Differentiating Relationships in the Workplace: A Cultural Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the constructs that constitute relationship differentiation in leader-member exchange relationships, which would provide unique theoretical insights and pragmatic applications for communication in the Malaysian workplace. Six-hundred questionnaires were distributed to employees of government, semi-government, and private organizations (n = 479). Results revealed that leader conceptual skills, communication openness, and trust contributed towards organizational citizenship behavior. Cultural considerations were invoked to explain certain findings of this study.

Keywords: Leader-member Exchange, Communication Dialogue, Relationship differentiation

JEL Classification: M14

1. INTRODUCTION

The leader-member exchange theory (LMX) is based on the premise of differential quality of relationship between leaders and subordinates. The social exchange component of LMX relationships posits that, the extent to which supervisors and subordinates agree or disagree about the quality of their relationship would provide a more complete picture of that relationship. Thus, suggesting that leader-member differentiation approach as a valuable tool in understanding the dyadic nature of LMX relationship. Despite promising findings the conceived model of LMX remains largely detached from cultural conditions, which are crucial in understanding relational alignment or “congruence.” This is due to the differences in which human relationships are valued and maintained from culture to culture (Liden, 2012).

Within the framework of LMX theory in the Malaysian workplace, studies have demonstrated the link between LMX quality and work outcomes. For example, LMX quality has a positive direct impact on organizational citizenship behavior, satisfaction (Ishak and Alam, 2009; Lo et al., 2006), commitment (Khong, 2009; Lo et al., 2010), and delegation (Ansari et al., 2007). However, none of these studies has investigated LMX dyadic agreement nor examined the cultural context (i.e., cultural norms) in the Malaysian workplace. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to address this call by examining the constructs of relationship differentiation in the Malaysian workplace. Our approach in the present study is slightly different from previous research on LMX. This study also hoped to further clarify the elements that constitute the concept of manager-subordinate relationships by selecting several specific characteristics from the focus group and dialogue group discussions, and examine how managers and subordinates talk about LMX differentiation in the workplace (Zhou and Schriesheim, 2010). Specifically, our goal is to systematically test the construct of relationships differentiation in leader-member relationships, which can be understood and reconciled in the Malaysian workplace.

2. METHODS

The study involved three phases of data collections. The first two phases involved in-depth interviews involving employees from...
four organizations - Malaysian Airport Berhad, BERNAMA, Tenaga Nasional Berhad, and Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The interviews were conducted in order to ascertain issues concerning conflicts and relationships between superior and subordinates, which also focused on work experiences, perceptions, and feelings towards each other. The focus and dialogue group approaches were adopted because Malaysians, in general prefer to affiliate themselves with groups (Bakar and McCann, 2016). The discussions were transcribed, and qualitative methodologies were employed to uncover themes and relationships from the discussions of each focus group and dialogue, utilizing various theoretical lenses (Sandberg, 1997). The third phase of the study was the survey method, which is the method to be discussed in the paper.

2.1. Population and Sampling

The samples of organizational employees consisted of full-time employees from three types of organizations (i.e., government, semi-government and private sectors in Malaysia). Six hundred questionnaires were distributed to the employees (200 for each type of the organizations), with the response rate of 79.8% (479 questionnaires).

2.2. Instrumentation

Questionnaires were prepared both in Bahasa Malaysia and English. Although the commonly accepted practice of questionnaire distribution in Malaysia is in English, our research utilized the bilingual approach since the respondents of the study involved full-time employees of different types of organizations (i.e. government, semi-government and private sectors), holding different positions in the workplace and were also comprised of different racial groups (i.e., Malay, Chinese, Indian, and others).

2.3. Measurement

Items for the survey were generated based on the themes yielded from the interviews in Phases 1 and 2. It consisted of measures of perceived leader conceptual skills, communication openness, respect, trust, age, (all served as independent variables) and organizational citizenship behavior (dependent variable). While the independent variables assessed employees’ perception towards their leaders, the dependent variables measured the employees’ perception toward their group members. All items employed the Likert format, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The variables and measures are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Variables and measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Number of items (N)</th>
<th>A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leader conceptual skills</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication openness</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCB</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OCB: Organizational citizenship behavior

respondents were Malays, 6% were Indians, 5.5% were Chinese and 5.5% belong to other ethnic groups. The majority of the respondents were between the age of 26 to 35 (61.8%) and only 9.1% of the respondents were 25 years old and below. In terms of positions, most of the respondents held supporting posts, representing 74.5%. Another 25.5 were at the management and professional levels. A majority of the respondents had working experience between 4 and 7 years (31.9%), and only 14.8% had 3 years of experience. Of all the respondents, 49.5% claimed that they worked with the government sector, 28.8% in semi-government sector and the remaining 21.7% worked with the private sector.

It can be observed that all variables were moderately perceived by respondents (range from M = 3.14, SD = 0.660 to M = 3.65, SD = 0.661). Generally, respondents attributed high responses to communication openness, suggesting that they mostly perceived good communication openness by their leaders.

3.1. Hypotheses Testing

The results of hypotheses testing are demonstrated in Table 2. The results showed that there was a significant and positive relationship between leader conceptual skills and organizational citizenship behavior (β = 0.377; CR = 3.692; P < 0.001). Therefore, H1 was accepted. In addition, the results also revealed that communication openness had a significant relationship with organizational citizenship behavior (β = 0.349; CR = 3.499; P < 0.001). Hence, H2 was also accepted. However, these findings contradicted the results of the relationship between respect and organizational citizenship behavior. Respect showed no significant relationship with organizational citizenship behavior (β = 0.049; CR = 0.776; P > 0.10), therefore H3 was rejected. The study also found that trust had a significant relationship with organizational citizenship behavior. Therefore, H4 was accepted.

3. RESULTS

Of the 600 questionnaires distributed, 479 questionnaires were returned (79.8%). Fifteen questionnaires were incomplete and 100 of them were dropped after the tests for outliers were conducted. A total of 364 (60.6%) questionnaires were analyzed. Hair et al. (2010) suggested that the minimum sample size for SEM analysis approach is about 200 respondents. Hence, the sample size of 364 appeared to be adequate for statistical analysis.

Descriptive statistics was used to report the profile of the respondents. In this study, gender distribution was higher for male (50.8%) as compared to female (49.2%). 86% of the respondents were Malays, 6% were Indians, 5.5% were Chinese and 5.5% belong to other ethnic groups. The majority of the respondents were between the age of 26 to 35 (61.8%) and only 9.1% of the respondents were 25 years old and below. In terms of positions, most of the respondents held supporting posts, representing 74.5%. Another 25.5 were at the management and professional levels. A majority of the respondents had working experience between 4 and 7 years (31.9%), and only 14.8% had 3 years of experience. Of all the respondents, 49.5% claimed that they worked with the government sector, 28.8% in semi-government sector and the remaining 21.7% worked with the private sector.

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4. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned, this study examined the variables that constituted the relationship differentiation in LMX relationships which provide unique theoretical perceptions and practical applications for communication in the Malaysian workplace. We selected several specific characteristics from the focus and dialogue group discussions and examined how manager-subordinate talked about LMX differentiation in the workplace. We analyzed 58 items that focused on leader conceptual skills, communication openness, respect, trust, age, gender, and ethnicity. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with both groups from the management and support staff.
### Table 2: Results of hypotheses testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Relationship between exogenous and endogenous variables</th>
<th>S.E</th>
<th>t (CR)</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Standardized parameter estimate (β)</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H_1</td>
<td>Leader conceptual skills→OCB</td>
<td>0.097</td>
<td>3.692</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.377</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H_2</td>
<td>Communication openness→OCB</td>
<td>0.098</td>
<td>3.449</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.349</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H_3</td>
<td>Respect→OCB</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.776</td>
<td>0.438</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>Rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H_4</td>
<td>Trust→OCB</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>2.289</td>
<td>0.022**</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***P<0.001, **P<0.05. SE: Standard error, OCB: Organizational citizenship behavior

The study found that leader conceptual skills (β = 0.377; CR = 3.692; P < 0.001), communication openness (β = 0.349; CR = 3.499; P < 0.001), and trust (β = 0.092; CR = 2.289; P < 0.05) had significantly affected organizational citizenship behavior. Hence, Hypothesis 1 (H_1), Hypothesis 2 (H_2), and Hypothesis 4 (H_4) were accepted. The results also suggested that positive communication skills, communication openness, and trust between leader and subordinate could lead to positive organizational citizenship behavior among employees. Conversely, the results revealed that respect (β = 0.049; CR = 0.776; P > 0.10), did not significantly affect the organizational citizenship behavior. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 (H_3) was not supported. Consequently, leaders should be aware of the importance of communication skills since these factors play an important role in stimulating employee behavior towards the organization.

### 4.2. Limitations and future research

In spite of the significant contributions discussed above, several limitations need to be acknowledged. Firstly is the sample size. It is acknowledged that the response rates within groups are particularly important for all multi-level studies. Our analysis of 364 respondents is rather small for multivariate analysis and this could lead to some problems when estimating regression weights in relation to hypothesis testing, especially using the SEM technique. Secondly, due to the time and financial constraints, the sample of organizations involved was also limited to those in Peninsular Malaysia. Thus, the generalization of results should be made with appropriate caution. This research was a cross-sectional study which measured perceptions and intentions at a single point in time. A typical limitation of cross-sectional studies is the restriction of their ability to prove a cause-effect relationship (Sekaran, 2000). For future research, scholars could consider the moderating effect of relational demography within various organizations to increase the generalizability of the present findings. Therefore, more comparative studies between Malaysian and multinational companies operating in Malaysia should be considered.

### 5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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