

DEFINING RELATIONAL DISTANCE FOR TODAY'S LEADERS

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Work relationships, and thus, the experiences of work itself, are affected by perceptions of “distance.” Distance influences leader-follower relationships, which in turn have been shown to impact many organizational outcomes (Bass, 1990; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Northhouse, 2001). In this study, a literature review across five different scholarly fields provides theoretical arguments for three related dimensions of relational distance. Relational distance is the perception that distance between leaders and followers occurs in three interrelated dimensions: structural, status, and psychological. The dimensionality of relational distance is contextualized with quotes from employees experiencing various types of distance. The multidimensionality of relational distance reveals a fertile ground for future leadership research.

Over the years, researchers have gradually introduced distance as a variable in the analysis of organizational phenomena and have argued that distance may be a critical factor in understanding the relationships among individuals, groups, and organizations (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Ghemawat, 2001; Hambley, O'Neil, & Kline, 2007; Napier & Ferris, 1993). Understanding relational distance, or the distance between individuals, is important for the study of leadership because leadership is inherently relationship-based (Hunt, 2004; Küpers, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2001).

Many different ways of exploring distance have been used in the study of organizations. Approximately 33.7 million Americans (11% of the workforce) telework at least once per month—an increase of 43% since 2003 (WorldatWork, 2009). Organizations are becoming flatter and less centralized (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999), and individuals have less clear and less tangible links with their organizations (Wiesenfeld et al., 1999). Buoyed by higher birth rates among minorities and rising immigration, organizations have become increasingly diverse (Chen & VanVelsor, 1996). New research is examining the generative processes that better the health of individuals and groups within organizations (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Finally, global expansion and mergers have led to increased workforce diversity and the need for collaboration across functional and geographic boundaries (Cummings, 2004; Espinosa, Cummings, Wilson, & Pearce, 2003; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Monge & Contractor, 2003; Randel

& Jaussi, 2003). In this changed world, the relevance of relational distance becomes imperative. Because leaders must learn how to operate in this new world and to guide others through these changes, understanding relational distance in the leadership context is a primary step.

Prior research on distance has covered various aspects including social, physical, structural, psychological, spatial, and functional (D. Byrne, 1961; Crouch & Yetton, 1988; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Ferris & Rowland, 1985; Giles & J. L. Byrne, 1982; Ibarra, 1995; Schmann, 1978; Sundstrom & Sundstrom, 1986; Turban & Jones, 1988). It is becoming increasingly apparent that distance must be viewed as an interaction between multiple aspects. Building on the work of Antonakis and Atwater (2002) and Napier and Ferris (1993), relational distance is defined here as multidimensional and interactive distance between individuals. While this article reviews and synthesizes existing ideas about distance, it also extends earlier work by using a multidisciplinary lens and integrating findings from a larger number of disciplines. The three dimensions of relational distance are structural distance, status distance, and psychological distance (see Figure 1).

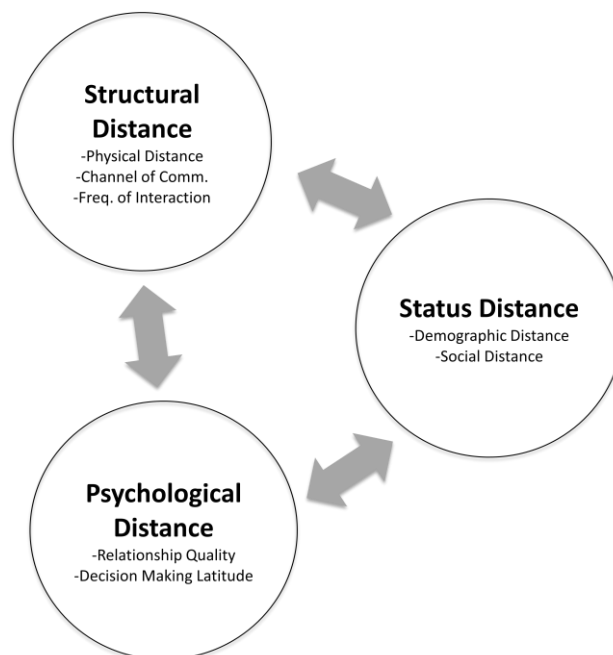


Figure 1. The Construct of Relational Distance.

It is important to contextualize the use of the word relational in the context of the relationship between leader and follower. In contrast with the relational view of organizations that identifies persons and organizations as ongoing multiple constructions (Hosking, 2000), this paper utilizes an entity perspective to understand previously organized perceptions and cognitions that influence assessments of distance between a leader and a follower in a relationship. In contrast, relational leadership theory proposes leadership as “a social influence process through which coordination and change are constructed and produced” (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 668). It is entirely possible that relational distance could influence or constrain this social influence process, but in order to understand its impact on the process, we must first understand relational distance itself.

The Multidimensionality of Distance

A multidimensional understanding of relational distance is necessary for two reasons. First, organizational participants are not likely to perceive different types of distance (e.g., physical separation, channel of communication, and frequency of interaction) as existing independently. Classic decision-making literature informs us that individuals do not generally refer to all aspects of any given situation before making a decision but instead use a collection of heuristics to determine the most important aspects of that situation (March & Simon, 1958). These simple decision rules allow individuals to process a large amount of information quickly and efficiently (Allport, 1955; Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Because automatic processing and simple decision rules are commonly used to construct perceptions, it is unlikely that evaluations of distance are made by explicitly calculating the measurement of each different type. Instead, individuals combine multiple ideas of “being apart” into one idea of distance, making the dimensionality of relational distance more realistic.

The second reason for understanding the multi-dimensionality of relational distance is the incomplete and potentially misleading or contradictory picture that results from attempts to understand distance by looking at any type independently. For example, in measuring only spatial distance between superior and subordinate, Podsakoff, Todor, Grover, and Huber (1984) found that contingent reward leadership led to higher performance in close rather than distant conditions. Howell and Hall-Merenda (1999) also looked at contingent reward leadership and measured spatial distance using a specific scale for very close (within 100 feet) and very distant (different city), but they found the opposite result. These contradictory results indicate that distance needs to be studied across multiple dimensions (not just one, such as spatial) in order to get a more accurate and replicable way of describing relational distance.

Existing theoretical models of distance, such as Napier and Ferris' (1993) dyadic distance and Antonakis and Atwater's (2002) leader distance, address the multidimensionality of distance between individuals. Napier and Ferris (1993) were the first to propose multiple dimensions of distance as a way to improve understanding and effects of distance in organizational behavior research. They proposed that functional distance (affect, decision-making latitude, relationship quality) is caused by both structural (office design, spatial distance, opportunity to interact) and psychological distance (demographic differences, values differences, power distance). A second model of distance was proposed by Antonakis and Atwater, who separated Napier and Ferris' structural distance dimension into two categories: physical distance and frequency of interaction. Furthermore, rather than propose psychological distance and functional distance as two different dimensions, Antonakis and Atwater suggested a third dimension: social distance (representing the intimacy of the relationship). These three factors, although independent, coexist to create leader distance.

These models introduce the multidimensionality of distance and demonstrate similarities between the types each model includes. However, the models do not agree about how different types of distance are combined or whether they are connected to organizational experiences. These models are presented visually in Figure 2 and Figure 3 and can be compared with the proposed model of Relational Distance (shown in Figure 1) to reveal differences in the dimensions highlighted in each model. As a result of the differences across these models, it is necessary to revisit distance between leaders and followers to determine the dimensions that are part of relational distance.

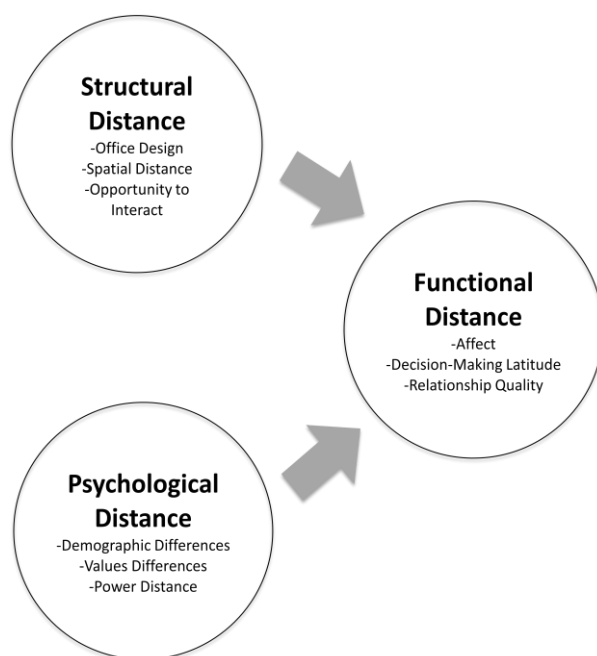


Figure 2. Napier & Ferris' Model of Dyadic Distance.

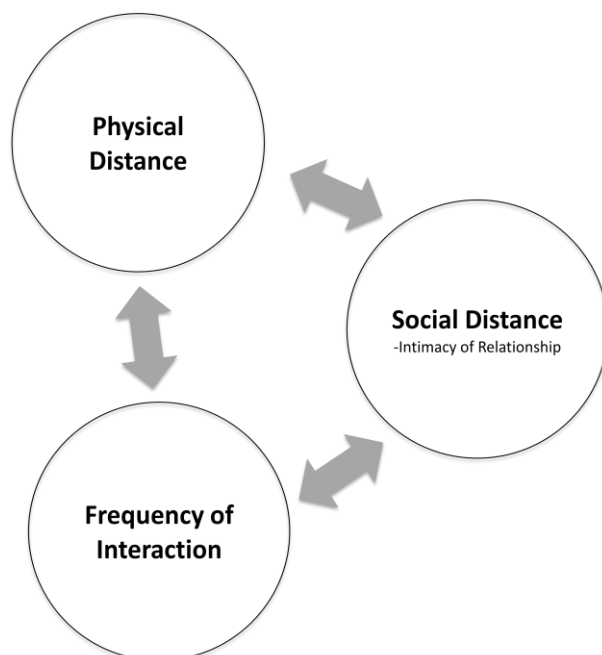


Figure 3. Antonakis & Atwater's Model of Leader Distance.

Building a Model of Relational Distance

A review of literature in multiple fields—including psychology, communication, organizational behavior, and sociology—yielded seven unique categories of distance. These seven types of distance have potential impacts on the relationship between leaders and followers: Physical Distance, Channel of Communication, Frequency of Interaction, Demographic Distance, Social Distance, Relationship Quality, and Decision Making Latitude. A closer examination of the seven types showed significant interdependence among some of them. A thorough literature review shows that these seven types can be combined to form three dimensions of relational distance. These interdependencies are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 <i>Summary of the Dimensions of Relational Distance</i>			
Dimension	Type	Characteristics	Sample References
Structural	Physical	Spatial distance, location, geographic proximity	Allen, 1977; Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Ghemawat, 2001; Monge & Contractor, 2003; Sorenson & Stuart, 2001
	Channel of Interaction	F2F/computer-mediated, synchronous/asynchronous	Daft & Lengel, 1996; Elsbach & Cable, 2003; Mann, Varey, & Button, 2000; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976
	Frequency of Interaction	Number of communications (regardless of media used)	Latane, 1995; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 2001
Social	Demographic	Age, race, gender, education, experience	McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995; Sorenson & Stuart, 2001; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989; Zenger & Lawrence, 1989
	Social	Power, status, rank, authority, social standing, cultural norms	Ahuja, Galletta, & Carley, 2003; Ghemawat, 2001; Latane, 1995; Monge & Contractor, 2003; O'Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989; Shamir, 1995
Psychological	Relationship Quality	In-group vs. out-group; affect; extra effort	Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999; Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997
	Decision Making Latitude	Autonomy; trust; empowerment	Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Spector, 1986; Spreitzer, 1995

In order to corroborate the types of distance evidenced in the literature and make connections between theory and practice, interviews were conducted with fifteen people working in a variety of contexts (human resources, middle- and senior-management, technology development, and sales) and for a variety of organizations (technology, banking, health services, and consumer products). Interviewees were chosen based on personal and professional contacts, and all worked for organizations that supported remote work for some employees. The interviews lasted approximately one hour; most interviewees chose to be interviewed at work, but some were conducted in people's homes and at coffee shops. Participants were promised anonymity, and all interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Using an interview guide (Appendix A), interviewees responded to questions about their working relationships with leaders and co-workers. These semi-structured interviews were not intended to provide a theoretical foundation but instead to provide contextual illustration of the themes discussed in the literature. Interviewees' anecdotes revealed several types of distance, which are also evidenced in the multidisciplinary literature. While interviewees did not always use the same terminology as the literature, significant overlap was found by rereading the interview transcripts for supporting quotes.

In the following sections, I define each dimension, describe how each type fits within one of the three dimensions (structural, status, or psychological), and discuss why these dimensions are a useful way to describe distance between leaders and followers. Unlike previous distance studies, this model both increases richness and deepens context by including information coming from individuals who experience various types of distance at work. Selected participant quotes are included to illustrate literature-based concepts from the five scholarly fields (psychology, organizational behavior, communication, sociology, and information technology) that inform the construct of relational distance.

Structural Distance

I propose that structural distance includes the characteristics or properties of a technology, task, or organization that influence organizational communication. It includes three types of distance: physical distance, channel of communication, and frequency of interaction.

Physical Distance

It is often physical distance (spatial separation) that comes to mind when issues of distance at work come up because, for many, this is the most visible and dramatic change. In fact, all of the interviewees spoke about physical distance, remote locations, or geographic separation. As one interviewee noted, "There is no question that people are used to working in proximity to each other. There have been practices that have been built up over at least 100 years or more on how people work together when they are together" (E. R., personal communication, October 1, 2004). The rich literature on virtual teams investigates how the new organizational structure of people working at a physical distance from each other is related to many classic constructs of organizational studies, including communication and collaboration (Cohen & Mankin, 1999), team maintenance (Gibson & Manuel, 2003), and effectiveness (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998).

Physical proximity plays an important role in organizational relationships as physical separation has been found to decrease influence, inhibit social interaction, and cause perceptions of inactivity (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). One interviewee specifically addressed the issue of others' perceptions of what remote workers are actually doing and described the strategies for dealing with this potential problem:

What I am worried about is that people will question what I am doing in California. So [the trip report] is a method for me to make me feel better that they know that I am doing stuff. In reality what it's doing is giving them information about what's going on. The information doesn't flow as easily from HQ to myself. (K. H., personal communication, October 18, 2004)

Physical distance is becoming more prominent in organizations, and is important to both scholars and organizational participants in determining the amount of distance that exists between leaders and followers.

Channel of Communication

Elsbach and Cable (2003) found that reduced face-time affects an individual's ability to get work done and affects others' perceptions of their work, regardless of actual outputs. Some interviewees felt face-to-face meetings were sometimes necessary to maintain effective communication:

I always have a list of things that I want to chat with people about and email is not a good tool just to chat with someone. And everybody else's schedule is just like mine. There are meetings that start at 8 in the morning and go 'til 6 at night. So it's not like I am going to pick up the phone and call one of my cohort and they are going to miraculously answer the phone. So there are some reasons to meet in person. (R. L., personal communication, October 1, 2004)

Another interviewee explained that, in the workplace, "face time becomes important because nothing compares to face-to-face. I get more accomplished in three days having face-to-face conversations with people than in three weeks remotely" (T. H., personal communication, October 19, 2004). The importance of different channels of communication's capabilities is well known among communication scholars, but the fact that all the interviewees mentioned the channels they used to communicate with colleagues lends credence to the idea that this is an important issue for organizations as well.

Frequency of Interaction

Most of the interviewees mentioned frequency of interaction, a factor that is also discussed in the management literature. Interaction frequency is a prerequisite to the development of organizational identity (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 2001), and it creates a sense of shared meaning, which helps employees feel like they are active and included participants (Wiesenfeld et al., 1999). Frequency of interaction further increases the ease and efficiency of communication (Zenger & Lawrence, 1989). One interviewee discussed the advantages of collocated office space. "Our offices in Orange County have three floors and 150 people and so you don't even force the interaction, it just happens. On the elevator, in the hallway, whatever" (S. H., personal communication, September 30, 2004). When individuals are not collocated, interaction needs to be scheduled.

We have points where we connect with our boss. Every two weeks we have one-on-one discussions where we talk about ongoing projects, any problems that have arisen, any new things that need to be addressed. Our manager also has a weekly staff meeting that lasts an hour. It's more of a one-way flow. He tells us what is going on with the company and what is going on with the managers in the group as far as their current thinking. (L. K., personal communication, October 1, 2004)

Research shows that increased interaction not only may lead to increased communication but also is a necessary condition for enabling network links (Monge & Contractor, 2003).

Interdependence of the Three Types

There is ample evidence that the impact of physical separation is often difficult to isolate from channel of communication or frequency of interaction. In reference to starting a remote work program, one interviewee directly addressed this mutual dependence:

That was a challenge ... because you can't just go are you collocated/are you not? Do you have an office/do you not? Because people have offices and are never in them. I ended up having to do hours of face time versus hours of phone interactions to try to get at that because it's very difficult. My boss could be down the hallway and I only interact with her every other week. That is a tricky part (K. W., personal communication, October 1, 2004).

By questioning the importance of leaders' and followers' physical locations and addressing how and how often they might use different channels of communication (e.g., phone or face-to-face), K. W.'s response reinforces the interdependence of physical separation, channel of communication, and frequency of interaction within the structural dimension of distance.

In the literature, Stanko (2006) showed that higher physical distance forces reliance on communication technologies (e.g., email as a communication channel) for interpersonal communication. Physical distance is also tightly tied to frequency of interaction, as research shows that having two people in close proximity increases both the likelihood and frequency of communication (Allen, 1977; Barnlund & Harland, 1963; Monge & Contractor, 2003; Sorenson & Stuart, 2001). Shamir (1995), in his definition of "close" leaders, reflected the assumption that there is both greater frequency of interaction and more immediacy of transactions between physically close leaders and followers. Face-to-face communication has much higher levels of immediacy than asynchronous communication channels, such as email or letters and memos (Daft & Lengel, 1996).

Thus,

Proposition 1: Structural distance is a dimension of relational distance and is comprised of three mutually dependent types: physical distance, channel of communication, and frequency of interaction.

Status Distance

Status distance refers to distance created by differences in sociodemographic factors, power, and prestige and is akin to relationship inequality. The literature (see Table 1) refers to these types of distance as demographic and social distance.

Demographic Distance

In the organizational behavior and psychology literature, there exist both theoretical and empirical studies exploring the impact of demographic differences on organizational outcomes. Demographic differences are forms of distance that encompass factors such as age, ethnicity, gender, education, and experience.

As the workforce becomes more demographically diverse and equal opportunity laws are enforced, organizations increasingly need to address the distance that results from demographic differences. While demographic differences within the workplace were not mentioned in interview conversations, a few interviewees spoke about the cultural differences (specifically ethnic and racial differences) that must be addressed when interacting with global companies:

Then there is the challenge of working across cultures and that can be a real challenge. If you have someone who is new into the team, how do you get them off to a smooth start when you don't know them and aren't familiar with the site where they work. (L. K., personal communication, October 1, 2004)

My group is 75% Indian so there are certain norms that differ. I am still working through some of those differences and learning their styles. They are wonderful – absolutely the most warm, welcoming individuals I have worked with, to be honest. Discussion is a big deal and they are very upfront and forthright so it's a lot of fun. But it's interesting being the only female in the room and a Caucasian female at that. It's interesting because I stick out ... like a sore thumb. (K. W., personal communication, October 1, 2004)

Research has also investigated what happens when people feel like they “stick out.” The literature demonstrates much evidence of the effects of demographic differences and relational demography. Demographic distance can have both positive and negative effects. Zenger and Lawrence (1989) found that communication among high-technology researchers was positively associated with both age and tenure. Tsui and O'Reilly (1989) found that dissimilarity in supervisor-subordinate dyads (relational demography) is linked to lower performance assessments and increased role ambiguity. Additionally, studies by O'Reilly and colleagues (O'Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992) found that age differences can hinder communication and social integration, resulting in lower commitment and greater turnover. Given the interviewees' comments about demographic differences and the important impacts of relational demography and demographic differences, it is necessary to include this type of distance when understanding the conceptualization of distance between leaders and followers.

Social Distance

While demography looks at differences in observable attributes, social distance looks at value and attitude differences. Several interviewees referred to social distance, which includes elements described by Napier and Ferris (1993)—such as the degree of similarity in values (e.g., culture and sex role orientation)—and by Antonakis and Atwater (2002), such as the degree of similarity in status, rank, authority, social standing, and power. It can also refer to organizational cultural understanding, such as a shared professional language: “Both my boss and I share the same consulting background so we share terminology and have the same expectations. Most of the people here speak a different language” (R. J., personal communication, October 5, 2004).

Social distance may be especially suited to explain the effects of demographic variables that typically reflect social status (e.g., age, tenure, education) (Perry, Kulik, & Zhou, 1999). Social distance may also describe the distance that arises from being apart from those in positions of power, such as in this example:

The staff meeting goes back and forth to make sure it's fair that way. One of the things that I do is that I actually go to east every couple of months. So that, in fact last time I actually did the staff meeting with the folks in [the remote location] so that the ones in the [home office] were kind of virtual for me. They were on video. It moves the balance of power. (R. L., personal communication, October 1, 2004)

The impacts of social distance for organizations are mixed. While perceptual differences stemming from hierarchy and past experiences (among other factors) positively impact productivity, they negatively impact communication effectiveness between leaders and followers (Gibson, Cooper, & Conger, 2009). In their investigation of network centrality (i.e., the importance of an individual in a social network), Ahuja, Galletta, and Carley (2003) found that individual role characteristics, such as status, can influence structural positions or individual centrality, which in turn influences access to opportunities and performance.

Another explanation for differences stemming from social distance is the interaction between social distance and cultural differences. One cultural difference, power distance (Hofstede, 2001), may be particularly relevant. "Power distance refers to cultural conceptions regarding the degree of power which authorities should have over subordinates" (Lee, Pillutla, & Law, 2000, p. 687). While power distance is unlikely to explain actual differences in status or demography, it is likely to impact followers' assessment of the legitimacy of status distance. Individuals with low power distance may have better relationships with authority, which could also influence access to opportunities and performance.

Interdependence of the Two Types

While the interview data was essentially absent of connections between demographic and social distance, the literature supports their interdependence. Previous research shows a strong connection between demographic distance and social distance, stating that status incongruence can explain the effects of demographic differences on work outcomes (Perry et al., 1999; Tsui et al., 1992).

Both demographic and social distance describe how alike (or different) individuals can be. As such, they are deeply interdependent. Attraction-Selection Theory suggests people are attracted to similar others, and, as a result, organizations tend to be homogeneous (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). Similarity is most frequently determined by visible cues such as race and gender but can also be determined by hierarchical rank and organizational status. This can limit people's organizational worlds with powerful implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Monge & Contractor, 2003). Once individuals perceive they belong to a given group, this membership becomes part of how they self-identify (Gibson et al., 2009). To the extent that this is true, people are expected to evaluate members of their own group more positively than those of other groups to maintain a positive self-regard. Status distance describes the impacts of the demographic and social differences between leaders and followers.

Thus,

Proposition 2: Status distance is a dimension of relational distance and is comprised of two mutually dependent types: demographic and social distance.

Psychological Distance

Psychological distance refers to a lack of affinity between people and is driven by internal and sometimes unconscious factors. It is comprised of low relationship quality and limited decision-making latitude.

Relationship Quality

People develop different quality relationships with co-workers, leaders, and subordinates. Nearly all of the interviewees spoke about the quality of the relationships with their supervisors, their subordinates, or both. These relationships develop in unique ways depending on the context and the individuals involved. Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975) is based on the premise that leader-follower relationships are developed or negotiated. A close (high quality) relationship is developed between a leader and a few subordinates, while the leader relies on formal (low quality) relationships with the rest of his or her subordinates (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Dockery & Steiner, 1990). LMX theory proposes that, in exchange for loyalty and commitment, followers in the in-group receive favorable treatment from their supervisor, including privileged information, support, and improved access to developmental assignments (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997).

Dansereau, Yammarino, and colleagues (Dansereau et al., 1975, 2002) found that leaders develop relationships with individual subordinates that are completely independent from the relationship they experience with other subordinates. As one of the interviewees noted, “there is no guarantee that managers will treat all employees equally” (J. M., personal communication, October 21, 2004). These findings, dubbed “individualized leadership,” show that departures from an average style are not random and are found to be predictive of organizational outcomes, as this interviewee remarked: “I receive individual attention from my boss. He wants a sense of what I am doing. Because I am trusted, I may be able to circumvent rules. Trust comes from proving the profitability of deals but it takes longer because [my boss] is far away” (F. C., personal communication, September 30, 2004).

Relationships, revealed through interpersonal interaction, are the building blocks of many organizational functions. Specifically, close relationships are more likely to fulfill psychosocial functions and can enhance individual competence and effectiveness (Ibarra, 1995). As these high quality exchange relationships develop, common goals are internalized and mutual trust, respect, and obligation are fostered (Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999). Here is how one supervisor interviewed described the relationship quality in his in-group: “I have a great team of people and they are unique in the skills they do and they are ... again, you have to hire great people that are motivated and have a clear set of deliverables that they have to deliver against” (R. L., personal communication, October 1, 2004). Relationship quality appears to be important to both scholars and interviewees. This suggests that the way individuals describe their interactions with their leader is pertinent to relational distance.

Decision Making Latitude

Decision making latitude describes the autonomy an employee has and was mentioned by two-thirds of the interviewees. Spreitzer (1995) defined autonomy as leaders delegating decision-making to followers. One interviewee, in exploring some of the issues associated with “remote work,” spoke of autonomy:

I think, for some managers, there is a fear of losing control in terms of if you can't see somebody, how do you know they are being productive. But when you are dealing with knowledge work, it is more important to ask whether deadlines were met. If you didn't work today but then worked 'til midnight, I don't really care. I just go by the work. (R. L., personal communication, October 1, 2004)

Decision making latitude, or the lack of it, can exist regardless of where people are actually working, as evidenced by another employee's statements about his or her own boss' influence.

My boss doesn't direct my daily work. I do that at my own pace and with my own style. I am assigned a beat and I work it. However, she can influence planning and my long-range goals. I set my own priorities by thinking about the needs of the department. I know what has to be done because I have been doing this for a long time. (M. B., personal communication, October 28, 2004)

Evidence from both the empowerment and autonomy literature supports higher levels of performance and productivity when subordinates are given more control over work-related decisions (Koberg, Boss, Senjem, & Goodman, 1999; Spreitzer, 1995; Spreitzer, Kizilos, & Nason, 1997). In a meta-analysis, autonomy was found to explain almost 50% of variation in supervisory satisfaction (Spector, 1986), indicating that autonomy is closely tied to the supervisor since he or she has ultimate control over the degree of autonomy experienced by subordinates. It also shows that employees favor autonomy. Hackman and Oldham (1976) described the desirability of high autonomy and high “experienced responsibility” for achieving beneficial work outcomes. Autonomy is given to those employees who have a proven track record of success as well as to those who share a positive relationship with leaders.

Interdependence of the Two Types

Employees who receive more autonomy from their supervisors perceive closer affect and better relationships with those supervisors (Spreitzer, 1995), demonstrate a willingness to put forth extra effort, and seek feedback about the quality of their performance (Russo & Campbell, 2004).

Interviewees saw different reasons for differential treatment, which speaks to the connectedness of relationship quality and decision making latitude. One individual saw three reasons for his or her own ability to work remotely: first, he or she had a history that spoke to the unlikelihood of abusing the “privilege;” second, the individual had a pattern of delivering results; and finally, he or she had achieved a level in the organization that afforded some specialized treatment (M. B., personal communication, October 28, 2004). Other interviewees spoke about how their behavior had changed over time with a given supervisor. For example,

I've been here for less than a year. When I first started, I wanted to respond to every email within half a second. I wanted to be here early in case the phone rang. I wanted to stay late in case the phone rang – just so that I was seen to be putting in the effort. I suppose the more I am seen to do that and the more results I'm actually getting that are

measurable, the less important it is to continue with that really odd behavior. (S. H., personal communication, September 30, 2004)

The above quote demonstrates that performance led to increased autonomy given by the leader and felt by the subordinate.

The interdependence of relationship quality and decision making latitude is demonstrated throughout the literature review. Thus,

Proposition 3: Psychological distance is a dimension of relational distance and is comprised of poor relationship quality and limited decision making latitude.

Discussion and Conclusion

The role of physical distance in leader-follower relationships is certainly not a new concept. Jesuit missionaries, military field commanders, and traveling salesmen have all had to deal with the challenges inherent in managing from afar. Due to remote work and organizational changes, physical distance is increasingly prevalent in the workplace. Increasing physical distance has spawned a discussion of distance that delves into many aspects of the leader-follower relationship. Organizations now are forced to consider what contributes to a distant relationship and the impact relational distance might have on leader-follower interactions.

While this paper reviewed and synthesized existing ideas about distance, it also goes beyond earlier work by using a multidisciplinary lens and integrating findings from a larger number of disciplines to produce a richer, more complete understanding of the construct of relational distance. The theoretical base is highlighted with quotes from individual employees who experience relational distance.

Beyond its contribution to theoretical understandings of relational distance, this research also has implications for practitioners. The prevalence of remote work has brought discussion of physical distance to the forefront, and organizations now recognize that highly functioning work relationships depend on more than physical proximity. Indeed, these functional relationships are the building blocks of organizations and critical to organizational functioning. Leader-follower relationships in particular can contribute to a variety of work outcomes. As a result, leaders need to gain a deeper understanding of the interrelated dimensions of relational distance because this multidimensional construct will surely impact factors such as commitment, satisfaction, and performance.

Conceptualizing relational distance as the interplay among perceptions of structural, status, and psychological distance provides fruitful avenues for future research. First, it is important to test how dimensions of relational distance relate to organizational outcomes. While it is proposed that relational distance affects the factors mentioned in this paper, only an empirical study can confirm this. When looking at the impact of relational distance on organizational outcomes, researchers must compare the construct of relational distance to other related constructs (e.g., relational demography, leader-member exchange) to assess the value of adding this construct to the scholarly toolkit. In addition, leadership is rarely binary with each leader having one follower and vice versa. Therefore, the complexity of the differential relationship between leaders and multiple followers should be investigated. Further, since relational distance can be perceived by anyone involved in an organizational relationship of any kind, this understanding can be applied across levels of analysis to answer questions relating to leadership effectiveness, team performance, and inter-organizational cooperation. In the spirit of relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006), this may help in shifting attention from leaders as

people to leadership as a process, which would allow for an examination of both formal and informal leadership processes at any level of an organization.

Centuries after distance became a factor for individuals and organizations, we now need to develop a holistic understanding of how distance is perceived by leaders and followers. This paper is intended to encourage further research on the dimensions of relational distance and the impacts of their interaction. It is reassuring that other researchers have begun to recognize the importance of distance, but we must move beyond uni-dimensional, independent operationalizations. I anticipate that further use of this three-dimensional construct of relational distance will lead to greater recognition of its complexity and its effects on a wide variety of organizational relationships.

About the Author

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Appendix Interview Guide

1. What is your job title? Describe your job responsibilities.
 - a. Describe the nature of your work. What sorts of tasks do you work on?
 - b. Do you have the ability to determine/alter the type/number of tasks, the way tasks fit together to make up the whole, the individuals with whom you interact, the nature of those interactions?
2. Tell me about the relationship that you have with your co-workers.
 - a. How do you communicate with your co-workers?
 - b. How often do you communicate with your co-workers?
 - c. Do you consider yourself part of a work group? What size is the group?
 - i. Do you feel connected to your work group? To the company?
3. Tell me about the relationship that you have with your supervisor.
 - a. How do you communicate with your supervisor?
 - b. How often do you communicate with your supervisor?
 - c. Does he/she have an effect on you, the way you do your job?
 - d. When was the last time that they influenced you? What happened?
4. Do you ever meet with your supervisor or your co-workers outside of work? Tell me about it.
5. Are there organizational processes for working remotely?
6. Do you have any experience working virtually?
 - a. Tell me about how and when you started working virtually.
 - i. Probe: voluntary, instigator, reward, reasons, length of time, technology used
 - ii. Do you think you are effective when working virtually?
 - iii. How did you learn what to do in this situation?
7. What is working virtually like?
8. What are the issues?
9. What are the benefits?
10. What bugs you?
11. Who (in this organization) has the most influence on you?
 - a. How and why?