

Critique and Review of Leader-Member Exchange Theory:

Issues of Agreement, Consensus, and Excellence

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Abstract

The relationship quality that develops between leaders and those designated as followers is of longstanding interest to researchers and practitioners. The purpose of the present paper is to review the more recent developments in the field of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory to identify specific issues related to leader-member agreement and follower consensus that have potentially important theoretical and practical implications. We introduce the concept of LMX excellence, which involves high-quality LMX, high leader-member agreement as well as high group consensus in LMX quality. We outline how leaders and followers' behaviour as well as context can enhance or hinder the development of LMX excellence and conclude with an overview of the practical and theoretical implications as well as future research needs.

The relationship quality that develops between leaders and those designated as followers continues to be a significant topic of interest for leadership researchers and practitioners. Although the leader is the typical focus in much of the leadership-related research (e.g., leader personality traits, behaviours, styles, decisions, and so on), there is longstanding attention to the interactions between leaders and followers in forming and maintaining leadership processes going back to the influential early work of Weber (1921-22). Although leadership research has advanced beyond Weber, this attention continues to evolve in terms of promoting a more systematic approach to relational or relationship-based leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The most prominent approach that focuses on leader-follower relationships is that of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), originally introduced as the Vertical Dyad Linkage model (Danserau, Graen, & Haga, 1975).

The explicit focus of LMX is on the quality of the dyadic exchange that develops between leaders and followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The LMX approach was one of the first systematic leadership theories to include the follower in leadership processes. Although one focus is on the reciprocal exchange between a leader and a follower, the theory also acknowledges that both parties contribute to the development and maintenance of the ongoing relationship quality. Meta-analytic research has shown that high quality relationships are associated with positive work-related outcomes, such as follower satisfaction, commitment, and performance (Gerstner & Day, 1997) as well as citizenship behaviour (Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007).

Much of the research focus has concentrated on antecedents and outcomes of LMX at the individual or dyadic level, but recently has advanced to the team level (Naidoo, Scherbaum, & Goldstein, 2008). However, there are possible differences between leader and member perspectives on the same relationship (although see Graen & Schiemann, 1978;

Graen, Hui, & Taylor, 2006) as well as lack of consensus among followers of the same leader regarding their LMX with this leader. Potential reasons for this will be addressed in the following brief overview of the issues related to agreement and consensus, and their respective roles in achieving LMX excellence.

LMX agreement. The focus of much of the LMX research to date has been on examining followers' perspectives of the shared exchange. This has created an asymmetry in the available research base with research on leaders' perspectives or the shared perceptions of leaders and followers being underrepresented. That does not mean that leaders' perspectives have been completely ignored, but data from the Gerstner and Day (1997) meta-analysis reveals that whereas 69 samples were identified that measured LMX from followers' or members' perspectives only 22 samples were identified using the leaders' LMX ratings. Because a leader and follower experience a mutually shared dyadic relationship, perhaps it would be expected that there would be a reasonably high level of agreement between their perspectives as measured by independent LMX ratings. Thus, measuring LMX from only one perspective might make sense. But in the 24 identified samples identified by Gerstner and Day (1997) that measured LMX from both perspectives, an average sample-weighted correlation of only .29 was found. More recently, Sin, Nahrgang, and Morgeson (in press) identified 64 samples that measured LMX from both the leader and follower perspectives. Those findings estimated a true score correlation of .37 between perspectives. These results indicate that there is only modest relationship between measurement perspectives even with a larger number of study samples.

It should be noted that the correlation between leader and follower LMX ratings does not indicate interchangeability (see Bliese, 2000). That is, the correlation does not guarantee that leader and follower values are the same, only that they are related. In order for leader-member agreement to be established, it is necessary that leaders and members rate their

mutual relationship equally. We thus define LMX agreement as leaders and followers rating their relationship equally high or low and not that there is merely a high correlation between them.

The lack of agreement about a shared relationship quality might be considered as one indicator of an “impoverished relationship” (George Graen, personal communication) in that the expectations that a given leader and a follower would have of each other would be inconsistent in cases of LMX disagreement. Research suggests that the imbalance in LMX measurement perspectives found in Gerstner and Day’s meta-analysis can be overcome, as recent findings have identified specific correlates and even some of the causes of LMX rating (dis)agreement (Graen et al. , 2006).

LMX consensus. LMX theory has evolved based on the fundamental assumption that leadership is potentially different for each leader-follower relationship. As such it does not make theoretical or practical sense to use *average leadership style* to describe the behaviour of any given leader because a leader’s behaviour is likely to differ depending on the follower (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen, 1976). Leaders treat followers differently according to LMX theory and followers do not always see their leader in the same way. Consequently, the issue of consensus among followers in the same workgroup may be especially relevant to LMX research. Although traditional leadership approaches that emphasized an average leadership style would expect to find consensus in a workgroup (followers agreeing on their view of the leader’s behaviour), LMX theory makes no such claim. Empirical research also supports this basic assumption of LMX theory that there is significant variance in follower ratings of their relationship with the same leader (Graen, 1976; Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras, 2003).

Defining LMX excellence. Previous research that has not considered agreement and consensus has insufficiently addressed the prescriptions of LMX theory. Early LMX researchers argued that the most desirable set of workgroup relations is when the leader

negotiates high-quality exchanges with all followers (Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Thus, LMX theory goes beyond merely attempting to describe leader-member relationships to offering prescriptions regarding the ideal state of affairs in the group. The present approach takes these prescriptions further in recommending that LMX excellence consists of three parts (a) a high-quality exchange relationship, (b) leader-follower agreement on this relationship, and (c) consensus among followers in a workgroup regarding their respective relationships with the leader. The three prescriptions of LMX excellence proposed here of high level, high agreement, and high consensus, provide an overarching goal set that every workgroup leader should work towards.

Despite these LMX prescriptions, the emphasis of most of the extant research has been on the individual and dyadic level. As a result researchers know little with regard to what factors help to shape LMX agreement and consensus. Because of their proposed role in shaping LMX excellence, we will take a closer look at certain factors that can serve as catalysts for reaching LMX agreement and building consensus. We will refer to positive agreement and positive consensus in this overview as components of LMX excellence. We use this terminology to indicate that agreement and consensus should be directed at high level of LMX quality rather than agreement and consensus regardless of the respective level of LMX.

An overarching purpose of the present paper is to review the more recent developments in the field of LMX with regard to specific issues of agreement and consensus that have potentially important theoretical and practical implications. In particular, we review the research and existing theory on how and why leaders and followers work to develop and enrich the quality of their shared relationship (or not), how consensus in a work group can develop, and various contextual factors that might influence agreement and consensus. We will concentrate specifically on characteristics of the leader, characteristics of the follower(s),

and contextual or situational factors when forwarding propositions on how to achieve LMX excellence. Our goal is to help establish an agenda for future research in the area of LMX agreement and consensus while taking into account relevant contextual variables. In order to provide the appropriate background and framing for this discussion of agreement and consensus, we will first provide a brief overview of LMX theory.

Brief Overview of LMX Theory

Work-based relationships, especially those involving a superior, are important considerations in any organisational context. Gerstner and Day (1997) noted that one's relationship with a leader or boss is a lens through which the entire work experience is viewed. In relationship-based leadership theories such as LMX any differences in the evaluation of the same leader's behaviour are thought to reflect real differences in the relationship between leader and follower. This implies that a leader's behaviour often varies among a group of followers as a function of different interpersonal relationship qualities that develop between the leader and followers (Sherony & Green, 2002). Consequently, relationship qualities will likely differ between followers of the same leader. The relationship quality between leader and member can be described using several quality indicators or currencies of exchange (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Liden & Maslyn, 1998), namely *affect* or mutual liking, *loyalty* or faithfulness across situations, *contribution* in terms of effort and support, and *respect* in the form of a personal reputation for excellence.

It is thought that an important resource embedded in a high-quality LMX relationship quality is reciprocity. According to Liden, Sparrow, and Wayne (1997): "A high-quality LMX relationship is based on social exchange, meaning that the leader and member must contribute resources valued by the other party and both parties must view the exchange as fair" (p. 50). Uhl-Bien and Maslyn (2003) differentiated between three components of reciprocal behaviour: (a) *immediacy* (time lapse between exchanges), (b) *equivalence*

(equality of the exchange value to each party), and (c) *interest motive* (why an exchange was negotiated). In an empirical test of this perspective on reciprocity, they found that immediacy and equivalence were negatively related to follower- as well as leader-rated LMX, indicating a certain level of trust in the exchange that makes reciprocity on those dimensions less relevant. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that mutual interest was positively related to LMX perceptions, highlighting the importance of that reciprocity component in developing high-quality exchanges.

Recommendations have been made to researchers that a complete evaluation of LMX theory requires at minimum that the leader and member independently rate their mutual relationship (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Differences in perspectives could be an interesting variable of study in their own right, especially if it is thought that relationships in which there is mutual agreement about the high quality are different than those in which the quality or agreement is low or mixed (Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, in press; Scherbaum, Naidoo, & Ferreter, 2007). A related question that has emerged in the LMX literature is whether dyads can be considered as dependent or independent from each other. Yammarino and Dansereau (2002) argue that all dyadic relationships maintained by a given supervisor are unique and therefore independent from each other; however, Graen and Scandura (1987) see dyads as mutually dependent. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) have described the development of LMX research as moving from an individual to a dyadic to a team network perspective. If a network approach is truly where LMX research is heading (e.g., Graen & Graen, 2007, 2008; Sparrowe & Liden, 2005), then greater attention will need to be paid to the overall social context and how it influences the development of various dyadic exchanges.

These differing perspectives on the relative independence of dyads in a workgroup suggest that there is also little apparent theoretical agreement on the degree to which group

context is a relevant factor in shaping LMX quality. If dyads are dependent upon each other then the implication is that group context is especially important; however, if they are independent of each other then the broader work group context would not play an important role with regard to any one particular dyadic relationship quality. This is an area in which additional research is sorely needed.

As noted previously, we see the perception of a high-quality LMX relationship on the part of the follower to be the baseline or first step in the development of LMX excellence. But reaching excellence goes beyond one person's perception of that relationship (individual level) to also include a leader's agreement about the high quality (dyadic level) and also a general workgroup consensus on high quality relationships across all of the respective leader-member dyads (group level). In helping to further promote this idea and encourage more research on the topics of LMX agreement and consensus, we will first review what is known from the research literature about these concepts and then propose sets of leader, follower, and situational variables as other possible avenues to explore.

Prior Research on Agreement and Consensus

Recent chapters from an edited series devoted to LMX theory and research (Graen, 2003b, 2004, 2006; Graen & Graen, 2005, 2007, 2008) highlight the importance of going beyond a dyad perspective of LMX to also take into account how LMX dyads are embedded in groups and in the broader organisational context (e.g., Mayer & Piccolo, 2006). For years researchers treated the LMX ratings of leaders as independent data across a set of followers even though this created nesting or non-independence in the data. Consequently, the notion that followers are nested within leader dyads and that these dyads are also nested in workgroups has not been fully appreciated until recently (for recent exceptions see Graen's edited LMX series).

A recent exception to this is research by Offstein, Madhavan, and Gnyawali (2006) who introduced a triad level of analysis. Their approach takes into account that leaders negotiate the quality of exchanges with more than one follower and that followers also have a relationship with each other that has potentially important implications for LMX (also see Sherony & Green, 2002). These recent contributions emphasise that relationship dyads should not be regarded in isolation but have to be put into a broader context. In the following, we will briefly review prior research that has focused specifically on issues of LMX agreement and consensus.

Agreement

In theory, it would be expected that leaders and followers would strongly agree on the quality of their shared relationship. But as noted previously, empirical research has shown that this is not the case (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Recent research found that this lack of agreement may be due in part to the realization that relationships need to develop and that this may take more than just time together. Graen et al. (2006) found that over six-months working on a shared project that engineers showed little or no agreement between leaders and members regarding dyadic relationship quality. They argue that relational quality takes time to develop between people who have not worked together and it can change dynamically as the relationship is challenged. This “challenge of commitment” may occasion the testing of reciprocal LMX between leader and members and hence improve agreement within dyads. Some see this as key to the development of LMX agreement (George Graen, personal communication).

Using a sample of 98 matched dyads, Sin et al. (in press) found that the correlation between leader and follower rated LMX increased with length of tenure and as the amount of dyadic intensity increased. These authors also used meta-analytic techniques to evaluate potential antecedents of LMX agreement across studies. Across 64 studies and nearly 11,000

dyads, the average corrected correlation was found to be moderate ($\rho = .37$). Furthermore, it was confirmed that relationship tenure was positively associated with the correlation between leader and follower rated LMX, and that this correlation was higher on the affectively oriented relationship dimensions. These are promising findings; however, more still needs to be known about how relationship tenure shapes agreement as we defined it above in terms of leaders and followers rating their relationship equally high or low, and why and how affectively oriented dimensions of LMX are associated with higher levels of agreement.

Two recent studies on LMX agreement suggest that we may need to further refine what is meant by agreement. Glibkowski, Chaudhry, and Wayne (2007) differentiated between mutuality and reciprocity in LMX relationships, building on research that has been conducted in the area of psychological contracts (e.g., Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). Specifically, mutuality refers to a shared understanding when one person is the recipient of the exchange (e.g., leader and follower both agree on the followers' workplace contributions) whereas reciprocity refers to the degree of agreement about the reciprocal exchange (e.g., leader and follower agree on what they are both getting from the exchange relationship). The empirical focus of their study was on what the authors termed objective reciprocity that involved a comparison of separate leader and follower ratings about the relationship. No evidence was found for LMX objective reciprocity in their sample of manufacturing employees in that on average the supervisors reported more resources received from their employees as compared to what employees reported they received from their supervisors.

Cogliser et al. (in press) investigated issues associated with different types of leader-member agreement. They drew a theoretical and empirical distinction between balanced LMX dyads characterised by high exchange quality and balanced LMX dyads characterised by low exchange quality. They further distinguished between different types of unbalanced dyads, specifically, follower over- or underestimation of LMX quality relative to their

leader's view. Their results suggested that in balanced high-exchange dyads, the followers demonstrated better performance and stronger commitment and job satisfaction than in balanced low-exchange dyads. In unbalanced dyads where leaders and followers disagreed on their shared relationship quality, follower overestimation was characterised by lower follower performance but higher commitment and higher job satisfaction as compared to conditions of follower underestimation.

Paglis and Green (2002) demonstrated that high LMX agreement was related to lower frequency of conflict between leader and followers. In a theoretical paper, Basik and Martinko (2008) developed propositions concerning unbalanced dyads in terms of follower underestimation that are consistent with the findings of Cogliser et al. (in press). Basik and Martinko also suggest that balanced dyads (either high-high or low-low) will experience lower conflict and that high-exchange balanced dyads will result in higher follower performance and commitment. Again, these propositions are much in line with what has been demonstrated previously by Paglis and Green as well as Cogliser et al.

Although these articles point to the importance of considering separately the differences between balanced and unbalanced dyads in terms of follower outcomes, this practice is the exception rather than the rule. We have argued that agreement on a shared high-quality exchange is an important step in achieving LMX excellence but the reality is that very little research has been conducted on the consequences of disagreement in LMX ratings. A key question that remains largely unanswered concerns the possible reasons behind leader-member agreement or disagreement, especially those that go beyond just considering the tenure of the relationship. Though not much research is available in this area, some theoretical considerations are worth mentioning. Cogliser et al. (in press) discuss a few possibilities that might contribute to disagreement or unbalanced dyads such as follower dispositions (e.g., negative affectivity, locus of control), cognitive processes stemming from

differences in implicit leadership theories, relational dynamics such as the lack of mutual expectations, and contextual factors such as span of leadership.

Other researchers have approached the problem of leader-member disagreement from a psychometric perspective on the ratings themselves. Scherbaum and his colleagues (2007) found that the LMX-SLX was psychometrically sound when using item analysis theory for leaders (down), members (up), and peer-ratings (across) (Scherbaum et al., 2007). Tekleab and Taylor (2003) reported that leaders tend to report a higher overall mean and lower variation in their LMX ratings than followers. This could contribute to a low correlation between leader and follower ratings of LMX and provide evidence of LMX disagreement as leader and follower report different mean levels of their relationship quality. Gerstner and Day (1997) noted overall lower reliability for leader than for member LMX ratings. Keeping in mind that leaders often have to rate several followers, the validity of these ratings may be affected as well. Scandura, Graen, and Novak (1986) proposed that leaders may be reluctant to differentiate between their followers and therefore their ratings may be subjected to the effects of social desirability and restriction of range. Other reasons for disagreement derive from research on 360-degree feedback ratings. For example, Harris and Schaubroek (1988) offered three explanations for low agreement across ratings sources: (a) egocentric bias (biases in self-perception in the direction of an inflated self-view), (b) differences in organisational level (meaning that people on different hierarchical levels define performance differently), and (c) observational opportunities (raters have differential opportunities to observe a target ratee).

Clearly, more research is needed to address this potentially important concern of leader-member (dis)agreement. After reviewing what the research on consensus reveals, we will return to this issue in offering our own propositions with the goal of guiding future researchers.

Consensus

Consensus (sometimes called differentiation) refers to the variability across followers in a given workgroup with regard to their respective ratings of their relationship with the same leader. One focus of consensus is on the absolute level of alignment in LMX quality across dyads within a workgroup, but a somewhat different one includes the followers' perspectives of different dyads within the same group (Van Breukelen, Konst, & van der Vlist, 2002; Schyns, 2006). As noted before in contrast to other leadership approaches, variance in follower ratings is treated as meaningful information in LMX research. But from prescriptive perspective it has been recommended that leaders work to establish a good relationship with every follower (Graen et al., 1982; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This implies that other things being equal, high consensus (low variance) along with positive relationship quality (high mean) is a desired and effective way of leading (achieving LMX excellence). A clear situational exception to this was found by Naidoo et al. (2009) who reported a group performance contribution of both team mean and variance on LMX.

Despite this prescription, the typical way in which leader-member relationships have been regarded is in isolation from other dyads or the broader organisational context. This may be inappropriate if dyads are interdependent because the quality of relationship in one LMX dyad might influence the LMX quality in another dyad (Graen & Scandura, 1987). For this reason it is potentially important to take consensus issues into account when evaluating LMX outcomes. The classic work of Heider (1958) also suggests that the independence of dyads is unlikely. Instead, members with positive relationships will probably consider members with negative relationships sceptically as a means of maintaining a balanced triad (member-leader-member), implying that cooperation between these different members maybe be jeopardised. Conversely, members with relatively poor exchange qualities with their leader may view those with excellent LMX with appreciation (if desired) or envy, resentment,

or possibly even anger (if undesired). As noted below, however, some researchers have shown that when the differentiation (low consensus) is perceived to be due to legitimate factors such as ability or motivation level, then there is greater acceptance of different relationship qualities in the group.

Empirical research indicates that there is little consensus across follower LMX ratings. Hofmann et al. (2003) reported an intra-class correlation coefficient value of .39 for member-member agreement across work-group dyads. This suggests that approximately 39% of the variance in LMX was explained by group membership, whereas the remaining variance can be explained at the individual level. Looking into the effects of LMX differentiation (i.e., lack of consensus) on performance, Liden, Erdogan, Wayne, and Sparrowe (2006) argued that LMX differentiation could actually enhance individual performance when leaders treat followers differently according to the level of contribution that each provides. They assume that this will be perceived as equitable treatment by followers. The counterargument Liden et al. set up relates to fairness in the sense that LMX differentiation will lead to poor performance based on followers' feelings of unfair treatment. In short, the theoretical arguments appear to cut both ways. Empirically, however, these researchers found no relationship between LMX differentiation and individual performance.

Liden et al. (2006) argued further that LMX differentiation is positively related to individual performance for low (impoverished) LMX groups but not for high (excellent) LMX groups. Their assumption is based on the idea that in low LMX groups, differentiation can convey the feeling that an enhanced relationship with the supervisor is possible whereas in high LMX groups, differentiation may be less important as all members enjoy a good relationship quality with their leader. Their results supported this assumption.

In terms of group performance, Liden et al. (2006) argue for two opposing relationships: Differentiation can lead to high group performance when leaders select the right followers for

the right task according to their capabilities. But differentiation can lead to low group performance when followers start to withhold effort as they begin to feel they are treated unfairly. No main effect for LMX differentiation on group performance was found. In an effort to examine this relationship more closely, Liden et al. looked into task interdependence and median LMX in the group as potential moderators. They found that the relationship between LMX differentiation and group performance is higher under conditions of high task interdependence and low median LMX.

Mayer, Keller, Leslie, and Hanges (2008) investigated how co-worker LMX influences the relationship between an individual's LMX and several outcomes. The theoretical approach taken in their research was that because dyads are embedded in groups it is likely that social comparison processes influence the relationship between individual LMX and outcomes. Their results suggested that relationships between individual LMX and job satisfaction and commitment were moderated by co-worker LMX such that the relationships were stronger for high rather than for low co-worker LMX. This held true for both actual and perceived co-worker LMX and for some behavioural indicators such as aspects of organisational citizenship behaviour and leader-rated deviance behaviour and performance.

In other related research, van Breukelen and Wesselius (2007) found support for the perspective that a leader's differentiation across members will be viewed negatively by followers only under certain circumstances. Using the example of sport teams, the authors noted that differentiation tends to be perceived as fair when players are shown rewarding treatment on the basis of their abilities. The findings of van Breukelen and Wesselius point to an important direction in the research into consensus in LMX: Under what conditions differentiation is regarded as fair and will lead to positive outcomes (or at least avoid negative ones) and under what conditions it is regarded as unfair and will likely lead to negative consequences?

Taken together, these findings suggest that a general effect for LMX consensus may not exist, but that it may be more important to look at context effects that influence the relationship between consensus and outcomes. Specifically, the perception of fairness with regard to differentiation appears to be particularly relevant when considering outcomes of consensus in LMX (see Scandura, 1999, for a discussion of the relevance of fairness in LMX.). The reasons for a lack of consensus in how followers view their relationship quality with their leader can be traced back to LMX development. As leader and member both contribute to the development of the dyadic relationship, it makes sense to take a look at characteristics of both the leader and follower in the initiation of LMX relationships

It is typically assumed that leaders make an offer for a positive exchange quality relationship to followers, who choose to accept or decline this offer (e.g., Graen, 2003a; Graen & Scandura, 1987). Research has shown that the acceptance of an LMX offer may be at least partially based on members' growth need strength (Graen et al., 1982; Graen, Scandura, & Graen, 1986). Those followers with strong need for personal growth and development were more likely to accept these LMX offers and increase their hard performance than those low on growth need strength. Offers also might be rejected because of the felt obligation that comes about by entering into this exchange agreement or simply due to a lack of interest. Another possibility that has been discussed in the literature is that leaders may simply not have the resources to establish a good relationship quality with all followers (Dansereau et al., 1975; Green, Anderson, & Shivers, 1996; Schriesheim, Castro, & Yammarino, 2000; Schyns, Paul, Mohr, & Blank, 2005). This could be a particular problem for leaders with strict organizational rules or a large span of control, contributing to a stronger differentiation among followers. A large span of control might also serve as an inhibitor for a leader accepting the overtures of followers to develop their working relationship.

As alluded to above, it is also possible that followers take action to initiate a positive relationship with their leader although this is less frequently considered. Follower offers may be more likely when they join an existing team as opposed to when a leader is new to a team and has the responsibility to establish working relationships with all of the new followers. Following on the notion that follower growth need strength may be one factor that influences reactions to leader offers and thus shapes the mutual relationship, Schyns, Kroon, and Moors (2008) argued that followers may differ in the degree to which they perceive LMX as being important based on their implicit leadership theories and work-related needs. Their results indicate that followers' needs are related to their ratings of their relationship quality with their leader. This can be due to differences in expectations towards leaders but also due to real differences in leader behaviour based on a reaction to followers' needs. This implies that followers reporting to the same leader could very likely report different LMX qualities depending on their needs and implicit leadership theories, thereby resulting in low consensus regarding LMX.

We next turn our attention to areas to consider in terms of new directions for future research on LMX agreement and consensus in building toward LMX excellence. We have organized these directions into a set of propositions that take into consideration leader behaviours and attributes, follower behaviours and attributes, and contextual conditions that could enhance agreement and consensus, and along with high quality, contribute to achieving LMX excellence. Our goal was not to try and provide a comprehensive overview of all the possible factors that could influence agreement, consensus, and ultimately excellence, but to focus on those that we believe show the most promise for advancing LMX theory and research.

Future Research Directions in Agreement, Consensus, and LMX Excellence

LMX Agreement and Excellence

We have noted that most of the research on LMX development has focused on developing high-quality dyadic relationships. Nonetheless, the data suggest that leaders and followers may not necessarily agree on the quality of their shared relationship (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Sin et al., in press). For that reason, our approach is to suggest potential factors that would enhance LMX agreement. In terms of going beyond establishing more than a good leader-member exchange to possibly achieving leader-member excellence (Graen, 2009), it is a baseline requirement that both members of the dyad agree on the high-quality nature of their mutual relationship. Research indicates that the more positive the LMX, the higher the agreement (Graen, 2003a). Proposed below are some theoretically relevant factors based on the leader, follower, and situational context respectively that are thought to influence the development of what we term “positive LMX agreement” (high LMX level and high agreement), which helps to foster the achievement of LMX excellence.

Self-concepts. One factor influencing leader-member agreement is thought to be the self-identities that both leader and follower hold. Lord and his colleagues (Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999) built on research from social psychology in decomposing self-identity into three dimensions: individual, relational, and collective. Research suggests that these different levels cannot be activated simultaneously. Researchers have proposed that most people have aspects of all three components of self-identity available to them, but that situational factors make one particular level of self-identity salient over the others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). These different levels of self-identity are potentially important factors in serving as motives that guide attention and behaviour in interpersonal relations (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001).

When individual self-identity is activated, it emphasizes a person’s uniqueness as an individual and serves as motivation to establish and maintain this uniqueness in their relations with others. A relational self-identity is based on dyadic relations with specific others (e.g., a

leader). A collective level of self-identity is defined in terms of broader group membership (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003a, 2003b; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). From these brief descriptions of follower self-identity it can be seen how holding an individual identity might serve as an obstacle to reaching LMX agreement with a leader. This would be especially likely if the follower is motivated primarily to establish his or her uniqueness (i.e., individual identity), or if the leader and follower were operating with different self-identity levels. Lord et al. (1999) argue that holding a relational self-identity can elevate dyadic leader-member relations to greater importance. In particular, holding a relational self-identity would be expected to enhance positive LMX agreement because the motivating factor in social relationships at this level is the dyad and not the individual or the whole group.

Proposition 1: Leaders' and followers' who hold relational identities will have greater LMX agreement.

Some authors have argued that leaders play an important role in influencing follower self- concept. For example, Lord and Brown (2004) have claimed that leaders can influence follower motivation by shaping these three levels of their self-identity in different ways at different times to best suit the needs of the group in terms of maximizing goal achievement. According to Brewer and Gardner (1996), situational factors are important in rendering different levels of self-identity salient; therefore, leaders can create situations in which relational self-identity is more salient as a way to potentially enhance LMX agreement.

Proposition 2: Leaders who influence followers to adopt a relational self-identity will contribute to enhancing LMX agreement.

Follower behaviour and attributes. LMX was one of the first approaches in leadership research to formally acknowledge the role of the follower in leadership processes (Graen, 1976). The orientation taken with this follower role can serve to enhance or impede LMX

agreement and ultimately the level of excellence achieved. From a behavioural perspective, actions taken by a follower to gather information about their role expectations as well as how they are meeting such expectations will be important concerns in developing LMX agreement. It is proposed that actions taken by followers to actively seek out direct and indirect feedback cues will help to enhance LMX agreement.

Feedback seeking behaviour is a type of self-regulation strategy that involves the degree to which an individual asks for feedback from several sources and to monitor the environment for indirect feedback cues (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Feedback serves an important informational purpose for followers in terms of understanding role expectations and how well they are meeting those expectations. We expect that feedback not only affects LMX agreement but also has a positive effect on the level of LMX, thus enhancing positive LMX agreement.

Proposition 3: Feedback seeking behaviour engaged in by the follower will enhance positive LMX agreement with the leader.

Self-monitoring. Whereas feedback seeking is a behaviourally based individual difference, there may be dispositional factors that also shape the likelihood that LMX agreement will develop with a leader (Cogliser et al., in press). One such factor that is proposed to shape agreement is follower *self-monitoring personality*. This refers to the degree that someone monitors and controls the expression of self that they present to others in social situations (Snyder, 1987). High self monitors are chameleon-like in adjusting their attitudes and behaviours to fit with the expectations of others, whereas low self-monitors are both less willing and less able to project images of themselves that differ from their privately experienced self (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000). The postulated link to LMX agreement is that in order to meet the expectations of an important other such as a leader, a follower first must know what those expectations are. High self-monitors are more likely than lows to be attuned

to the cues provided by a leader as to what is needed to fulfil their expectations for ultimately establishing LMX excellence. But leaders may not trust the actions of high self-monitors and reject their acts as blatant attempts at ingratiation (Lam, Huang, & Snape, 2007).

Proposition 4: Follower self-monitoring personality will be positively related to positive LMX agreement with the leader.

Contextual influences on LMX agreement. There are many potential situational influences that can alter the amount of feedback or other information that is available to followers. There may be some structural concerns such as span of control (i.e., the number of followers reporting to a particular leader; see Green et al., 1996; Schriesheim et al., 2000; Schyns et al., 2005) and whether or not the leader is co-located with the followers. Regardless of these particular kinds of structural factors, it is believed that there are deeper issues associated with the climate or the culture of a workgroup that can shape the level of LMX agreement that develops. These aggregate level attributes of a work context are based in the norms that develop among members of that context. Two such factors proposed here are psychological safety and power distance.

Psychological safety refers to the amount of interpersonal trust that is experienced in a given group or organization context. When there is a high level of psychological safety workgroup members feel that they can take interpersonal risks with each other and the formal leader with little likelihood of being made to feel foolish or stupid (Edmondson, 1999). Research by Edmondson and colleagues has shown that psychological safety is positively related to the amount of learning that occurs in a team because people in the team are more willing to try new behaviours and to ask for help when needed. In terms of enhancing LMX agreement, it is postulated that workgroups espousing norms that increase individual trust in the leader and facilitate taking interpersonal risks, will provide more direct and indirect feedback about the leader's expectations. More feedback in the environment will provide for

greater opportunities to gather information about those expectations, thus enhancing to positive LMX agreement.

Proposition 5: The level of psychological safety experienced by followers is related to positive LMX agreement.

Similar to our argument regarding self-identities, we can assume that leaders can and should use their influence to create psychological safety in their team. As Edmondson, Bohmer, and Pisano (2001) argue, a major influence in shaping the amount of psychological safety is the leader's orientation to the group.

Proposition 6: Leaders who build psychological safety in their group will contribute to enhancing LMX agreement.

Power distance was originally discussed as a cultural dimension that differentiates across societies (Hofstede, 2001); however, it can also be used to describe the values held by smaller collectives such as organizations and workgroups. This particular cultural value refers to the extent that unequal power and status across individuals in the collective are acknowledged and accepted. High power distance cultures more readily accept such inequalities among its members, which can interfere with vertical feedback and open communication between leaders and followers. For this reason, it is expected that those workgroups in which there is a more egalitarian culture where accessibility to the leader is more likely will foster greater leader-follower LMX agreement.

Proposition 7: The level of power distance experienced in a given context is negatively related to positive LMX agreement.

LMX Consensus and Excellence

Summarising from the available literature, we know that LMX consensus is most likely reached when there are three prevailing conditions. First, a leader makes an offer of developing a high-quality exchange to *all* followers. Second, followers should be similar to

each other in their exchange needs regarding the leader. Third, followers have opportunities to interact to agree on their relationship with their leader (Graen, 1976; Heider, 1958).

According to previous research, these factors all work together in shaping high consensus in follower reported LMX and at the same time keep the mean LMX quality on a high level.

Nonetheless, there are likely additional catalysts to the development of positive LMX consensus (high average LMX and high follower consensus). Several of these are proposed below.

According to Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), leaders need to – and be able to – make an exchange quality offer to all followers. This puts the onus of creating positive LMX consensus on the leader. Although this might be an overly narrow approach to achieving positive LMX consensus, it serves as a good starting point to explore this phenomenon.

Social identity. As with LMX agreement, we see the leader's role in shaping follower identity and behaviour to be a key factor in shaping LMX consensus. Early work on Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) explored how individuals develop a social identity on the basis of salient aspects of their group identity (e.g., race, gender, or ethnicity) and the consequences this has on interactions within and between groups. In the context of leadership, SIT has been used to explain how leaders emerge (Haslam & Platow, 2001) and why they are granted power (Turner, 2005). Both results can be achieved by contributing to establishing in followers a feeling of importance of belonging to a particular group.

According to Haslam et al. (2001), leaders who are seen as enhancing social identity with the group are attributed more charisma and receive more positive evaluations in a crisis than other leaders. A similar process could be relevant in LMX. That is, when leaders are perceived by their followers as belonging to a cohesive and high-status group, and thus enhancing self-identity, followers may be more willing to accept leaders as “one of us” and work to establish a positive relationship with the leader on a group basis. In other words, for a

workgroup to be characterised by positive LMX consensus, the group itself must be salient as a source of social identity (also see Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999). Thus, leaders need to (a) help establish a collective group identity within their followers, (b) be seen to be part of that group, and (c) make this identity salient when necessary.

Proposition 8: In workgroups with members holding a positive social identity to the group there will be a higher likelihood of positive LMX consensus than in groups in which this is not the case.

Transformational leadership. LMX has been theoretically and empirically linked to transformational leadership (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen, 2003a; Wang et al., 2005). Empirically, Basu and Green (1997), Deluga (1994), as well as Howell and Hall-Marenda (1999) have shown substantial positive relationships between transformational leadership and LMX. Gerstner and Day (1997) have argued that transformational leadership can be one way of establishing positive LMX relationships with all followers. One component of transformational leadership in particular (i.e., individualised consideration), appears to be very relevant in forging high-quality LMX relationships. One difficulty in linking transformational leadership with LMX is that the former is traditionally seen to be focused on portraying an average leadership style across the whole group of followers. Nonetheless, some researchers have demonstrated that transformational leaders influence follower performance through LMX (Wang et al., 2005). Thus, we assume that average leadership style such as transformational leadership contributes to the development of LMX consensus and group excellence.

Proposition 9: In work groups where leaders demonstrate high levels of transformational behaviours there will be a higher probability of positive LMX group consensus than in other groups where the leader shows low transformational behaviours.

Follower needs. Even if the leader tries to establish a good relationship quality with all followers in the workgroup, there is no guarantee that all followers will accept this relationship offer or even be aware of the offer. As discussed, research indicates that followers' needs play an important role in establishing consensus in LMX. Specifically, followers' needs must be aligned such that they are motivated to establish and maintain a good relationship quality with their leader. From this perspective, it is likely that deep level diversity, that is dissimilarity in values and needs, (Hiller & Day, 2003) could play a role in inhibiting LMX group consensus and excellence. Followers who are similar in their needs and values might be more motivated to establish similar high-quality relationships with their leader, whereas those groups in which there is a diverse set of competing needs will have more difficulty with this. However, followers' needs to not only have to be aligned with the other group members' needs but they also have to be conducive to LMX, in a sense that followers' needs enhance the interest in establishing a high level LMX relationship with their leader. For example, Graen (2003, see also Graen and Scandura, 1987) indicate that followers' growth need strength is related to accepting positive LMX relationships with their leaders. Thus, a high level and consensus of growth need strength will enhance consensus in LMX.

Proposition 9: In work groups where followers share needs that are conducive to LMX there will be a higher probability of positive LMX group consensus than in other groups.

Contextual influences. Leaders and followers do not interact in a vacuum. The organisational and group context that they share can have an effect on the establishment of positive or negative relationship qualities and also influence how many good relationship qualities emerge.

Span of leadership has been indicated as a boundary condition for establishing a large number of high quality relationships (Schyns et al., 2005; Schyns, Maslyn, & Weibler, 2008).

It has been argued that leaders with a large span of leadership (i.e., responsible for leading many followers) will find it difficult to establish good relationship qualities with all of them. Thus, although it is difficult to pinpoint the ideal numbers of followers to lead, it is likely that smaller spans of leadership will be more conducive to LMX group consensus than larger ones.

Proposition 10: In work groups with a small span of leadership there will be a higher probability of positive LMX group consensus than in other groups where there is a larger span of leadership.

Climate. Another factor influencing positive LMX consensus could be organisational and group climate. For example, results of a recent study by Tordera, Gonzalez-Roma, and Peiro (2008) indicate that supportive climate is positively related to LMX in general.

According to James and colleagues who have conducted some of the pioneering theoretical and empirical work in the area of climate, the preferred term when dealing with individual perceptions of the workplace environment is *psychological climate*.

According to James and James (1989), four dimensions of psychological climate can be distinguished: (a) role stress and lack of harmony; (b) leadership facilitation and support; (c) challenge and autonomy; and (d) workgroup cooperation, friendliness and warmth (see also James et al., 2008).

The climate aspect of leadership facilitation and support is very similar to LMX. But psychological climate refers not to dyadic relationships but to the prevalent relationships and perceptions within the group as assessed by an individual. If by means of social interaction, individuals come to share their group perceptions, then group climate emerges. That is, individuals within a group agree on their assessment of the prevalent climate. In terms of LMX consensus, we argue that if the group climate with respect to leadership facilitation and support is high, this situation is conducive to positive LMX consensus.

Proposition 11: Work groups with a perceived psychological climate emphasising leadership facilitation and support will have higher positive LMX consensus than work groups that have a relatively low climate for leadership facilitation.

Culture. On the broader level of culture (shared beliefs and values), individualism and collectivism can be relevant when establishing relationships. LMX has been researched mainly in individualist cultures, such as the United States and Europe (e.g., Bernerth, Armenakis, Feild, Giles, & Walker, 2007; van Breukelen et al., 2002) but it has also been examined in collectivist cultures such as China and Japan (Graen & Wakabayashi, 1994). While the outcomes of LMX are favourable in both cultural contexts, little is known about the influence this culture dimension has on LMX consensus. As collectivist cultures are more oriented towards the group (Hofstede, 2001) and members are better at decoding social cues (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), we can assume that collectivist groups have more shared views on their relationship quality with their leaders than individualist groups. However, power distance may be important in determining whether or not this consensus is necessarily positive. In cultures with large power distances, a lot is to be gained from a positive relationship quality with a leader, so that that positive LMX consensus likely can be assumed (at least, when it comes to followers' reports). In cultures less impacted by high power distance, a positive relationship quality with one's leader may not be essential; thus, LMX level may vary more between groups.

Proposition 12: In cultures with high collectivism and high power distance, there will be higher levels of positive LMX group consensus than in cultures low in collectivism and low in power distance.

Summary and Conclusions: Towards LMX Excellence

In this overview we concentrated on two gaps in the literature on LMX, namely the antecedents of agreement between leader and member concerning their mutual relationship

and the antecedents of consensus among followers concerning the relationship to their leader. The call for agreement and consensus in LMX is based on somewhat different arguments. As leaders and followers rate the same exchange quality relationship, the lack of agreement noted in the literature is a problem that researchers need to pay close attention to. But this is not a new problem in that some of the early LMX work focused on the problem of agreement (Graen & Schiemann, 1978). Too often it appears that LMX is measured only from the followers' perspective because of convenience. It should be noted that this is incomplete and may be providing biased LMX data. As we have noted, an overarching goal should be to achieve agreement in LMX and to achieve high level LMX at the same time (what we have termed positive LMX agreement) as a foundation for building LMX consensus and ultimately LMX excellence.

The case for consensus is slightly different. The idea of LMX originates in the observation that leaders tend to have different relationships with different followers. Given the positive outcomes associated with high-quality LMX relationships, it is recommended that leaders attempt to forge high-quality relationships with all followers. Despite this prescription, it will likely be much more difficult to implement this than to prescribe it. High-quality exchanges demand extensive resources in terms of social capital outlays to build and maintain in terms of the strong network ties involved.

We have proposed that LMX agreement and consensus are influenced by the leader, the follower(s), and aspects of the work/organisational context. Role expectations are important both in terms of leader and follower influences on agreement. Leaders need to make clear what their expectations are but followers also need to be active in seeking feedback regarding their role expectations and to what extent they are fulfilling those expectations according to the leader. When expectations are clear and shared between a leader and follower, the way is paved for a mutually positive understanding of their relationship. Self-monitoring tendencies

can enhance this understanding as followers high in self-monitoring are better able and more highly motivated to detect cues in their leader's behaviour as to their expectations and to work towards meeting them. We also argue that leaders who establish and make salient positive social identities and those who appeal to a collective or relational self-identity will ultimately achieve higher LMX excellence. The trick is in knowing how to achieve social identity in a group and how each level of self-identity should be activated and when to do so. Our suggestion is to first help to build social identities in order to enhance LMX consensus and follow that with developing followers' relational self-identities to then build LMX agreement. It is our contention that followers who emphasise their own uniqueness in the form of having an individual level of self-identity activated will show less agreement with their leaders than those whose level of self-identity is more relational. Similarly, followers whose social identities are not connected to their work group will not likely share their colleagues' view of positive LMX quality because it will not be important to them.

Leaders' transformational leadership can also influence consensus as transformational leaders tend to engage in individual consideration, a behaviour that can likely enhance LMX. Transformational leaders emphasise the common goal which could in turn positively affect social identity and thus consensus in LMX. In order for positive LMX consensus to emerge, followers must feel the need for a positive relationship with their leader and as a group have a collective need to share this positive relationship.

Besides leader and follower characteristics, we identified several contextual factors influencing LMX excellence. Climate – and specifically psychological safety – can support the development of agreement and consensus by allowing a positive group atmosphere to emerge and supporting trust among leaders and followers. On a broader level, cultural dimensions such as power distance and individualism-collectivism can impact on the possibilities to establish agreement and consensus in LMX. In high power distance cultures,

we would expect less interaction and communication between leaders and followers and thus fewer opportunities to develop agreement. Similarly, individualism can be an obstacle to consensus as followers are less inclined to search for cues about other colleagues' relationship with their leader.

Summarising our considerations regarding LMX agreement and consensus, we have proposed that the optimal situation is where the leader and all followers agree on a high LMX relationship, resulting in positive LMX agreement and consensus (Naidoo, et al., 2007). So far, we have looked into factors enhancing either agreement or consensus. A question remains as to what are the conditions that leaders, followers, and organisations need to fulfil to achieve LMX excellence. Our overview suggests that clarifying the role of followers is vital to LMX excellence, as is identifying followers' needs and how the leader can address them. Climate is vital when it comes to creating an atmosphere that is conducive to LMX excellence. However, one constraint we have identified in terms of achieving LMX excellence is culture. It appears that in individualist cultures and cultures with a high power distance, achieving LMX excellence is a particular challenge. However, in our opinion there are still some recommendations to leaders in these situations on how to potentially achieve LMX excellence. As we have indicated before, establishing and emphasising a group identity seems to support LMX excellence. In an individualistic context, this may be even more beneficial than in a collectivistic context as in the latter case, group identity may develop naturally without the leader's intervention. Thus, leaders of individualistic followers need to put extra emphasis on building followers' group identity.

When it comes to power distance, we argued positive LMX agreement may be difficult to achieve due to infrequent communication and interaction patterns. However, high power distance could be conducive to positive LMX consensus as followers might be more attuned and interested in creating a positive relationship with their leader. These contradicting

assumptions mean that overall, the experienced power difference between leaders and members could prevent establishing LMX excellence as LMX excellence is defined as high level, high consensus, *and* high agreement.

Power distance can be one aspect of leader distance. According to Antonakis and Atwater (2002), leader distance can comprise three aspects: (a) status and power distance, (b) physical distance, and (c) infrequent contact with followers. It often refers to leaders on a higher level of the organisational hierarchy rather than direct supervisors. Research on leader distance can help understand the role of different dimensions of LMX in the agreement and consensus debate. Shamir (1995) argues that the perception of charisma is based on different factors depending on the distance between leader and followers. On the basis of this argument, Schyns et al. (2008) have reasoned that in case of leader distance, different dimensions of LMX (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Liden & Maslyn, 1998) may be more or less relevant for establishing LMX consensus. Specifically, Schyns et al. (2008) assume that contribution and affect need more direct communication in order to be appreciated by both leader and member, whereas as loyalty and professional respect do not need to be confirmed to the respective other member of the dyad on a daily basis and can thus be upheld in contexts of high leaders distance. Thus, depending on leader distance, LMX excellence may be based on different LMX dimensions.

Limitations and Further Research

We have introduced the concepts of LMX excellence, consisting of high level LMX quality, high agreement, and high consensus. Based on previous research we have argued that this is the optimal constellation in achieving positive organisational outcomes associated with LMX excellence. Nonetheless, these ideas await future empirical scrutiny. While we have identified several antecedents of LMX excellence, our list is by no means exhaustive. Other possible factors and possible boundary conditions need to be identified in further research.

For example, we assume that LMX consensus is related to positive organisational outcomes. However, this might not be the case under all conditions. Recent research into LMX in sports teams has shown that when a differentiation a leader makes between followers is perceived as fair, variation will not negatively influence outcomes (van Breukelen & Wesselius, 2007). We can even assume that LMX differentiation that is perceived to be fair will in the long run support a positive relationship quality with all followers, though maybe based on different currencies of exchange (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Another important limitation of our overview is that while we reviewed leader, follower and context factors, the follower characteristics we identified show the followers in a rather passive light: They either possess LMX-conducive characteristics or not. However, followers are thought to generally play a more active role in the LMX leadership process than is granted to them in more traditional leadership approaches. Thus, future research should investigate how followers can actively influence LMX excellence (Uhl-Bien & Maslyn 2003). This is especially relevant as followers are thought to benefit in varied and significant ways from a positive relationship quality with the leader (Gerstner & Day, 1997).

In closing, we note that our paper proposes further steps in identifying the means to achieve LMX excellence. We call on LMX researchers and practitioners to join us in our quest for LMX excellence!

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