



Relative leader–member exchange, negative affectivity and social identification: A moderated-mediation examination



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ABSTRACT

We argue that leader–member exchange (LMX) standing relative to the LMX relationships of other coworkers (RLMX) in workgroups may influence employees' job performance. Based on social comparison and social identity theories, we develop a moderated-mediation model of the psychological processes linking RLMX and job performance, and test it on a sample of 252 employees and 42 managers working in two large banks. Results of hierarchical regression analyses provide support for the model. We found that RLMX was positively related to social identification after controlling for perceptions of LMX; and also that social identification mediated the relationship between RLMX and job performance. We found further that negative affectivity moderated the relationship between RLMX and social identification which, in turn, also mediated the interactive effect on job performance.

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1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, considerable research has been undertaken to examine the importance of leader–member exchange (LMX) in the workplace (see [Schyns & Day, 2010](#), for a review). LMX theory focuses on differentiated interpersonal exchange relationships that leaders develop and maintain with subordinates using different leadership styles within workgroups ([Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975](#)). Although [Gerstner and Day \(1997\)](#) demonstrated that LMX relationships have implications for employees' work attitudes and behaviors, LMX research to date has tended to view subordinates' LMX relationships with their leaders in isolation of the LMX relationships of other coworkers in a workgroup ([Kramer, 1995](#); [Sias & Jablin, 1995](#); [Sparrowe & Liden, 1997, 2005](#)). In this respect, a group of LMX researchers (see [Henderson, Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2008](#); [Liden & Antonakis, 2009](#); [Sherony & Green, 2002](#); [Sparrowe & Liden, 1997, 2005](#); [Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanasy, 2008](#); [Vidyarathi, Liden, Anand, Erdogan, & Ghosh, 2010](#)) have recently offered the view that interpersonal exchange relationships between leaders, subordinates, and coworkers are interconnected and embedded within a larger social network in organizations. This suggests that these exchange relationships are interdependent and can influence each other. In particular, the differential quality of LMX relationships creates a psychological boundary for interpersonal comparison that may lead each employee to be aware of her or his relative standing in a workgroup. Thus, an employees' *relative standing* of her or his LMX relationship (RLMX; defined as an employee's LMX quality relative to the average LMX quality of others within a workgroup) may also influence her or his work attitudes and behaviors in workgroups (see [Henderson et al., 2008](#); [Hu & Liden, 2009](#); [Liden & Antonakis, 2009](#); [Vidyarathi et al., 2010](#)).

According to LMX theory (see [Dienesch & Liden, 1986](#); [Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995](#)), leaders tend to develop high-quality relationships with only a few subordinates within a workgroup and these relationships serve as channels for leaders to distribute

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organizational resources, job-related benefits, and psychological support to subordinates. Hence, relative to other group members in a workgroup, members in higher quality LMX relationships are likely to be more advantageously treated. Employees' LMX relationship quality therefore is likely to derive from their comparative positions in the workgroup (as compared to other co-workers' LMX relationships). Consequently, the differences between an employee's LMX relationship and others' LMX relationships may influence the employee's evaluation of her or his LMX relationship (Hu & Liden, 2009; Vidyarthi et al., 2010). Although the theoretical and practical bases of LMX differentiation have been made explicit, research examining the effect of RLMX on employees' work attitudes and behaviors—and the underlying psychological processes involved—has only recently begun to attract attention (e.g., Henderson et al., 2008; Hu & Liden, 2009; Vidyarthi et al., 2010).

By integrating social comparison theory (SCT; Festinger, 1954; Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007) and social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1972), we explore the effect of RLMX by testing a moderated-mediation model, the purpose of which is to explain the psychological process of how RLMX is related to employees' job performance. Specifically, we propose two mechanisms by which RLMX might exert impact on performance outcomes. First, we theorize that social identification (the extent that individuals define themselves based on collective values and group characteristics; see Brewer & Gardner, 1986) will mediate the relationship between RLMX and job performance after controlling for perceptions of LMX. Second, we posit that negative affectivity (NA; a dispositional tendency to experience negative emotions, see Watson & Clark, 1984) will attenuate the relationship between RLMX and social identification. We argue further that social identification will also mediate the interactive effect between RLMX and employees' NA on job performance.

Fig. 1 depicts our proposed model. Specifically, we aim to advance the new area of RLMX in LMX literature in three ways.

First, we examine the effect of RLMX on social identification. This extends current LMX research by explicating how social comparison processes occur in a set of differentiated relationships between leaders and followers in workgroups (Henderson et al., 2008; Henderson, Liden, Glibkowski, & Chaudhry, 2009; Hu & Liden, 2009; Vidyarthi et al., 2010). We argue in particular that, by exploring employees' relative LMX standing as compared with others' LMX relationships in workgroups, we address a new and critically important issue about the implication of the social context of LMX differentiation. This is because social comparisons are likely to provide a new perspective on whether RLMX is associated with employees' identity which, in turn, serves as a basis for their cognitive, affective and motivational processes.

Second, our research is in response to the call by Henderson et al. (2008) and Vidyarthi et al. (2010) to identify intervening processes that might explain relationships between RLMX and performance outcomes. Drawing on SIT and SCT, therefore, we propose that social identification mediates the relationship between RLMX and job performance. In particular, we posit that social identification has the potential to increase our understanding of how relative LMX standing is related to the way employees perceive and envision themselves in a workgroup that, in turn, may also be associated with their behavioral reactions.

Third, we explore the moderating role of an individual difference variable, employee negative affectivity (NA), attempting to understand how LMX relationships is associated with social identity processes in workgroups. This is consistent with recent research (e.g., see Hochwarter & Byrne, 2005; Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007) that has begun to explain why employees with different personality characteristics respond differentially to perceptions of their LMX relationships in workgroups. The past research, however, has not yet explored affective-based personality variables such as NA as a moderating effect in LMX research (Bauer & Green, 1996; Hui, Law, & Chen, 1999). To examine this issue further, we elucidate why and when RLMX may influence the social identification of employees and, in turn, their subsequent job performance.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

2.1. RLMX: conceptualization and empirical evidence

The concept of relative LMX (RLMX) was originally developed by Graen, Liden, and Hoel (1982) and is predicated on the nexus of LMX and social exchange. As such, RLMX differs from LMX in that RLMX assesses members' *relative* standings in terms of their exchange relationships with the leader, whereas LMX measures the quality of relationships between leaders and their members (Henderson et al., 2008; Hu & Liden, 2009; Vidyarthi et al., 2010). Moreover, RLMX is distinct from a newly proposed construct called LMX social comparison (LMXSC), such that the former reflects the degree to which an individual's LMX differs from the

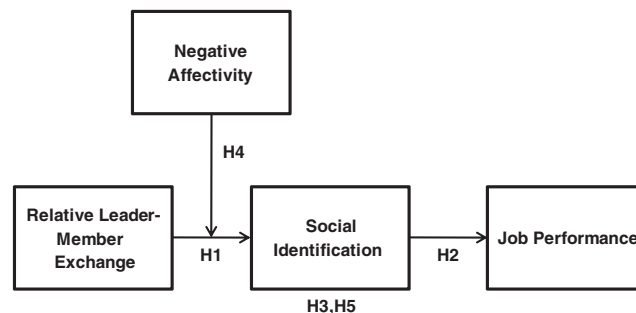


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model of processes linking relative LMX and job performance, moderated by negative affectivity and mediated by social identification.

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