including several meta-analyses (e.g., Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997), it is clear that employees personally benefit from high-quality social exchange with leaders. Nonetheless, examination of existing findings reveals that research has yet to investigate implications of LMX quality for the personal well-being of leaders. As an indication of this gap in existing research, neither Dulebohn et al.'s nor Gerstner and Day's seminal LMX meta-analysis

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touched on any form of leader well-being. In fact, this situation extends beyond LMX research such that leader's own well-being has been overlooked in general by researchers, as noted by Byrne, Barling, and Dupré (2014). It is thereby not surprising that Courtright, Colbert, and Choi (2014) portrayed their study as being among the first journal articles on the demands of leadership in connection with stress experienced by the leaders themselves.

More specific to the present study, we could find only one study in the premier leadership-focused journal that includes the subjective well-being of leaders as an outcome variable. In that study, Senior et al. (2012) found that among students placed in a position of group leadership for a business simulation over 22 weeks, those with greater developmental stability reported higher levels of well-being in connection with said activity. We seek to extend research on leader well-being as a criterion by examining it specifically with respect to the relationships that incumbent leaders maintain with their group members over time. As such, the present study centers on leaders' own psychological states of leader well-being, in the form of both positive affect and job stress, with LMX quality at the group level of analysis as a plausible explanatory phenomenon.

There are several reasons why these phenomena are important to explore together. First, leader well-being is salient because leadership roles have many potential stressors (Day et al., 2004; Fiedler, 1993) and stress can cause bad decisions by leaders (Thompson, 2010). In addition, there is evidence that manifold interpersonal exchanges and associations can add up to exert a lot of social influence on one individual's well-being (Haslam & van Dick, 2011). For example, vexing interpersonal interactions are a principal stressor for individuals at work (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Narayanan, Menon, & Spector, 1999). As most leaders deal with numerous followers and experience disparate interactions, leader well-being may be especially susceptible to LMX quality at the group level of analysis. That is, although the origin of LMX involves leader–follower interactions for each dyad or matched pair (an individual level of analysis), a multilevel perspective maintains that LMX is also a group-level phenomenon emerging from bottom-up dyadic exchanges. By exploring whether leaders' subjective well-being can be explained uniquely by the aggregated social exchange that takes place with their designated followers, this study adds uniquely to the emerging emphasis placed on LMX in the group context (e.g., Henderson, Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2008).

Finally, we adopt *transactional stress theory* (Courtright et al., 2014) as a general framework for positing that LMX quality would have ramifications for leader well-being. A basic idea stemming from transactional stress theory is that leadership roles entail numerous transactions with various entities, such that in aggregate the challenges encountered by a leader may amount to demands that take a toll on one's well-being. How this applies to LMX quality and leader well-being is the notion that when considered in aggregate, deficiencies in social exchange pose a challenge that demands sustained effort and thus depletes scarce resources (Hobfoll, 1989) of a leader. In particular, we propose that lower mean levels and greater differentiation of LMX at the group level function as transactional stressors for leaders of such groups, resulting in less positive affect and greater job stress experienced by those leaders.

Theoretical background and study hypotheses

LMX and leaders' well-being

LMX is perhaps the most popular conceptualization of the give and take that occurs between leaders and their followers. The theory of LMX, which has evolved from a vertical dyad theory to a social exchange theory of voluntary behavior (Bernerth, Armenakis, Feild, Giles, & Walker, 2007), has been afforded a prominent place in the study of leadership. The foundation of the theory proposes that individuals form unique relationships with a given leader based on giving and receiving various phenomena ranging from promotions to extra effort. It follows that the core of LMX is the leader–follower exchange for each dyad or matched pair (an individual level of analysis). The theory explicitly emphasizes the unspecified nature of future returns, thereby distinguishing social exchange from economic exchange in which parties negotiate exact quantities of return at the time of the transaction (Blau, 1964). An important consideration is that LMX develops over time in response to repeated experiences of social exchange between a leader and a group member (see Park, Sturman, Vanderpool, & Chan, 2015). A group member's perceptions of LMX would, therefore, reflect an accumulation of observations embodying a great deal of information and experience.

From the standpoint of each follower, research finds that one who shares high-quality exchanges with a leader would likely be afforded additional developmental opportunities (e.g., promotions, challenging work assignments, and coaching; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Wakabayashi & Graen, 1984). Receiving discretionary benefits results in a sense of indebtedness, as a member appreciates the time and energy devoted to them by a leader (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). The individual follower would then be motivated to support the giving leader through exceptional performance and enhanced loyalty (Conger, 1999; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). This is the process by which LMX quality for each leader–member dyad would ultimately pertain to leader well-being. Extending this to the interactions a leader experiences across all members of his or her group would suggest that LMX aggregated to the group level could have profound ramifications for a leader.

Accordingly, we explore the implications of LMX quality in aggregate within a group for the group leader's positive affect and job stress as psychological states of well-being. In that positive affect subsumes recently experienced emotions such as excitement and enthusiasm (Clark & Watson, 1988), and is uniquely related to social activity (Watson, Clark, McIntyre, & Hamaker, 1992), it qualifies as a meaningful indicator of leader well-being. As leaders' job stress is a state of distress experienced from one's job (Motowidlo, Packard, & Manning, 1986), it is another important form of well-being (Rantanen, Kinnunen, Feldt, & Pulkkinen, 2008) for the present study. Incorporating a construct of activated pleasure along with one of experienced distress captures both sides of state-like hedonic well-being (for comparison see Monnot & Beehr, 2014; Senior et al., 2012).

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