Blaming leaders for team relationship conflict? The roles of leader-member exchange differentiation and ethical leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to extend our understanding of the role of leaders in team relationship conflict. Leader-member exchange (LMX) differentiation was hypothesized to be positively related to team relationship conflict. Additionally, ethical leadership was hypothesized to moderate relations between LMX differentiation and team relationship conflict.

Design/methodology/approach – Hypotheses were examined in a sample of 79 working teams. Data were collected via a questionnaire containing measures of LMX, team relationship conflict and ethical leadership.

Findings – Hypotheses were supported by the data. LMX differentiation was positively related to team relationship conflict, and ethical leadership weakened the relationship between LMX differentiation and team relationship conflict.

Originality/value – This is the first theoretical analysis and empirical study of relationships between LMX differentiation and team relationship conflict. Theoretically, by using LMX theory to account for team-level outcomes, this study extended power of LMX theory. Practically, these results suggest that leaders may be responsible for team relationship conflict.

Keywords Ethical leadership, Leader-member exchange differentiation, Team relationship conflict

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Relationship conflict found its prevalent existence in organizations. Over the years, researchers have found that it is detrimental for both individuals involved and for groups in which relationship conflict resides (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). It has been shown that relationship conflict is negatively associated with affective commitment (Mills and Schulz, 2009), teamwork behavior (Chen et al., 2011), work performance (Jehn, 1994; Lau and Cobb, 2010) and team effectiveness (Simons and Peterson, 2000). However, while the consequences of relationship conflict have been well documented, little is known about its antecedents. Our knowledge of the antecedents of relationship
conflict mainly comes from several studies that examined team member diversity (Jehn et al., 1997; Tepper et al., 2011; Mohammed and Angell, 2004), task conflict (Choi and Cho, 2011; Greer et al., 2008) and conflict management strategy (Dechurch and Hamilton, 2007; Friedman et al., 2000).

An important limitation of the extant literature is that studies have almost exclusively taken the team member perspective in examining antecedents of team relationship conflict (see Harris et al., 2011 for an exception), yet large strides have not been made. To address this literature gap, we attempt to approach team relationship conflict from a leader perspective and develop a theoretical model that takes into account the role of leadership. Leader-member exchange (LMX; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995) theory provides a good framework to understand supervisor-subordinate working relationships. According to LMX theory, leaders differentiate between subordinates, such that leaders form a high-quality exchange relationship with some subordinates and establish a low-quality transactional relationship with others (Dansereau et al., 1975). Given the premise of LMX theory that leaders form differentiated relationships with subordinates, we are surprised to find that no empirical study to date has looked into the relation between LMX differentiation and relationship conflict. Drawing on LMX and social comparison theories, we expect that LMX differentiation may trigger a social comparison process within the group and bring in relationship conflict. In this regard, leaders are to be blamed for team relationship conflict. But is this all the story? By integrating ethical leadership theory with LMX theory, we further argue that ethical leadership interacts with LMX differentiation to influence relationship conflict and acts as a buffer in the relationship.

The purpose of this study was to extend our understanding of the role of leaders in team relationship conflict. Specifically, we tested the proposition that LMX differentiation has a positive effect on team relationship conflict. We then examined the moderating role of ethical leadership in the relationship between LMX differentiation and team relationship conflict. Through this study we propose to contribute to broaden our knowledge on the antecedents of team relationship conflict.

2. Theory and hypotheses
2.1 Effect of LMX differentiation on team relationship conflict
Team relationship conflict involves interpersonal disagreements and tensions among team members and is usually expressed with negative feelings such as anger, distrust, fear and frustration (Jehn, 1995). Based on social category theory, prior research revealed that relationship conflict was related to surface-level team composition of a group as well as deep-level differences with respect to team members’ personalities, values and attitudes (Tepper et al., 2011; Mohammed and Angell, 2004). Thus, it is likely that man-made differences among team members, namely, differences in LMX quality in the present study, are also related to team relationship conflict.

LMX differentiation is a group-level construct, which refers to “a set and outcome of dynamic and interactive exchanges that occur between leaders and members” (Henderson et al., 2009). We expect that LMX differentiation may trigger social comparison processes in the group, which, in turn, will increase relationship conflict in the group. First, the varied levels of LMX quality within the group are likely to trigger social comparison processes. In high-quality exchange relationships, subordinates may
get more information (Dienesch and Liden, 1986), mentoring (Scandura and Schriesheim, 1994), empowerment (Liden et al., 2000) and other resources from the leaders (Dienesch and Liden, 1986). Additionally, subordinates in high-quality exchange relationships can be assigned tasks that are more challenging and more valuable. In contrast, a low-quality exchange relationship is characterized by a low degree of mutual trust, respect and obligation. Subordinates in low-quality exchange relationship only do what is required by their job descriptions (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). However, LMX is a limited resource (Liden et al., 1997); on one hand, leaders dominate in the development of LMX relationship, while on the other hand, leaders lack time and organizational resources to form high-quality relationships with all subordinates (Dienesch and Liden, 1986). Research suggests that other individuals in one’s social group act as the reference point and the context for social comparison (Brown et al., 1992). Given the high value and scarcity of high-quality exchange relationships (Gerstner and Day, 1997; Schriesheim et al., 1998; Yrle et al., 2002), subordinates may compete with their colleagues to develop or maintain a high-quality exchange relationship (Wayne and Ferris, 1990).

Second, subordinates in high-and low-quality relationships will get different results from the social comparison process, causing a relationship conflict in the group. Social comparison is defined as “the process of thinking about information about one or more other people in relation to the self”, including an upward social comparison, parallel comparison and downward social comparison (Wood, 1996). The social comparison process plays a critical important role in individuals’ assessment of the work environment (Greenberg et al., 2007). Research suggests that employees’ perceptions of LMX social comparison are positively related to job performance and citizenship behavior, and explained unique and meaningful variance in outcomes beyond their own LMX relationship with leaders (Vidyarthi et al., 2010). We argue that an upward comparison with better-off others will make subordinates in low-quality LMX feel threatened and will undermine their self-identity and self-evaluation (Lockwood, 2002). Furthermore, they may even envy those who are in high-quality exchange relationships (Vecchio, 2005), given that leaders usually play a more important role in the development of an LMX relationship than subordinates (Chen and Tjosvold, 2007), and that some subordinates reported that they once tried very hard to improve their LMX relationship but they failed to do so (Maslyn and Uhl-Bien, 2001). In contrast, subordinates in high-quality LMX relationship will delight in their own superiority in the downward comparison processes (Lockwood, 2002). It has been revealed that people in better situations may avoid contacts with less fortunate others (Taylor and Lobel, 1989). Besides, subordinates in high-quality LMX may feel the envy from worse-off others, have difficulty working together and experience conflict.

In addition to upward and downward comparisons, subordinates may make parallel comparison with similar others. Subordinates who experience similar LMX relationships can well perceive themselves to be similar with each other, and the more similar the LMX relationship between the two subordinates, the more closely their relationship is likely to be (Sherony and Green, 2002). According to similar-attraction theory, subordinates in similar low-quality LMX relationships are more likely to develop a close relationship based on similar psychologies characterized as envy, and may form a subgroup called “out-group”. Similarly, subordinates in high-quality LMX relationships will form a subgroup called “in-group” with similar others. Shared membership will reduce perceptions of risk (Brewer, 1981); thus, the formation of the
“out-group” and the “in-group” may enhance the effect of subordinates toward dissimilar others, thus increasing relationship conflict. Therefore, we hypothesized the following:

H1. LMX differentiation will be positively related to team relationship conflict.

2.2 The moderating role of ethical leadership
Ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown et al., 2005). Brown et al. (2005) further pointed out that ethical leaders are characterized as honest, trustworthy and fair. The ethical leaders not only pay attention to ethics themselves and provide subordinates with voice, a procedurally or interpersonally just process, but also set ethical standards to regulate subordinates’ behavior; in addition, ethical leaders care about the ethical consequences of their decisions and make principled and fair decisions. A social learning perspective suggests that subordinates view leaders as role models and learn what behavior is rewarded and punished via role modeling. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that both ethical leaders and their subordinates tend to be honest, trustful and fair (Brown et al., 2005).

We predict that high levels of ethical leadership will buffer the positive impact of LMX differentiation. First, we argue that ethical leaders will pay much attention to procedure justice which will undermine subordinates’ psychology of social comparison. LMX literature suggests that LMX relationship develops from the initial interaction between leaders and subordinates and involves the consequent efforts of both leaders and subordinates, and that subordinates are not able to improve their LMXs without the effort of their leaders (Dienesch and Liden, 1986). Ethical leaders who value procedure justice may respond positively to subordinates’ goodwill to improve their LMX relationships and allocate their resources accordingly. Therefore, subordinates in the group may well perceive that their extant LMX relationships are not unchangeable and they have the opportunity to improve their LMX relationships if they make efforts to do so. Prior research suggest that when individuals could image a similarly successful self, they were inspired by the other’s accomplishment, and when they could not image a similarly outstanding self, they will be demoralized (Greenberg et al., 2007). Thus, when comparing with superior others, subordinates in low-quality exchange relationships will probably try their best to improve their LMX relationships, and their self-identity and self-evaluation will not be undermined too much in the upward comparison (Lockwood, 2002). These subordinates will not have strong motivation to envy the superior others (Vecchio, 2005). On the other hand, subordinates in high-quality exchange relationships will not delight too much in their own superiority in the downward comparison processes, and will probably feel alarmed at the prospect of falling to a low-quality exchange relationship. It is also likely that subordinates in high LMX relationships may tend to make upward social comparisons rather than downward social comparisons (Greenberg et al., 2007). All in all, the boundary between out-group and in-group subordinates will become weak and vague, and the comparison processes and relationship conflict will not be further triggered. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:
3. Method

3.1 Sample and procedure
Data were collected via a questionnaire. The sample was composed of 79 project teams from 16 firms located in Shenzhen, China. Surveys were put into unsealed envelopes and handed to respondents, with a letter of explanation clipped to the top, describing the purpose of the survey and the confidentiality of the process. All surveys were marked with a number to differentiate respondents from different work teams. Participants returned questionnaires anonymously in sealed envelopes to researchers and in return received ¥ 20 in reward. Three hundred fifty employees from 80 teams participated in the survey, and all the questionnaires were returned. After removing largely uncompleted and arbitrarily completed questionnaires, we obtained a useable sample of 334 employees from 79 teams. The average team size was 4.2. The majority (71.6 per cent) of the sample was male, and 59 per cent respondents were in their twenties. The majority (96.7 per cent) of participants earned a post-secondary school degree (associates, bachelors or graduate degree). More than half (50.6 per cent) of the respondents were married.

3.2 Measures
Most widely advocated scales were used to measure variables in the present study. Because the respondents’ mother language was Chinese, the survey questionnaires were translated from English to Chinese. We followed the standard back-translation procedure. Responses to survey questions were measured on 5-point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

LMX differentiation. LMX differentiation was calculated by the standard deviation of each team member’s ratings of LMX. A seven-item measure developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) was used to measure LMX. An example item is “My working relationship with my manager is effective” (α = 0.892). Besides, the control variable mean LMX in the present study refers to the mean of each team member’s ratings of LMX.

Relationship conflict. Three frequency subscales adapted from Jehn (1995) were used to measure relationship conflict. An example item is “There is much relationship tension in my work group” (α = 0.813).

Ethical leadership. Ethical leadership was assessed using the ten-item scale of Brown et al. (2005). An example item is “My manager always conduct his/her personal life in an ethical manner” (α = 0.895).

Control variables. Group size, group mean of LMX and three demographic diversity variables (age, gender and education) were examined as control variables because previous research has shown that team size was positively related to affective conflict (Amason and Sapienza, 1997), and that mean LMX was negatively related to team conflict (Boies and Howell, 2006). We also controlled for demographic diversity variables in that they were shown to affect team relationship conflict (Tepper et al., 2011; Mohammed and Angell, 2004). Blau’s (1977) index was used to measure diversity on self-reported demographic variables (age, gender and education level).
3.3 Level of analysis and aggregation
We generated ethical leadership and team relationship conflict by aggregating subordinate ratings to the group level. First, we assessed the degree of team member agreement regarding ethical leadership and team relationship conflict by calculating the $r_{wg}$ statistic. The $r_{wg}$ statistic is used to determine inter-rater agreement. The mean $r_{wg}$ values for ethical leadership and team relationship conflict were 0.977 and 0.975, respectively. Additionally, these values are above the acceptable value of 0.70 (Dixon and Cunningham, 2006). Second, we used the ICC(1) to examine the variability in responses at the individual level within a group. The ICC(1) for ethical leadership and team relationship conflict were 0.18 and 0.25, respectively. These values were lower than the value of 0.50 recommended by researchers and were acceptable (James, 1982); thus, aggregation is justified. Finally, we used the ICC(2) to assess the reliability of the group means. The ICC(2) for ethical leadership and team relationship conflict were 0.49 and 0.58, respectively. Although these values were not greater than 0.70 criteria the $r_{wg}$ values and ICC(1) already provided support for aggregation.

4. Results
4.1 Measurement model results
We conducted maximum likelihood confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to examine the distinctness of the variables. CFA results presented in Table I show that the hypothesized three-factor model provided a good fit to the data, $\chi^2 = 96.58$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.078, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.965, normed fit index (NFI) = 0.949. RMSEA scores < 0.08 (Hoyle and Panter, 1995) and CFI and NFI scores > 0.90 (Bentler and Bonnet, 1990) indicate that the indices fall above the guidelines for a good fit. Furthermore, as shown in Table I, the chi-square difference illustrates that the three-factor model yielded a significantly better fit than the two two-factor models and the single-factor model.

4.2 Descriptive statistics and correlations
Table II shows descriptive statistics, reliabilities and correlations among the study variables LMX differentiation, ethical leadership and team relationship conflict. Supporting $H1$, LMX differentiation (LMXD) was positively related to team relationship conflict.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$\chi^2$/df</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>NFI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1: three-factor$^a$</td>
<td>96.58</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.018</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>0.965</td>
<td>0.949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2: two-factor$^b$</td>
<td>228.41</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6.718</td>
<td>0.131</td>
<td>0.894</td>
<td>0.879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3: two-factor$^c$</td>
<td>379.36</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11.158</td>
<td>0.175</td>
<td>0.812</td>
<td>0.799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 4: one-factor$^d$</td>
<td>514.95</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14.713</td>
<td>0.203</td>
<td>0.738</td>
<td>0.728</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: $N = 79$; $^a$Model 1 = LMXD, ethical leadership and team relationship conflict treated as separate factors; $^b$Model 2 = LMXD and ethical leadership were combined as one factor and team relationship conflict was treated as another separate factor; $^c$Model 3 = team relationship conflict and ethical leadership were combined as one factor and LMXD was treated as another separate factor; $^d$Model 4 = LMXD, ethical leadership and team relationship conflict were all combined as one factor.

Table I. Results of CFA
4.3 Results of tests of the hypotheses

We used hierarchical regression to test the hypotheses. We tested the hypothesis by centering the predictor, calculating moderated interaction terms (LMXD × ethical leadership) and regressing team relationship conflict on the predictor in three steps. At Step 1, the control variables were entered. At Step 2, the main effects of LMXD on team relationship conflict were examined. At Step 3, the incremental contribution of the two-way interaction on the predictor was examined.

Regression results are provided in Table III. As shown in Table III, Step 1 (control variables) explained 5.6 per cent (\( p < 0.01 \)) of the variance of the dependent variable, the independent variable explained an additional 15.1 per cent (\( p < 0.001 \)) of the variance and the two-way interaction contributed an additional 1 per cent (\( p < 0.05 \)) to the explained variance. Hypothesis 1 proposes that LMXD will be positively related to team relationship conflict. The results support this hypothesis. LMXD is positively and significantly related to team relationship conflict (\( \beta = 0.212, p < 0.001 \)). Hypothesis 2 predicts that ethical leadership will moderate the relationship between LMXD and team relationship conflict. The results show that the LMXD × ethical leadership was significantly and negatively related to team relationship conflict (\( \beta = -0.106, p < 0.05 \)). Hypothesis 2 was also supported.

To graphically illustrate the interactions, we utilized a procedure recommended by Cohen (1983), where we plotted two slopes: one at one standard deviation below the mean and one at one standard deviation above the mean.

Figure 1 illustrates that when ethical leadership was lower, the slope of the line was steep, suggesting that the positive relationship between LMXD and team relationship conflict was stronger when ethical leadership was lower.

5. Discussion

In this study, we set out to examine the direct relationship between LMXD and team relationship conflict (\( H1 \)) and how ethical leadership moderates this relationship (\( H2 \)). We found support for the direct positive relationship between LMX differentiation and team relationship conflict, and a possible explanation can be found in the LMX and social comparison theory. When leaders differentiate, the varied level of LMX relationships among the group may trigger the social comparison processes and thus may increase relationship conflict in the group. Additionally, the formation of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Team size</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mean LMX</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>–0.228***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Age diversity</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.273***</td>
<td>0.096</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Gender diversity</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.197***</td>
<td>–0.278***</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Educational</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.391***</td>
<td>0.138*</td>
<td>0.284***</td>
<td>–0.018</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diversity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. LMXD</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.108*</td>
<td>–0.080</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>(0.829)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Ethical leadership</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>–0.079</td>
<td>0.406***</td>
<td>–0.070</td>
<td>–0.016</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>–0.134*</td>
<td>(0.895)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Team relationship</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>–0.130*</td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.264***</td>
<td>–0.388***</td>
<td>(0.813)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Notes: \( n = 79 \); Italicized values appearing on the diagonal indicate Cronbach’s alphas; *\( p < 0.05 \), ***\( p < 0.001 \)
subgroups may even intensify relationship conflicts between out-group and in-group. Our second hypothesis, which predicted the moderating effect of the ethical leadership on the relationship between LMXD and team relationship conflict, was also supported. The positive relationship was stronger when ethical leadership was low rather than high. A possible explanation is that ethical leaders value justice and undermine the psychology base of comparison.

5.1 Theoretical implications
We make several major contributions to the literature. First, we extend the growing, but still very limited, body of research on the antecedents of team relationship conflict. Researchers have generally agreed that relationship conflict causes significant
problems in the workplace, but little research has investigated why relationship conflicts occur (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). We have added support to the research that LMXD is an antecedent of team relationship conflict. This finding is similar to extant empirical findings that show team diversity may cause team relationship conflict. But our contribution lies in the finding that LMXD, man-made team diversity caused by leaders, is related to team relationship conflict. By examining the critical role of leaders in bringing team relationship conflict, we provided a totally new perspective to understand the antecedents of team relationship conflict. Second, traditional LMX literature focuses on the leader-member dyads in isolation but fail to take into account of social context of the LMX relationships (Vidyarthi et al., 2010). Thus, by looking at leader-member dyads horizontally and examining the relations between LMXD and team relationship conflict, we highlight the explanation power of LMX theory on group-level outcomes. In addition to the knowledge that high-quality exchange relationships are beneficial and low-quality exchange relationships are harmful (Gerstner and Day, 1997), we now know that the existence of different levels of exchange relationship may also hurt. Finally, by testing the moderating role of ethical leadership, we further clarify the theory boundary of the direct relationship and underscore the merit of integrating ethical leadership with LMX theory in future research and theory.

5.2 Practical implications
We offer several practical implications of our results. The first implication is that because LMX differentiation is related to team relationship conflict, all effort should be made to reduce the LMX differentiation. Managers themselves should be encouraged to be aware of the dark side of differentiation leadership and make every opportunity to avoid it. In this regard, we pointed out a possible path to reduce team relationship conflict, which should shed some light on improving individual and group outcomes. The second implication directly stems from our interaction results. Given that ethical leadership moderates the relationship between LMX differentiation and team relationship conflict, an organization should support an ethical leadership culture and take into the merit of ethical leadership when recruiting leaders.

5.3 Limitations and future research directions
This study also bears several limitations, and we invite future researcher to examine and further deepen our understanding of leaders’ role in team relationship conflict. First, this study suffers from common-method bias. In this study, LMXD, ethical leadership and relationship conflict were all reported by subordinates. Although we applied some techniques to minimize the impact of common-method bias on our study, the common-method bias is not extinct and may still have some influence on our study. Second, our arguments rest largely on social comparison theory, yet no related variables were included in our theoretical model. If future researchers introduce some variables related to social comparison and examine a moderated-mediation model or mediated-moderation model and if these models are supported, the argument and
mechanism proposed in this study would be much convincing. Third, we propose that the mobility of LMX relationship in groups will affect the social comparison process. But our cross-sectional design could not validate whether the proposed mobility can be realized and thus undermines our explanations. We encourage future researchers to use longitudinal designs and measure the mobility of LMX to better understand the effects of quantity and mobility of LMX on team relationship conflict. Finally, future researchers can develop new models based on our study to better understand the role of leaders in team relationship conflict. For example, a possible research design is to examine demographic diversity and LMXD together in one model to compare their impact on relationship conflicts. Besides, ethical leadership was found to be negatively related to team relationship conflict ($\beta = -0.440, p < 0.001$) in this study, thus future researchers can explore the relationship between ethical leadership and relationship conflict.

References


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