Leader-member Exchange, Work-to-family Enrichment, and Work Engagement

Lin Qiu
School of Business Administration, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, China
linqiu@scut.edu.cn

Keywords: Leader-member exchange; Work-to-family enrichment; Work engagement.

Abstract. The primary purpose of this study was to examine the influence of leader–member exchange (LMX) on employee work-to-family enrichment (WFE) and work engagement. Based on data from a sample of 138 employees in China, this study demonstrated that LMX was positively related to both WFE and work engagement. Work engagement mediated the relationship between LMX and WFE. The results indicate the important implications of a resourceful environment in high quality LMX relationships for employees’ work-family enrichment and work engagement, and the mediating mechanism of work engagement as well.

Introduction
In the last two decades, we have witnessed a surge of interest in leader–member exchange (LMX). LMX theory holds that leaders develop unique exchange relationships with their followers. In turn, the quality of this relationship influences followers’ work attitudes, behaviors, and performance [1]. In accordance with LMX theory, accumulated research has shown that maintaining a high-quality LMX relationship is beneficial to the organization in terms of favorable employee attitudes and behaviors outcomes, such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and job performance [2]. Despite these established findings, less attention has been paid to the potential linkage between LMX and work engagement. Engagement is a functional form of work involvement that is positively related to important outcomes such as job performance, commitment, and health [3]. Therefore, it is important to understand the association between LMX and work engagement.

According to scholars, supervisors have a crucial influence of the experiences of their subordinates, both inside and outside the work context [4]. However, existing research has focused primarily on work-related outcomes, ignoring the effect that LMX relationships can have on employees’ work-family interactions. This study aims to fill this void by linking LMX to work-family enrichment, the processes in which experiences in work or family role improve the quality of life in the other role [5]. In addition, although there is a wealth of literature on the proximal effects of LMX, little is known about the process through which LMX influences follower outcomes. To echo a recent call to explore the underlying mechanisms and processes by which LMX exerts its influence on the employee outcomes [3], the present study also aims to examine the indirect effects of LMX on work-family enrichment through work engagement. These ideas are graphically summarized in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Conceptual model.](image-url)
Literature Review and Hypotheses

LMX.

LMX theory proposes that leaders have unique social exchange relationships with their followers. Owing to resource constraint, a supervisor only develops high-quality LMX with a few subordinates and leaves the remainder of LMX relationships at low quality [1]. Low-quality LMX relationships are based on economic exchanges, i.e., exchanges based on the formal requirements of the employment contract in which employees do what they are expected to do and get paid accordingly. In contrast, high-quality exchanges go beyond the formal contract and are based on mutual respect, affect, support and loyalty, and felt obligation.

LMX and Work-family Enrichment.

The majority of research on work-family interface has focused on work–family conflict. Recently, scholars have increased their interest in examining how engagement in one role positively influences the other role—work–family enrichment. The experience of work–family enrichment is traditionally described using role theory, which suggests that participation in multiple roles can produce positive outcomes for individuals. Work–family enrichment is bidirectional in that work potentially enriches family life (work-to-family enrichment; WFE) and family life also potentially enriches work (family-to-work enrichment; FWE) [5]. The present research focuses on WFE because it has been believed that work-related variables influence WFE rather than FWE [6].

As suggested by Greenhaus and Powell (2006), enrichment occurs when resource gains in one role improve performance in another role [5]. The authors identified five types of resources that drive the work–family enrichment process, including skills and perspectives, psychological and physical resources, social-capital resources, flexibility, and material resources [5]. Compared with those in low-quality LMX relationships, employees in high-quality LMX relationships are more likely to experience higher level of WFE, because they will obtain more salient organizational resources through supervisors’ social network, such as more enriched work opportunities, autonomy, valuable information, social support or other socio-emotional interactions [7]. Thus, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: LMX is positively related to WFE.

LMX and Work Engagement.

Work engagement has been defined as a positive, work-related state of mind [8]. Engaged employees have high levels of energy, are enthusiastic about, inspired by and proud of their work. To be competitive in the marketplace, organizations have to reduce costs and maximize profit. Engaged employees are a key element of these goals. Engaged employees can contribute to profitability through their drive and energy to be productive, exhibiting enhanced in-role job performance and extra-role behaviors, and less likely to leave the organization [9]. By retaining talented people and motivating them to implement the company’s strategy, an engaged workforce can be a competitive advantage to an organization.

This study suggests that the relationship between LMX and work engagement can be best understood via the conservation of resources (COR) theory. According to COR theory, people are motivated to obtain, retain, protect, and foster their resources (e.g. autonomy, developmental opportunities, social support) [10]. In particular, it has been argued that state engagement—in which individuals approach their work with feelings of energy and enthusiasm—is most likely to occur when individuals have high levels of work-related resources [9]. Leaders, in their inherent position of power, are an important source of job sources. As stated earlier, LMX acts as a social influence such that supervisors treat subordinates in higher quality relationships more favorably than subordinates in lower quality relationships. In high LMX relationships, leaders provide employees with additional resources like autonomy, information, and the opportunities to participate in the decision-making
process [11]. On the contrary, employees having low-quality LMX receive less supervisory support and fewer other job-related resources. Thus, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

**H2:** LMX is positively related to work engagement.

**Work Engagement as a Mediator.**

Whereas researchers have established positive links to engagement at work, the effects of work engagement on work-family interactions still remain unclear. Greenhaus and Powell (2006) suggested that work-to-family enrichment occurs when resources gained in work role either directly improve performance in the family role or indirectly through the influence on positive affect [5]. For example, resources obtained at work may result in better performance at work, which may create more positive affect at work, ultimately transferring to more positive affect in the family domain.

Fredrickson (2001) has suggested that employees’ experiences of positive emotions are an integral component of a comprehensive conceptualization of work engagement [12]. As mentioned above, research has consistently found engagement to positively predict various positive organizational outcomes. Researchers argue that such positive outcomes may be explained by the heightened positive emotions of engaged employees [9]. It is reasonable to suggest that the heightened positive emotions of engaged employees will transferring to more positive affect in the family domain. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H3:** WFE is positively related to work engagement.

This study is also interested in the mediating role of work engagement in explaining the relation between LMX and WFE. Thus far, we proposed LMX to be related to WFE and work engagement. Also, we proposed to work engagement be related to WFE. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that work engagement can be an important mediating mechanism in the relationship between LMX and WFE. That is, the resourceful environment in the high-quality LMX relationships will facilitate employees’ work engagement, which, in turn, the positive emotions caused by engagement enhances their WFE. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H4:** Work engagement will mediate the positive relation between LMX and WFE.

**Methods**

**Participants.**

The participants in this study were full-time employees in China. In all, 138 (76.7%) participants completed all sections of the survey. Out of these participants, 52.9% are female, with the majority (58%) being married. Approximately 73.2% were 40 years old or less.

**Measurement.**

All the measurements were rated on a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 = (strongly agree).

Work-to-family enrichment (WFE) was measured using the 7-item scale developed by Tang et al. (2007) under the Chinese settings [13]. In the present study, Cronbach’s α for WFE was .78.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) was measured using the LMX-7, a unidimensional scale from Scandura and Graen, and Novak (1986) [14]. In the present study, Cronbach’s α was .85.

Work engagement was measured by using six items which were taken from Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006)’s questionnaire [8]. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .81. According to previous research, this study statistically controlled for position (1 = non-supervisory, 2 = first-level supervisor, 3 = middle-level manager, 4 = top-level manager) gender
(1 = male, 2 = female), age (1=40 or less, 2=more than 40), and marriage status (1=single, 2=married) in all analyses to rule out alternative explanations for our findings.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlational Analyses.

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of all study variables. The LMX variable mean score ($M = 3.08, SD = .73$) shows that employees are positive about the relationship with their supervisor. Furthermore, it is shown that employees experience fairly high WFE ($M = 3.85, SD = .68$) and fairly high work engagement ($M = 3.17, SD = .72$). An examination of the zero-order correlations of the variables demonstrated that all of the study variables were correlated in the direction expected. LMX was positively related to both WFE ($r = .20, p < .01$) and work engagement ($r = .39, p < .001$), and work engagement was positively related to WFE ($r = .29, p < .001$).

Hypothesis Testing.

This study used hierarchical multiple regressions to test Hypotheses 1 - 4. In all analyses, we entered the control variables of position, gender, age and marital status first into the regression model, and then the primary study variables. Table 2 shows the regression results for estimated coefficients of the mediation model.

Baron and Kenny (1986) proposed a four-step approach to establish the conditions for mediation. As can be seen in Table 2, after controlling for several demographic variables, LMX was significantly related to work engagement (Model 2; $\beta = .28, p < .01$). Thus, Condition (a) for the mediation effect
was met. WFE was also significantly related to LMX (Model 4; β = .21, p < .05), satisfying Condition (b). WFE was positively related to work engagement (Model 5; β = .38, p < .01). Thus, Condition (c) was met. Further, after work engagement was taken into account, the effect of LMX on WFE was non-significant (Model 5; β = .11, p > .05), which suggests a full mediation effect. Thus, Condition (d) was satisfied. To provide a more rigorous test of the mediation effect, we used Preacher and Hayes’s (2004) macro to test the indirect effect with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Results showed that the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect estimate [0.03, 0.18] did not contain zero, indicating that the indirect effect was significant. Taken together, Hypotheses 1-4 were supported, that is, LMX partially mediated the relationship between WFE and work engagement.

Discussion

Integrating LMX and work-family enrichment literature and the conservation of resources theory, this study examines the effects of LMX on WFE and work engagement. As predicted, this study found that the quality of LMX had a positive relationship with both employee WFE and work involvement, and work engagement acted as the mediator between LMX and WFE. This study emphasizes the value of high-LMX relationships for building a resourceful environment. In turn, this resourceful environment has important implications for employees’ work engagement and work-to-family enrichment. These findings of this study make several important contributions to the literature.

First, this study is one of the first to examine LMX as a predictor of work engagement. LMX and work engagement are two important constructs that have been extensively investigated in current organizational behavior research. Previous studies have consistently shown that work-related resources are positively associated with work engagement, such as opportunities for development, performance feedback, autonomy, skill variety, transformational leadership, and social support from colleagues and supervisors [9]. Some studies have examined the effects of supervisor support on employee work engagement, but little has been known about the effects of LMX. A recent study found that the quality of leader–follower relationship is crucial to reinforce employee’s engagement, and called for more studies to robust the linkage between them [15]. The results of the current study contribute to the existing literature by indicating empirically the linkage between LMX and work engagement in a non-western setting.

Second, this study extended the work-family enrichment literature by demonstrating work engagement as an outcome variable, responding to the call from Carlson et al. (2011) [16] to explore the outcomes of enrichment in the work domain. As an understudied area, more research is needed on how enrichment is related to work-related outcomes to make the case to organizations that enrichment is important and deserves attention. Given that it has been believed that work engagement relates to positive job-related attitudes, health and well-being, extra-role behavior, and job performance, the positive synergies between work and family should draw attention of scholars and practitioners as a facilitator to organizational success and individual personal growth.

Third, the results of this study also add to our existing knowledge on the relationship between LMX and work-family enrichment. Greenhaus and Powell (2006) suggest that resources are the key in the generation of enrichment. According the LMX theory, employees will be benefited from additional resources in high-quality relationships [7]. This study showed that a high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationship provides important resources which can facilitate WFE. Furthermore, results of the present study empirically demonstrate for the first time that work engagement acts as a mediator in the relation between LMX and WFE. This result also echo recent calls to investigate the underlying mechanisms and processes by which LMX exerts its influence on the employee outcomes [3].

The findings of this study also provide implications for management practitioners. As LMX has a direct effect on work engagement and an indirect effect on WFE, high-quality supervisor–subordinate relationship is the crucial success factor for promoting the positive work-family interactions and cultivating employees’ positive feelings about their jobs. Past studies
have evidenced that LMX is associated with leaders’ behaviors and personality [2]. In developing high-quality LMX, appropriate selection and trainings of managers are especially important. In addition, considering the importance of job resources for employee work-family interface and work-related emotional experiences, it may be fruitful for organizations to invest in building job resources more formally into the organizational system to provide employees with opportunities to grow and develop.

Acknowledgements
This research was financially supported by the Humanity and Social Science Youth foundation of Ministry of Education of China (12YJC630156), and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (D2155990), SCUT.

References


