Differentiating Relationships in the Workplace: A Cultural Perspective

Haslina Halim[1]*, Hassan Abu Bakar[2], Bahtiar Mohamad[3]

[1]Department of Communication, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, 06010, Kedah, Malaysia, [2]School Department of Communication, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, 06010, Kedah, Malaysia, [3]School Department of Communication, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, 06010, Kedah, Malaysia. *Email: haslina0410@gmail.com

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 quality 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.

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

Table 1: Variables and measures

Variables	Number of items (N)	A
Leader conceptual skills	22	0.97
Communication openness	15	0.95
Respect	13	0.95
Trust	10	0.89
Age	6	0.74
OCB	14	0.90

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 ($\beta = 0.377$; CR = 3.692; P < 0.001). Therefore, H_1 was accepted. In addition, the results also revealed that communication openness had a significant relationship with organizational citizenship behavior ($\beta = 0.349$; CR = 3.499; P < 0.001). Hence, H_2 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 ($\beta = 0.049$; CR = 0.776; P > 0.10), therefore H_3 was rejected. The study also found that trust had a significant relationship with organizational citizenship behavior. Therefore, H_4 was accepted.

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

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

***$P<0.001$, **$P<0.05$. 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.

4.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this research has several contributions towards the existing body of literature. Firstly, it includes new constructs which represent the characteristics towards LMX differentiation; leader conceptual skills, communication openness, trust and respect. Furthermore, the results revealed that 62.5% of the variance in organizational citizenship behavior can be explained by communication openness, trust, respect, and leader conceptual skills. Hence, the results revealed that leader conceptual skills, communication openness, and trust are important determinants of LMX differentiation in the workplace. This suggests that the factors may enhance organizational citizenship behavior for Malaysian employees.

Secondly, this study provides empirical knowledge that integrates the information on determinants of LMX differentiation and the variables, which also emerged as the strongest predictors to organizational citizenship behavior by developing and testing multilevel modeling using SEM. The results obtained also provide support for the hypothesized relationships in the model.

Apart from practical implications, the findings also have implications on the management of communication exchange process in the workplace. Firstly, the present study builds upon the notion that employee organizational citizenship behavior is developed through interpersonal relationships caused by the high-quality interactions among leaders and subordinates. In terms of cultural context, it is not surprising that all races in Malaysia (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) have similarity attraction in the workplace. All ethnics in Malaysia might have good relationship and strong performance when they work within a group.

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

REFERENCES

Ansari, M.A., Hung, D.K.M., Aafaqi, R. (2007), Leader-member exchange and attitudinal outcomes: Role of procedural. Leadership and Organization Development Journal, 28(8), 690-709.

Bakar, H.A., McCann, R.M. (2016), The mediating effect of leader–member dyadic communication style agreement on the relationship between servant leadership and group-level organizational citizenship behavior. Management Communication Quarterly, 30(1), 32-58.

Hair, J.F., Black, W.C., Babin, B.J., Anderson, R.E. (2010), Multivariate Data Analysis. 7th ed. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Ishak, N.A., Alam, S.S. (2009), Leader-member exchange and organizational citizenship behavior: The mediating impact of self-esteem. International Journal of Business Management, 4, 52-61.

Khong, K.W. (2009), Organizational commitment: The study of organizational justice and leader-member exchange (LMX) among auditors in Malaysia. International Journal of Business and Information, 4, 161-198.

Liden, R.C. (2012), Leadership research in Asia: A brief assessment and suggestions for the future. Asia Pacific Journal of Management, 29(2), 205-212.

Lo, M.C., Ramayah, T., Hui, J.K.S. (2006), An investigation of leader-

member exchange effects on organizational citizenship behavior in Malaysia. Journal of Business and Management, 12, 5-23.

Lo, M.C., Ramayah, T., Min, H.W., Songan, P. (2010), The relationship between leadership style and organizational commitment in Malaysia: Role of leader-member exchange. Asia Pacific Business Review, 16, 79-103.

Sandberg, J. (1997), Are phenomenographic results reliable? Higher Education Research and Development, 16(2), 203-212.

Sekaran, U. (2000), Research Methods for Business: A Skill-Building Approach. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Zhou, X.T., Schriesheim, C.A. (2010), Quantitative and qualitative examination of propositions concerning supervisor-subordinate convergence in descriptions of LMX quality. The Leadership Quarterly, 21, 826-843.