The Leadership Quarterly 26 (2015) 81–97

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Leadership Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua

When do subordinates commit to their supervisors? Different effects of perceived supervisor integrity and support on Chinese and American employees[☆]

Chi-Ying Cheng[a,*,1], Ding-Yu Jiang[b,*,1], Bor-Shiuan Cheng[c], Jean H. Riley[d], Chin-Kang Jen[e]

[a] *School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, Singapore*
[b] *Department of Psychology, National Chung Cheng University, Taiwan*
[c] *Department of Psychology, National Taiwan University, Taiwan*
[d] *California School of Organizational Studies, Alliant International University, USA*
[e] *Department of Human Resource Management, National Sun Yat-Sen University, Taiwan*

A R T I C L E I N F O

Article history:
Received 1 June 2013
Received in revised form 31 July 2014
Accepted 15 August 2014
Available online 6 September 2014

Editor: Charles Dhanaraj

Keywords:
Commitment to the supervisor
Perceived supervisor integrity
Perceived supervisor support
LMX
Chinese and American employees

A B S T R A C T

While subordinates' commitment to the supervisor is highly desirable, the routes to achieve this might vary in different cultures. Drawing on the theories of leader–member exchange (LMX) and cultural logic, this study posits different interaction effects for subordinates' perceived supervisor integrity and support on commitment to the supervisor in cultures with different expectations of personal integrity. The results indicate that an additive effect can be observed for American subordinates: perceived supervisor support increases commitment to the supervisor to a greater extent when a high degree of supervisor integrity is also perceived. In contrast, a compensatory effect can be observed for Chinese subordinates: perceived supervisor support increases commitment to the supervisor more when a lower degree of supervisor integrity is perceived. Our findings shed light on cultural differences in the psychological mechanisms of employees' relationship with their supervisors. Theoretical and practical implications for the effectiveness of Asian leadership are discussed.

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Introduction

Much research has been carried out on the effects of organizational commitment as a global construct (for a review, see Mathieu & Zajac, 1990), and organizational commitment has been demonstrated to be a multiple-foci construct (e.g. commitment to organization, top management, supervisor, and workgroups; Becker, 1992). Among various foci of commitment for employees, subordinates' commitment to the supervisor has been found to be the most predictive of leadership effectiveness and employee performance in both Chinese and American organizations (e.g. Chen, Tsui, & Farh, 2002; Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003). Driven by interest in theoretical development and managerial advancement, research into the antecedents of subordinates' commitment to the supervisor is a growing area in organizational research (for a review, see Henderson, Liden, Glibkowski, & Chaudhry, 2009). For cultural reasons, subordinates' commitment to the supervisor is especially important in Chinese organizations. Chinese culture is known to be a "face" culture that emphasizes social relationships, such that different exchange rules will be applied according to different social ties and will lead to different personal outcomes (Hwang, 1987). This cultural characteristic of the Chinese leader–member

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[☆] We thank Dr. Fanny M. Cheung and Dr. Kwok Leung for providing both Chinese and English versions of concern for face scale in support for our research.
[*] Corresponding authors.
E-mail addresses: cycheng@smu.edu.sg (C.-Y. Cheng), psydyj@ccu.edu.tw (D.-Y. Jiang).
[1] The first two authors contributed equally to this work.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.08.002
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relationship is different from that of its American counterpart (e.g. Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008), and contributes to the unique commitment of Chinese employees to their supervisors (Chen et al., 2002; Cheng, Jiang, & Riley, 2003).

Drawing on social exchange theory, Western leader–member exchange (LMX) theory suggests that subordinates exhibit personal commitments to their direct supervisors in return for personal support from these supervisors (e.g. Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). For example, Vandenberghe, Bentein, and Stinglhamber (2004) showed that commitment to the supervisor directly affects employees' job performance and intention to quit. However, supervisor support may not be the only issue for employees considering entering an exchange relationship with their supervisors (Blau, 1964; Byrne, Pitts, Chiaburu, & Steiner, 2011). Employees' perception of whether they can trust their employers plays a critical role in building a LMX relationship, especially during the early stages of relationship building (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998).

Trust is commonly defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). To develop the willingness of the trustor to be vulnerable to the actions of the trustee, the trustee needs to be perceived as trustworthy, the antecedent of trust (Ring & Van de Ven, 1992). According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), if a trustor does not perceive a trustee as trustworthy, the trustor will not engage in social exchange activities with that trustee. Among the antecedents of trust proposed in prior organizational research (Mayer et al., 1995, Table 1), perceived supervisor integrity is one of the most critical for subordinates' trust in supervisors (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, 2007; Lapidot, Kark, & Shamir, 2007; Moorman, Darnold, & Priesemuth, 2013). Perceptions of supervisor integrity precede a subordinate's trust in the supervisor, which paves the way for building a positive exchange relationship between supervisor and subordinate and in turn leads to the subordinate's commitment to the supervisor (Becker, 1998; Palanski & Yammarino, 2007; Simons, 2008). We thus posit perceived supervisor integrity as a potential antecedent of subordinates' commitment to the supervisor in addition to perceived supervisor support.

Furthermore, we predict different interaction effects of perceived supervisor integrity and perceived supervisor support on the commitment of American and Chinese employees to supervisors, due to different expectations of individual integrity. Recent cultural research has indicated that people in a dignity culture (a pervasive culture shared by European Americans; Ayers, 1984) and a face culture (a pervasive culture shared by East Asians; Ho, 1976) view individual integrity in very different ways (Kim, Cohen, & Au, 2010a, 2010b; Leung & Cohen, 2011; Weber, 1997). According to Weber (1997), dignity cultures assume that the source of a person's worth and trustworthiness is inherent, whereas face cultures assume that these are given by others. Specifically, when it comes to personal worth, dignity cultures value intrinsic virtues that cannot be taken away by others, such as integrity (Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002), whereas face cultures assess personal worth and trustworthiness according to external evaluations by others (Kim et al., 2010a, 2010b). Thus, when entering a social exchange relationship with their supervisors, American and Chinese employees may view personal integrity differently. The exchange rules used in dignity and face cultures are also different. Fair exchange, in which both parties have equal autonomy regarding whether or not to enter an exchange relationship, is dominant in dignity cultures, while unequal power in an exchange relationship, determined by hierarchical social relationships, is prevalent in face cultures (Leung & Cohen, 2011). As a result, perceived integrity and perceived support might play different roles in LMX relationships in dignity and face cultures.

Our study untangles the different psychological mechanisms underlying subordinates' commitment to their supervisors in Chinese and American cultures. We propose that due to different expectations of supervisor integrity in dignity and face cultures, the interaction effects of perceived supervisor integrity and perceived supervisor support on commitment to the supervisor will be different for Chinese and American subordinates. This study contributes to that on the effectiveness of Asian leadership, an important but understudied topic, by introducing culture explanations to the processes that precede commitment to the supervisor by Chinese employees. By comparing Chinese and American employees, our findings shed light on how cultural influences shape LMX relationships in different cultural contexts. Our theoretical development and hypotheses are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Differences between organizational commitment, commitment to the supervisor, and trust in the supervisor

The concept of commitment to the supervisor is derived from organizational commitment, one of the most important psychological constructs in organizational behavior (for a review, see Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996). Organizational commitment represents a psychological attachment to the employing organization, and according to Allen and Meyer (1990) may take three forms: a. affective commitment, defined as “employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization”, b. continuance commitment, defined as “commitment based on costs that employees associate with leaving the organization”, and c. normative commitment, defined as “an employee's feelings of obligation to remain with the organization” (Allen & Meyer 1990, p. 1). Organizational commitment is considered as one of the most important variables studied in organizational research because of its positive association with desirable outcomes, such as reduced absenteeism, reduced turnover, and improved job performance (Iverson & Buttigieg, 1999; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Although organizational scholars concur on the importance of organizational commitment, the extent to which it truly influences employees' organizational behavior is controversial (for a review, see Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). To reconcile the inconsistent effects of organizational commitment on different levels of organizational outcomes, Reichers (1985) proposed that the general concept of organizational commitment might be best understood as a collection of commitments, and employees could experience different commitments to the goals and values of multiple groups within the organization. Supporting Reichers (1985) multi-foci approach, Becker (1992) demonstrated that employees' foci of commitment (e.g. to top management, supervisor, and workgroup) account for unique variances in job satisfaction, intention to quit, and prosocial organizational behavior above and beyond the variance in commitment to the organization. Through classifying foci of organizational commitment as global or local, Becker et al. (1996) proposed that local foci, such as commitment to the supervisor or workgroup, are psychologically more proximal than global foci (i.e. commitment to top management

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