



Gender Dissimilarity and Leader-Member Exchange: The Mediating Effect of Communication Apprehension

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This article proceeds from the perspective that demographic variables directly affect social dynamics (e.g., communication), which in turn influence a variety of organizational outcomes, including leader-member exchange. This paper elaborates on previous studies of leader-member exchange that discuss personality traits and personal characteristics by providing an in-depth examination of two variables: communication apprehension and gender dissimilarity. Thus, by providing an in-depth examination of these two personal characteristics, this article proposes a model that may explain why some dyads have difficulty forming high quality leader-member exchange relationships. Testable propositions are presented for empirical testing in future research.

Leadership (Goertzen & Fritz, 2004). Yukl (2006) described LMX as the “the role making processes between a leader and each individual subordinate and the exchange relationship that develops over time” (p. 117). LMX theorists posit that most leaders develop separate exchange relationships with each subordinate (Minsky, 2002). Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) suggested that LMX relationships are best described as a continuous variable with high quality relationships on one end and low quality relationships on the other end. According to Kim and Organ (1982), low exchange relationships or “out groups” involve purely contractual supervisor-subordinate relationships in which both parties follow formal rules, policies, and procedures. High exchange relationships or “in groups” involve noncontractual social exchanges that exceed formal role requirements (Kim & Organ). Effective leadership occurs when leaders and followers develop and sustain mutual relationships and, thus, obtain access to rewards because of these high exchange partnerships (Goertzen & Fritz).

Leader-member exchange has been found to relate positively to organizational outcome variables such as organizational commitment (Seers & Graen, 1984), organizational citizenship behavior (Scandura, Graen, & Novak, 1986), performance appraisal (Mitchell, 1983), and career

progress (Wakabayashi & Graen, 1984). Previous studies have identified numerous antecedents to or determinants of LMX formation. These include influence and interaction patterns (Waldron, 1991); subordinate loyalty (Scandura & Graen, 1984); mutual trust, respect, and obligation between leader and follower (Liden & Graen, 1980); communication frequency (Baker & Ganster, 1985; Kacmar, Witt, Zivnuska, & Gully, 2003; Schiemann & Graen, 1984); communication style (Madlock, Martin, Bogdan, & Ervin, 2007); supportive communication (Michael, Harris, Giles, & Field, 2005); and demographics such as age (e.g., Waldman & Avolio, 1986), race (e.g., Moch, 1980), education (e.g., March & Simon, 1958; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989), tenure (e.g., Tsui & O'Reilly), and gender similarity of dyad members (Duffy & Ferrier, 2003; Fairhurst, 1993; Goertzen & Fritz, 2004; Tsui & O'Reilly).

Research focusing on organizational outcome variables illustrates the rewards garnered by leaders, followers, and organizations from high quality LMX relationships. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) posited that all leaders should be trained to offer the opportunity to develop high quality relationships with all subordinates. Liden, Sparrowe, and Wayne (1997) proposed a model of LMX development which discusses general categories of variables including personal characteristics of the leader and follower that could affect perceptions of one another and their communication. This article examines two of the variables discussed by Liden et al.—communication apprehension and gender dissimilarity—in more depth in order to gain a better understanding of how these variables effect LMX formation. Duffy and Ferrier (2003) suggested that demographic variables directly affect social dynamics (e.g., communication), which in turn influence a variety of organizational outcomes, including LMX. Scandura (1999) argued that discrepancies in empirical studies concerning LMX suggest that there may be other variables that need to be researched further. Thus, by providing an in-depth examination of two personal characteristics—gender dissimilarity and communication apprehension—this article proposes a model that may explain why some dyads have difficulty forming high quality LMX relationships.

Madlock et al. (2007) found that subordinates who have high levels of communication apprehension tend to have lower quality LMX relationships. Wayne, Liden, and Sparrowe (1994) reported that high quality exchange relationships are more likely to occur when leaders and members are the same gender. Fairhurst (1993) argued that when gender linked behavior is present or suspected, “there is an obligation to understand the construction of the LMX relationship through discourse in relation to gender” (p. 324). Thus, this article examines the extent to which communication apprehension partially mediates the effect of gender dissimilarity on leader-member exchange quality.

Specifically, this paper provides an in-depth look at gender dissimilarity and communication apprehension because these variables may be continuously present in the formation of LMX relationships. Gender similarity/dissimilarity between dyad members is a variable that will remain constant in LMX formation. Goertzen and Fritz (2004) reported that when the sex of direct reports and managers are different, the relationship is more likely to be characterized by low quality LMX. This has significance in fields that are primarily dominated by one gender (e.g., men in nursing field, or women in science and engineering fields). Communication apprehension may inhibit LMX formation by stopping the reciprocity process examined by Liden et al. (1997). Furthermore, researchers report that communication apprehension increases when members of dyads are dissimilar (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998).

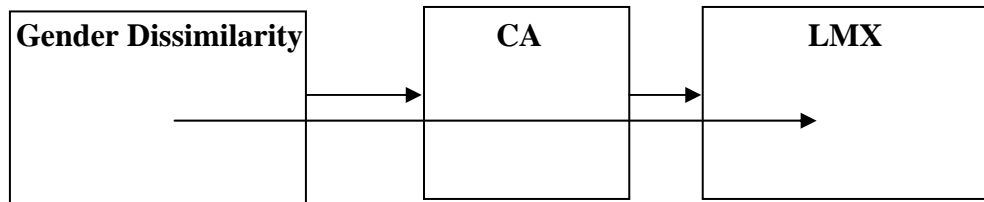


Figure 1. Proposed model: Communication apprehension (CA) partially mediates the relationship between gender dissimilarity of leader and follower (IV) and leader-member exchange quality (DV).

Organizing Framework

Figure 1 provides a graphical overview of the proposed model. The model presented in this paper contributes to LMX and communication literature by examining gender dissimilarity and communication apprehension in more detail and by examining the combined effects of gender dissimilar dyads and communication apprehension. The combined effects of gender dissimilar dyads and communication related anxiety have not been fully considered. This article also contributes to LMX literature and communication literature by introducing communication apprehension as a potential mediating variable. Graen, Dansereau, and Minami (1972) reported that the relationship quality between leader and follower can be determined by the quality of communication exchanges. This study focuses on the possible partial mediating effects of communication apprehension. Not only may gender dissimilarity directly affect LMX quality, but gender dissimilarity may also increase communication apprehension, which in turn inhibits quality LMX formation.

Given the many perspectives of LMX theory, this article begins with a selective literature review on the evolution of LMX theory. Following the literature review of LMX theory, a selective literature review is presented concerning gender dissimilarity and LMX formation. Next, drawing from the literature of gender dissimilarity and LMX, communication apprehension is discussed. In the concluding sections, this study presents an application of the model including a presentation of testable propositions. Finally, the concluding sections discuss the implication of the model for leaders and followers as well as opportunities for future research.

Formation of Leader-Member Exchange

Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) reported that early work concerning LMX began with studies on work socialization (i.e., Johnson & Graen, 1973) and vertical dyad linkage theory (i.e., Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975). Vertical dyad linkage theory was later renamed LMX theory (Graen, Liden, & Hoel, 1982; Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982). During the early stage of model development, researchers discovered that “managerial processes in organizations were found to occur on a dyadic basis, with managers developing differentiated relationships with

direct reports” (Graen & Uhl-Bien, p. 226). Dansereau et al.’s model posited that in developing relationships with members, leaders form two groups based on the quality of their exchanges. Employees with high exchange relationships are in the “in group,” while employees with low exchange relationships are in the “out group.” Members engaged in high exchange relationships with leaders (in-group) established expanded and negotiated role responsibilities not mentioned in the employment contract. In contrast, members engaged in low exchange relationships with leaders (out-group) mostly complied with formal role requirements (Yukl, 2006).

LMX research has been organized into two categories: (a) studies analyzing relationships between LMX and organizational outcome variables and (b) studies evaluating antecedents to LMX formation (Graen & Uhl Bien, 1995). Leader-member exchange is frequently examined as a predictor of organizational outcome variables such as career progress (Wakabayashi & Graen, 1984), organizational commitment (Seers & Graen, 1984), organizational citizenship behavior (Scandura et al., 1986), performance appraisal (Mitchell, 1983), innovation (Basu, 1991), and empowerment (Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1993). Graen and Uhl-Bien reported that high quality LMX relationships result in positive outcomes for leaders, followers, work units, and organizations. In a meta-analytic review, Gerstner and Day (as cited in Goertzen & Fritz, 2004) explained that direct reports in high quality exchange relationships “receive disproportionate attention from managers, receive higher performance evaluations, report lower turnover rates, and experience greater satisfaction with their managers” (p. 4). Yukl (2006) reported that high exchange relationships result in more sharing of information, tangible rewards such as pay increase, personal support and approval, and facilitation of the subordinate’s career.

Multiple studies have also been conducted evaluating antecedents to LMX formation such as liking (Dienisch & Liden, 1986), value similarity (Liden, Wayne, & Stillwell, 1993), interaction patterns (Waldron, 1991), communication frequency (Baker & Ganster, 1985; Schiemann & Graen, 1984), perceived similarity (Murphy & Ensher, 1999), and demographic similarity (e.g., Liden et al., 1993). Liden et al. (1997) reported that three types of leader-member characteristics have been examined as antecedents to LMX: performance or competence, personality, and upward influence behavior. Specifically, personality traits of both leader and follower have been investigated as possible detractors of LMX quality: dependability (Graen, 1989); decision-making styles (Graen); loyalty (Scandura & Graen, 1984); mutual trust, respect, and obligation (Liden & Graen, 1980); communication frequency (Baker & Ganster, 1985; Kacmar et al., 2003; Schiemann & Graen); communication style (Madlock et al., 2007); demographics (Green, Anderson, & Shivers, 1996); educational dissimilarity (March & Simon, 1958); and sex similarity of dyad members (Fairhurst, 1993; Goertzen & Fritz, 2004; Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989). In a like manner, Liden et al. (1997) explained that rather than focusing on leader and member characteristics as separate entities, researchers have investigated interactional variables as detractors to LMX. For instance, Dienisch and Liden (1986) suggested that compatibility between leader and member might affect the type of exchange that forms. Compatibility between leader and member have been broken down and examined in terms of likeability, similarity, and perceived similarity (Liden et al., 1997). Several studies have examined perceived similarities, attitudes, and demographics between leader-member dyads. The model presented in this study provides an in-depth examination of gender dissimilarity and communication apprehension as well as the combined effects of these variables.

Gender Dissimilarity and Its Possible Impact on LMX Formation

Despite extensive research regarding demographic variables and LMX theory, little research has examined the impact of gender dissimilarity in leader-follower dyads on the quality of leader-member exchange (Duffy & Ferrier, 2003; Goertzen & Fritz, 2004; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989). Goertzen and Fritz argued that research concerning the relationship of gender similarity of dyads and LMX has produced inconsistent results. For instance, Larwood and Blackmore (1978) studied the actions of 60 management students asked to recruit volunteers to participate in a research project. Results from their study showed that females tended to recruit female volunteers and males tended to recruit male volunteers. Studying 272 dyads, Tsui and O'Reilly found that greater dissimilarity in superior-subordinate demographics is associated with (a) less effectiveness of subordinates as perceived by the superiors, (b) less personal attraction between supervisor and subordinates, and (c) increased role ambiguity of subordinates. Demographic similarity is associated with attitudinal and value similarity, which in turn may enhance interpersonal attraction and increased frequency of communication (Tsui & O'Reilly).

Bauer and Green (1996) reported that similar dyads tend to like (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989) and trust (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) each other more than dyads that are dissimilar. Similar individuals may have a higher level of attraction based on a perceived similarity in attitudes, values, and experiences (Byrne, 1971). The relationship between attraction and similarity is described as the similarity attraction paradigm (Byrne). Graen and Cashman (1975) suggested that LMX relationships are formed somewhat by personal compatibility. Gender dissimilar dyads may perceive one another as less compatible, which in turn may inhibit LMX quality (Dienisch & Liden, 1986). Some research supports the idea that gender dissimilarity inhibits LMX quality, while other studies do not. For instance, using a longitudinal study, Duchon, Green, and Taber (1986) examined gender of dyad members as a predictor of LMX quality. They discovered that dyads composed of differing gender are more likely to be characterized as low quality LMX relationships. In contrast, Liden et al. (1993) reported that demographic similarity, a composite variable including gender similarity, is not a significant predictor of LMX quality. Several researchers encouraged future studies investigating the relationship between gender dissimilar dyads and LMX quality (Bauer & Green; Goertzen & Fritz, 2004).

Communication Apprehension and Its Possible Impact on LMX Quality

The model proposed in this study not only suggests that gender dissimilarity has a direct effect on LMX quality, but the model also suggests that the effect of gender dissimilarity on LMX quality is partially mediated by communication apprehension (CA). In other words, gender dissimilarity may increase CA and that in turn reduces LMX quality. Communication apprehension is one of the most extensively researched variables in the field of interpersonal communication. Researchers consider communication apprehension to be the most common handicap suffered by people in contemporary American society (McCroskey & Wheelless, 1976). McCroskey (1977) defined CA as "the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p. 78). Richmond (1984) expanded McCroskey's definition by stating, "High CA people experience emotional distress during or

anticipating communication, prefer to avoid communication, and are perceived by others and themselves as less competent, skilled, and successful” (p. 101).

Most communication theorists agree that both personality traits and situational aspects influence CA. Originally, CA was considered to be a characteristically stable personality “trait” (Beatty, Behnke, & McCallum, 1978). However, further research indicated a situational or “state” CA orientation also exists. Trait apprehension “is a relatively enduring, personality type orientation toward a given mode of communication across a wide variety of contexts” (McCroskey, 1982, p. 147). In other words, trait apprehension is the fear of communication generally, regardless of the speaking situation (i.e., dyadic, small group, public speaking, and mass communication). In contrast, state apprehension is specific to a given communication situation (McCroskey, 1977). For example, if leaders or followers experience state apprehension, they may be apprehensive to speak in dyadic interactions, but have no difficulty speaking in public settings or vice versa. Devito (2007) explained that communication apprehension exists on a continuum with high apprehension on one end and low apprehension on the other end.

McCroskey (1982) posited that all individuals experience some degree of CA. However, high levels of CA may lead to debilitating effects such as the decrease in frequency, strength, and likelihood of engaging in communication interactions. High CAs may react with communication avoidance, communication withdrawal, and communication disruption (Cole & McCroskey, 2003). Individuals with high levels of CA are perceived as being less competent and less successful, requiring more training, and having difficulty establishing positive relationships with co-workers (Falcione, McCroskey, & Daly, 1977; McCroskey & Richmond, 1979). Once individuals with high CA become members of organizations, they are perceived as less productive (Richmond, McCroskey, & Davis, 1982) and are less likely to advance in their careers (Richmond et al.; Richmond & Roach, 1992). Communication apprehension has also been found to be a significant predictor of LMX quality (Madlock et al., 2007). Therefore, managers and subordinates with high CA levels may encounter severe consequences concerning organizational outcomes, including leader-member exchange.

Researchers have identified several factors that increase communication apprehension: (a) *degree of evaluation*—apprehension increases when a person knows he or she is being evaluated, (b) *subordinate status*—apprehension increases when an individual feels inferior, (c) *degree of unpredictability*—apprehension increases as predictability decreases, and (d) *degree of dissimilarity*. Researchers suggest apprehension increases when a person feels that he or she has little in common with listeners (Beatty, 1988; McCroskey & Daly, 1987; Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). Certainly, one dissimilarity between communicators might be gender. The suggestion that gender dissimilarity between leader and follower increases follower CA is particularly interesting to LMX research. Previous research has suggested that demographic dissimilarity is associated with less effective communication (Williams & O’Reilly, 1998). Tsui and O’Reilly (1989) reported that interpersonal attraction and similarity have been found to have a positive effect on communication between dyad members. Lincoln and Miller (1979) found that increased similarity between dyad members increased communication. Although dissimilarity of dyad members is identified as a predictor of higher levels of CA, no studies have been conducted examining the possible effects of gender dissimilar dyads on communication apprehension (J. C. McCroskey, personal communication, November 16, 2008). McCroskey suggested that other studies conducted on dissimilarity (D. A. Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; i.e.,

race, culture, age, and tenure) and communication apprehension indicate that this is an important area for future research.

In a like manner, there appears to be only a few studies dedicated to communication characteristics of leaders and members as potential antecedents to LMX quality (Madlock et al., 2007). Madlock et al. argued that despite the communicative nature of leader-member exchange, research examining communication and LMX is limited. Dansereau et al. (1975) indicated that personal characteristics of individuals may influence the communication exchange process between leaders and members, thus affecting the quality of the exchange process. Madlock et al. reported that communication apprehension is a significant predictor of LMX. This notion expands on Graen's (1989) theory that LMX quality evolves through communication. In a recent model of LMX, Bauer, Erdogan, Liden, and Wayne (2006) suggested that extraversion has a positive effect on the formation of quality LMX relationships. McCroskey, Heisel, and Richmond (2001) reported that extraversion is negatively correlated with communication apprehension. Madlock et al.'s study is the only study that examines the effects of CA on LMX quality. Thus, this study elaborates on previous studies of leader-member exchange (i.e., Liden et al., 1997) which discussed the reciprocity process of leader-member exchange, personality traits, and personal characteristics, by focusing on the potential mediating effect of CA between gender dissimilarity and LMX quality.

Application of the Model and Testable Propositions

Gender Dissimilarity and LMX Quality

Researchers in social psychology (e.g., Harrison, 1976) have reported a strong link between demographic similarity of dyad members and affective relationships. Byrne, Clore, and Worchel (as cited in Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989) reported that people tend to be drawn toward individuals who are similar to them in terms of demographic characteristics, activities, and attitudes. Researchers have reported that subordinates with gender dissimilar supervisors receive lower performance ratings (Tsui & O'Reilly). Similarity between dyad members increases liking and may positively influence the exchange relationship (Wayne et al., 1994).

Goertzen and Fritz (2004) stated that a number of previous studies on gender dissimilarity and LMX quality have produced inconsistent and inconclusive results and further research is needed to determine the strength of this predictor variable. Some studies have reported no relationship between gender similarity and LMX quality (e.g., Basu & Green, 1995; Bauer & Green, 1996), while others reported a positive relationship between gender dissimilarity and low quality leader-member exchange (e.g., Duchon, et al., 1986; Green et al., 1996). Research suggests that sex sameness of dyad members does not predict high quality leader-member exchange, yet gender dissimilarity is related to lower quality leader-member exchange (Green et al.). In other words, gender similarity does not necessarily indicate high quality LMX, but gender dissimilarity may influence low quality LMX formation. Moreover, several previous studies acknowledge gender of dyad members as an ancillary variable (Goertzen & Fritz), and few studies have separated gender from other demographic variables (e.g., Liden et al., 1993). Thus, the model proposed in this study suggests a more in-depth examination of gender dissimilarity and leader-member exchange quality.

Proposition 1: Gender dissimilarity between leader and member will be positively related to a lower quality leader-member exchange relationship.

Gender Dissimilarity and Communication Apprehension

Gender dynamics may not be explicit in organizational discourse. However, “where sex linked behavior is present or suspected, there is an obligation to understand the construction of LMX relationships through discourse in relation to gender” (Fairhurst, 1993, p. 324). Buss (1980) suggested there are major situational elements that may cause an increase in communication apprehension; dissimilarity is one of these elements. Devito (2007) posited that when individuals feel they have little in common with their listeners, they are more likely to feel anxious. Green et al. (1996) reported that relational demography may reduce communication and may lead to greater social distance between dyads. Studies concerning demographic dissimilarity, such as educational dissimilarity (Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989) and cultural dissimilarity (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997; Stephan & Stephan, 1992), suggested that when dyads are dissimilar, communication related anxiety increases (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). Although dissimilarity is identified as a predictor of higher levels of CA, no studies have been conducted examining the possible effects of gender dissimilar dyads on communication apprehension (J. C. McCroskey, personal communication, November 16, 2008). Thus, the model proposed in this study suggests a more in-depth examination of the effect of gender dissimilarity on communication apprehension.

Proposition 2: Higher levels of communication apprehension will be positively related to gender dissimilarity between leader and follower.

Communication Apprehension and Leader-Member Exchange Quality

Although several studies examined communication between leader-member dyads such as communication style (Yrle, Hartman, & Galle, 2002), communication frequency (Baker & Ganster, 1985; Kacmar et al., 2003; Schiemann & Graen, 1984), and supportive communication (Michael, Harris, Giles, & Field, 2005), only one study exists which discusses the effects of communication apprehension and leader-member exchange quality (i.e., Madlock et al., 2007). Furthermore, although Liden et al. (1997) offered a model consisting of personality traits, personal characteristics, and the reciprocity process between leader and follower, their model fails to acknowledge the effects of communication apprehension on leader-member exchange quality. Communication apprehension may inhibit LMX formation by stopping the reciprocity process examined by Liden et al. Liden and colleagues presented a more recent model of LMX relationships which suggests that extraversion has a positive effect on the formation of high quality LMX (Bauer et al., 2006). McCroskey et al. (2001) reported that extraversion is negatively correlated with communication apprehension. Yrle et al. (2002) suggested that supervisors and subordinates in high quality leader-member exchange relationships should also experience high quality communication exchanges. The effect of CA on leader-member exchange is an important area of investigation. Obviously, high quality LMX relationships may

not form if leaders and members avoid or withdraw from communication exchanges. Furthermore, Richmond and Roach (1992) reported that individuals with high CA have difficulty establishing positive relationships with fellow employees. Therefore, this model proposes further investigation of the relationship between communication apprehension and leader-member exchange quality.

Proposition 3: Higher levels of communication apprehension will be positively related to lower quality leader-member exchange.

Proposed Research Design

Using the recommendations from previous studies (e.g., Duffy & Ferrier, 2003; Goertzen & Fritz, 2004), the propositions in this paper will be tested using a longitudinal quantitative study. In order to examine the effects of gender dissimilarity and communication apprehension on LMX quality, data will be collected during three periods: 2 weeks, 6 weeks, and 6 months. Four dyad combinations will be examined: female managers and female direct reports, female managers and male direct reports, male managers and female direct reports, and male managers and male direct reports (Varma & Stroh, 2001). The LMX-7 will be used to measure leader-member exchange quality (Graen et al., 1982; Seers & Graen, 1984). The LMX-7 is a 7-item questionnaire on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Gerstner and Day (1997) reported that the LMX-7 demonstrates the highest reliability (i.e., internal consistency .78) and largest correlations with other variables than any other LMX measure.

Communication apprehension will be measured using the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24; McCroskey, 1982). The PRCA-24 is the most popular measure of CA (Levine & McCroskey, 1990). The PRCA-24 is a 24-item Likert-type scale that assesses CA in four communication contexts: public, small group, meeting, and interpersonal. Researchers reported that the PRCA-24 is internally consistent and reliable. McCroskey (1984) reported that the internal reliability of the PRCA-24 is estimated at .94. Researchers also posited that the PRCA-24 is a valid instrument (McCroskey, 1984; Pitt, Berthon, & Robson, 2000).

Conclusion

Scandura and Graen (as cited in Engle & Lord, 1997) suggested that organizations cannot afford to allow low quality LMX relationships to permeate their workforce “as the impact of these relationships may be seen in the bottom line” (p. 1006). Previous models examining the effects of personal characteristics and personality traits of leaders and followers on LMX quality offer high levels of generalization (e.g., Liden et al., 1997). By providing an in-depth examination of two personal characteristics—gender dissimilarity and communication apprehension—this study proposes a model which may explain why some dyads have difficulty forming high quality LMX relationships. This research may provide further insight into leader-member exchange quality, thus, potentially helping leaders and followers cultivate and enhance higher quality exchange relationships.

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