



The moderating effect of political skill on the demographic dissimilarity – Leader–member exchange quality relationship

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ABSTRACT

LMX theorists have long argued that similarity between supervisors and subordinates will lead to the development of higher quality leader–member exchange (LMX) relationships. However, studies that have examined the impact of similarity on these relationships have found mixed results, suggesting the need for examining moderators. The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of subordinates' political skill on the relationship between supervisor–subordinate racial similarity/dissimilarity (RSD) and the quality of LMX relationships. The sample consisted of 189 participants in a retail service organization. The results indicate that political skill is a significant moderator, and plays a substantial role in LMX relationship quality for racially dissimilar supervisor–subordinate dyads. The strengths and limitations of the study, and directions for future research are discussed.

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The relationships supervisors develop with their subordinates have received much attention in the leadership literature under the rubric leader–member exchange (LMX). LMX stipulates that supervisors can develop differential relationships with their various subordinates, and these relationships consist of different outcomes and expectations (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Although the antecedents of LMX have received considerably less research attention than the outcomes of LMX, similarity between the supervisor and the subordinate has been found to be one of the important determinants of LMX. Much of this research has found that a high degree of similarity is related to higher quality LMX relationships, whereas lower similarity is related to lower quality LMX relationships (Green, Anderson, & Shivers, 1996; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993).

Demographic similarity is one important aspect of similarity that requires further examination because organizations are becoming increasingly demographically diverse (Wagner & Hollenbeck, 2005). In particular, researchers have noted the importance of the study of race in organizations, and its neglect in the literature (Cox, 2004; Ilgen & Youtz, 1986; Nkomo, 1992). Despite its importance, there has been little research on racial similarity/dissimilarity (RSD) in organizations (Cox, 2004). Furthermore, the majority of research that has been conducted on race in organizations has been focused on equal opportunity and hiring decisions, with many of the results being inconsistent (Cox, 2004; Cox & Nkomo, 1990).

However, the impact of race in organizations is great, affecting important job outcomes, such as compensation and advancement (Roberson & Block, 2001). In their review of racial studies in the area of human resources and organizational behavior, Cox & Nkomo (1990) reported that 71% of the studies found significant racial effects. Also, with an increasing proportion of the workforce in the U.S. consisting of ethnic and racial minorities (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), RSD is becoming a more prevalent issue of both theoretical and practical importance (Cox, 2004).

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Therefore, mixed race supervisor–subordinate dyads are likely to increase, and it is important for us to develop a more informed understanding of the role RSD plays in supervisor–subordinate relationships. RSD is likely to create a barrier to the development of high-quality LMX relationships. However, those subordinates possessing certain skills might be able to overcome racial dissimilarity with their supervisors to develop high-quality relationships, which might partially explain the mixed findings reported regarding research on demographic similarity (Liden et al., 1993).

One such skill set is political skill, and it essentially involves the ability to understand the working environment and the actions of those in the environment, and to use this to influence individuals to achieve both organizational and personal goals (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005; Ferris et al., 2007; Ferris, Treadway et al., 2005). Political skill should enable subordinates, operating within the context of racially dissimilar dyads, to use their knowledge of the workplace and their supervisors to develop high-quality relationships through the use of such mechanisms as influence and understanding. Therefore, the purpose of the present paper is to examine the moderating influence of political skill on the relationship between supervisor–subordinate RSD and LMX quality.

1. Leader–member exchange

LMX theory states that supervisors can vary their style and behavior across subordinates, and in doing so, determine the relationship quality (Gerstner & Day, 1997), which can be classified on a continuum from high-quality to low-quality (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High-quality relationships are thought to be positive, characterized by trust, high frequency of interaction, support, and more formal and informal rewards (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). In other words, these relationships are effective for both the supervisor and subordinate, offering both parties distinct advantages. Subordinates in these relationships are thought to reflect higher organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) (Major, Kozlowski, & Chao, 1995; Wayne & Green, 1993). Low-quality LMX relationships are thought to be based solely on the employment contract, whereby the subordinate does exactly what is specified in the contract, and the supervisor does the same (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). As would be expected, these relationships are characterized by less trust, support, frequency of interaction, and higher turnover (Dienesch & Liden, 1986).

It is imperative for leaders to develop effective, high-quality relationships with their followers because of the impact this relationship has not only on follower behaviors, but also on the organization. For instance, OCBs are thought to increase organization effectiveness, and these behaviors are more likely to occur in high-quality relationships. Furthermore, LMX is positively related to affective commitment, various measures of satisfaction, perceived organizational support, and supervisor effectiveness (e.g., Anderson & Williams, 1996; Kinicki & Vecchio, 1994; Kramer, 1995; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Major et al., 1995; Schriesheim, Castro, & Yammarino, 2000; Wayne & Green, 1993). Additionally, LMX quality is negatively related to actual turnover, turnover intentions, and social loafing (e.g., Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Major et al., 1995).

Although considerable research has been conducted on LMX over the past three decades, there has been very little investigation of LMX relative to workforce diversity (Douglas, Ferris, Buckley, & Gundlach, 2003). Furthermore, the role that antecedents play in the development and maintenance of LMX relationships has been largely ignored. Dienesch and Liden (1986) suggested that other factors also be considered in the development of LMX, such as the characteristics of the supervisor and subordinate, and the combination of those characteristics. These factors include attractiveness, similarity, and liking. The focus of the present study is on the interface of supervisor and subordinate characteristics, with specific reference to similarity. Researchers have suggested that the similarity between supervisor and subordinate may affect the type of exchange that forms (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Theoretically, it has been argued that high similarity would be related to higher LMX quality (Tsui, Xin, & Egan, 1995).

Researchers examining the effects of other forms of similarity on LMX relationships also have found mixed support. These studies have included the similarity between supervisors and subordinates on cognitive style, class, competence, demographics, education, locus of control, least preferred co-worker, need for achievement, need for power, positive affectivity, and perceived attitude (Allinson, Armstrong, & Hayes, 2001; Bauer & Green, 1996; Duchon, Green, & Taber, 1986; Engle & Lord, 1997; Green et al., 1996; Liden et al., 1993; McClane, 1991; Pelled & Xin, 2000; Phillips & Bedeian, 1994; Snyder & Bruning, 1985). Whereas, age, sex, class, competence, positive affectivity, and perceived attitude similarity were mostly found to have positive relationships with LMX quality, the rest of the similarity antecedents were found to be non-significant.

Tsui et al. (1995) argued that those subordinates who are more demographically similar to their supervisors would realize higher quality exchanges. However, research in this area has reported mixed support for demographic similarity. For instance, Liden et al. (1993), using a composite demographic variable consisting of sex, race, education, and age, did not find a significant relationship with LMX quality, whereas Green et al. (1996) found sex similarity to be related to LMX quality. However, these mixed findings might be related to other personal characteristics, such as political skill. For instance, subordinates might be able to neutralize the potential dysfunctional consequences of demographic differences, thus reducing the psychological distance by utilizing political skill (Napier & Ferris, 1993).

2. Political skill

Political skill is defined as: “The ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organizational objectives” (Ferris, Treadway et al., 2005, p. 127). Politically-skilled individuals are able to combine social astuteness with the ability to adjust their behavior to various situational demands in a manner that appears genuine and sincere (Ferris, Treadway et al., 2005). Thus, these individuals inspire trust, confidence, and support from those around them, and are able to exercise influence over others effectively.

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