Relationships Differentiation: Cross-ethnic Comparisons in the Malaysian Workplace

Hassan Abu Bakar, Haslina Halim, Che Su Mustaffa & Bahtiar Mohamad

To cite this article: Hassan Abu Bakar, Haslina Halim, Che Su Mustaffa & Bahtiar Mohamad (2016) Relationships Differentiation: Cross-ethnic Comparisons in the Malaysian Workplace, Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 45:2, 71-90, DOI: 10.1080/17475759.2016.1140672

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2016.1140672

Published online: 03 Feb 2016.
The social exchange component of leader–member exchange (LMX) relationships quality suggests that the perception of the supervisors and subordinates on the quality of their relationship would provide a more complete picture of that relationship. Thus, taking a leader–member agreement or differentiation approach is a valuable tool in understanding the dyadic nature of LMX relationship. One of the notable developments in this emerging line of research is the congruence model of LMX offered by Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, and Gardner (2009). Cogliser et al. (2009) demonstrated that the agreement between a leader and his/her member’s perceptions of leader–member relationships quality has relational consequences impacting the followers’ outcomes. However, to date, this approach has not received enough research attention especially on the nature of relationship differentiation among managers and subordinates (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014).

Meanwhile, communication literature has long recognized dialogue as a mode of communication. In fact, dialogue has been advocated to offer societal problems and enhance organizational effectiveness, and transform organizational participations and relationships among organizational members. We argue that dialogue initiative between managers and subordinates benefits leader–member relationships differentiation, both in research and practice. For example, communication scholars have examined that dialogue improves participant’s knowledge and understanding on policy and change (Kerr, Cunningham, &
Tutton, 2007), improves negotiation expertise (Phillips, 2011) and increases the credibility of decision-making (Walls, Rogers, Mohr, & O’Riordan, 2005). In lieu of that, we advance the following research question: What are the specific characteristics of the relationships differentiation that are deep-rooted among manager–subordinates in Malaysian workplace?

Hence, the purpose of this study is to address this call by examining what constitutes relationships differentiation in LMX relationships, which will provide unique theoretical insights and pragmatic applications for communication in Malaysian workplace. Our approach in the present study is slightly different from the previous research of LMX. Previous perspectives exploring leader–member relationships predominance by two-way influence relationships between a leader and a follower, aimed primarily at attaining mutual goals (see Uhl-Bien, 2006). In this study however, we seek to further clarify what constitutes the concept of manager–subordinate relationships by selecting several specific characteristics from dialogue group discussions and examine how manager–subordinate talk about LMX differentiation in the workplace (Zhou & Schriesheim, 2010). Specifically, relationships differentiation between the manager–subordinate is a manifestation of dynamic and interactive exchanges that occur between managers and subordinates, the nature of which (task-related vs. social-related) may differ across dyads. As noted by Graen (2006), the connotative meanings exchange in manager–subordinate relationships differ from one culture context to another, and all communications between individuals in an organization within the context of one or several larger systems are culturally biased. Specifically, our goal is to expand the researchers’ understanding of the concept and characteristics of the relationships differentiation in leader–member relationships which can be understood and reconciled in Malaysian workplace.

In sum, this study hopes to theoretically contribute towards LMX research and literature on workplace cultural context. On the one hand, it extends our knowledge about leader–member differentiation as a construct and furthers our understanding about its association with cultural norms. On the other, the findings will provide support for the effects of cultural norms on manager–subordinate relationships. This study will highlight the use of workplace communicative characteristics in conjunction with social cognitive theories in explaining the concept of relationships differentiation in manager–subordinate relationships. Finally, the study will highlight the unique cultural dynamics of Malaysia and broaden the context in which we understand leader–member relationships. This study chooses the Malaysian cultural setting because relational norms in Malaysia operate in a unique multi-ethnic configuration (see Bakar, Jian, & Fairhurst, 2014; Bakar & McCann, 2014).

Review of Literature

**LMX Theory**

The LMX theory was proposed based on the premise of role theory and social exchange theory. The LMX framework suggests that leaders develop differential dyadic relationships with their members (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). It is argued that lower quality LMX relationships are characterized by economic exchanges of pay and performance, whereas higher quality LMX relationships are marked by the exchange of such socio-emotional resources of trust, commitment, and respect (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012). Four decades of research on LMX has shown that LMX is significantly associated with a
broad range of outcome variables, such as turnover intention, job performance, and job satisfaction (for reviews, see Dulebohn et al., 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997). Broadly speaking, this research on LMX indicates that high quality relationships are likely associated with positive subordinate outcomes. As we move towards a better understanding of which aspects of LMX relationships impact various individual attitudes and behaviors, we will not only be able to further develop and refine LMX theories, but will also be in a better position to fill some critical (and gaping) lacunas in the extant research. For example, past research on supervisor–subordinate dyads has suggested that communicative exchange in the relationships plays an important role in supervisor–subordinate expectations of their LMX quality. We also concur with researchers who argue that more attention on LMX needs to come from the standpoint of communication as relational process in the leader–member dyadic relationships (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). This argument is consistent with that of Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) who saw communication as a series of dyadic exchanges that determine leader–member relationships quality.

Within the framework of LMX on Malaysian workplace, studies have demonstrated a link between LMX quality and work outcomes. For example, LMX quality has a positive direct impact on organizational citizenship behavior, satisfaction (Ishak & Alam, 2009; Lo, Ramayah, & Hui, 2006), commitment (Lo, Ramayah, Min, & Songan, 2010) and delegation (Ansari, Hung, & Aafaqi, 2007). However, this same research has bypassed the critical domains of supervisor–subordinate dyadic relationships differentiation exchange, as well as related communication attributes in the exchange. Nor has this research examined the effects of communication dialogue of relational dyadic exchange. Studies such as this one thus, fill a research void in that we are capturing the LMX relationship from both the supervisor’s and the subordinate’s communication perspectives (see Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012).

The present study focuses on Malaysian workplace. This choice offers several unique opportunities to further understand the relationship of cultural context with LMX. First, it allows a sharp contrast with Western cultures, especially the US, in which most LMX theories are developed and tested. Some societal cultural differences between Malaysian and Western cultures are supported empirically and well known (see Bakar & McCann, 2014). For example, Hofstede (2003) and House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) suggested that the culture in Malaysian organizations indicates high scores for power distance and masculinity–femininity dimensions compared to other Asian and Western countries. Additionally, Malaysians are putatively more collectivist, meaning that there are close ties among individuals and a greater tolerance for a variety of opinions. Second, unlike many other Asian countries with a rather homogeneous cultural and ethnic composition, Malaysia is heterogeneous, consisting of Bumiputra (including Malays and other indigenous people), Chinese, Indians and several other smaller ethnic groups. Malaysian society is still ingrained with traditional values and historical practices (e.g. the occupational segregation of the Chinese as managers).

In spite of this vast literature, our understanding of LMX differentiation between leaders and members remains rather limited. The meta-analysis of LMX research by Gerstner and Day (1997) claimed that “one of the most provocative findings” was a significant but modest mean sample-weighted correlation between leader and member reports of LMX (p. 836). A more recent meta-analysis by Sin, Nahrgang, and Morgeson (2009), with greater effect on group sizes and a much larger sample size, found a slightly more moderate correlation than Gerstner and Day ($\rho = .37$). This curious finding has prompted studies designed to
deeper our understanding of LMX differentiation as a construct (Cogliser et al., 2009; Zhou & Schriesheim, 2009, 2010). For example, Zhou and Schriesheim (2009, 2010) revealed that leaders and members have “different perspectives and different criteria” when evaluating LMX quality (p. 828). While leaders focus more on task-related aspects, members pay more attention on social-related dimensions when judging LMX relationship quality. This lack of convergence on task- and social-related dimensions, they argued, results in the low to moderate LMX differentiation between leaders and members.

Within the work group, Sias and Jablin (1995), found that the differences in the quality of supervisor’s exchanges with her or his subordinates have an impact on each member of the work group where each of them is aware of the differential treatment that exists and, in fact, talks about it. Sias (1996) also found that members of a work group interacting about differential treatment by their supervisor, served to create and reinforce social perceptions about differential treatment in the work group (Sias, 1996; Sias & Jablin, 1995). These studies reveal that communication is the vital factor in different relationship qualities within the workgroup. It is also shown that the quality of communication with supervisors, be it direct or indirect, drives and reinforces subordinates’ perceptions of their respective work group relationships. Thus, further exploration in this area certainly is warranted.

Despite the findings by Cogliser et al. (2009), theoretically, we argue that LMX differentiation characteristics and cultural context should be empirically tested. The low to moderate LMX differentiation between leaders and members was explained as occurring due to a combination of differences in the performance of high vs. low LMX members, as well as by the supervisor’s rating biases (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Such differences between leaders and members occur due to the value of resources provided by high LMX members. For example, members enjoying high LMX relationships are more likely than those involved in lower LMX relationships, to receive challenging task assignments, training opportunities, resources, information and support (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Low differentiation is likely facilitated by high LMX members having a greater share of the leader’s discretionary resources, including the latter’s attention, time, and expertise, than the low LMX members. More quality time with the leader should translate to lower leader–member differentiation. Therefore, both leaders and members could respond to LMX based on the perceptions towards the quality of relationships, and when leaders provide different levels of support and resources to members. Such differentiation may challenge the expectations and judgments of the relationships quality by the leader. Thus, if members perceive that a differentiation exists in the quality of relationships, they may respond by performing or behaving at higher levels. Previous studies have also supported this proposition. For example, studies by Markham, Yammarino, Murry, and Palanski (2010), Chan, Chen, and Lam (2011) and Jackson and Johnson (2012) found that when the extent of LMX differentiation decreases between leaders and members, leaders are likely to give higher performance rating. We see Cogliser and her colleagues’ work as a significant step towards understanding LMX differentiations. However, as they have acknowledged, their model failed to take into account some important workplace contextual factors.

Because LMX differentiation is inherently concerned with relational dynamics (Cogliser et al., 2009), we argue that such dynamics do not operate in a cultural vacuum. Instead, its functions and effects have to be understood in association with relational norms within the context of local cultural configurations. This leads to the purpose of this study, which is to explore the potential characteristics of relational norm, as the manifestation of
leader–member differentiation in a non-Western work context. So far, we have presented views of LMX in Western and Malaysian context with regards to definition and characteristics. Although important in itself, the approach failed to address leader–member communication as a dynamic development of relational process. Recent research by Fairhurst and Grant (2010) on leader–follower language as social relationships construction, serves as the springboard for our investigation. In the following, we introduce dialogue as communication model and present our research question.

**Dialogue in Science Communication**

Bokeno and Gantt (2000) defined dialogue as a collaborative, mutually constructive, critically reflective, participatory and emergent conversational process in which participants actively examine and reconstruct relationships among self, others and the world. Unlike other forms of deliberative communication, dialogue is not intended to resolve conflict or reach a decision, but rather to explore and learn, with no necessary expectation of action to follow. Thus, dialogue is positioned primarily as a process of divergent thinking that explores and expands understandings on communicative behavior. It is intended to achieve several closely related purposes. First, dialogue focuses on increasing the understanding or shared meanings among people and mainly emphasizes on the emergence of shared meaning among participants. Second, dialogue is aimed at raising awareness of take-for-granted assumptions and beliefs. Through dialogue, exploring and inquiring are emphasized with questioning one’s own and others’ assumptions, with the aim of understanding and learning from these, rather than critiquing them or proving them wrong. Third, dialogue is promoted as a mean of enhancing learning at the individual, group, organizational and societal levels (Burson, 2002). As such, learning occurs as participants explore perspectives and assumptions, raise awareness and develop shared understanding. Fourth, dialogue encourages collaboration (Bendell, 2003), and finally, it enhances the quality of decision and action.

As mentioned earlier, communication scholars have examined the kinds of knowledge used by participants in dialogue. However, communication scholars have not examined explicitly the effects of dialogue experiences on manager–subordinate relationships’ attitudes towards differentiation due to the lack of socio-historical systems of thought in manager–subordinate relationship studies. As noted by Fairhurst (2011) the communicative perspective is not just one of many variables of interest; rather, communication is central, definitive, and constitutive of manager–subordinate relationships. Thus, it is likely that leaders and members have “different perspectives and different criteria” when a leader and a member communicate—that is, How are these communicative differentiation characteristics accomplished in workplace?

**Leader–Member Communication in Malaysian Context**

Any examination of the Malaysian workplace requires an understanding of culture and the role of ethnicity in Malaysian organizations. Malaysian society is comprised primarily of three large ethnic groups; Bumiputra (Malays and other ethnics) (65.1%), Chinese (26.0%) and Indian (7.7%) (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2013). Each of these ethnic groups maintains its own strong ethnic identity, with its own cultural customs, practices, language, values and beliefs (Bakar & McCann, 2014). However, unlike Western heterogeneous
societies, in which liberal values are applied to regulate cultural and workplace ethics (e.g., considering workplace diversity discourses, equal opportunity laws, diversity hiring goals, and so on), Malaysian society is still ingrained with traditional values and historical practices. Generally, all ethnicities in Malaysia tend to value harmonious relationships, respect towards the elders and religions, and believe in face-saving (Bakar & McCann, 2014).

The uneven ethnic distribution of workers across economic sectors is a core demographic characteristic of the Malaysian workforce. A majority of the Bumiputras work in the manufacturing and public sectors, the Chinese—along with a small number of Indians—dominate management and professional positions, while the majority of Indians work in the plantation sector (see Bhopal & Rowley, 2005). Additionally, the unique heterogeneity (with-homogeneous subdivisions) of Malaysian society highlights the complexity of communication and the significant role of “context” in Malaysian workplaces, especially if viewed in light of more culturally heterogeneous societies in East Asia and elsewhere.

Previous studies have indicated that the role of ethnicity is mainly focused on the distinct communication style in the workplace (Ashcraft & Allen, 2003) and therefore influences the communication climate in that workplace (Allen, 2007). In the Malaysian cultural context, ethnicity does not only shape the cultural norms of the society, but also the different types of communicative behavior in the workplace (Bakar & McCann, 2014). For example, a research conducted by Nair-Venugopal (2000) found that “Malaysian English” (a mix of English and Malay languages) is the predominant way of speaking in the Malaysian workplace setting.

To fully comprehend what constitutes effective leader–member communication in workgroups, one must consider an in-depth understanding of the local cultural contexts that underpin workgroup interaction (and its potential effect on leadership behaviors and outcomes). Although globalization pushes organizations across the world to converge through the adoption of common best practices, a strong pull towards culturally divergent ways of doing business and interaction continues to exist as well. Given the potential for cultural divergence in leader–member relationships, this study sets out to investigate the impact of communication based on cultural norms exchanges in the Malaysian workplace. As Malaysian culture is firmly grounded in traditional values such as paternalism, humility, seniority and respect for tradition in building relationships (Bakar, Jian, et al., 2014), such values suggest that communicative cultural-norm will represent a salient feature of the work context. Thus, we advance the following research question: When different ethnics communicate, what are the specific characteristics of the leader–member relationships and communication differentiation that are deep-rooted in the Malaysian workplace?

Method

This research was conducted within the context of a larger research project investigating cross-ethnic relationships in Malaysia to a trial alternative method of dialogue, as potential means for improving the cross-ethnic relationships in Malaysian workplace. We drew a fairly broad definition of leader–member dyadic relationships differentiation from the LMX model perspectives, we argued that differentiation between in the leader–member dyad relationships is the distinctiveness of the communication and interaction that exists among the leader and the members. More specifically, leader–member relationships differentiation addresses the extent to which leader–member dyadic communication is similar or dissimilar and culturally appropriate or inappropriate. This differentiation can be displayed
by the way an individual expresses his or her emotions, feelings, and thoughts, and manifests kindness in his/her evaluations of interactions or conversations within leader–member dyads. This perspective leads to the purpose of this study, which is to explore the potential differentiation in cross-ethnic relationships.

**Participants**

To achieve our goals, we selected and divided employees of three private and government-link corporations in Kuala Lumpur, into three focus groups and one dialogue group in which they discussed their opinions on manager–subordinate and related issues. We chose these organizations because the representations of three major ethnics (Malay, Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indian) are found in private and government-link corporations (Selvarajah & Meyer, 2008). Three focus group discussions were conducted for each ethnic group. One dialogue group discussion was conducted with the inclusions of three ethnics on various organizational levels. We chose a dialogue group approach in the study because Malaysians prefer to express controversial issue in groups. Thus, they prefer to give their opinions in group discussions as compared to one-on-one interviews (Bakar & Mustaffa, 2013). In the Malay ethnic group, mean age of participants was 34.2 years old, 45% male (9 people) and 55% were female (11 people). The sample consisted of 7 people from top management, 9 from middle management and 4 from supporting staff. In the Malaysian Chinese ethnic group, mean age of participants was 37.6 years, 60% were male (15 people) and 40% were female (10 people). The sample consisted 10 people from top management, 11 from middle management and 4 from supporting staff. In the Malaysian Indian ethnic group, mean age of participants was 32.8 years, 80% were male (12 people) and 20% were female (3 people). The sample consisted of 3 people from top management, 7 from middle management and 5 from supporting staff. All the 60 participants took part in the dialogue group discussion.

**Procedure**

Prior to attending the focus groups and dialogue group, participants were given information sheet about the research. The focus group and dialogue group discussions were 1–2 h in duration and were conducted on site. All were taped and video recorded except for one focus group session where we were denied permission to video record. Each focus group was facilitated by one researcher with the help of a research assistance belonging to a particular ethnic group. The presence of this research assistance helped the facilitator to build rapport with the participants. The dialogue group session was facilitated by one researcher and all three research assistances were present for support and observation. All facilitators had training and experience in group process facilitation. While the focus and dialogue discussions are dynamic and every group was different, the facilitators were guided to follow five key features of the Bohmian model of dialogue (Zorn, Roper, Broadfoot, & Kay Weaver, 2006). These conditions were operationalized by explaining, encouraging, modeling and gently enforcing the ground rules; respectful communication, openness and listening, suspension of judgment, and reflection and learning (see Isaacs, 1999).

In the process, the participants were asked general questions about their work routine, followed by more specific probes related to their daily interactions. We formulated specific
questions and probes based on the definition of relationships differentiation of LMX theory. Our main aim, then, was to explore what constitutes the relationships and communication differentiation. Therefore, the following examples of questions were posed for the participants to discuss: Would you please describe your relationship with your supervisor? If you had to describe your supervisor to someone who had not met him or her before, how would you describe him or her? How do you get feedback on your work? How do you solve conflicts with your superior? These questions gave us allowance to compare with LMX differentiation.

Analysis
Following the data collection, transcription and confirmation of transcripts on recordings were conducted to verify the transcription’s accuracy. Prior to the analysis, we conducted intercoder reliability and reliability among facilitators from each dialogue group sessions (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). To analyze the data, we employed qualitative methodologies to uncover themes and relationships from the discussions of each dialogue group, utilizing various theoretical lenses (Fairhurst, 2007). The transcriptions from each dialogue group session were read and analyzed by researchers and discussed with each other and with independent researchers. Next, the researchers re-read the data and began identifying the descriptions of the leader–member communication differentiation that could be extracted from the transcriptions. During this phase, we examined the meaning of communication differentiation with specific examples—illustrations that revealed key themes indicative of participants’ communication character at the workplace that have been underdeveloped or underplayed in current literature. Finally, as the descriptions of the LMX differentiation have been identified, the researchers re-read, discussed, and categorized these descriptions into specific category (Daymon & Holloway, 2010).

Results
Dienesch and Liden (1986) and Liden and Maslyn (1998) identified the potential for other “currencies of exchange” outside work behaviors for leader and members. This approach to LMX has received favorable supports (Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Currencies of exchange include affect, loyalty, and/or professional respect between members, which can occur in varying amounts and combinations. Studies indicate that, the leader and the members focus on different currencies of exchange from their partners. Leaders are likely to employ more work-related currencies, and members’ focus to employ more socially related currency (Day & Crain, 1992; Dockery & Steiner, 1990). A work-related currency is a perceived contribution, whereas the social currencies consist of affection, loyalty and professional respect.

Within communication literature, findings provided support that communication exchange is directly and indirectly associated with leader–member relationships quality. In fact, Fairhurst (2007) noted that communication exchange activities goes beyond the description from Liden and Malsyn’s (1998) “currencies of exchange”. Our findings support such a relational emphasis on communication. In the following sections, we analyze more particularly the communication characteristics that indicate the ways that certain themes shape employees’ understanding of leader–member relationships differentiation within the organization.
Differentiation on Perceived Leader Conceptual Skills

The perceived leader conceptual skills is derived from Hu and Liden (2011), who argued that the key element in leader–member relationships is the ability of the leader to reaffirm individual subordinate's strengths and potentials, as well as to provide support for the workgroup as a whole. This category were inductively derived based on overall subtext analysis and comparisons across group. We computed an inter-rate reliability of .87 (Cohen's kappa) across two rates and it showed adequate internal consistency.

The most distinctive leader characteristics expressed by all ethnics (both subordinates and leaders) when dealing with ethnicity differences in the workplace were specific social and emotional skills that facilitate a leader's ability to enact these relationships differentiation in workplace. Groves (2005) noted that several leaders’ verbal communication skills including the ability to perceive and understand subordinates’ emotions, regulate the emotions and generate or express them. In addition, the ability and skills of the leaders as an integral role of the social control will influence, and the motive of the followers are an essential component of the leader–member relationships building. Literature on communication style in Malaysian workplace has also already suggested that the politeness of exchange is based on the use of language, communication and interaction as the way in which an individual expresses emotion, feeling, thought and manifest kindness toward others (see Bakar, Walters, & Halim, 2014). Our data suggests that even when the central topic is on work related communication exchange, Malaysian employees first perceive leader's conceptual skills as the ability of the leader to lead discussions and to ensure the discussions reflect the benefits to the workgroup. For instance, an Indian manager gave the following statement about a leader's communication skills:

My supervisor is Malay, you know they like to explain verbally and through discussions within the group and then put it in formal channel … like in my workplace, we are like a family and work towards the best, he monitor of course like a father for the family and he need to leads and make sure harmony in workgroup. I take advice from him to make sure I perform well in the group. It is okay to have disagreement with our supervisor but we are different and this is in Malaysia you are expected to be different, it must be done in discussions. I can't simply say that I disagree … you know this is all about the group my supervisor do things for the group and I have to do things for the group as well. At the end what matters to the group is more important and perform. Again, I will only give my inputs during group discussions unless my supervisor calls me personally into his room but then again I will only give my general thoughts on the issues. That's the thing, our supervisor leads and discussions, makes us to give our view, any decisions he made is group based.

The statement does not mean that Malaysian employees do not pay attention to the content or believe that communication is not about communication differentiation content between individual leader–member dyad. Instead, it concurs with a more blurred view on interactional process and content, believing that one cannot be distinct from the other in the group. Therefore, it is essential that the subordinate's perceptions of communication with their supervisor at workplace should be related to how the overall group members understand their job and the cooperation with their co-workers in a team. Furthermore, since the leader's communication skills are based on the use of language and interaction, team members should articulate their attitudes towards team effectiveness (Bakar, Walters, et al., 2014).
Openness to Communication

The openness to dialogue communication is derived from Yang, Kang, and Johnson (2010), who argued that openness in communication has been treated as synonymous with listening, honesty, frankness, trust and supportiveness. This category was inductively derived based on the overall subtext analysis and comparisons across group. We computed an inter-rate reliability of .82 (Cohen's kappa) across two rates and it showed adequate internal consistency.

Kim’s (1994) conversational constraint theory advocates the concept of “social appropriateness” that is, what constitutes appropriate communication behavior in certain cultural context. Kim (1994) also noted that social appropriateness can only be determined through interpersonal relationships and task orientation interaction, with the emphasis on high relationship quality between people, depending on cultural context of the interactions. The inter-ethnic communication in Malaysian workplace is reflected throughout the entire spectrum of mind, emotion, morality, goodness and practicality in judgments of the communication and interaction with another person. Generally, in Malaysia and most of Asian workplaces, Malaysians are expected not to speak with a loud tone to an elderly person or superior, as it is perceived to be ill-mannered (Bakar, Walters, et al., 2014). In addition, in leader–member relationships communication, openness include both, message sending and message receiving behaviors, with the observation that leader's message receiver was especially salient to the openness. For instance, a Chinese supporting staff gave the following statement about openness communication:

Manager need to honest with us but not straight forward. Which I think it worth. Sometimes they need to treat us as a friend and honestly I look my manger as a friend. Because of this I think we can discuss openly and can share any problem. They need to accept and appreciate subordinates’ opinion. They need to listen and evaluate their opinion. They need to discuss and advise them and discuss what should they do. If there are, they can come personally and discuss. I realized in this relationships we have to look beyond normal working mode.

This statement indicated that managers in Malaysian organizations are expected to show wisdom, demonstrate compassion and honest communication with their subordinates (Selvarajah & Meyer, 2008), all of which are consistent with the concept of communication openness. In addition, subordinates in Malaysian organizations expected communication with their managers to consist of trust and obligatory politeness (Bakar, Walters, et al., 2014). By not conforming to these norms via subtle communicative exchanges, leader–member dyadic communication openness is closely tied to dyadic relational differentiations. Therefore, it is possible that leader–member dyadic communication openness is a form of reciprocation in the relationships differentiation (Bakar & Sheer, 2013).

Communicative Practice of Respect

The communicative practice of respect notion is based on Hendrick and Hendrick’s (2006) work on respect in interpersonal relationships. In interpersonal communication and relationships, individuals require respect as a feeling of worthiness, as personal and collective identity differs from culture to culture. The term respect itself can be characterized as feelings of esteem in the relationships that manifest in both, highly valuing the individual’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and the willingness to be influenced. This category was
inductively derived based on an overall subtext analysis and comparisons across group. We computed an inter-rate reliability of .90 (Cohen’s kappa) across two rates and it showed adequate internal consistency.

Liden and Maslyn (1998) noted that in mutual and matured leader–member relationships, there would be greater tolerance for and expectation in, the power of differentiation. Our analysis suggests that the tolerance that the members perceive is mainly a reverence for their immediate manager. The most distinctive features of mutual respect described by the participants of this study is that a leader is flexible, prefers to maintain his or her hierarchy and has input for group decisions. Respect is shown through observing the leader’s views on certain issues and valuing the leader’s opinion. A Malay supporting staff gave the following statement about respect in relationships differentiation:

I don’t really speak much with my Chinese boss. But then when if it is out of office like clearing stock my boss will wear t-shirt like us and we will have lunch together. At least that part he is flexible and that earn respect form us. This is very important to us in the group. All of us know he have to maintain differences in hierarchy so that we will respect him. First thing is they have to respect our views and try to be a good listener. At the same time we have to understand their problem. I will respect my boss decision if it is for the benefit of the group.

The statement shows that respect can be viewed as important to individual and group identity in Malaysian workplace. In this regards, respect can also be viewed as flexibility and tolerance of view and behavior in the relationships. However, their concept of respect includes a more serious representation of respecting subordinate’s views and incorporating good listening skills into the relationship. It is also worth to note that the concept of respect in relationships differentiation and the one implied by the notion of hierarchy difference, should be maintained in leader–member relationships.

**Trust as Relationships Differentiation**

Trust as relationships differentiation is derived from Colquitt, Scott, and LePine (2007), who described that trust in relationships is an individual expectation that another individual will perform a particular action. In this sense, individuals choose with whom they will trust based on the constituting evidence of trustworthiness of another individual. This category was inductively derived based on the overall subtext analysis and comparisons across group. We computed an inter-rate reliability of .87 (Cohen’s kappa) across two rates and it showed adequate internal consistency. In leader–member relationships, trust can be seen as subordinates’ belief and willingness to act on the basis of words, actions and decisions of their immediate manager. In leader–member relationships, trust is the manifestation of compatibility of interest, needs, values and emotional attachment in the relationships (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). A Malay middle manager described it as follows:

Mostly you can trust your superior. There is no such thing 100% trust. He will for sure check my work now it is easy only through email. Mostly I will update him this is where the trust between us come in. If there is problem then we will try to solve among together and your trust his decision. It is expected to trust his decision and it is worth when he give us space to argue his decision. You see it is because sometimes they themselves don't trust with their judgement.

The construction of trust in leader–member relationships differentiation in this study can be seen as pivotal for the leader’s effectiveness and work decision. Moreover, as noted by Pellegrini and Scandura (2008), leader’s behavior and work ability is fundamental in
determining the level of interpersonal trust. Therefore, the leader’s behavior, such as allowing mutuality of influence in the decision-making process, is an important element of trust building activity in leader–member relationships differentiation.

Age Differentiated Communication

The age differentiation communication based on communication accommodation theory, suggests that people of different generations often regard others and behave in ways that are biased in favor of one’s age group. In fact, it has been established in communication literature that older workers were seen as more non-accommodative in their communication with older adults than to their peer of the same age group (see Ota, McCann, & Honeycutt, 2012). This category were inductively derived based on overall subtext analysis and comparisons across group. We computed an inter-rate reliability of .82 (Cohen’s kappa) across two rates and it showed adequate internal consistency. Previous studies on demographic diversity in leader–member relationships have shown that demographic differences or similarities affect the dyad quality relationships, as well as the dyad work attitudes and behaviors. A current development in diversity research on relational-norm congruence specifies that dyadic demographic diversity (similarity or dissimilarity), when congruent with the cultural norm for that demographic category, will be associated with more positive relational and task outcomes. For example, although leader–member dyads may differ in age, when consistent with relational norms of that special work context, age dissimilarity was positively associated with the follower’s performance ratings (Bakar, Jian, et al., 2014). A Chinese manager gave the following statement about age differentiation in relationships:

I don’t see the problem with age gap. We all are like brother and sister. They (the bosses) know how I am, the respect still there. Even though they are younger than me. They still respect you as veteran in the organization. That is wise and polite. You got more working experience and knowledgeable than them. As older person you have to give good example. But then, it is our culture to respect seniors and this is about age gap factor.

The above statement illustrates the way communication differentiation becomes more complex as the target of age becomes visible in the relationships. Differences in communicative behaviors and social meaning attributed directly to differently aged people. Thus, in this tenets, communication between leader–member with age differentiation requires greater sense of respect. As such, this behavior reflects the leader’s politeness towards their older members. On the other hand, older individual needs to demonstrate the important criteria of their status that is knowledgeable and to be respected.

Discussions

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the intercultural communication literature in many ways. First, by fostering and cultivating communication and dyadic relational norms, this finding is noteworthy in that it complements a substantial body of research supporting the significance of leader–member dyadic communication and dyadic relational norms in the workplace (e.g. Oetzel, McDermott, Torres, & Sanchez, 2012). The context of multi ethnic relationships differentiation in Malaysian organizations offers a unique site for the examination of
culture and communication in the workplace. The categories of meanings of relationships differentiation have revealed some unique ways in which cultural norms and communication are conceptualized, valued, and constructed by Malaysian employees. Through these conceptions, we begin to see the influences that such culture has on the workplace, which in this case shows how Malaysian employees communicate about relationships differentiation. Furthermore, the characteristics of relationships differentiation have clearly illustrated how conceptualizations and constructions of the meaning of relationships in work and socialization process are intertwined between culture and communication.

As mentioned previously, LMX theory has expressed differentiation in leader–member relationships differently. Liden and Maslyn (1998) indicated that differentiation in relationships emphasizes on the representation of mutual understanding in affect, loyalty, contribution and respect as it is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. Our findings indicated that the views of the Malaysian managers and employees are different from what have been described in Liden and Maslyn's (1998) investigations. Malaysian employees accept relationships differentiation, but they come with certain expectations. However, we are cautious with the meaning of relationships differentiation. Leaders and members in the workplace indicate that leader's conceptual skills, openness in communication, respect, trust, and age differentiation are linked with relationships differentiation.

Subsumed and integrated throughout the discussions in the dialogue group is a larger context of Malaysian cultures, which not only provide lenses of differentiation, but also continuously interact to influence and shape meaningful interactions in supervisor–subordinate relationships in an organization for Malaysian employees. More specifically, our approach to examine the discussions of Malaysian employees on the relationships differentiation concept within the organization revealed two important aspects of Malaysian communication characteristics in an organization. First, the discussion among Malaysian employees illustrates the meaning of leader's conceptual skills, trust and respect regarding the relationships differentiation of their manager. Accordingly, the meaning indicates the emphasis of the leader's knowledge and wisdom for group development. Trust and respect also come from the leader's credibility in communicating within the workgroup. In this regard, we argue as well that the indication of relationships differentiation could also mean that the acceptance of relational norms in Malaysian employees are merely a gesture of respect towards different cultural values and not because of the actual or power based relationships.

Finally, all the categories indicate that relationships differentiation is linked with strong cross-ethnic relational norms. The leaders are expected to use coordination skills to integrate work groups. Clearly, this aspect of character in Malaysian employees reinforced Bakar and McCann's (2014) review of research on multiracial society in Malaysia, which dictated the relational norms of Malaysians employees. This study assessed what people do in a specific cultural setting. Our behaviorally driven mode of investigation, which is supported by many prominent communication researchers (e.g. Ting-Toomey, 2010), allows for culturally specific behaviors to inform our descriptions of communication in the workplace. The current investigation examined perceived interactions of behaviors in workplace and found that interaction based on relationships differentiation was indirectly associated with cross-ethnic in Malaysian workplace. Regarding the cross cultural applicability of our findings, we recognize that these findings require more rigorous empirical testing in other cultural venues. That said, we hope that the relationships differentiation model in Malaysia explored herein is a promising tool for use by practitioners and scholars.
The understanding of a specific communication culture in an organization has a major implication for managing communication in organizations. The findings of the present study suggest a major shift in how managers might identify and describe specific culture communication at work, a shift from communication attributed to materialize employees’ descriptions of their own communication’s point of view. Based on this study, it clearly shows that relationships differentiation is rooted by the culture’s background and does affect the meaning of leader–member dyad relationships in an overall organizational culture. Thus, taking the employees’ description in the group dialogue makes it possible to fully describe how relationships is formed, developed, and organized in a specific culture. Based on the findings, differentiation in dyadic relationships materializes when: (a) they are able to communicatively construct with each other through cultural norms; and (b) one is willing to contribute and recognize that trust and respect is the key in dyadic communication differentiation activities. In this part of leader–member relationships, communication acts as a guiding principle of hierarchical dyadic relationships through leader’s conceptual skills, openness in communication, respect, trust, and age differentiation. Thus, these elements are necessary and are a salient conditions of how leader–member relationships is defined and materialized. Results in this study indicate that communication is attributed through communication dialogue of leader–member relationships differentiation. Researchers on LMX, including Uhl-Bien (2006) have found that leader–member communicative attributes contributes and can predict relationships quality and foster agreement between managers and employees, suggesting that leader–member communication differentiation attributes can represent and help a social system in organizations. The finding adds value to relational dyadic communication literature by demonstrating the relevance of studying leader–member dyadic communication, by providing an examination of the way in which leader–member reflects communication differentiation in workplace. The results suggest that in leader–member relationships, leader–member dyadic communication differentiation is more related to conceptual skills, openness in communication, respect, trust, and age differentiation. Our findings are consistent with the unique concept of differentiation based on relational leadership model (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Specifically, communication differentiation between the leader–member dyad is an indications of dynamic and interactive exchanges that occur between leaders and members, that is, when leader–member dyad communication differentiation is high, the dyad may be unable to fully reap the benefit of rich interactions. On the other hand, when the differentiation of communication and interactions between leader–member dyad is low, the effects of communication and interactions become greater in both leader and member perceptions’ on the relationships.

**Practical Implications**

The findings of this study have important implications for leading and building effective leader–member relationships in organization. First, if managers can be made aware of the critical role of conceptual skills, openness in communication, respect, trust, and age differentiation exchange and its potential to influence relationships with his/her subordinates. In these relationships differentiation outcomes, manager will be better positioned to capitalize on, and subsequently strengthen relationships with subordinates.
can lead to strong leader–member dyadic relationships. Second, if a manager encounters problems with the quality of communication, we would urge this manager to forge conceptual skills, openness in communication, respect, trust, and age differentiation to reduce relationships differentiation.

The notion of leader–member relationships differentiation challenges some of today’s prevailing leadership and communication training practices, which narrowly focus on skill developments within teams, sometimes ignoring the critical role of relationships differentiation in leader–member relational process. When a manager in an organization fully embraces the profound role that workplace communication, such as conceptual skills, openness in communication, respect, trust, and age differentiation, can have on the relational norms and workgroup interaction and development, this manager may have better success in nurturing and achieving high quality relationships with his/her subordinates. It is in no way an overstatement to suggest that a range of positive organizational outcomes may potentially emerge.

Limitations and Future Directions

The dialogue group method employed in this study can be used to identify and describe relationships differentiation in the workplace—that is, by taking into consideration the aspects of leader–member dyadic relationships concept, specifically, the Malaysian employees expressing their views of leader–member relationships in the organization. This study, however, does not get the emotional contributions to understand the meaning of relationships in the workplace—that is, the emotional dimension of choices of power in supervisor–subordinate relationships. Future research may attempt to examine Malaysian employees’ communicative explanations in relation to cultural norms—for example, how trust and respect are interconnected in leader–member relationships. The current investigation is limited only to several organizations in Malaysia. As mentioned earlier, a current description of Malaysian employees in the workplace as participants justifies the research questions advanced in this study. Therefore, a comparative study between and within organizations should be considered.

Finally, the results extend our understanding of the concept of leader–member characteristics by identifying the specific form of relationships differentiation characteristics across five broad categories: leader’s conceptual skills, openness in communication, respect, trust, and age differentiation. Yet, to continue providing useful knowledge, researchers must continue their efforts to identify the specific meaning of leader–member relationships dimensions in Malaysian organizations. Of course, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution, given the inherent limitations of the research design. Recent research views relationships in the workplace and communication activities within a specific culture as interdependently complex processes that are grounded within group identity (Selvarajah & Meyer, 2008), and thus a key limitation of this research is the nature of the data. Clearly, a thorough study that tracks supervisor–subordinate dyad development on employees in organizations is needed. Likewise, the use of dialogue group methods warrants caution. The issue of the extent that identifies relationships characteristics reflects the entire variation of leader–member relationships differentiation at the workplace among the groups studied, due to limitation of the dialogue groups’ data collection technique employed in this study.
Moreover, it should also be acknowledged that additional research might illuminate further aspects that constitute leader–member relationships in the workplace.

Our findings indicate that by only focusing on the actual meaning of differentiation in relationships per se, current descriptions of the relationships on Malaysian organizations do not recognize the communicative descriptions in a specific cultural context. In this study, we found the communicative descriptions that materialize leader–member relationships differentiation in Malaysian organizations, namely, when the differentiation enables communication with each other through a leader's conceptual skills that contributes to openness in communication, respect and trust in the relationships. We can offer no universal solution to the question of what constitutes the social and cultural structure of an organization, but our approach does point to the excludability of the immaterial character of communication and meaning of relationships in specific workplaces.

Finally, although the current investigation supported the leader–member relationships differentiation tenets, further attention and testing (e.g. for further convergent and divergent validity of the categories) are needed. While the current study examines leader–member dyadic relationships differentiation through communication dialogue style agreement in the workplace, other communication attributes (e.g. new forms of communication such as social media) with different theoretical explanations may also associate with leader–member relationships differentiation. One promising new direction is to record and content-analyze the actual interactions within the workgroup. As such, alternative model of leader–member relationships model basing on the concept of differentiation could be developed to examine a collection of specific aspects of communication behavior in workplace.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Professor Stephen Croucher and the reviewers of this paper for their many helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia [grant number 12384].

Notes on Contributors

Hassan Abu Bakar is an associate professor in the Department of Communication, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, and Othman Yeop Abdullah Graduate School of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia. His main research interests are in dyadic communication in workplace, leadership style, organizational communication, and cultural context.

Haslina Halim is a senior lecturer in the Department of Communication, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia. Her main research interests are in organizational communication and intercultural communication. She is currently working on research projects related to the two areas of study.
Che Su Mustaffa is a professor in the Communication Department, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Her research interests are in organizational communication such as communication satisfaction, communication technology, family communication, and Malaysian Malay communication style. Her works appeared in refereed journal such as Journal Analysis, Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, Intercultural Communication Studies, Corporate Communications: an International Journal, and Human Communication.

Bahtiar Mohamad is a senior lecturer in the Communication Department, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia. He teaches Public Relations, Corporate Communication, Communication for Managers, and Organizational Image Management, which all combine to support his hybrid profession linking communication with the management. His main research interests are in corporate identity, corporate image, investor relations, and corporate branding from the point of view of public relations and corporate communication.

**ORCID**

Hassan Abu Bakar [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6043-173X](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6043-173X)

**References**


