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A Case Study on How the Team Leaders in the Chinese University Lead Their Teams: From the Perspective of LMX

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Abstract. The purpose of the current study aims to explore the leadership of the team leaders in a Chinese university from the perspective of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX). To fill this gap in the literature, the current study used a qualitative case-study method examining the factors that affect LMX at a Chinese university and the dimensions of LMX at a Chinese university. What emerged from the data was that: (1) all three participants considered followers' personalities an essential factor affecting the relationship between a leader and their followers; (2) the matching between leaders and followers in their abilities, efforts, and personal aspirations is an essential factor affecting the relationship between leaders and followers; (3) leaders' prior familiarity with followers is a critical factor affecting the relationship between leaders and followers; (4) the dimensions of leadership in the Chinese cultural context include mutual emotional support, trust, face, loyalty, commitment, and dedication; (5) there exists an element of paternal relationship in terms of the relationship between a leader and their followers in the Chinese culture.

Keywords. Leader-Member Exchange, LMX, leadership

Introduction

Creswell asserts that all qualitative research needs to be reflexive and suggests that the introduction of case studies can start with a vignette to explain the researcher's reflection on personal experiences related to the research topic and how these experiences will affect the interpretation of data Impact (Creswell, 2015). This case study originates from the researcher's reflections on the influence of western and eastern cultures on organizational leadership. The researcher grew up in China and completed his elementary to higher education in China. However, in the past two years of studying in the United States (U.S.), the researcher found that the relationship between leaders and followers shaped by interpersonal relationships characterized by individualism under the influence of Western culture showed different characteristics and attributes than that in the Chinese society. For instance, the Chinese embrace collectivism in a relation-oriented and high-power distance cultural context, while Americans embrace individualism in a low power distance cultural context (Thomas, 2015). In this regard, the leadership theory developed in the western cultural context is likely to show different features if set in the Chinese cultural context.

Research Question

The purpose of the current study aims to explore the leadership of the team leaders in a Chinese university from the perspective of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX). The current study seeks to examine the factors that affect LMX, namely the relationship between leaders and their followers in a Chinese university, and explore the dimensions of LMX of the three leaders in a Chinese university. Because the qualitative inquiries, especially case studies, involve asking the kinds of questions that focus on the why and how of human interaction (Agee, 2009), the central research question of this case study seeks to answer the question “how” and “why,” which invites a process of exploration and discovery. The central research question is, “how do the team leaders in a Chinese university lead their team members?” In order to answer the central questions, two sub-questions were raised: (a) What are the factors that affect LMX at a Chinese university? (b) What are the dimensions of LMX at a Chinese university?

Trustworthiness

The case study allows researchers to collect data from individuals and analyze them to develop a deep understanding of the case and explore specific issues. Conventional data analysis includes transcribing data from interviews, encoding the data, and categorizing and aggregating them into topics—the researcher in the current study used NVivo 10 software for coding.

Validity is traditionally understood as the correctness or precision of research, meaning how the phenomenon under study is accurately reflected. In a qualitative study, alternative terms for validity, such as credibility and plausibility, are sometimes used (Ritchie et al., 2014). Creswell (2015) asserted that for qualitative research, the validation test would be carried out from the lens of researchers, research participants, readers, and reviewers using triangulation, member checking, and external review. Specifically, the credibility of the current study was enhanced by engaging reflectivity and triangulation from the lens of the researcher. For example, because the researcher grew up in China, he already understands Chinese culture. However, to avoid the influence of the researcher’s personal experience and background for the current study, the researcher purposefully avoids using leading questions in the interview that might derive from the researcher’s inherent assumptions or hidden prejudices. In line with the data triangulation, evidence in the current study was collected from three different participants in a Chinese university. When it comes to the validation from the lens of the participants, the researcher asked each participant to affirm or amend a transcript based on their understanding of the interview, which encouraged accuracy and genuine input from participants while supporting the researchers’ efforts to maintain participant confidentiality and integrity of the research.

Reliability is understood as whether the current study would be repeated if another study was undertaken. In qualitative research, the terms confirm-ability or dependability are sometimes used to refer to reliability (Ritchie et al., 2014). The researcher anticipates the ability of future researchers to replicate the current research, thus creating an opportunity for increased validity through replication. Specifically, the researcher documents the steps for conducting this research and creates an audit trail of any changes that may have occurred during the current study. The sample size is small in the current study, meaning that transferability may be problematic, which must be acknowledged. However, suppose one gives proper weight to the specific cases and presents generalizations in the current study as a working hypothesis rather than a conclusion, integrity can be maintained by adequately qualifying any generalization or extrapolation (Patton, 1990).

Ethical concerns

The researcher had completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative's introductory course for student researchers on Human Participants Research Curriculum. The researcher assumed that he would interview both adult males and females. Of the three research participants, there were two adult women and one adult male. The women were interviewed in their own offices in the university, which protects the moral integrity of both the researcher and participants.

Literature Review

Background of Leader-Member Exchange

The effectiveness of leadership has always been a central topic in the study of organizational behavior. In the past decades, there has been a proliferation of research concerned with the trait theory of leadership, the behavior theory of leadership, and the contingency theory of leadership (Northouse, 2018; Yukl, 2013). However, all these theories studied the effectiveness of leadership only from the perspective of leaders (Boies & Howell, 2006). LMX is the leadership theory that first addressed the influences of followers on the interactions with their leaders (Northouse, 2018). Over recent years, studies regarding LMX have continued to expand with a considerable increase in the number of publications (Lapierre et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2005).

Concept of Leader-Member Exchange

LMX is a relationship-based leadership theory that emphasizes the two-way or dyadic relationship between leaders and followers (Graen & Bien, 1995). In comparison with the trait theory of leadership, behavior theory of leadership, and the contingency theory of leadership, LMX has manifested its uniqueness in several ways. First, LMX focused on the independent binary link between leaders and their followers, which is referred to as the Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL)(Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Second, LMX assumed that leaders would develop different relationships with their followers. Specifically, leaders tended to establish relationships with their "in-group" members based on social exchanges that emphasized mutual emotional support, mutual trust, and loyalty, whereas leaders develop a relationship with their "out-group" members merely based on the job description in the work contract (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Northouse, 2018; Yukl, 2013). Because "in-group" status may play a significant part in the employees' professional success, "in-group" members fought to maintain their superior identities with their leaders, and "out-group" members aspired to become an "in-group" members (Northouse, 2018)

Dimensions of Leader-Member Exchange

Liden and Maslyn (1998) proposed that LMX had four dimensions: Affect, Loyalty, Contribution, and Professional Respect. Affect is understood as the mutual fondness that members of the dyad have for one other, which is predominately motivated by interpersonal attraction (Duncan & Herrera, 2014). Loyalty is understood as how the leaders and their followers support each other toward realizing organizations' goals (Duncan & Herrera, 2014). Contribution is referred to as the efforts made by leaders and their followers to achieve organizational goals (Duncan & Herrera, 2014). Professional respect is understood as how leaders and their followers perceive each other's professional reputations (Duncan & Herrera, 2014). The instrument, The Multidimensional Measure of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX-MDM), was also developed by Liden and Maslyn (1998) to measure LMX.

Afterward, a number of studies regarding LMX have substantiated the importance of trust in LMX. For example, Gomez and Rosen (2001) asserted that trust was an essential component of LMX because trust played a significant part in developing relationships inside LMX. Brower et al. (2009) argued that trust and respect were the foundations upon which high-quality LMX might be realized. According to Den Hartog (2018), if a leader used coercion in exercising leadership, followers were likely to lose their trust in leaders, eventually changing the high-quality relationship between a leader and their followers into a low-quality relationship.

Antecedent factors to LMX

Many variables have been studied as the antecedent factors that would affect leadership effectiveness. Extant research has shown that the personalities of followers may be positively related to the effectiveness of LMX. For example, according to Bergner (2020), the Big Five personality traits, such as openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and vocational interests, raise the importance of cognitive capacity in leadership and entrepreneurship. The study conducted by Bergner also suggested that the combination of personality traits or interests with cognitive ability is the most potent for predicting leaders' success (Bergner, 2020). Moreover, Han et al. (2019) drew on theories regarding followership and trust to examine the influence of employees' proactivity on their leaders' attitudes, cognition, and behaviors. The results suggested that employees' proactive personality was positively related to leaders' cognition and affect-based trust (Han et al., 2019). Wang et al. (2019) also explored the relationship between leadership styles, proactive personality, and career skills. The results suggested that there was a stronger relationship between leadership style and career skills when employees scored higher in proactive personality (Wang et al., 2019).

Extant research has also suggested that the similarity between a leader and their followers may be positively related to the effectiveness of LMX. For example, Lee et al. (2018) examined the underlying mediating mechanism of whether LMX would mediate the relationship between emotional intelligence and followers' attitudes and behaviors. The results suggested that LMX partially mediates the relationship between follower E.I. and attitudinal outcomes and organizational citizenship behavior (Lee et al., 2018). In particular, the similarity of E.I. between the leaders and their followers was positively related to LMX rated by both leaders and their followers (Lee et al., 2018). By drawing upon the similarity-attraction theory, Parent-Rocheleau (2020) studied the relationship between the leader and follower similarity and the quality of dyadic relationships. The results suggested that leader and follower similarity in psychological capital is associated with high dyadic relationship quality. In contrast, the dissimilarity situations when followers scored lower in PsyCap than the leader would diminish relationship satisfaction and citizenship behaviors (Parent-Rocheleau, 2020).

Contextual Factors

Extant research has suggested that under the influence of Confucianism, face and guanxi are two typical cultural features in a collectivist cultural context, such as China. Considering the impact of face and guanxi in interpersonal relationships in Chinese culture (King & Wei, 2018; Fu & Xie, 2019), the relationship between leaders and their followers is likely to have different dimensions than those in western culture.

The concept of face in Chinese organizations is congruent with the collectivist culture that underpins ancient and contemporary Chinese society (King & Wei, 2018; Ran & Zhao,

2018). For instance, the face issue has been ingrained in Chinese culture throughout history and has not changed even in modern times. Under the influence of collectivist culture, according to Huang and Hu (2004), corporate conflict management focused more on achieving collective goals and sustaining interpersonal ties. Employees within organizations were expected to preserve their own and others' faces in order to maintain harmony and mutual benefit in interpersonal relationships.

According to Wong et al. (2016), the notion of *guanxi*, which is associated with interpersonal interactions in China, was also a significant mechanism of interpersonal governance in Chinese society. For instance, according to Fu and Xie (2019), Chinese leaders' fatherly generosity toward their followers, which was regarded as paternalistic leadership (Northouse, 2018), reflected the *guanxi* or the interpersonal interaction between leaders and their followers. Therefore, The notion of *guanxi*, which stresses the importance of interpersonal and intergroup harmony built on particular ties, such as trust and mutuality, may significantly influence the effectiveness of LMX, namely the relationship between leaders and followers in the Chinese cultural context (Arnesen & Foster, 2018; Zhang & Gill, 2019).

Research Method

The researcher used a qualitative research method to explore the research question (how team leaders in a Chinese university lead their teams). Because the case study best examines "how" and "why" questions to develop an in-depth description and analysis of a single case, the qualitative approach that best fits this research is that of a case study.

Population for the Study

The team leaders in a Chinese university are the study population. The researcher limited the sample to three leaders in a Chinese university in Hangzhou city in Zhejiang province in China. According to Ritchie et al. (2014), published lists are handy for generating a sample of organizations or professionals. Therefore, when it comes to the sampling frames in the current study, published lists in the Chinese university are appropriate existing sources.

Sampling Strategy

The purposive strategy is used as one of the sampling strategies in the current study. The selection of participants is criterion-based or purposive. This is because these participants have features that will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and questions regarding LMX in the Chinese context. Maximum variation sampling is also used as one of the sampling strategies. According to Creswell (2018), this approach consists of determining in advance some criteria that differentiate the sites and participants and then selecting sites or participants that are different in the requirements, which will increase the possibility that the findings in the case studies will reflect differences or other perspectives. In the current study, participants from different levels of leadership in the university, such as the Professor or Associate Professor level, the Lecturer level, and the Master Student level, are deliberately selected to reflect particular features of the sampled population (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Setting

The researcher limited the sample to a university in Hangzhou city of Zhejiang province in China to provide a more cohesive population and accommodate the scale of research

resources available. The researcher intentionally a middle-scale state university within this geographic area, a representative and typical example of a Chinese university.

Sample Matrix

Table 1 presents a sample matrix that helps identify this research's purposive or criterion-based sample. Creswell (2007) states that the sample size ranges from as little as one to as many as 325. Creswell then asserts the typical range to be three to ten. In this case, the researcher's goal was to interview one to three participants in each category. It is hoped that not only the critical constituencies of relevance to the subject matter are covered, but enough diversity is also included within each of the critical criteria so that the impact of the characteristics concerned can be explored to control for the selection criterion (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Table 1

Criterion Based Sample Matrix

Levels of Team leaders	University in China		
	Small scale	Middle Scale	Large Scale
Professors or Associate Professor	1-3	1-3	1-3
followers of professors or Associate Professor	1-3	1-3	1-3
Lecturers	1-3	1-3	1-3
followers of Lecturers	1-3	1-3	1-3
Master Students	1-3	1-3	1-3
followers of Master Students	1-3	1-3	1-3

Implementing the Design

Based on the sample matrix, though it is ideal for examining interviews from all three types of universities in China (small, middle, and large scale), the researcher did not implement the entire design. Instead, the researcher limits the implementation to examine only three interviews from a medium-scale university due to the restraint of access to team leaders in other universities. The researcher consulted with the published list in the university and made appointments with three participants who represented team leaders at the professor level, lecturer level, and student level, respectively. All three participants confirmed their willingness to participate in the current study. Although interviewing both the three leaders and their followers could provide a fuller picture of LMX, subject to the time restraint, the current study only interviewed the leaders but not their followers. Although the sample size in the current study is relatively small, the three participants represented the team leaders from three different levels in the university, which could enable in-depth exploration of the phenomena under investigation.

The interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes each. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. The researcher analyzed each transcription with the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) called NVivo by QSR International. Beginning with a process of open coding, the researcher coded each interview based on the content the participants provided. The researcher then brought those nodes together under themes that emerged from the coding and the literature review. Due to qualitative research

techniques, the findings indicated the depth of information and description available, even in a small sample.

Description of Participants

The three participants interviewed were from the same university. The participants' names were changed to protect their privacy. Leader 1, a 45-year-old woman, is an associate professor of Chinese studies who works as the team leader in the international education department and oversees a group of Chinese lecturers who teach Chinese to international students. Leader 2, a 25-year-old girl, is a master's student of fashion design who acts as a leader of the marketing team in the fashion design department; she oversees a group of five undergraduate students. Leader 3, a 46-year-old man, is a lecturer on fashion design and a leader in a project that focuses on designing new types of clothes. His team includes two master's students and two lecturers.

Findings

Theme One: Factors Affecting LMX

All participants asserted that the degree of relationship established between leaders and their followers would be affected by different factors. Almost every participant pointed out that at least one factor positively or negatively affected the relationship with their followers. Figure 1 presents the factor affecting LMX.

Followers' Personality

All three participants considered followers' personalities an essential factor in the relationship between a leader and their followers. Leader 1 pointed out that in Chinese society, "cheerful followers" will contribute to better communications and cooperation. Leader 2 also asserted that although she was willing to help all her followers, whether cheerful or not, it was easier for her to establish a closer relationship with her "cheerful followers." Leader 3 also believed he was more likely to reach a decent relationship with a cheerful person. He elaborated that one of his followers had been in a depressed psychological state because of the negative influence of his family. This follower's negative emotions seemed like a "bottomless pit, absorbing all his passions." He deliberately chooses to keep away from him in terms of work and interpersonal relationships.

The Matching of Leaders and followers in terms of Their Abilities, Efforts, and Personal aspirations

Among the three participants, both Leader 1 and Leader 3 pointed out that matching the ability, efforts, and personal aspirations of a leader and their followers was an essential factor in forming a positive relationship between a leader and their followers. Leader 1 said that because she was a very "capable person," if her followers could match her ability, she could easily engage in deep communication and exchange personal affections beyond work scope with her followers. She said, "although some of her followers are unwilling to teach the foreign students with poor Chinese proficiency, some of her competent and responsible followers would take on these more difficult tasks." She not only appreciates such followers who would like to take on challenging tasks but also begins to develop a personal and close friendship with them.

Leader 3 also believes that the level of effort and awareness of each other's actions will also affect his relationship with his followers. He asserted that, in general, because a leader's working ability was always better than their followers, leaders often hope that their

followers can “work as hard as they do.” He said that, in his work, he selected two postgraduate students to participate in one of his research projects. Although the two followers were very young, they worked very hard and were dedicated and committed to each project. Especially with his spiritual encouragement and support, they would burst out more creativity. As a result, he was very willing to develop a harmonious and close relationship with his followers. However, in his mind, leading followers who were not as active as he was felt like pushing a dead horse upward to the top of a mountain, which was miserable and exhaustive.

Additionally, Leader 3 also argued that matching the leader’s aspirations with his followers would affect his relationship with his followers. He believed that if his followers’ aspirations were “consistent with his aspirations,” they would be able to work more efficiently to achieve outstanding work results. Conversely, if his followers’ aspirations are “inconsistent with his aspirations,” they would not have many deep cooperation and communication opportunities. He said he had an outstanding follower who received a professional clothing design education in Italy and was good at finding inspiration from Chinese and European clothing cultures. However, because this follower was more focused on the research of clothing culture theory and was not interested in a clothing design research project he was responsible for, they failed to develop a close relationship.

Age

Among the three participants, only Leader 2 pointed out that the age of followers was an essential factor affecting the relationship between leaders and followers. Leader 2 asserted that the age difference between her and her followers would affect how closely she established relationships with her followers. She said although she was her team leader, the age gap between her and her followers was only 1 to 2 years old. Because she and her followers belong to the “same age group and share common interests and hobbies,” it was easier to establish and maintain closer relationships.

Gender of followers

Among the three participants, only Leader 2 pointed out that gender was one of the critical factors affecting the relationship between leaders and followers. Leader 2 argued that many unmarried men and women in Chinese culture still maintained a more traditional and conservative interpersonal relationship. Because she was still single, she thought that having too close relationships with male followers may not be appropriate. “If the followers are girls, she would be willing to maintain a closer relationship with them”.

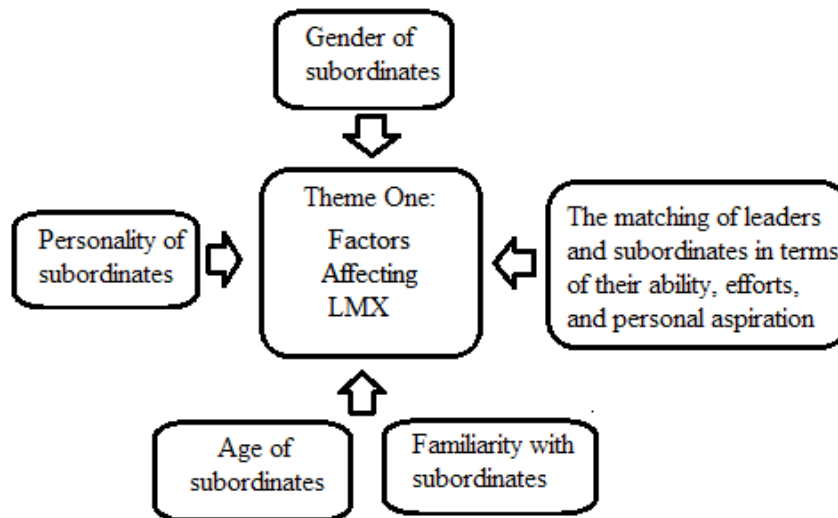
Familiarity with the followers

Among the three participants, both Leader 2 and Leader 3 pointed out that the level of familiarity with followers was a critical factor affecting the relationship between leaders and followers. Leader 2 argued she would develop a specific concept of “identity” spontaneously in the circle of acquaintances. She elaborated that if she found some of her followers “comes from her city,” she may have an affection towards that followers.

Leader 3 also pointed out that acquaintance was also one of the most critical factors influencing his relationship with his followers. He believed that due to Confucian traditional culture, the Chinese attached great importance to the element of acquaintances. The acquaintance seems to have an invisible binding force, which may help him form a closer relationship with his followers. Although he believed that contemporary society often held derogatory views on acquaintance relationships, he did think that acquaintance relationships

could produce positive outcomes. For instance, “the help acquaintances provide at weddings and funerals makes him feel warm. The acquaintance-like interpersonal relationship in the workplace makes him feel like “an extended family.” In his own life, this mode of taking care of each other dominates his thinking and actions in his interpersonal communication with his followers. For example, because he has worked with some of his followers for more than ten years, these followers became his acquaintance. In the workplace, he was likely to be more supportive of his followers, helping them to “preserve face” in front of others.

Figure 1
Factors Affecting LMX



Theme Two: Constructs of leadership
Emotional Support

As shown in Figure 2, mutual emotional support between leaders and followers is one of the dimensions of LMX. Leader 1 believed that in establishing relationships with her followers, she has more emotional support for some of her associates but less emotional support for others. She said that she had known some of her followers for more than 15 years, such as Angela. As a result, her “emotional connection and spiritual mutual support and understanding” toward Angela would naturally surpass other followers who had just arrived in her department. In the same way, Angela would respond to her emotional and spiritual mutual support, and their relationship developed even further. Additionally, Leader 1 also believed that more paternalistic humanistic care was given to followers who had close relationships with her. She elaborated that the management in the traditional Chinese culture has a paternalistic meaning, which emphasizes the traditional cultural relationship of the “father and son” and the “monarch and minister.” As a leader, she felt obliged to give “more mercy or paternal care” to her followers she knew well, and those followers would thus feel more grateful, encouraged, and motivated in their work.

Trust

Mutual trust between leaders and followers is one of the dimensions of LMX. Leader 3 believed that in the relationship with his followers, he had more confidence in those followers he knew well but less with those he was not close with. For some new colleagues, he may have

a purely working relationship with them. Once the work ended, his working relationship with them was over. But because he better understood his old colleague's background and personal characteristics, he usually put more trust in them. Leader 1 asserted that good character was an essential quality of a person. She elaborated that this is because Confucius, the ancient wise man of China, always emphasizes the cultivation of a person's morality. The followers she appreciated, recognized, and trusted to perform well were those who were trustworthy on a long-term basis, not on a short-term basis. In addition, both Leader 1 and Leader 3 held the view that as far as their more trusted followers were concerned, these followers could be more convinced that their leaders could fairly distribute the remuneration, give them fair pay, and provide them with appropriate opportunities. In other words, a more mutual trust allows their followers to develop a more positive attitude which is essential for them to boost work productivity and enthusiasm.

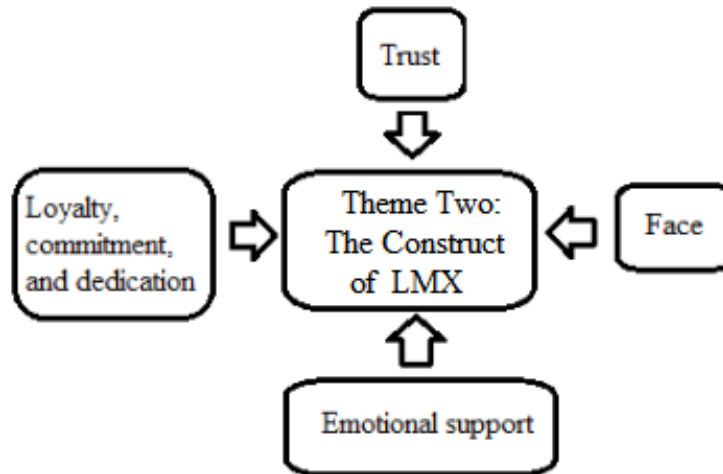
Face

Preserving the face of the followers is one of the dimensions of LMX. Leader 3 asserted that in his relationship with associates, he gave more favor to those followers he was closer with and purposefully preserved their faces. He believed that the Chinese principle of doing things emphasizes the "golden mean," reflected in how he treats his followers, such as preserving their faces. In his view, "preserving the faces" of his followers helps his followers get higher job satisfaction and be more loyal to him. However, in the process of dealing with some new colleagues or other followers whom he was not very close with or familiar with, although he would still show them respect and courtesy by adopting a "golden mean mindset," he would choose a more formal way of communication to work with them and give less favorable to them. He admitted that it seemed more necessary for him to "preserve the faces" of those he knew well than those he was unfamiliar with.

Loyalty, Commitment, and Dedication

Loyalty, commitment, and dedication are some of the dimensions of LMX. Leader 1 pointed out that her followers who developed a good relationship with her could always feel that she supports them; as a result, her followers could carry out future work with a more positive and loyal attitude. For instance, she found that her followers, to whom she was closer, often took the initiative to undertake more difficult teaching tasks. However, her followers, whom she was less familiar with and with or less close to, tended to evade their responsibilities to take on more difficult teaching tasks. In the same way, Leader 3 also believed that his followers who received extra affirmation and encouragement from him tended to be more committed. Leader 2 also pointed out that the followers who had a close relationship with her appeared to be more committed and dedicated in their design work. She said that followers who were closer to her always presented excellent final projects, but this seemed not to be the case with those to whom she was less close.

Figure 2
Constructs of LMX



Discussion

The first finding is that all three participants considered followers' personalities an essential factor affecting the relationship between a leader and their followers. For example, Leader 1 and Leader 3 believed that they were more likely to reach a decent relationship with a cheerful person. The negative side of a personality would adversely affect the relationship between a leader and their followers. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Han et al. (2019), which indicated that employees' proactive personality engenders their leaders' cognition-and affect-based trust, which positively influences empowering leadership. This is because the achievement of the ideal leadership effect in any organization is inseparable from the support and efforts of its followers. Cheerful followers are likely to take positive and proactive actions to control the environment instead of resorting to negative complaints, even in difficulties, which may contribute to establishing a high-quality relationship with their leaders. This finding suggests that Chinese universities should examine applicants' personalities when recruiting faculty and staff as the personalities would affect the relationship with their future leaders.

The second finding drawn from the study is that the degree of the matching between leaders and followers in their abilities, efforts, and personal aspirations is an essential factor affecting the relationship between leaders and followers. For example, Leader 1 believes that as a leader, the degree of matching of the ability between her and her followers would affect the establishment of relationships between them. Leader 3 assumed that the level of effort and awareness of each other's actions and the aspirations between leaders and their followers would also affect the quality of the relationship between a leader and their followers. Additionally, Leader 2 also believed that if she and her followers belonged to the same age group and were of the same gender, it would be easier for her to have deep emotional communication with her followers. This finding can be explained using the similarity-attraction paradigm, which suggests that if individuals shared strong similarities in terms of ideas, beliefs, and behavior patterns, they would be more attracted to one another (Wells & Aicher, 2013; Wollschlaeger & Diederich, 2020). This finding is consistent with the research suggesting that matching leaders and members in terms of their ability, preferences, and personality would positively impact the

quality of LMX (Townsend, 2002; Lee et al., 2018; McNatt & Judge, 2004; Parent-Rochelleau, 2020).

The third finding is that leaders' prior familiarity with followers is a critical factor affecting the relationship between leaders and followers. Compared with western cultures, the Chinese culture pays more attention to acquaintances, meaning that the Chinese may rely more on acquaintance relations to carry out social activities and maintain social exchanges than westerners do. In other words, the culture of acquaintance may determine the lifestyle and interaction of social members in Chinese society. This conclusion is consistent with the study conducted by Arnesen and Foster (2018), Wong et al. (2016), and Zhang & Gill, (2019), which suggested that *guanxi*, a term that delineated the unique connection and stressed the importance of maintaining interpersonal and intergroup harmony among acquaintances, was not only an important cultural and social concept in China but also the primary means of relational governance in Chinese society. This finding also shows for the first time that the issue of acquaintance is an essential issue for predicting the quality of the relationship between a leader and their followers at a university in China.

The fourth finding is that the dimensions of leadership in the Chinese cultural context include mutual emotional support, trust, face, loyalty, commitment, and dedication. Leader 1 believed that in establishing relationships with her followers, she would provide more emotional support for her followers with whom she was closer. Leader 3 thought that in establishing relationships with her followers, he had more trust in the followers he knew well and would preserve the faces of those followers he was more familiar with. All three participants asserted that as far as the followers they are closer with are concerned, they were more loyal to their leaders and organization, more committed, and more dedicated. These findings are consistent with the theory of LMX conducted by Liden and Maslyn (1998) and Gomez & Rosen (2001). In particular, it is worth noting that the current study suggested for the first time that team leaders' preserving the faces of their followers at a Chinese university was a dimension of LMX in the Chinese context. This finding was also in accord with the study conducted by Huang and Hu (2004), King and Wei (2018), and Ran and Zhao (2018), which suggested that organizational conflict management in a collectivist culture focused more on the realization of collective goals and the issues of preserving face in interpersonal relationships. Because the Chinese society is a typical conflict avoidance style under the collectivism, when in a conflict situation, the Chinese usually adopt a non-confrontational way to preserve each other's face (Yang & Li, 2018; Zhai, 2005).

The fifth finding is that there exists an element of paternal relationship in terms of the relationship between a leader and their followers in the Chinese culture, which emphasizes that leaders need to give their followers more humane care and favor. This is because Chinese Confucianism emphasizes the traditional cultural relationship of the father and son in Chinese management (Loy, 2020). This conclusion is consistent with the study conducted by Fu and Xie (2019), which suggested that leaders in Chinese organizations tended to treat their followers with fatherly benevolence.

Limitation

The current study has several limitations. First, in terms of the sample size, this study uses only three participants from the same university in China. Second, as far as the forms of data are concerned, only the interview is used as the primary approach in this qualitative study. Third, although the research question of the current study necessitates the use of a case study approach, amending the research questions and then using other relevant qualitative methods

to study the same subject of leadership in the Chinese cultural context is likely to give rise to other significant findings.

Recommendation

Future studies may consider taking samples from a larger scale to verify the transferability of the research results. In order to provide more adequate data on how the team leaders lead their followers in the Chinese university, the followers of those leaders need to be included in future studies. Additionally, because the current study is only conducted in a Chinese university, it is estimated that qualitative research in another cultural context is likely to produce other different results. Therefore, researchers are recommended to study LMX in cultural contexts other than China to expand our understanding of LMX.

Future researchers are advised to use multiple data collection approaches when it comes to data collection. For instance, a combination of observation, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials could be used to collect the qualitative data for analysis in the study.

Future research on cross-cultural studies of the leadership theories with the approach of ethnography is also needed. This is because the basic idea of ethnographic research is to describe how a cultural group develops actions, conversations, and behavioral patterns over time under interaction (Creswell, 2018). By selecting a cultural sharing group, such as a team under the leadership of a team leader in a Chinese university, future researchers could describe its team members' interaction with their leaders in detail in terms of their religious and belief patterns, thoughts, and behavior patterns, and linguistic practices.

Conclusion

The current study concludes that LMX, namely the degree of relationship established between leaders and followers, will be affected by followers' personalities and ages, the matching of leaders and associates in terms of their abilities, efforts, and personal aspirations, as well as the gender of followers. Moreover, the current study also concludes that the construct of LMX includes mutual emotional support and trust between leaders and followers, leaders' efforts to preserve the face of their followers, and the followers' loyalty, commitment, and dedication. The significance of the current study is that the findings could effectively help Chinese leaders understand their leadership behaviors, thereby improving their efficacy of LMX.

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