



## Review

# A longitudinal examination of the effects of self perceived leader–member dyadic communication differentiation and perceived group member performance: Does ethnicity make a difference?



Hassan Abu Bakar<sup>a,\*</sup>, Robert M. McCann<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Communication Department, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia*

<sup>b</sup> *Human Resources and Organizational Behavior Department, University of California, Los Angeles, Anderson School of Management, A410, 110 Westwood Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1481, USA*

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the notion that ethnicity similarity/dissimilarity and leader–member dyadic communication differentiation at several different points of time effect group member's performance. Longitudinal data from 4 studies on 141 matching dyads in 28 group's projects were used. Both leader's and member's perceptions on dyadic communication was assessed at three points (Time 1, 2 and 3) and used to predict group leader's perceived ratings of performance in Time 4 during groups' life cycles. Results of hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) analyses indicate that the effect for leader–member dyadic communication differentiation and the dyads ethnicity similarity only occurs near the end of the group's lifecycle. These findings show that effects for leader–member dyadic communication differentiation on group member performance differ depending on the ethnicity of the dyads to which they belong at what point in the group's lifecycle dyadic communication is assessed. Results showed that such effects are distinct at the later stage of the group development.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +60 4 928 4834; fax: +60 4 928 6706.

E-mail addresses: [abhassan@uum.edu.my](mailto:abhassan@uum.edu.my) (H.A. Bakar), [robert.mccann@anderson.ucla.edu](mailto:robert.mccann@anderson.ucla.edu) (R.M. McCann).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 310 794 5461; fax: +1 310 825 0218.

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A part of an effort to illuminate dyadic communication in the workplace is gained by using the relational dyadic communication perspective, in which communication is seen as negotiated process through which a dyad reciprocally defines the relationships (Mumby & Stohl, 1996; Liu & Wilson, 2011). In this regard, when applied to leader–member dyad communication and interaction, the assumption is that leaders differentiate relationships quality and communicate differently among their various subordinates (Sias, 2008). Thus, within a particular work group, considerable variance in the communication and interaction may exist between the group leader and an individual group member. In particular, the social norms and cognitive dynamic between group leader and group member is crucial in the dynamic supervisor–subordinate dyadic communication within work group (Gordon & Stewart, 2009; Lee, Park, Lee, & Lee, 2007). In fact, recent empirical evidence has pointed out that the more dissimilar the supervisor–subordinate dyad in terms of ethnicity, which in turn indicates dissimilar social and cultural norms, the less effective the supervisor perceives the subordinate to be (Bakar, Jian, Fairhurst, 2014a).

A number of research questions arise from this arrangement. First, do group members with relative congruence on cultural norms with their immediate group leaders communicate better and perform better compared to group members with different cultural norms? Second, do work groups, whose group leader differentiates group members in terms of the communication because of social norm differences, perform better (or worse) than groups whose group leaders do not differentiate? Finally, what are the dynamics involved in the relationship between group leader–group member differentiation in terms of communication and social norms and work group outcomes across the lifecycles of groups?

Research based on superior–subordinate communication mostly has been focused on the first research question, establishing the positive effect of supervisory communication on individual outcomes (Bakar, Dilbeck, & McCroskey, 2010; Barry & Crant, 2000; Myers & Kassing, 1998; Jablin, 1979). However, to date, the second and third research questions have not been explored fully in communication research especially on the dynamics involved between leader–member dyad social norms and communication differentiation on work-group performance. This is a notable development in a line of research that conceptualizes the dyadic phenomenon that closely examines the leader–member relational processes and outcomes. In spite of its emphasis on a dyadic relational dynamic and the promising findings in initial investigations, the relational dyadic model remains largely detached from a consideration of the impact of cultural relational norms. Thus, incorporating the effects of cultural relational norms constitutes a significant advance in the relational dyadic communication model.

The purpose of this study is to advance the research on relational dyadic communication in the workplace by investigating the longitudinal interactions effect of ethnicity's similarity/dissimilarity and leader–member dyadic communication differentiation at several different points of time on group-level performance and behavior in the Malaysian workplace. This study chooses the Malaysian cultural setting because relational norms in Malaysia operate in a unique multi-ethnic configuration. Entrenched traditional value systems are closely tied with visible demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity (see Bakar et al., 2014a; Bakar & McCann, 2014). In fact, Malaysian culture is firmly grounded in visible ethnic identity in building relationships (Selvarajah & Meyer, 2008). Malaysia has a unique mixture of cultures and ethnic divisions that make cultural-norm similarity a salient feature of the workplace.

This study first seeks to investigate the effect of communication differentiation on work group performance and organizational citizenship behavior, while accounting for the leader–member dyads ethnic differences and similarities. Second, this study investigates leader–member communication dyads differentiation on work-group performance and organizational citizenship behavior at various points in the lifecycle of a work group. Examining both team performance and organizational citizenship behavior may clarify the nature of effects for leader–member dyadic communication differentiation on group outcomes. Our study aligns with a recent call by Seibold, Hollingshead, and Yoon (2014) to focus more on multi-level research designs that capture the interactions between communication and cultural factors in the work group.

## 1. Theoretical background and hypothesis

### 1.1. Supervisor–subordinate dyadic communication in workplace

In an organizational setting, supervisor–subordinate dyad communication has been broadly defined as “an exchange of information and influence among organizational members where one of those members has official authority to direct and evaluate other members of organizational activities” (Jablin, 1979). Drawing from the relational dyadic communication

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