Benevolent Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), Followers’ Performance: An Extension of Leadership Theory in a Nonprofit Organization

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ABSTRACT

By extending Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang and Chen’s (2005) model of transformational leadership 
and leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship, a revised model was proposed in which LMX 
mediated the relationship between benevolent leadership and followers’ performance. Using a sample 
of 178 leader-member dyads collected in a non-profit organization, results indicated that benevolent 
leadership and LMX were positively related to followers’ performance. Findings also support LMX 
mediated the relationship between benevolent leadership and followers’ performance. Implications 
for the theory and practice of leadership are discussed.

Keywords: Leadership development, cross-cultural leadership, governance in not-for-profit 
organizations; behavior, work performance

INTRODUCTION

There is an accumulation of leadership literature concerns the quality of leader-member relationship 
(Janssen, & Van Yperen, 2004; Lam, Huang, & Snape, 2007; Sparrowe, Soetjipto, & Kraimer, 2006; 
Tangirala, Green, & Ramanujam, 2007). The relationship-based leadership approach has attempted to 
explicitly explain one-on-one reciprocal social exchanges between two parties, i.e. leader and follower. A 
better understanding of the dyadic relationship is termed leader-member exchange (LMX) which is defined 
as the relationship between leader and follower which concerns the quality of exchange between leader and 
follower, and the degree of emotional support and exchange of valued resources (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). 
This relationship becomes important for organizations seeking to learn how to build mutual leader-follower 
trust and two-side support relations. Empirical studies have examined the theoretical integration of the 
leadership behaviors, such as transformational leadership and LMX (Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang & Chen, 
2005). However, little research has examined the leadership behavior and LMX relationship in Chinese 
cultural contexts (Hui, Law, & Chen, 1999). Benevolent leadership, as identified by Farh and Cheng (2000) 
is one of the three components of paternalistic leadership (PL) behaviors. The other two are authoritarian and 
moral leadership. According to Confucianism, although the inferior party in a hierarchical relationship should 
be loyal and obedient, the superior one should act gently and benevolently toward the inferior (Wu, Hsu, & 
Cheng 2002). A paternalistic leader must express benevolence for the return of something from followers
The concept of benevolent leadership has spawned a leadership behavior in Mainland China and Taiwan (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang & Farh, 2004; Cheng, Shieh, & Chou, 2002). There is a growing research interest in the leadership effectiveness in nonprofit organizations (De Hoogh, Den Hartog, Koopman, Thierry, Van den Berg, Van der Weide & Wilderom, 2005; Pearce, 1993). De Hoogh et al. (2005) have advanced understanding of the leaders’ motives, charismatic leader behavior, and work attitude in the profit and nonprofit sector. Non-profit organizations provide services for the benefit of others and/or society. Previous studies have not fully explored the mediating mechanisms by which benevolent leadership exerts its influence on followers’ performance in nonprofit organizations. This paper aims to examine an extension of Wang et al.’s (2005) model of transformational leadership and LMX relationship, and explore the relationships between benevolent leadership, LMX and followers’ performance.

This study makes two main contributions. First, it extended Wang et al.’s (2005) model of transformational leadership and LMX by investigating how benevolent leadership is related to the quality of LMX and follower performance in a nonprofit organization (De Hoogh et al., 2005). It is important to understand the antecedents and consequences of benevolent leadership in relationship-based linkage with followers (Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002; Pellegini & Scandura, 2008). Second, while past research suggests that LMX is fully mediated by the relationship between transformational leadership and followers’ performance (e.g. Wang et al., 2005), such studies have not taken into account elements of Chinese leadership in an Asian context (Hui et al., 1999) and in cross-cultural settings (Dickson, Den Hartog, & Mitchelson, 2003).

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Paternalistic leadership (PL), an indigenous Chinese leadership style, is rooted in China’s patriarchal tradition (Farh & Cheng, 2000). Benevolent leadership has long been considered as constructive and welcome by followers (Cheng, Shieh, & Chou, 2002; Wu et al, 2002), as this type of leadership was found to have positive effects on followers’ psychological response, such as identification, compliance and gratitude (Farh & Cheng, 2000). Benevolent leadership demonstrates individualized, holistic concern for followers’ personal or familial well-being beyond work relations. A benevolent leader expresses concern about subordinates’ personal life and takes good care of their family members as well. The other two dimensions of
paternalistic leadership are authoritarian and moral leadership (Cheng, Chou, & Farh, 2000). Authoritarian leadership asserts absolute authority and control over followers and demands unquestionable obedience from followers. Moral leadership demonstrates superior personal virtue, self-discipline, and unselfishness (Yang, 1994).

A model depicting the key theoretical relationships between benevolent leadership and follower performance is presented in Figure 1.

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**Benevolent leadership and followers’ performance**

Benevolent leadership includes concern for followers and their family member, maintenance of prestige and avoidance of humiliating behavior. Studies have found that benevolent leadership is positively correlated with gratitude and repayment (e.g. Cheng & Jiang, 2000). The reciprocity between leader and follower takes the form of genuine gratitude, personal loyalty, or compliance with the superior’s requests (Farh & Cheng, 2000). When benevolent leaders and followers play their respective roles to each party, social harmony exists. Cheng, Huang, & Chou (2002) found that benevolent leadership has a positive effect on team member interaction, commitment, and satisfaction in team context (Yang, 1994; Cheng & Farh, 2001).

Empirical studies have examined that benevolent leadership is positively associated to follower behavioral outcomes, like in-role and extra-role performance. In-role performance is the completion of tasks required by employees’ organizational roles (Williams & Anderson, 1991). Extra-role performance is defined as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) as “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization” (Organ, 1988, p.4). By discretionary, behavior is not an enforceable requirement of the role or the job description (Allen & Ruch, 1998). OCB is a type of behavior that takes the initiative to do extra duty, help colleagues, protect organizational resources and do more than the minimum amount of work (Farh, Early, & Lin, 1997). Benevolent leadership has a positive effect on organizational commitment and intention to stay (Cheng, Huang, & Chou, 2002; Liang, Ling, & Hsieh, 2007).
Hypothesis 1. Benevolent leadership is positively related to followers’ task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors.

LMX and followers’ performance

LMX theory proposes that leaders form unique relationships with each follower in which high LMX employees receive higher levels of support (Graen, 1976; Deluga, 1994). The quality of LMX and leaders develop relationships of varying quality with different followers are occurred (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In a high-quality LMX relationship, employees tend to receive better social support, and more guidance for career development (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). According to social exchange theory, the differentiated exchange relationships between leader and follower are evident (Wang et al., 2005). Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor’s (2000) cross sectional study indicated that LMX and performance are found to have positive effect.

Previous studies have found the quality of the LMX relationship is to be positively associated with employee job satisfaction (Liden, Wayne & Sparrowe, 2000). Obligations are often diffuse and unspecified. There is no standard or value against which gifts, favors, or contributions can be measured in high-quality LMX relationship (Blau, 1964). LMX theory develops different kinds of relationship with different followers, especially focus on the dyadic exchange leader-follower relationship (LePine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002). Bass (1990) suggested that high quality LMX relationships will manifest the development of other types of leadership, such as benevolent leadership. A positive association between LMX and OCB is expected. Thus,

Hypothesis 2. Leader-member exchange relates positively to followers’ task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors.

The Mediating Mechanism of Leader-Member Exchange

The quality of LMX relationship has long been considered fundamental to followers’ attitudes and behavior (Ansari, Hung, & Aafaqi, 2007). The mediating mechanism of LMX in the relationship between benevolent leadership and follower performance (task performance and OCBs) is premised on the notion of high-quality LMX relationship. The mutual relationship happens from a predominantly transactional exchange into a social exchange as trust, respect, and loyalty are earned (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Benevolent leaders are particularly effective in eliciting personal relationship from their followers and getting them to accept offers of expanded responsibilities.
As a benevolent leader guides followers by voluntary compliance and conformity, followers who experience high levels of trust and respect in their relations with the leader is more likely to accept leader’s authority. Liang et al. (2007) found that the relationship between benevolent leadership and OCB was mediated by LMX quality. Benevolent leadership provides the broader cultural framework and facilitating conditions within which leader-member relationship is personalized in the relationship-building process. LMX provides a good foundation to explain the relationship between benevolent leadership and followers’ performance. Thus,

*Hypothesis 3.* Leader-member exchange mediates the relationship between benevolent leadership and followers’ task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors.

**METHOD**

**Sample and Procedure**

The sample included leader-member dyads from a group of adult members of youth organization in Hong Kong. The leader works with several adult members to plan and organize activities for youth members. Both leader and adult members are voluntary and the leader does not have a much power on the adult members. We used two sets of questionnaires separately in the study: one for adult members and another for their immediate leaders. Questionnaires were administered to leaders and members in person (a leader and several adult members separately). The first author briefed them about the purposes of the study and explained the procedures for implementing the survey. Each questionnaire was coded with a researcher-assigned identification number in order to match adult members’ responses with their immediate leaders’ evaluations.

Out of 866 questionnaires (433 for leaders; 433 for adult members), 356 usable questionnaires (178 leader-member dyads) were returned, with usable response rates of 41.1% for both leaders and adult members respectively. These 178 adult members were supervised by 44 immediate leaders. The maximum number of surveys completed by a single supervisor was five. For the adult members sample, 52.8% were male and 45.5% had a degree education or above. The mean age and organizational tenure of the adult members were 30.6 and 4.0 years respectively. For the leader sample, 61.8% were male and 55.1% had a degree education or above. The mean age and organizational tenure of the leaders were 35.08 and 7.9 years. The average length of the leader-member relationship was 4.5 years.
Measures

Paternalistic leadership (PL) The dimensions of paternalistic leadership: authoritarian, benevolent, moral leadership were measured by Cheng, Chou and Farh (2000) scales. Followers to rate the leadership style of their immediate supervisors with 9-items on authoritarian leadership, 11-items on benevolent leadership and 6-items on moral leadership were asked (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree). Sample item for authoritarian leadership was “My immediate supervisor has asks me to obey his/her instructions completely”. Sample item for benevolent leadership was “My immediate supervisor is like a family member when he/she gets along with us”. Sample item for moral leadership was “My immediate supervisor employs people according to their virtues and does not envy others’ abilities and virtues”. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of authoritarian, benevolent, and moral leadership were .74, .89, and .83 respectively.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) Leader member exchange was measured by 7-items LMX scale from Liden, Wayne, & Stillwell (1993), Scandura, Graen, & Novak (1986), and Scandura & Graen (1984) (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Sample items were “supervisor recognition of subordinate potential” and “supervisor understanding of subordinate job problems and needs”. The Cronbach’s alpha is .80.

Followers’ task performance. Followers’ task performance was measured by Williams & Andersons (1991) five items scale (1 = never; 7 = always). The immediate supervisors were asked to asses their followers’ performance using this scale. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .90.

Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) Extra-role work performance was measured using 16 items drawn from the OCB scale (OCBI and OCBO) developed by Lee & Allen (2002). OCBI is the pro-social behavior towards co-workers, and OCBO is the pro-social behavior towards the organization. There are eight items of OCBI. A sample question was, “he/she helps others who have been absent.” Another eight questions measured OCBO. A sample item was “he/she offers ideas to improve the functioning of the organization.” Immediate supervisors were asked to rate the adult members on 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = always). The Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for OCBI and OCBO were .82 and .81.

Control variables Gender, education level, age, organization tenure, and leader-follower dyad tenure to followers’ performance were controlled (Bauer & Green, 1996; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993; Maslyn
which were self-reported. In addition, authoritarian and moral leadership were controlled, as the two dimensions of paternalistic leadership.

RESULTS

Data Analysis

In order to examine that benevolent leadership was distinct from LMX, first, a dimension-level confirmatory factor analysis was conducted including all the variables used in the study. The dimensions of LMX and benevolent leadership as its indicators were included. The second test of the distinctiveness of benevolent leadership and LMX involved comparing the correlations between each of these variables with task performance and OCB. Evidence for discriminant validity would be established if the two correlations were unequal. Cohen & Cohen (1983) described a test of the difference between two correlations calculated from a single sample. Finally, in a third test of the distinctiveness of benevolent leadership and LMX, we entered benevolent leadership into a regression model as predicting task performance and OCB. LMX was entered in a second step, looking for a significant change in the variance explained. If the change in $R^2$ of the model after entering LMX were significant, it would imply that LMX explained additional variance in the dependent variables, beyond what benevolent leadership explained. All the three tests indicated that benevolent leadership and LMX were distinctive from each other.

Confirmatory factor analysis Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the discriminant validity of paternalistic leadership: authoritarian, benevolent, and moral leadership using AMOS 5.0. The results suggested that the hypothesized three-factor model ($\chi^2 = 139.97$, $CFI = .95$, $TLI = .94$, $RMSEA = .06$) yielded a better fit than the single-factor model ($\chi^2 = 461.00$, $CFI = .63$, $TLI = .57$, $RMSEA = .15$). We also conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the discriminant validity of task performance, OCBO, OCBI, all rated by supervisors. Results showed that the three-factor model ($\chi^2 = 122.54$, $CFI = .95$, $TLI = .94$, $RMSEA = .04$) reached better fit than the two-factor model of task performance and OCB ($\chi^2 = 366.00$, $CFI = .77$, $TLI = .71$, $RMSEA = .12$) and the single-factor model ($\chi^2 = 496.28$, $CFI = .664$, $TLI = .597$, $RMSEA = .19$).

Descriptive statistics The means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations of all the key variables are presented in Table 1.
Hypothesis Test

Hypothesis 1 predicts that benevolent leadership was positively related to followers’ task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. After all the control variables were entered, results indicated that benevolent leadership was positively related to in-role performance ($\beta = .22, p < .01$), OCBO ($\beta = .17, p < .05$), and was not significant to OCBI ($\beta = .12, p > .05$), as shown in model 2 of Table 2. Hypothesis 1 was partially supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicts that leader-member exchange related positively to followers’ task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. After entering all the control variables, results indicated that LMX was positively related to followers’ task performance ($\beta = .35, p < .01$), OCBO ($\beta = .32, p < .01$), and OCBI ($\beta = .15, p < .1$) as shown in Table 2. Hypothesis 2 was supported. Hypothesis 3 predicts that LMX mediates the relationship between benevolent leadership and followers' task performance and organizational citizenship behavior. After we entered all the control variables, results indicated that benevolent leadership was significant to LMX ($\beta = .35, p < .01$), thus fulfill the first requirement for mediation. Lending to the support of Hypothesis 1, results indicated that benevolent leadership was positively related to in-role performance ($\beta = .22, p < .01$), OCBO ($\beta = .17, p < .05$), and was not significant to OCBI ($\beta = .12, p > .05$), as shown in model 2 of Table 2, which fulfill the second requirement for mediation. Given the first two pre-conditions for mediation were supported (Baron & Kenny, 1986), LMX was significant with the relationship between benevolent leadership to in-role performance ($\beta = .23, p < .001$), OCBO ($\beta = .27, p < .001$) and not significant to OCBI ($\beta = .07, p > .05$), indicating in model 4 of Table 2. Hypothesis 3 was partially supported.

DISCUSSION

While a great deal of research is available to examine the effects of benevolent leadership and LMX on followers’ outcomes, relatively less research has examined the relationships among them. This study,
extended Wang et al.’s (2005) model of transformational leadership and LMX relationship, investigates the relationship between benevolent leadership and LMX on followers’ performance. The results indicated that benevolent leadership are socialized with high-quality LMX which in turn positively associated with followers’ performance. The benevolent leadership and follower performance relationship can explain by social exchange theory. The findings indicated that social bonding between leader and follower is critical in a non-profit organization. Although the results are based on a nonprofit organization, there is no reason to expect different results were the same study to be conducted in the West. Although some have questioned whether LMX models are applicable to collectivist cultures such as the China Mainland, research has shown remarkably consistent results across cultures (Hui et al., 1999).

Implications

First, although previous studies have well-documented on the quality of LMX in Western leadership (Mardanov, Sterrett, & Baker, 2007), researchers focused primarily on the mediating effect of transformational leadership on followers’ performance. LMX literature has shown considerable support to the wide variety of employee performance behaviors (Kacmar, Witt, Zivnuska, & Gully, 2003). The present study adds on investigating how LMX mediates the relationship between benevolent leadership and follower in-role and extra-role performance. Second, results suggest that effective leaders express benevolent leadership within a personal, dynamic relational exchange context. Benevolent leadership is sensitive to follower contributions. LMX-enhancing leadership strategies should be part of development programs in nonprofit organizations. Third, the results provide insights on how high-quality LMX relationships can be developed. Chinese leadership with considerable care on follower is more likely to have the outcomes of high-quality LMX.

Limitations

Despite theoretical and practical implications, this study has several limitations. First, it is difficult to have a definite conclusion about causation in a cross-sectional study. Followers rated both benevolent leadership and LMX, and supervisors rated on follower performance, giving rise to concern about possible common source bias. Future research should collect data by using longitudinal designs. Second, because the raw data were collected only in a nonprofit organization, the extension of leadership theory cannot fully be generalized. Some researchers have shown that leadership may vary across cultures (Farh, Leung, & Law,
Future research should extend the proposed benevolent leadership and LMX model in other context. Third, this study examines the direct impact of benevolent leadership on follower performance. Future research should develop measures to further investigate the relationship between the other Chinese leadership styles, such as authoritarian and moral leadership and LMX on follower performance.

In conclusion, this study provides insights into the relationships between benevolent leadership and LMX on followers’ performance. The findings supported that LMX mediates the relationship to followers’ performance in a nonprofit organization.

REFERENCES


# TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliabilities of Measures

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Notes:

a. n = 178
b. The correlation coefficients are significant at *P<0.05, **P<0.01.
c. Reliability coefficients appear along the diagonal.
OCBO = Organizational Citizenship Behaviors for Organizations, OCBI = Organizational Citizenship for Individuals, LMX = Leader Member Exchange
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| N    | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 |
| Df   | 8   | 5   | 8   | 6   | 5   | 8   | 6   | 9   | 5   | 8   | 6   | 9   | 5   | 8   | 6   | 9   |
| R²   | .25 | .17 | .31 | .29 | .35 | .11 | .16 | .20 | .21 | .14 | .17 | .15 | .18 |
| Δ R² | .20 | .17 | .14 | .12 | .04 | .10 | .05 | .10 | .05 | .14 | .04 | .02 | .01 |

Notes:
*P< .05, ** P< .01, *** P<.001
IRP = In-role Performance, OCBO = Organizational Citizenship Behaviors for Organizations, OCBI = Organizational Citizenship for Individuals, LMX = Leader Member Exchange
FIGURE 1
Research Framework

Benevolent Leadership → Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) → In-role Performance

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) → Organization Citizenship Behaviors for Organizations (OCBO)

Organization Citizenship Behaviors for Organizations (OCBO) → Organization Citizenship Behaviors for Individuals (OCBI)

Source: Adapted from Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang & Chen (2005)