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The relationships amongst leader-member exchange, perceived organizational support, affective commitment, and in-role performance: A social-exchange perspective

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The relationships amongst leader-member exchange, perceived organizational support, affective commitment, and in-role performance

A social-exchange perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine whether leader-member exchange (LMX) and perceived organizational support (POS) have interactive effects on affective commitment to the organization. The utility of Social Exchange Theory for explaining workplace attitudes and behaviors in non-Western settings has been questioned. Another objective is to test the hypotheses, which are based on Social Exchange Theory, within a Chinese context.

Design/methodology/approach – Cross-sectional, self-report data on LMX, POS and affective commitment were obtained from 428 full-time employees in China. In-role performance ratings were provided by immediate supervisors.

Findings – LMX and POS have synergistic effects on affective commitment. Affective commitment mediates both the relationship between LMX and in-role performance and the relationship between POS and in-role performance.

Research limitations/implications – The limitations include using a cross-sectional, self-report design for LMX, POS and affective commitment, and only sampling employees in organizations in China. The findings support an explanation of workplace attitudes and behaviors in a non-Western setting based on social exchange. The effects of a proximate source of social exchange (i.e. LMX) on affective commitment depend on the level of a remote source of social exchange (i.e. POS), and vice versa.

Practical implications – Organizations need to improve the quality of their leader-follower relationships and support their members. Organizations need to increase affective commitment because it appears to drive in-role performance.

Originality/value – The authors show that LMX and POS from the same source (i.e. followers) may have interactive effects on affective organizational commitment as well as that social exchange may explain workplace attitudes and behaviors in China.

Keywords Affective commitment, In-role performance, Leader-member exchange, Perceived organizational support

Paper type Research paper



Social interactions involve tangible and/or intangible exchanges between at least two parties (Homans, 1961). Social interactions can be construed as comprising economic exchanges and/or social exchanges. Economic exchanges involve tangible exchanges that create specific obligations. In contrast, social exchanges occur when one person acts in ways which may benefit another but does not create specific obligations. The recipient is obligated, however, due to the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), to act in ways which will benefit the initiator (Blau, 1964).

Social exchanges form the basis of high-quality relationships between employees and their leaders as well as between employees and their organizations (Settoon *et al.*, 1996; Wayne *et al.*, 1997). The social exchanges involved in leader-member exchange (LMX) include favors from the leader or supportive leadership and therefore can be regarded as a form of direct or proximate social exchange because the social exchange occurs directly from the leader to the employee. In contrast, the social exchanges involved in perceived organizational support (POS) include policies and processes that enhance the wellbeing of all employees and can be regarded as a form of indirect or remote social exchange because POS involves social exchanges that apply to the wider organization.

Several studies have investigated the direct effects of LMX (e.g. Ansari *et al.*, 2007; Lee, 2005) and POS (e.g. Bishop *et al.*, 2005; Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990) on affective commitment to the organization. None of these studies, however, examined whether LMX and POS have interactive effects on affective commitment. Although Pan *et al.* (2010) examined the interaction between LMX and POS in a Chinese context and found a non-significant interaction with regards to affective commitment to the organization, they did not assess their measurement model, which brings into question their finding given that they used measures for LMX and POS that were developed in the US. The question therefore remains as to whether or not LMX and POS have interactive effects on affective commitment. We will address this gap in the literature.

Although it is well established that LMX and POS are positively correlated to several outcome variables, little attention has been given to the mechanisms via which LMX and POS affect these outcomes. One of our objectives is to address this gap in the literature.

There is a growing interest in the field of organizational dynamics, especially in emerging economies such as China, where the growth and development of organizations are playing an increasingly important role in the global marketplace. China is one of the largest and fastest-growing emerging economies and thus China's presence in the world market cannot be ignored.

Today's multinational nature of doing business brings with it multicultural and heterogeneous workforces. Although there is a new generation of Chinese managers who are embracing Western management styles, the push for modernization combined with differing management and leadership styles can render the development of high-quality work relationships, employee commitment and work performance challenging for many organizations in China.

Inherent differences in the cultural values and work attitudes between Chinese and Western employees create further challenges for cross-cultural managers. For instance, in China, managers expect subordinates to be respectful and obedient because of the high power distance between superiors and subordinates. Contrasting with the strong hierarchical and patriarchal traditions that exist in Chinese companies (Westwood *et al.*, 2004) there is less power distance between managers and subordinates, and a greater emphasis on individualism in Western organizations (Law *et al.*, 2000).

Another key difference between Chinese and Western business practices lies in the importance of *guanxi*, or interpersonal relationships. Chinese work cultures are heavily person-oriented and *guanxi* plays a large part in an employee's loyalty, obligation and reciprocity to their seniors, as well as their behaviors and attitudes toward their organization (Wong *et al.*, 2001; Vanhonacker, 2004).

The applicability of Western management concepts and theories to Chinese organizations is an important issue especially as more and more Western managers work for or with Chinese organizations (Casimir and Li, 2005). Little is known about the extent to which POS, LMX and affective commitment to the organization apply beyond Western cultures, particularly countries that are culturally distinct such as China because only a few studies (e.g. Chan and Wyatt, 2007; Fahr *et al.*, 2007) have examined LMX, POS or affective commitment within a Chinese context.

Some scholars suggest that Social Exchange Theory may not be applicable in non-Western settings because workplace attitudes and behaviors in these settings are driven predominantly by role expectations rather than by the norm of reciprocity. Another objective we have therefore is to test our hypotheses, which are based on Social Exchange Theory, within a Chinese context.

LMX

LMX theory is based on the dyadic relationships between leaders and their followers within an organizational work unit. According to LMX theory, leader-follower relationships can range from "low-quality" to "high-quality" (Wayne and Green, 1993). Furthermore, the quality of the relationship between a leader and a follower depends on how the leader perceives the follower. A high-quality relationship occurs when the leader perceives the follower as competent, trustworthy, and motivated whereas the converse holds for a low-quality relationship (Liden and Graen, 1980). Having a high-quality relationship with one's leader can affect the entire work experience in a positive manner (Graen and Scandura, 1987).

In a high-quality leader-follower relationship, the follower is treated as a trusted assistant, advisor and an in-group member whereas in a low-quality relationship the follower is not trusted and is treated as a hired hand and an out-group member (Liden and Graen, 1980). A high-quality relationship involves LMXs wherein the leader is attentive toward and supportive of the follower while the follower is committed to and has a positive attitude toward both the job and the leader: The converse holds for a low-quality relationship (Dansereau *et al.*, 1975). Followers who have high-quality exchanges with their leaders have greater influence in the decision-making process, fewer job-related problems and are more likely to take on special responsibilities compared to followers who have low-quality exchanges (Scandura *et al.*, 1986). Moreover, high-quality exchanges are based on social exchange to a greater extent than are low-quality exchanges (Graen and Scandura, 1987).

Compared to individuals with low-quality LMXs, individuals with high-quality LMXs have higher levels of self-efficacy (Murphy and Ensher, 1999; Schyns *et al.*, 2005), greater involvement in decision-making processes and are more empowered (Yukl and Fu, 1999), receive more supportive communication from the leader (Michael *et al.*, 2005), work-related information, mentoring, coaching and other developmental processes (Scandura and Schriesheim, 1994). Employees who receive mentoring from their supervisors have less role stress and less job-related burnout than those who do not (Thomas, 2005). Not surprisingly, LMX quality has a positive impact on the

follower's work-related outcomes such as job satisfaction (Yao and Wang, 2006) and satisfaction with the leader (Gertsner and Day, 1997).

High-quality LMXs are characterized by mutual respect, trust and obligation between a leader and a subordinate, and have long been considered to be a key antecedent to the successful in-role performance of employees. High-quality exchanges are positively associated with job performance-related variables (Graen *et al.*, 1982). Gertsner and Day's (1997) meta-analysis found that LMX is positively related to performance ratings.

Perceived organizational support

POS refers to the "global beliefs" developed by employees concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and is concerned about their welfare (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). Organizations are personified as important figures in the lives of employees through a process of transference (Levinson, 1965). Employees thus develop relationships based on social exchanges with their organizations, and their perception of the organization's commitment to them determines their own commitment to the organization (Shore and Tetrick, 1991), which is consistent with the norm of reciprocity (Wayne *et al.*, 1997).

Employees who believe that their organizations both value their contributions and are concerned about their welfare tend to reciprocate by performing their jobs well (Shore and Wayne, 1993). POS meets the psychogenic needs of employees and thus contributes to overall job satisfaction by conveying to employees that help and support are always available (Eisenberger and Rhoades, 2002). POS is positively related to effort-reward expectancies (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990), conscientiousness in carrying out formal job responsibilities, expressed calculative involvement with the organization, and innovation on behalf of the organization in the absence of tangible rewards (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990). POS is negatively correlated to turnover intentions (Eisenberger and Rhoades, 2002) and employee-withdrawal behaviors such as absenteeism (Rhoades *et al.*, 2001).

Affective commitment to the organization

Affective commitment refers to an emotional attachment to an organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991) and requires congruency between the individual's values and goals and those of the organization. Loyalty to the organization forms when individuals identify with the values and goals of the organization, feel that they are part of the organization, prize membership of the organization (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Price, 1997), and feel that the organization is committed to them (Shore and Tetrick, 1991).

Numerous factors can facilitate the development of an emotional bond with an organization. Procedural justice (Ansari *et al.*, 2007) and distributive justice (Karriker and Williams, 2009) positively affect organizational commitment. The manner in which an organization designs jobs can influence the development of affective commitment to the organization as autonomy (Currivan, 1999) and job enrichment (Luna-Arocas and Camps, 2008) have been shown to be positively related to affective commitment. Promotional opportunities and supervisory support (Price, 1997), intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (O'Driscoll and Randall, 1999) and job satisfaction (Thatcher *et al.*, 2006; Matzler and Renzl, 2007) have all been found to have a positive influence on organizational commitment.

Individuals who are emotionally attached to an organization are happy to continue their membership with the organization and regard the organization's problems as their own (Porter *et al.*, 1974). As a result, they willingly become highly involved with the organization and enjoy working for the organization (Ugboro, 2006).

Hypothesis development

There are several reasons why the quality of LMXs is positively related to follower performance. First, in a high-quality leader-member relationship, the leader provides tangible and intangible benefits to the follower (Erdogan and Enders, 2007). Tangible benefits (e.g. resources) facilitate better performance by clearing the path for followers (cf. House, 1971) whereas intangible benefits (e.g. favors from the leader) obligate followers to exert extra effort and to be committed to their work due to the norm of reciprocity. Second, followers in high-quality relationships receive higher levels of support, are more empowered and have higher levels of job satisfaction compared to followers in low-quality relationships (Feldman, 1986; Gertsner and Day, 1997). Finally, followers in high-quality relationships have greater opportunities for promotion compared to followers in low-quality relationships and thus would be more obligated to their leaders to perform well and more motivated to perform well in order to take advantage of such opportunities.

LMX is positively related to affective commitment (Ansari *et al.*, 2007; Bhal *et al.*, 2009) and mediates the relationship between other leadership behaviors (e.g. transformational leadership) and affective commitment (Lee, 2005). The quality of LMXs is positively related to affective commitment because high-quality LMXs meet various socio-emotional needs (e.g. affiliation, esteem and emotional support) of followers (Arneli *et al.*, 1998), and result in favorable working conditions (Rhoades *et al.*, 2001). Followers who are treated well by their leaders are likely to feel a sense of belonging to and identify with the organization (i.e. become emotionally attached to the organization) because the leader represents the organization.

Affective commitment to the organization is positively related to in-role performance (Fahr *et al.*, 2007; Fu *et al.*, 2009; Park and Rainey, 2007) arguably because as emotional attachment to the organization increases, the willingness of employees to do their best for the organization increases. There must be good reasons for an employee to become emotionally attached to an organization. Likely reasons include positive treatment from one's leader (i.e. LMX) and from the organization as a whole (i.e. POS). Positive treatment is a form of social exchange and will evoke the norm of reciprocity, which ultimately will motivate one to do one's best for the organization.

Employees are likely to perform their jobs well when they regard the organization as an extended family and feel a sense of belonging to the organization (Parish *et al.*, 2008). Employees who identify with the organization because the organization is personally meaningful to them can demonstrate their allegiance to the organization by working hard and performing their jobs as best as they can. Consistent with this reasoning are the findings that affective commitment reduces absenteeism and turnover intention (Chiu and Francesco, 2003).

LMX should have a positive and direct influence on follower performance not only because of the obligations that arise from favorable treatment from the leader (e.g. in-group membership) but also the additional support and access to resources that favored followers receive from the leader (Henderson *et al.*, 2008). LMX may also have a positive and indirect influence on follower performance via affective commitment to the organization. LMX meets various socio-emotional needs of followers and thus increases the likelihood that followers will become emotionally attached to the organization. As we discussed earlier, affective commitment is a key precursor to job performance.

We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

- H1.* Affective commitment to the organization mediates the relationship between LMX and in-role performance.

Employees who feel supported by the organization are likely to perform better than employees who feel that the organization does not support them. POS should have a positive and direct influence on the performance of employees for several reasons including the obligation to reciprocate both the support provided by the organization and the organization's commitment to them (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2001; Fuller *et al.*, 2006). POS should also enhance employee performance because of the positive effects of a supportive and employee-friendly workplace. There is considerable evidence that POS is positively related to in-role performance.

Previous studies (e.g. Bishop *et al.*, 2005; Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990; Shore and Wayne, 1993; Wayne *et al.*, 1997), including one in China (Fahr *et al.*, 2007), have found a strong positive association between POS and affective commitment to the organization. POS has also been shown to mediate the relationship between several variables (e.g. positive organizational rewards and procedural justice) and affective commitment (Rhoades *et al.*, 2001).

POS is positively related to affective commitment to the organization arguably because POS fulfils several socio-emotional needs of employees including esteem, approval and affiliation, and consequently facilitates the formation of an emotional bond with the organization (Eisenberger and Rhoades, 2002; Rhoades *et al.*, 2001). Organizational factors such as decentralization, compensation, participation and formal employee-grievance procedures (Smeenk *et al.*, 2006) lead to employees believing that they are cared for and valued by their organizations thereby increasing their affective commitment to their organizations (Wayne *et al.*, 1997).

POS may indirectly influence performance via affective commitment to the organization. Employees who perceive the organization as supportive and caring are likely to become emotionally attached to the organization partly because support and care from the organization addresses their need for affiliation and provides them with a sense of belonging. Such employees are likely to identify with the organization and consequently will readily do their best for the organization by looking for better ways to perform their jobs and solving the organization's problems voluntarily, even if the problems are not their own and there are no extrinsic rewards for doing so (Fuller *et al.*, 2006).

We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

- H2.* Affective commitment to the organization mediates the relationship between POS and in-role performance.

LMX and POS are positively related to one another (Masterson *et al.*, 2000; Wayne *et al.*, 2002). High-quality LMX involves the leader providing a follower with career advice, task and training opportunities, emotional support and information. High-quality exchanges are characterized by high levels of trust, interaction, support, and formal/informal rewards (Dienesch and Liden, 1986). LMX affects POS because the leader is a formal representative of the organization (Eisenberger and Rhoades, 2002). On the other hand, employees who are well supported by the organization are likely to desire and accept high-quality relationships with their supervisors (Wayne *et al.*, 2002).

The effects of a proximate source of social exchange (i.e. a high-quality relationship with the leader) on affective commitment to the organization may depend on the level of a remote source of social exchange (i.e. high POS), and vice-versa. The quality of the relationship with the leader is a close source of social exchange as it involves direct contact with the leader whereas POS includes a distant source of social exchange in

that it stems from factors such as organizational policies, and reward and recognition systems that are established by senior managers who generally do not work closely with most employees.

LMX and POS are likely to have interactive effects on affective commitment to the organization because a low level of one, even with a high level of the other, reduces the likelihood that an emotional attachment to the organization will develop. In other words, it takes two hands to clap (i.e. a high level of both LMX and POS) when it comes to the formation of an emotional attachment to the organization.

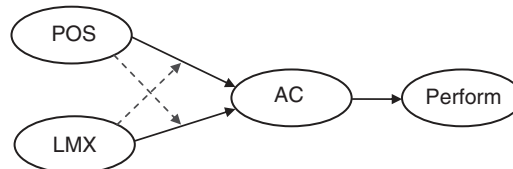
Employees are unlikely to become emotionally attached to their organizations if they perceive their organizations as unsupportive even if they have high-quality relationships with their leaders. When POS is low, a “good” leader might be seen as somewhat of an aberration in a “bad” organization rather than as a typical authority figure in the organization and consequently, it is unlikely that the employee will form an emotional bond with the organization. Employees who regard the organization as unsupportive and uncaring would also most likely not enjoy being at the workplace and this would further impede the formation of an emotional attachment to the organization.

Employees are also unlikely to become emotionally attached to their organizations if they have low-quality relationships with their leaders even if they perceive their organizations to be supportive. A low-quality relationship with one’s leader will generally render the work experience unpleasant and the employee will therefore be unlikely to form an emotional attachment to the organization. When LMX is low, a positive relationship with the organization is unlikely to result in emotional attachment to the organization because one’s immediate supervisor (i.e. leader) strongly influences employees’ experiences within the organization (Landry and Vandenberghe, 2009).

We think that the formation of an emotional bond with the organization is most likely to occur when an employee has a high-quality relationship with the leader and perceives the organization as supportive. When both LMX and POS are high, the leader and the organization are seen in a positive light because both help to meet the socio-emotional needs (e.g. affiliation and respect) of employees and therefore become emotionally significant to employees. Under such conditions, because of internalization of the organization’s core values and central identity features (Van Dick *et al.*, 2004), employees are likely to incorporate membership of the organization into their social identities (cf. Tajfel, 1981).

Based on these arguments, we propose the following hypothesis, which is depicted in Figure 1:

H3. LMX and POS have interactive effects on affective commitment to the organization: the strength of the positive relationship between LMX (or POS)



Notes: LMX, leader-member exchange; POS, perceived organizational support; AC, affective commitment; perform, in-role performance

Figure 1.
The hypothesized model

and affective commitment to the organization increases as POS (or LMX) increases. More specifically, affective commitment to the organization will be lowest when both LMX and POS are low and will be highest when both LMX and POS are high.

Method

Sampling and procedure

Participants are full-time employees of organizations in a variety of industries including high-tech, manufacturing, service and education. These organizations are located in the northern, middle and southern regions of China. The sample consists of 428 respondents, of which 234 are male and 194 are female. The average age is 30.0 years (SD = 7.2 years) and the average work experience is 8.5 years (SD = 8.3 years). The highest level of education for the majority (i.e. 71 percent) of participants is junior high school or high school, 17 percent stated that they have completed a Bachelors Degree of college, and eight percent stated that they have completed postgraduate degrees (e.g. Masters or Doctorate); some of the participants (i.e. 4 percent) did not provide details of their highest level of education. A self-administered survey was used to collect data. Performance ratings were provided by the immediate supervisors of the participants.

Measures

LMX was measured using Graen and Uhl-Bein's (1995) seven-item scale. This scale measures the extent to which employees feel their supervisors are supportive and believe they have close working relationships with their supervisors. Eisenberger *et al.*'s (1986) eight-item Survey of Perceived Organizational Support was used to measure POS. This scale measures the extent to which employees feel valued and cared for by their organizations. Affective commitment was measured using Allen and Meyer (1990) eight-item scale, which measures the extent to which employees feel a sense of emotional attachment and belongingness to the organization and wish to retain membership of the organization. In-role performance was measured using Williams and Anderson's (1991) seven-item scale. The Appendix contains the items that were used. All of the items were translated from English to Chinese using the backward-translation method.

Results

An exploratory factor analysis was used because the measures we used are not well established in Chinese contexts. For instance, although Chan and Wyatt (2007) measured affective commitment to the organization using Allen and Meyer's (1990) eight-item scale, they did not conduct a factor analysis on the measure.

A single factor analysis, using the principal axis factoring option in SPSS, with Varimax rotation was conducted to check the structure of the four scales that were used to measure LMX, POS, affective commitment and in-role performance. A cut-off value of 0.40 was used for the factor loadings based on Hair *et al.*'s (2008) recommendations for the sample size and number of items involved. The findings from this analysis are presented in Table I.

As shown in Table I, the final rotated solution revealed the following results: the first factor comprises only POS items; the second factor comprises only affective commitment items; the third factor comprises only LMX items; and the fourth factor comprises only performance items. Total scores for LMX, POS, affective commitment

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| | Factor | | | |
|---|--------|------|------|------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| <i>Perceived organizational support</i> | | | | |
| POS1 | 0.70 | | | |
| POS2 | 0.54 | | | |
| POS4 | 0.66 | | | |
| POS5 | 0.81 | | | |
| POS6 | 0.90 | | | |
| POS7 | 0.86 | | | |
| POS8 | 0.87 | | | |
| <i>Affective commitment</i> | | | | |
| AC1 | | 0.62 | | |
| AC2 | | 0.46 | | |
| AC3 | | 0.60 | | |
| AC5 | | 0.72 | | |
| AC6 | | 0.77 | | |
| AC7 | | 0.59 | | |
| AC8 | | 0.73 | | |
| <i>Leader member exchange</i> | | | | |
| LMX1 | | | 0.84 | |
| LMX2 | | | 0.83 | |
| LMX3 | | | 0.84 | |
| LMX4 | | | 0.74 | |
| <i>Performance</i> | | | | |
| Perform1 | | | | 0.75 |
| Perform2 | | | | 0.87 |
| Perform3 | | | | 0.79 |
| Perform4 | | | | 0.79 |
| Perform7 | | | | 0.44 |

Table I.
Findings from the
factor analysis^a

Note: ^aLoadings >0.40 shown

and in-role performance were created by calculating the average of their respective items shown in Table I.

Table II provides the means and standard deviations (i.e. SD) for the variables, the correlations between the variables and the Cronbach's α for each of the variables. Table II shows the following: first, all of the final scales have satisfactory internal reliability; second, performance has a significant positive correlation with education and work experience; third, performance has significant positive correlations with POS, affective commitment and LMX; and fourth, POS, affective commitment and LMX have significant positive correlations with each other.

POS, affective commitment and LMX were obtained from the same source (i.e. followers) using the same method and there is therefore the likelihood that the significant positive correlations found between these three variables are due predominantly to common method and single-source biases. A single-component test was conducted using principal components analysis to more closely examine the covariance between these three variables. A principal components analysis was selected as it is designed to create a first component that maximizes the overall explained variance. The findings from this analysis revealed that common method and single-source biases do not account for the majority of the covariance of the items; the first component explained 27.9 percent of the overall variance in the items shown in Table I.

| | Mean (SD) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|----------------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Age | 30.0 (7.2) | – | | | | | | | |
| 2. Gender | – | –0.07 | – | | | | | | |
| 3. Education | – | –0.37 | 0.09 | – | | | | | |
| 4. WorkExp | 8.5 (8.3) | 0.91 | –0.06 | –0.46 | – | | | | |
| 5. LMX | 2.74 (1.58) | 0.06 | –0.16 | 0.10 | 0.00 | <i>0.90</i> | | | |
| 6. POS | 4.47 (1.25) | –0.04 | –0.04 | 0.02 | –0.05 | 0.21 | <i>0.91</i> | | |
| 7. AC | 4.36 (1.15) | 0.16 | –0.11 | –0.03 | 0.19 | 0.29 | 0.26 | <i>0.85</i> | |
| 8. Performance | 5.66 (0.91) | –0.07 | 0.00 | 0.14 | –0.09 | 0.20 | 0.13 | 0.33 | <i>0.86</i> |

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Notes: WorkExp, work experience; LMX, leader-member exchange; POS, perceived organizational support, and AC, affective commitment. Gender: male = 1, female = 2. Education: elementary school = 1, high school = 2, bachelors = 3, masters or doctorate = 4. ^aCronbach's α 's are presented in italics on the diagonal. $r > 0.08$, $p < 0.05$; $r > 0.11$, $p < 0.01$; $r > 0.14$, $p < 0.001$

Table II.
Means (SD), correlations
and Cronbach's α 's^a for the
measured variables

In order to control for the effects of the demographic variables on performance, residuals were obtained from a regression analysis in which the demographic variables (i.e. age, gender, education and work experience) were used to predict performance. The controlled performance scores (i.e. the residuals) were used in the analyses that were conducted to test the hypotheses.

H1 and *H2* were tested using the procedure for testing mediation effects outlined by Judd and Kenny (1981). This procedure involves meeting the following three conditions:

- (1) the independent variable significantly predicts the dependent variable (i.e. Condition 1);
- (2) the independent variable significantly predicts the mediator variable (i.e. Condition 2); and
- (3) when the dependent variable is regressed on both the mediator and the independent variable, the mediator significantly predicts the dependent variable, while the predictive utility of the independent variable is reduced (i.e. Condition 3).

If both the mediator and the independent variable are significant in this regression, then there is partial mediation. Furthermore, if the mediator is significant and the independent variable is not significant in this regression, then there is full mediation. Only Condition 2 and Condition 3 are essential for demonstrating mediation effects because a correlation between the mediator and the dependent variable is not sufficient evidence of mediation because both may be caused by the independent variable (Kenny *et al.*, 1998).

LMX significantly predicts performance ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$: Condition 1 met) and affective commitment ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$: Condition 2 met). Performance was then regressed on both LMX and affective commitment ($\beta = 0.08$, $p > 0.05$ and $\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$, respectively): Condition 3 met. *H1* is therefore supported as affective commitment mediates the relationship between LMX and performance.

POS significantly predicts performance ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$: Condition 1 met) and affective commitment ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$: Condition 2 met). Performance was then regressed on both POS and affective commitment ($\beta = 0.04$, $p > 0.05$ and $\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$, respectively): Condition 3 met. *H2* is therefore supported as affective commitment mediates the relationship between POS and performance.

The procedure outlined by Muller *et al.* (2005) was used to test *H3*. This procedure involves the following three multiple regression analyses:

- (1) the dependent variable (i.e. performance) is regressed on the independent variable (i.e. LMX), the moderator (i.e. POS) and their product-term (i.e. LMX × POS);
- (2) the mediator (i.e. affective commitment; AC) is regressed on the independent variable, the moderator and their product-term; and
- (3) the dependent variable is regressed on the independent variable, the moderator, their product term, the mediator, and the product – term of the mediator and the moderator (i.e. AC × POS).

The findings from the three regression analyses are presented in Table III.

All of the variables were standardized prior to conducting the multiple regression analyses in order to reduce the collinearity between the product-terms and their constituents. The findings from the three regression analyses are shown in Table III and reveal the following:

- (1) for the first regression analysis, LMX and POS have a non-significant interaction effect on performance while LMX has a significant positive unique effect on performance;
- (2) for the second regression analysis, LMX and POS have a significant interaction effect on affective commitment; and
- (3) for the third regression analysis, LMX and POS have a non-significant interaction effect on performance, affective commitment and POS have a non-significant interaction effect on performance, and affective commitment has a significant positive unique effect on performance while LMX and POS have non-significant unique effects on performance.

The following findings shown in Table III are particularly relevant for *H3*: first, LMX and POS have a significant interaction effect on affective commitment but not on performance; and second, affective commitment has a significant effect on performance in the presence of LMX, POS, the interaction between LMX and POS, and the interaction between affective commitment and POS. These findings indicate moderated mediation (Muller *et al.*, 2005).

To more closely examine the interaction between LMX and POS on affective commitment, participants were divided into two groups (i.e. low POS and high POS)

| Predictors | Equation (1) (Performance) | | Equation (2) (Affective commitment) | | Equation (3) (Performance) | |
|------------|-------------------------------|----------|--|----------|-------------------------------|----------|
| | <i>b</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>t</i> |
| LMX | 0.141 | 2.95** | 0.242 | 4.44*** | 0.072 | 1.55 |
| POS | 0.078 | 1.69 | 0.231 | 4.35** | 0.025 | 0.56 |
| LMX × POS | 0.003 | 0.07 | 0.147 | 3.08** | -0.021 | -0.48 |
| AC | | | | | 0.293 | 5.77*** |
| AC × LMX | | | | | -0.035 | -0.74 |
| AC × POS | | | | | 0.052 | 1.13 |

Table III.
Least squares regression results for the moderated mediation analyses

Notes: LMX, leader-member exchange; POS, perceived organizational support; and AC, affective commitment. **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001

based on a median split on POS. For the low POS group, $n = 204$ and for the high POS group, $n = 224$. A univariate regression analysis wherein LMX was used to predict affective commitment was conducted for both POS groups. The findings are as follows: for the low POS group, $b = 0.10$, $t = 1.9$, $p < 0.05$, $\beta = 0.14$; and for the high POS group, $b = 0.27$, $t = 6.1$, $p < 0.001$, $\beta = 0.38$. These findings reveal that although the relationship between LMX and affective commitment is significant and positive for both POS groups, the relationship is stronger with the high POS group. *H3* is therefore supported because the strength of the positive relationship between LMX and affective commitment to the organization increases as POS increases.

We then divided the sample into two groups (i.e. low LMX and high LMX) based on a median split on LMX. For the low LMX group, $n = 233$ and for the high LMX group, $n = 195$. A univariate regression analysis wherein POS was used to predict affective commitment was conducted for both LMX groups. The findings are as follows: for the low LMX group, $b = 0.10$, $t = 1.6$, $p > 0.05$, $\beta = 0.10$; and for the high LMX group, $b = 0.35$, $t = 6.6$, $p < 0.001$, $\beta = 0.43$. These findings reveal that the relationship between POS and affective commitment is significant only for the high LMX group. *H3* is therefore supported because the strength of the positive relationship between POS and affective commitment to the organization increases as LMX increases.

Table IV contains the means and standard deviations of affective commitment for the four groups (i.e. low LMX and low POS, low LMX and high POS, high LMX and low POS, and high LMX and high POS). As shown in Table IV, the low-low group has the lowest level of affective commitment and the high-high group has the highest level. These findings provide support for *H3*.

In summary, the major findings are as follows: affective commitment to the organization mediates the relationship between LMX and performance; affective commitment to the organization mediates the relationship between POS and performance; and there is a significant interaction between LMX and POS on affective commitment. Specifically, affective commitment to the organization is lowest when both LMX and POS are low and is highest when both LMX and POS are high.

Discussion

The overall objective of our study was to examine the relationships among LMX, POS, affective commitment to the organization and in-role performance. We found that LMX, POS and affective commitment all have significant positive correlations with in-role performance, which is not entirely consistent with the findings reported in other studies. For example, Vandenberghe *et al.* (2004) reported that affective commitment to the organization was not significantly correlated to in-role performance among a sample of nurses in a Belgian hospital whereas Fahr *et al.* (2007) reported that affective commitment to the organization but not POS was significantly correlated to in-role performance among a sample of full-time employees in China.

| | Low POS | High POS |
|----------|-------------|-------------|
| Low LMX | 4.00 (1.14) | 4.24 (1.26) |
| High LMX | 4.28 (0.84) | 4.99 (1.04) |

Notes: LMX, leader-member exchange; POS, perceived organizational support

Table IV.
Means (standard
deviations) for affective
commitment

The differences between our findings and those reported by Vandenberghe *et al.* (2004) regarding the correlation between in-role performance and affective commitment to the organization may be due to differences in the occupations of the respondents. Specifically, Vandenberghe *et al.*'s (2004) study involved a sample of nurses whereas we sampled employees of organizations in a variety of industries (i.e. high-tech, manufacturing, service and education). Nurses may be more likely than employees in some other industries to regard their work as meaningful and therefore would be more likely to fulfill their formal duties and responsibilities even if they do not hold positive attitudes toward their organizations. It is therefore worth investigating whether the perceived meaningfulness of one's work moderates the relationship between affective commitment to the organization and in-role performance.

We found affective commitment to the organization mediates not only the relationship between LMX and in-role performance but also the relationship between POS and in-role performance. LMX being a form of proximate social exchange generates both an obligation to the leader to perform one's job well and positive emotions toward the organization because the leader (i.e. immediate supervisor) is a prominent representative of the organization for employees. POS being a form of remote social exchange generates positive emotions toward the organization and obligations to the organization to perform one's job well. Positive emotions and the norm of reciprocity would normally predispose individuals to willingly do their utmost and this basic principle applies not only to personal relationships but also to the relationships between employees and their organizations. Employees are likely to perform better when they feel that they are a part of and belong to an organization as a result of having a close relationship with their leaders than when this is not the case.

The primary objective of our study was to examine whether LMX and POS have interactive effects on affective commitment to the organization. LMX and POS appear to have synergistic rather than additive effects on affective commitment. We found that emotional attachment to an organization is lowest when both LMX and POS are low and is highest when both LMX and POS are high. The positive effects of a high-quality leader-follower relationship on the follower's affective commitment appear to be enhanced in a high POS context. Similarly, the positive effects of POS on affective commitment appear to be accentuated when a follower has a high-quality relationship with the leader.

As far as we are aware, our study is only the second to test the interaction between LMX and POS on affective commitment to the organization: The first being Pan *et al.* (2010). The interaction between LMX and POS on affective commitment that we found contradicts the findings of Pan *et al.* (2010) who reported that LMX and POS have a non-significant interaction on affective commitment. As both studies involved samples of full-time employees in China, it is difficult to argue that the different findings are due to differences in national culture. Further studies using samples of full-time employees in China may shed light on this issue.

According to some scholars (e.g. Lam *et al.*, 2002; Westwood *et al.*, 2004), Social Exchange Theory may not be appropriate for explaining the attitudes and behaviors of employees in countries with high power distance and traditionalism, such as China. Their argument is that in such countries, employees are more likely to be motivated to fulfill the obligations of their prescribed social roles than by obligations that stem from social exchange because personalized relationships with authority figures require low power distance between the parties involved. Nevertheless, our findings provide support for an explanation of the attitudes and behaviors of employees in China based

on social exchange. It might be the case that workplace attitudes in China are aligning with those in Western countries. Future studies are required to further explore these different explanations of workplace attitudes and behaviors in China.

Our study has contributed to the literature on LMX and POS in a few ways. First, the “black box” between the leader-follower relationship and follower performance has received relatively little attention. We found that one of the factors in the black box is affective commitment to the organization. That is, a high-quality relationship with the leader is likely to result in affective commitment to the organization, which then enhances in-role performance.

The mechanism via which POS influences the performance of employees has received relatively little attention in the literature. Although mention has been made in the literature of POS increasing performance and some studies have tested this idea, none of the studies of which we are aware has examined intervening or mediating variables between POS and performance. We found that POS may influence in-role performance indirectly via affective commitment to the organization.

There is evidence that follower LMX and leader POS may have interactive effects on both follower job satisfaction and follower job performance (e.g. Erdogan and Enders, 2007). Up until now, however, the literature (e.g. Settoon *et al.*, 1996; Wayne *et al.*, 2002) has shown that LMX and POS when measured from the same source (e.g. followers) have either additive or non-unique effects on various outcome variables (e.g. in-role performance and extra-role performance) among Western samples. Our study is, however, the first to show that the effects of LMX and POS from the same source may be interactive with regards to affective organizational commitment. That is, the effects of a proximate source of social exchange (i.e. LMX) on affective commitment to the organization may depend on the level of a remote source of social exchange (i.e. POS), and vice versa.

Our findings have several implications for practice with regards to increasing employees’ emotional attachment to their organizations. As mentioned earlier, LMX and POS are different types of social exchange and both should increase the likelihood that employees will become emotionally attached to the organization and consequently perform well in their jobs. The apparent synergistic nature of the effects of LMX and POS on affective commitment to the organization makes us recommend that both types of social exchange need to be occurring within organizations in order to maximize the emotional attachment of members to their organizations and eventually the in-role performance of members.

Organizations need to focus on improving the quality of their leader-follower relationships. An organizational culture that requires all members to treat others with dignity and respect is one way to improve the quality of leader-follower relationships. Given that there is evidence (e.g. Bass *et al.*, 1987) that managers at lower levels of the organizational hierarchy tend to emulate the attitudes and behaviors of senior managers, the onus is on senior managers to emphasize the importance of developing positive leader-follower relationships and lead by example.

Organizations need to focus on being supportive toward their members. Policies against negative behaviors such as workplace bullying when enforced show employees that the organization genuinely cares about their wellbeing (Djurkovic *et al.*, 2008) and reward systems that are procedurally fair show employees that the organization respects their rights and dignity (Konovsky and Pugh, 1994).

Organizations need to think about ways in which the affective commitment to the organization of its members can be increased because it appears to be a key driver of

the in-role performance of members. Besides addressing LMX and POS, organizations can increase its members' affective commitment by encouraging social interactions between members (Smeenk *et al.*, 2006) as well as work-related interactions because people will voluntarily incorporate membership of particular groups into their social identity when such membership is valuable and emotionally significant to them (Tajfel, 1981).

This study has several limitations. The use of a cross-sectional design precludes us from proposing any conclusions about causality based on our findings. Our reliance on a single-source for LMX, POS and affective commitment brings into play various biases such as common method bias. We checked for common method variance using a principal components analysis and found that the first component accounted for less than one-third of the total variance in the items used for LMX, POS and affective commitment. The non-significant relationship between POS and affective commitment for the low LMX group provides further evidence that common method bias is likely not a serious issue in our study.

Considerable attention has been given to the biases inherent in single-source studies (e.g. social desirability, self-serving bias), especially those that rely exclusively on self-reported data. We therefore obtained ratings for in-role performance from the leader (i.e. immediate supervisor) rather than from the employee. However, the use of a third party to provide data on performance is also inherently biased as it is often impossible to objectively assess an employee's level of performance due to factors such as placing greater emphasis on some performance criteria and the effects of interpersonal factors on performance ratings.

We were unable to measure non-response bias by comparing early and late respondents because of the manner in which we collected our data. Finally, the exclusive use of participants who worked in Chinese organizations in China brings into question the generalizability of our findings.

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Appendix. Items used to measure LMX, POS, affective commitment and in-role performance^a

Leader-member exchange

- LMX1. Regardless of how much power he/she has built into his/her position, my supervisor would be personally inclined to use his/her power to help me solve problems in my work.
- LMX2. I can count on my supervisor to bail me out even at his/her own expense, when I really need it.
- LMX3. My supervisor understands my problems and needs.
- LMX4. My supervisor recognizes my potential.

- LMX5. My supervisor has enough confidence in me that he/she would defend and justify my decisions if I were not present to do so.
- LMX6. I usually know where I stand with my supervisor.
- LMX7. I have an excellent working relationship with my supervisor.

Perceived organizational support

- POS1. The organization values my contribution to its well-being.
- POS2. The organization fails to appreciate any extra effort from me (R).
- POS3. The organization would ignore any complaint from me (R).
- POS4. The organization really cares about my well-being.
- POS5. Even if I did the best job possible, the organization would fail to notice (R).
- POS6. The organization cares about my general satisfaction at work.
- POS7. The organization shows very little concern for me (R).
- POS8. The organization takes pride in my accomplishments at work.

Affective commitment

- AC1. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.
- AC2. I enjoy discussing my organization with people outside it.
- AC3. I really feel that this organization's problems are my own.
- AC4. I think I could become easily attached to another organization as I am to this one (R).
- AC5. I do not feel like "part of the family" at this organization (R).
- AC6. I do not feel "emotionally attached" to this organization (R).
- AC7. This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.
- AC8. I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization (R).

In-role job performance

- Perform1. Adequately completes assigned duties.
- Perform2. Fulfills responsibilities specified in job description.
- Perform3. Performs tasks that are expected of him/her.
- Perform4. Meets formal performance requirements of the job.
- Perform5. Engages in activities that will directly affect his/her performance evaluation.
- Perform6. Neglects aspects of the job he/she is obligated to perform (R).
- Perform7. Fails to perform essential duties (R).

Note: ^aR, reverse-scored item

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The authors are grateful to members of the LODJ editorial team for their useful comments and suggestions.

Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine whether leader-member exchange (LMX) and perceived organizational support (POS) have interactive effects on affective commitment to the organization. The utility of Social Exchange Theory for explaining workplace attitudes and behaviors in non-Western settings has been questioned. Another objective is to test the hypotheses, which are based on Social Exchange Theory, within a Chinese context.

Design/methodology/approach – Cross-sectional, self-report data on LMX, POS and affective commitment were obtained from 428 full-time employees in China. In-role performance ratings were provided by immediate supervisors.

Findings – LMX and POS have synergistic effects on affective commitment. Affective commitment mediates both the relationship between LMX and in-role performance and the relationship between POS and in-role performance.

Research limitations/implications – The limitations include using a cross-sectional, self-report design for LMX, POS and affective commitment, and only sampling employees in organizations in China. The findings support an explanation of workplace attitudes and behaviors in a non-Western setting based on social exchange. The effects of a proximate source of social exchange (i.e. LMX) on affective commitment depend on the level of a remote source of social exchange (i.e. POS), and vice versa.

Practical implications – Organizations need to improve the quality of their leader-follower relationships and support their members. Organizations need to increase affective commitment because it appears to drive in-role performance.

Originality/value – The authors show that LMX and POS from the same source (i.e. followers) may have interactive effects on affective organizational commitment as well as that social exchange may explain workplace attitudes and behaviors in China.