Using Leader-Member Exchange Theory to Explain Students’ Motives to Communicate

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The purpose of this investigation was to apply Leader-Member Exchange theory to the student-instructor relationship and explore if students’ perceptions of their relational quality with their instructors are reflected in their motives to communicate with their instructors. Participants were 139 undergraduate students who completed the Leader-Member Exchange 7 scale and the Student Communication Motives scale. It was found that students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors report using the relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic motives at a higher rate than students who perceive out-group relationships with their instructors. Future researchers should explore the ramifications of student-instructor in-group relationships on classroom climate.

Keywords: Leader-Member Exchange; Student Communication Motives; Student-Instructor Relationships

Instructional communication researchers recently have argued that the student-instructor relationship is interpersonally driven and relationally oriented (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Frymier & Houser, 2000). Implicit in this argument is the notion that students and instructors engage in communication in order to develop professional working relationships with each other. One way to explore this argument is through Leader-Member Exchange theory (LMX), which addresses interpersonal relationships.
between superiors and subordinates within the confines of organizational structure. LMX, which has been applied largely to the study of the superior-subordinate relationship (Lamude, Scudder, Simmons, & Torres, 2004), is based on the idea that superiors develop differential relationships with their subordinates, which is then reflected in the communicative quality of the relationship (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). The purpose of this investigation is to apply LMX to the student-instructor relationship and explore if students’ perceptions of their relational quality with their instructors are reflected in their motives to communicate with their instructors.

**Review of Literature**

Originally conceptualized as Vertical Dyad Linkage theory (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982), LMX theory has evolved from the exploration of independent dyadic relationships to how these dyadic relationships operate interdependently within a larger organizational environment (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Rooted in role theory (Graen, 1976), the premise behind LMX is that superiors form differentiated dyadic relationships with their subordinates (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). These differential relationships emerge in the form of one of three types of exchanges: a high-quality exchange between superior and subordinates, or *in-group relationships*; a moderate-quality exchange between superior and subordinates, or *middle-group relationships*; or a low-quality exchange between superior and subordinates, or *out-group relationships*. Historically, researchers have focused on identifying the differences that exist between participants in high-quality and low-quality exchanges (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Scandura & Graen, 1984). Subordinates in in-group relationships have high-quality exchanges with their superiors, which results in greater amounts of support, communication, and responsibility; subordinates in out-group relationships have low-quality exchanges with their superiors, which results in lower amounts of support, communication, and responsibility (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Subordinates in in-group relationships also have greater negotiating latitude and receive higher status than subordinates in out-group relationships (Duchon, Green, & Taber, 1986; McClane, 1991).

To date, researchers have drawn three conclusions about the differences between in-group and out-group exchanges. First, in-group subordinates are perceived as more productive (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994) and are rated higher in job performance by their superiors (Liden & Graen, 1980) than out-group subordinates. Second, in-group subordinates are more satisfied with their work, their position, their superiors, their coworkers, and their pay (Dansereau et al., 1975; Green, Anderson, & Shivers, 1996; Sherony & Green, 2002; Vecchio & Gobdel, 1984; Vecchio, Griffeth, & Hom, 1986) than out-group subordinates. Out-group subordinates, on the other hand, perceive more pay and work pace inequity than in-group subordinates (Vecchio et al., 1986). Third, in-group subordinates receive preferential treatment from their superiors in that they are mentored (Thibodeaux & Lowe, 1996), provided with leadership support (Dansereau et al., 1975) and access to financial resources (Green et al., 1996),
participate in joint decision making (Scandura, Graen, & Novak, 1986), and report feelings of employee empowerment (Gomez & Rosen, 2001).

For college students, having an in-group or an out-group exchange with their instructors may affect their motivation to communicate with their instructors. Martin, Myers, and Mottet (1999) identified five motives college students have for communicating with their instructors: relational, functional, participatory, excuse making, and sycophantic. Students who are motivated to communicate with their instructors for relational reasons attempt to develop interpersonal relationships with their instructors. Students who are motivated to communicate for functional reasons do so in an attempt to learn more about the course requirements, materials, and assignments. Students who are motivated to communicate for participatory reasons want to demonstrate they understand the course material. Students who are motivated to communicate for excuse making reasons do so to explain why assignments are incomplete or not finished. Students who are motivated to communicate for sycophantic reasons attempt to make a favorable impression on the instructor.

Students’ perceptions of their instructor’s communicative behaviors are related to their motives to communicate. For instance, the relational, functional, and participatory motives are correlated positively with perceived instructor use of functional communication skills (Myers & Bryant, 2004); the relational, participatory, excuse making, and sycophantic motives are correlated positively with perceived instructor use of verbal approach strategies (Mottet, Martin, & Myers, 2004); the relational and functional motives are correlated positively with perceived instructor nonverbal immediacy (Martin, Valencic, & Heisel, 2001); the relational motive is correlated positively with perceived instructor use of prosocial behavior alteration techniques (Martin, Heisel, & Valencic, 2000); and the relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic motives are predicted (in part) by perceived instructor friendliness and contentiousness (Myers, Martin, & Mottet, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

One primary distinction between in-group and out-group relationships resides in the quality of the communicative exchanges subordinates have with their superiors. According to Graen, Liden, and Hoel (1982), in-group exchanges are characterized by superiors who talk with their subordinates about their job performance, their work and personal problems, and ways to improve their performance, whereas out-group exchanges are characterized by superiors who seldom talk with their subordinates. Additionally, some in-group exchanges are marked by communicative behaviors such as joking, teasing, and coaching (Fairhurst, 1993) and mutual challenges and disagreements (Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989), whereas some out-group exchanges are marked by communicative behaviors such as coercion (Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989), face-threatening acts and competitive conflict (Fairhurst, 1993), and greater frequency of discussion about differential treatment (Sias & Jablin, 1995).

If these findings are applicable to the student-instructor relationship, students’ motives to communicate with their instructors may reflect whether they perceive
themselves as engaging in an in-group or out-group exchange with their instructors. As noted by Lee (1999), the perceived quality of LMX affects subordinates’ expectations about their communication with their superiors. Because in-group exchanges are characterized by respect, trust, and liking (Engle & Lord, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993), students who participate in an in-group exchange may be motivated to communicate for relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic reasons at a higher rate than students who participate in an out-group exchange, because these students want to appear respectful, involved, and concerned. Additionally, students in in-group relationships may be more motivated to communicate for relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic reasons out of obligation than students in out-group relationships. Brozo and Schmelzer (1985) reported that instructors expect students to ask questions, participate in class discussions, laugh at their humor, and offer comments on lecture and course materials. Because in-group subordinates often feel pressured to behave in a manner deemed appropriate by their superior (Dienesch & Liden, 1986), in-group students may be motivated to communicate for relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic reasons at a higher rate than out-group students. To investigate this idea, the following hypothesis is posited:

\[ H1: \text{Students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors will report being motivated to communicate with their instructors for relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic reasons at a higher rate than students who perceive out-group relationships with their instructors.} \]

Conversely, students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors may be less motivated to communicate for excuse making than students who perceive out-group relationships with their instructors. Because the development of in-group relationships is influenced largely by the judgment a superior makes about a subordinate’s job performance (Dansereau et al., 1975), students who engage in in-group relationships may be hesitant to offer excuses based on the negative perceptions attached to the behavior. After all, subordinates in in-group relationships are considered to be able to assume responsibility (Liden & Graen, 1980), to be trustworthy (Gomez & Rosen, 2001), and to be conscientious about their organizational behavior (Deluga, 1994). These considerations should apply to students in in-group relationships as well. To explore this notion, the following hypothesis is posited:

\[ H2: \text{Students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors will report being motivated to communicate with their instructors for excuse making at a lower rate than students who perceive out-group relationships with their instructors.} \]

Method

Participants

Participants were 139 undergraduate students (70 males, 69 females) enrolled in a variety of communication courses at a Midwestern university. The ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 31 years ($M = 19.66$, $SD = 2.39$). Seventy ($n = 70$)
Participants were first-year students, 27 participants were sophomores, 23 participants were juniors, and 19 participants were seniors. Participants received a minimal amount of course extra credit in exchange for their participation.

Procedures and Instrumentation

Participants completed the Leader-Member Exchange 7 scale (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and the Student Communication Motives scale (Martin et al., 1999). Using the methodology advocated by Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, and Richmond (1986), participants completed the instruments in reference to the instructor of the course they attended immediately prior to questionnaire completion. Data were gathered during the tenth week of the semester.

The Leader-Member Exchange 7 scale (LMX 7) is a seven-item instrument that asks respondents to indicate the quality of their working relationship with their superior. In this study, the LMX 7 scale was modified to reflect the student-instructor relationship. The seven items are:

- “I know how satisfied or dissatisfied this instructor is with me and my academic performance in this class.”
- “This instructor understands my learning problems and needs.”
- “This instructor recognizes my potential as a student.”
- “This instructor would be personally inclined to use his or her power to help me solve any problems I am having with my academic performance in this class.”
- “I can count on this instructor to ‘bail me out’ when I really need it.”
- “I have enough confidence in this instructor’s decisions that I would defend and support these decisions, even if she or he were not present to do so.”
- “I have an effective working relationship with this instructor.”

Responses are solicited using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Previous reliability coefficients of .87 and .89 been reported for the scale (Kassing, 2000; Lee, 1998, 1999). In this study, a reliability coefficient of .89 (M = 3.08, SD = .86) was obtained for the LMX 7 scale.

The Student Communication Motives scale is a 30-item instrument that asks students to report their reasons (i.e., relational, functional, participatory, excuse making, sycophantic) for talking with their instructors. Responses are solicited using a five-point Likert scale ranging from exactly like me (5) to not at all like me (1). Previous reliability coefficients for the five motives have ranged from .82 to .89 (Mottet et al., 2004; Myers, Martin, & Mottet, 2002). In this study, reliability coefficients ranged from .82 to .91 (relational: M = 2.44, SD = .90, χ = .91; functional: M = 3.76, SD = .83, χ = .88; participatory: M = 2.70, SD = .81, χ = .85; excuse making: M = 2.31, SD = .99, χ = .90; sycophantic: M = 2.39, SD = .81, χ = .82).

Data Analysis

Following the procedures utilized in previous LMX research (Lee, 1998, 1999), respondents’ scores on the LMX 7 scale were categorized into the three groups
(i.e., in-group, middle-group, out-group), based on each group having an approximate percentage of respondents. In this study, 47 respondents were categorized as in-group (i.e., 34%, or a LMX 7 score of 25 or higher), 51 respondents were categorized as middle-group (i.e., 37%, or a LMX 7 score between 20 and 24), and 41 respondents were categorized as out-group (i.e., 30%, or a LMX 7 score of 19 or lower). Because the focus of this study was on the difference between in-group and out-group students, the responses gathered from the middle-group participants were not included in the analysis. The hypotheses then were analyzed simultaneously using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The two LMX 7 groups (i.e., in-group, out-group) served as the independent variable, and the five student communication motives (i.e., relational, functional, participatory, excuse making, sycophantic) served simultaneously as the dependent variables.

Results

The MANOVA was significant, Wilks’s $\lambda = .53$, $F(5,82) = 14.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .47$ (see Table 1). Univariate effects were significant for the relational motive, $F(1,86) = 43.31$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .34$; the functional motive, $F(1,86) = 19.39$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .18$; the participatory motive, $F(1,86) = 31.48$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .27$; and the sycophantic motive, $F(1,86) = 11.72$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .12$; but not for the excuse-making motive, $F(1,86) = .16$, $p = .65$, $\eta^2 = .01$. An examination of the mean scores indicated that students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors report using the relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic motives at a higher rate than students who perceive out-group relationships with their instructors, but no significant difference in the use of the excuse making motive was observed. Thus, these findings provide support for the first hypothesis, but not the second hypothesis.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to apply LMX theory to the student-instructor relationship and explore if students’ perceptions of their relational quality with their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>In-group $^*$</th>
<th>Out-group $^+$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>17.45 (5.50)</td>
<td>10.56 (4.08)</td>
<td>43.31$^+$</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>25.09 (4.22)</td>
<td>20.66 (5.20)</td>
<td>19.39$^+$</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory</td>
<td>18.87 (4.76)</td>
<td>13.56 (4.01)</td>
<td>31.48$^+$</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse making</td>
<td>14.17 (6.50)</td>
<td>13.66 (5.54)</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sycophantic</td>
<td>15.89 (5.18)</td>
<td>12.39 (4.38)</td>
<td>11.72$^+$</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $^*$47 participants, $^+$41 participants, $^p < .01$. 

Table 1 Differences in Student Motives to Communicate by LMX Group Membership
instructors are reflected in their motives to communicate with their instructors. Two general findings were obtained. The first finding of this study was that students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors reported using the relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic motives at a higher rate than students who perceive out-group relationships with their instructors. This finding may be attributed to the outcomes associated with subordinate inclusion in LMX relationships. According to Dansereau et al. (1975), the primary outcome of subordinate inclusion in in-group relationships is that in-group subordinates give more time and energy, assume greater responsibility, and exhibit greater commitment to the organization than out-group subordinates. If this outcome is similar for college students, then students in in-group relationships may be more motivated to communicate for relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic reasons than students in out-group relationships because they perceive themselves as playing a vital support role in the classroom. By making inquiries or offering comments that solicit information about an instructor’s personal life (i.e., relational), reduce uncertainty about a course requirement or assignment (i.e., functional), or make them appear competent and helpful (i.e., participatory) or interested (i.e., sycophantic), students in in-group relationships may consider their input as being both a welcomed and a needed behavior by their instructors. Furthermore, in high-quality exchanges, subordinates’ attempts to contribute to the work environment are often reinforced and supported by their superiors (Dansereau et al., 1975; Liden & Graen, 1980). In this case, students may view themselves as actively promoting a supportive classroom environment, particularly if these communication attempts are reinforced and supported by their instructors.

Moreover, students in in-group relationships may be motivated to communicate for relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic reasons at a higher rate than students in out-group relationships because they believe these motives mirror the classroom behaviors their instructors expect from them, which then results in a positive impression made by the instructors of the students. In superior-subordinate relationships, creating a favorable impression is a primary determinant of whether a subordinate is selected for inclusion in an in-group relationship. Dockery and Steiner (1990) reported that superior liking of a subordinate significantly influences whether the superior will initiate a high-quality exchange with the subordinate. Subordinate inclusion in an in-group relationship also depends on whether the subordinate is perceived as having similar attitudes and values as the superior (Ashkanasy & O’Connor, 1997; Engle & Lord, 1997; Liden et al., 1993), whether the subordinate is extroverted (Phillips & Bedian, 1994), and whether the subordinate uses other-focused impression-management behaviors, such as praising the superior, taking an interest in what the superior does, and doing personal favors for the superior (Wayne & Green, 1993). Thus, communicating to fulfill these four motives may be the best way in which students can form an in-group relationship with an instructor, particularly if students engage in communicative behaviors to which the instructor responds favorably. For instance, researchers have discovered that instructors respond positively to students whom they consider to use affinity-seeking strategies.
(Wanzer, 1998) and be nonverbally responsive (Mottet, Beebe, Raffeld, & Paulsel, 2004) and immediate (Baringer & McCroskey, 2000). Future researchers should examine whether students who use the relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic motives also use particular communicative behaviors when they communicate with their instructors.

The second finding was that student use of the excuse making motive did not differ between students who perceive an in-group relationship with their instructors and students who perceive an out-group relationship with their instructors. In retrospect, this finding may be attributed to the situation rather than the student-instructor relationship. Because students who use the excuse making motive do so to explain why either an assignment is late or a task is not completed (Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 2002), the perceived quality of the student-instructor relationship may have little impact on student use of the excuse making motive because late or incomplete work undoubtedly will be viewed negatively by an instructor, regardless of the quality of the student-instructor relationship. Additionally, students who are motivated to communicate to offer excuses may be more influenced by their own personality and communicative traits than students who are motivated to communicate for other reasons. Martin et al. (1999) reported that students who communicate for excuse making also report communicating for control (i.e., to gain compliance and exert influence) across communicative contexts. Thus, communicating for excuse making may be one way in which some students assert their independence in the instructional context that is not affected by the quality of the student-instructor relationship.

One limitation of this study is the lack of data gathered on the student-instructor relationship and the structural characteristics of the course in which the relationship occurred. Having a greater knowledge of the instructional constraints that pervade the student-instructor relationship may yield a more comprehensive picture of how student-instructor in-group relationships and out-group relationships develop. In the organization, contextual influences such as work group composition, organizational policies, organizational culture, work unit size, work load, and gender dissimilarity act as constraints in the development of LMX relationships (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Green et al., 1996). Similar constraints also exist in the college classroom, such as course enrollment, policies, and requirements; instructors’ instructional style and use of instructional aids; and the frequency with which instructors interact with their students.

Additionally, a core assumption of LMX theory is that it is the superior who initiates subordinate inclusion in an in-group exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Due to the limited one-on-one interaction that exists between most college instructors and their students, it may be students who determine whether they have an in-group relationship with an instructor. Given that the majority of full-time college students are enrolled in four or more courses each semester, they may base an in-group relationship on an instructor with whom they perceive the most similarity or liking, consider the most effective, or have the most opportunity for interaction, regardless of how the instructor perceives the relationship or how the instructor interacts with
the student. Students also may self-select instructors based on instructor age. Edwards and Harwood (2003) found that younger instructors (i.e., age approximate) are more perceived more favorably than older instructors among students who believe age is a salient variable in instructor assessment. Based on their finding, it may be that in some cases, student participation in either an in-group or out-group relationship may be affected by the perceived age difference that exists between students and their instructors.

Because this study was a preliminary attempt at applying LMX theory to the student-instructor relationship, there are several avenues worthy of future investigation. One avenue would be to track the development of student-instructor in-group and out-group relationships in an attempt to determine whether these relationships increase or decrease in terms of both quantity and quality over time. Within the organization, Dienesch and Liden (1986) noted that in-group and out-group relationships develop fairly quickly and remain stable. However, because student classroom behaviors such as attendance, participation, and academic performance can fluctuate during a semester, it is possible the development of a student-instructor in-group relationship occurs when the student engages in the behaviors associated with a “good” student. Another avenue would be to investigate whether student proximity to the instructor impacts the development of student-instructor in-group and out-group relationships, particularly in large lecture, online, or distance learning courses. It is possible the formation of an in-group student-instructor relationship may be influenced more by proximity than student-instructor similarity, liking, or trust, all factors known to influence the development of superior-subordinate LMX relationships. Conversely, student-instructor similarity, liking, or trust may lead to the development of a personal relationship between a student and an instructor that extends beyond the classroom and results in an erosion of the power differential that normally exists between students and their instructor, causing a shift in the relational dynamics known not only to the student and the instructor, but to the other students enrolled in the course. Examining the effects of these interpersonally intimate student-instructor relationships on the classroom climate is yet another avenue area of future study.

In sum, the results of this study suggest that students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors are motivated to communicate for relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic reasons at a higher rate than students who perceive out-group relationships with their instructors. Although prior research has concluded that perceived instructor interpersonal and instructional communicative behaviors are related to students’ motives to communicate (Myers & Bryant, 2004), the findings of this study provide evidence that the perceived quality of the student-instructor relationship has a differential effect on whether students are motivated to communicate with their instructors and provides another venue in which the study of students’ motives to communicate with their instructors can be explored. As such, instructors should consider that students’ perceived quality of the student-instructor relationship is one reason why students are motivated to communicate with them.
References


