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Supervisor-Subordinate Agreement on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Quality:

Review and Testable Propositions

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**ABSTRACT**

Theoretical explanations are presented for the poor agreement between supervisor and subordinate leader-member exchange (LMX) descriptions that are commonly reported in the literature. We focus on (1) measurement deficiencies, and (2) differences in supervisor-subordinate perceptions of the LMX construct. Additionally, several other factors (e.g., information processing styles, attributional biases, etc.) are explored that may explain poor agreement. Testable propositions and suggestions for future research are developed and presented, and the applicability of the explanations to other leadership approaches is considered.

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Over the past three decades, leader-member exchange (LMX) theory has occupied an increasingly important place in the literature on leadership (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997; Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999). High quality exchange has frequently been found to be associated with higher subordinate performance and job satisfaction (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Liden et al., 1997), and sometimes with a number of other important “outcome” variables, such as increased organizational commitment (e.g., Duchon, Green, & Taber, 1986) and the receipt of mentoring and more rapid career advancement (e.g., Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994).

As research in this domain has become more sophisticated, in terms of theory (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), variable measurement (e.g., Liden & Maslyn, 1998) and data analysis (e.g., Schriesheim, Castro, & Yammarino, 2001), important issues have continued to be addressed. One such issue involves supervisor-subordinate agreement on LMX. Recently, it has been recommended by some theorists (e.g., Schriesheim, Neider, & Scandura, 1998) that joint (supervisor and subordinate) measurement and dyadic analyses be employed due to the fact that supervisor-described leader-member exchange (SLMX) typically correlates only modestly with subordinate-described leader-member exchange (LMX). In fact, Schriesheim et al. (1998, p. 307) summarize a number of studies in which SLMX-LMX correlations range from a high of .50 to a low of .16. Additionally, with the 24 samples that they located (total  $N = 3,460$ ), Gerstner and Day (1997) reported a meta-analytic average correlation of .29 (.37 when corrected for measurement error). This is only slightly higher than the self-supervisor correlations typically found in studies of performance rating agreement (corrected average  $r = .35$ ; Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988). All of this evidence makes it difficult to conclude that SLMX and LMX are actually measuring a single construct. This may raise serious concerns about some of the

foundations of knowledge on leader-member exchange, and this appears inconsistent with the most current theoretical conceptualization of LMX as a mutually shared relationship (Dansereau, Yammarino, & Markham, 1995; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

LMX has been defined as the quality of exchange between leaders and each of their followers. Moving through the role-making process, the two parties interact and the relationship between them reaches an equilibrium or balance through repeated interaction episodes (Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000; Graen & Scandura, 1987). Thus, the quality of the relationship should be mutually perceived (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). In fact, according to Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) the exchange relationship is a separate domain from the individuals involved in the relationship, and it is *objective*, not *perceptive*. Based on these arguments, SLMX and LMX should be seen as two measures of the same construct and one would expect that both reports should converge at least moderately well.

Unfortunately, and contrary to this expectation, SLMX-LMX correlations reported in the literature are typically low (as mentioned above). This may be viewed as indicative of fundamental problems such as construct invalidity, poor measurement, or inappropriate data-analytic procedures.

First, poor agreement raises a major threat to the construct validity of LMX because the lack of agreement indicates low convergent validity (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Since SLMX and LMX can be conceptualized as two methods (or perspectives) of measuring the same leader-member exchange construct, convergence between them should be at least moderate (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). However, low convergent validity may instead mean that SLMX and LMX are two separate constructs rather than two perspectives on a single construct. This leads to another problem: Low agreement may affect the generalizability of LMX research findings. It is

very likely that findings with an LMX measure cannot be readily generalized to SLMX relationships (and vice versa). For example, Wakabayashi and Graen (1984) discovered a stronger relationship with outcomes when using subordinate LMX perceptions. They believed that the insufficient explanatory power of SLMX was partly due to the low level of SLMX-LMX agreement.

Second, low agreement may reflect psychometric problems inherent in the LMX scales, such as measurement inequivalence or lack of content validity. For example, the LMX construct has been operationalized with many different scales (Schriesheim et al., 1999). However, most of them have not been developed and validated through systematic psychometric studies that have included the examination of measurement equivalence. Nonequivalent items may exist for all of these LMX measures when they are applied to leader and member groups, especially when administering matched supervisor and subordinate versions of the LMX-7 scale (which is recommended as the soundest LMX scale; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Low agreement is actually expected to occur when scale items are not interpreted in the same manner across leaders and members.

Third, low agreement may raise questions regarding the level of analysis that should be employed in LMX research. Although LMX theory clearly specifies the dyad as its level of analysis (Dansereau, 1995), poor SLMX-LMX agreement implies an operative “individual within dyad” level (i.e., large within dyad variance) instead of the “between dyad” or “dyad within group” levels that have usually been proposed in the literature (e.g., Dansereau et al., 1995; Hall & Lord, 1995; Schriesheim, Castro, Zhou, & Yammarino, 2001).

Finally, the lack of convergence between SLMX and LMX reports may reflect substantive differences that exist between leader and member perspectives. It is possible that

dyad members may not perceive LMX relations in the same manner and this will no doubt affect the formation, development, and effectiveness of leader-member relationships since some degree of mutuality or shared understanding is at the core of a functional exchange relationship (Blau, 1964).

The poor SLMX-LMX correlation has begun to attract the attention of some researchers (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) suggest that the degree of leader-member agreement can be used as an index of data quality. Other researchers (e.g., Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994) believe that leader-member agreement should be examined as a relevant independent or dependent variable. In any event, a few initial and tentative explanations have been offered as to why low agreement exists between leaders' and members' ratings of their relationship. For example, in their meta-analysis, Gerstner and Day (1997: 837) suggest that, "LMX is more reliably assessed from a member's perspective than from a leader's perspective.... Leaders may have a somewhat more complex, multidimensional construction of exchange quality than members as indicated by the lower overall LMX [coefficient] alpha [reliability] estimate from a leader's perspective." Minsky (2002) proposes a few relational characteristics such as demographic similarity, value similarity, perceived similarity, communication, feedback, and role clarity that may contribute to leader-member LMX agreement. Additionally, even though Schriesheim et al.'s (1999) review did not address the low agreement issue directly, they identified and discussed several concerns about the validity of the LMX construct and its measurement. Furthermore, Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, and Dansereau (2005), in addition to Schriesheim et al. (1999), have expressed serious reservations about the level of analysis that has typically been employed in LMX research. Both of these factors (measurement validity and incorrect specification of levels of analysis) may contribute to problems in leader-member

agreement. Unfortunately, despite recent increased recognition of the low agreement problem, it still remains a largely neglected concern and there has been almost no published theory that deals with this issue. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to develop and propose testable theoretical propositions concerning poor SLMX-LMX agreement. This should facilitate and encourage future theorization and empirical research to address the important questions in this area. Additionally, as we note in the conclusion to this paper, many of these concerns may apply to other approaches in the leadership domain. Thus, these approaches may be further enriched by attention to the issues that we raise herein.

### **RIVAL EXPLANATIONS FOR POOR AGREEMENT**

Although scant theory exists in the LMX literature about leader-member agreement, agreement among different rater sources has been more extensively examined in other fields such as performance appraisal, leadership behavior, cognitive and attribution theory, and perceptual differences (cf. Duarte, Goodson, & Klich, 1994; Engle & Lord, 1997; Facticeau & Craig, 2001; Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988; London, 1995; Lord & Maher, 1991; Martinko & Gardner, 1987; Pulakos & Wexley, 1983). One of the most consistent findings is that ratings obtained from different sources generally do not converge well. More specifically, a number of explanations have been offered to account for why leaders and followers do not agree in their ratings, especially with respect to performance appraisal.

In their review, Campbell and Lee (1988) discussed three explanations: informational, cognitive, and affective constraints. First, supervisor-subordinate discrepancies may result from differing cognitions about job requirements (which are usually caused by role ambiguity and lack of feedback; Jackson & Schuler, 1985). If the initial understanding of job responsibilities and evaluative criteria differ, lack of agreement in ratings may be inevitable. Second, due to the



complexity of most rating processes, evaluators typically use a limited number of cognitive schemas to categorize ratees when making judgments about performance (DeNisi, Cafferty, & Meglino, 1984). Once categorized, information that is inconsistent with the category is usually undervalued or discounted. Thus, agreement is not likely when the leader and the subordinate do not share similar cognitive schemas. Third, performance appraisal processes may trigger psychological defense mechanisms (e.g., denial, selective memory, etc.) and then result in self-serving bias as suggested by attribution theory (Feldman, 1981; Martinko, 2002). According to this theory, actors (i.e., employees) tend to attribute good performance to their own behavior and blame environmental factors for poor performance. Conversely, raters (i.e., supervisors) are more likely to attribute good performance to external factors and poor performance to the actors themselves. Such bias would consequently lead to discrepancies in performance ratings.

Harris and Schaubroeck (1988) suggested two other major causes for evaluation discrepancies. The first explanation is that raters may have different opportunities to observe actors' work behavior and that differing observational opportunities may account for disagreement among performance ratings (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). Second, raters at different organization levels may have different conceptualizations of what constitutes effective performance and/or that they may weight performance dimensions differently. This suggests that raters at different levels (e.g., supervisors and subordinates) may disagree on the overall rating as well as on the ratings of specific performance dimensions.

In a similar vein, Schrader and Steiner (1996) investigated another source of rater disagreement: differential comparison standards. This phenomenon occurs when raters select a different standard (e.g., different individuals, groups, etc.) as the referent against which they compare a ratee's performance. They concluded that different comparison standards are

responsible for the poor agreement among raters and, in particular, that managers tend to use different standards than do their subordinates. Their results indicated that more explicit and objective comparison standards produced higher levels of interrater agreement.

Taking a different perspective, Fecteau and Craig (2001) proposed measurement inequivalence as a more fundamental contributing factor to the lack of convergence in performance ratings. If supervisors and subordinates do not have equivalent interpretations of performance measurement items, their responses to these items will almost certainly differ. Fecteau and Craig were able to establish the measurement equivalence of a multidimensional performance rating instrument across self, peer, supervisor, and subordinate sources, suggesting that lack of agreement may be less a function of measurement problems than of substantive rater differences.

Lastly, Viswesvaran, Schmidt, and Ones (2002) adopted a multidimensional view of the performance construct and distinguished between two general explanations for poor rating agreement: the effects of a lack of construct-level convergence and the effects of rating difficulty. They believed that different raters may have different perceptions of the performance construct (i.e., the underlying performance dimensions) and that these construct-level differences will reduce convergence in their overall performance ratings. However, even when raters are assessing the same performance dimensions, perfect convergence between self and supervisory ratings cannot be expected due to the existence of rating difficulty (i.e., the biasing effects of measurement error). Furthermore, the level of agreement may vary across dimensions because of different levels of rating difficulty associated with each. According to Viswesvaran et al. (2002), the lack of construct-level convergence is a more fundamental threat to rating agreement since it

precludes the possibility of perfect agreement even after the biasing effect of rating difficulty is eliminated.

Although the explanations presented above help explain poor inter-rater agreement in general, not all of them apply to SLMX-LMX agreement. This is because the core of leader-member exchange is the relationship that is shared between the leader and the follower--it is not an attribute or behavior of just one party (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). For example, observational opportunity may not be an appropriate explanation for low SLMX-LMX agreement because both leader and follower interact with each other to form the working relationship. They should therefore share many (if not most) opportunities to observe that relationship. Consequently, this paper focuses on two particularly relevant explanations: measurement deficiencies and perceptual differences about the LMX construct. First, poor agreement on LMX ratings may reflect measurement deficiencies or a "tool problem". That is, leaders and members may interpret the same LMX survey items differently (Drasgow, 1987; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000), resulting in different ratings. Additionally, the referents to which LMX measurement items refer may be misaligned with the constructs that they are intended to measure. Second, LMX and SLMX descriptions may capture different perceptions and attributions of the exchange relationship. Obviously, these explanations are not mutually exclusive and they may operate simultaneously. In the following sections, pertinent literatures will be reviewed and propositions developed for future research. Some additional explanations will also be briefly considered before concluding.

### **Measurement Inequivalence**

Among the more simple, plausible, and easily remedied explanations for poor to modest agreement in supervisor and subordinate LMX ratings is a lack of measurement invariance or

equivalence--the fact that essentially the same survey questionnaire items may be interpreted differently by supervisors and subordinates (Drasgow, 1987). As noted by Fecteau and Craig:

If an instrument designed to measure a latent trait is invariant across groups, then individuals with the same standing on the trait will have the same expected score. Measurement equivalence does not require that the distributional properties (e.g., means, variances, etc.) be equal across the two groups; it only requires that the empirical relationships between indicators and the latent constructs they are intended to measure be equivalent.... If the assumption of measurement invariance does not hold, then ... the failure to find convergence in the scores obtained from members of different groups... may reflect the fact that the... observed scores from different groups are on a different scale and, therefore, are not directly comparable (Fecteau & Craig, 2001: 216).

Measurement inequivalence has long been recognized as problematic in cross-cultural or transnational research, where careful translation of survey items from one language into another may still yield measures that do not have the same meaning in different cultures (cf. Cheung & Rensvold, 1999; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). Recent research also shows that the lack of invariance is a critical issue in other multigroup research domains, such as supervisor-subordinate agreement on performance appraisals (e.g., Fecteau & Craig, 2001) and differential gender responses to survey measures (Eagle, Miles, & Icenogle, 2001).

Similarly, supervisor and subordinate raters may hold different interpretations of LMX scale items and therefore disagree on their responses to these items. Although no research has explicitly tested for the measurement equivalence of an LMX instrument across leader and member groups, there is some LMX research evidence suggesting the existence of measurement inequivalence. For example, LMX has been found to be more reliably assessed from a member's

perspective than from a leader's perspective (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Additionally, Graen and Scandura (1987) recognized that supervisors are reluctant to discriminate between lower and higher quality dyads and that it is not unusual to observe a central tendency pattern in superiors' LMX reports. Consequently, for example, it is likely that a supervisor may respond to the seventh item of the LMX-7 scale ("How would you characterize your working relationship with your subordinate;" Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) differently than would his/her subordinate assessing the same relationship. Thus, empirical studies should be undertaken to test whether measurement inequivalence is a contributing factor to the disappointing levels of leader-member exchange agreement commonly reported in the literature. If the lack of agreement is mainly due to a measurement inequivalence problem, the SLMX-LMX correlation can then be enhanced when inequivalent items are eliminated. Accordingly, the following propositions are proposed for future research:

*Proposition 1: Current LMX scales contain items that have measurement inequivalence across supervisors and subordinates.*

*Proposition 2: The correlation between SLMX and LMX scores increases when only equivalent scale items are employed.*

(It should be mentioned here that these two propositions do not apply to the multidimensional LMX scale of Liden and Maslyn, 1998, because its supervisor version asks different questions than those on the subordinate version; see Maslyn and Uhl-Bien, 2001, for further details.)

To test these two propositions, tests of measurement equivalence (e.g., Cheung & Rensvold, 1999; Fecteau & Craig, 2001; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000) would first need to be conducted on leader-member exchange descriptions that are collected from subordinates and supervisors (Proposition 1). Then, non-equivalent items would need to be removed from the

leader and subordinate exchange measures and the residual scales correlated. This correlation would then be compared with the correlation obtained by the original measures (with the non-equivalent items still included) (Proposition 2). Testing for statistically significant differences should recognize the fact that the original and equivalent measures are not independent (i.e., they are correlated) and accordingly employ a suitable statistical test (cf. McNemar, 1969, p. 158).

### **Misalignment in Scale Referents (or Item Wording)**

Dansereau, Alutto, and Yammarino (1984) and Dansereau et al. (1995) suggest another measurement possibility that may account for poor LMX agreement: inconsistent item wording or misalignment in the referents that persons completing LMX measures are asked to employ.

Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) suggest that two sets of similar items can be used to measure subordinate- and supervisor-perceived LMX; that only minor wording changes need be made in the instruments employed. Thus, for example, it is suggested that one subordinate-perceived LMX-7 item should be, "How well does your leader understand your job problems and needs?", while the corresponding supervisor-perceived SLMX-7 item should be worded, "How well do you understand your follower's job problems and needs?" (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 237).

Essentially, the referent for the two illustrative items given above concerns the degree to which the supervisor is believed to understand the subordinate's job problems and needs. The additional recommended LMX-7 and SLMX-7 items provided by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) employ the same approach with respect to the referent that the respondent is asked to employ.

An alternative approach to assessing leader-member exchange from leader and subordinate perspectives can be envisioned, however, and this may lead to higher levels of agreement among the dyads. Four types of items would be involved, one set designed to obtain perceptions from the subordinate and the leader about the subordinate's perspective and one set

designed to obtain perceptions from the subordinate and the leader about the leader's perspective (i.e., four types of items instead of two). Continuing the example from above, these four items would be worded something like this:

LMX1A. How well does your leader understand your job problems and needs?

LMX1B. How well does your subordinate think that you understand his/her job problems and needs?

SLMX1A. How well does your leader think that he/she understands your job problems and needs?

SLMX1B. How well do you understand your subordinate's job problems and needs?

The items with "A" suffixes (LMX1A, SLMX1A) would be completed by subordinates and those with "B" suffixes (LMX1B, SLMX1B) would be completed by their leaders. The LMX items are meant to obtain perceptions about leader-member exchange quality from the subordinate's point of view (as seen by both the subordinate and leader), while the SLMX items are meant to obtain perceptions about leader-member exchange quality from the leader's point of view (again, from both the subordinate and the leader).

Recognition of these four different item types thus leads to the following testable proposition:

*Proposition 3: The correlation between SLMX and LMX scores increases when both employ the same referent or perspective—either that of the subordinate or that of the leader.*

To test this proposition, data from the leader and the follower—using both perspectives—need be collected and correlated. For example, to measure agreement on the leader's perspective, the subordinates would need to complete items modeled after SLMX1A above, while the leaders

would need to complete matching items like SLMX1B. To measure agreement on the subordinate's perspective, the subordinates would need to complete items like LMX1A and the leaders would need to complete matching items similar to LMX1B. These correlations could then be tested against an agreement correlation produced by correlating subordinate descriptions that use the LMX-7 scale and supervisor descriptions that employ the SLMX-7 measure (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

As discussed earlier, discrepancies in the ratings provided by leaders and members may also arise from a host of other factors (e.g., attributional biases, rating difficulties, lack of construct-level convergence, etc.), none of which can be eliminated by using the same scale referents. Therefore, next we examine a more substantive explanation for low agreement (perceptual differences).

### **Perceptual Differences in the LMX Construct**

Although there are several possible perceptual differences that might be investigated, one seems particularly worth examining at this time: lack of construct-level convergence. London (1995) argued that disagreement among raters may occur because of the different organizational perspectives (self, subordinate, peer, or boss) they are taking. Raters from different perspectives may have different criteria or schema for evaluation and assign ratings accordingly. Likewise, leaders and their members bring certain expectations and assumptions about the characteristics of effective relationships to their dyadic interactions. Consequently, they may pay attention to different aspects or dimensions of the exchange that they consider important in relationship development and therefore describe the relationship differently.

**Differential conceptualizations of the LMX subdimensions.** The possibility of differential conceptualizations of LMX subdimensions has actually been suggested in the



literature. Gerstner and Day (1997) concluded that leaders might have a more complex, multidimensional view of exchange quality than do members. They recommended that correlating those facets of supervisor leader-member exchange that best match subordinate conceptions of leader-member exchange might result in higher LMX-SLMX correlations. In fact, the LMX construct has been recently defined by some researchers as multidimensional and several subdimensions have been specified and operationalized (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Schriesheim et al. (1999) also summarize many subdimensions that have been proposed in the literature as being part of the leader-member exchange construct. It therefore seems possible that leaders' perceptions of the exchange process may involve different dimensions than those involved in the members' perceptions.

*Proposition 4: Supervisors attend to different dimensions of the leader-member exchange relationship than do their subordinates.*

Proposition 4 needs to be addressed by research that asks leaders and subordinates to indicate the factors that they consider important when they judge the quality of their leader-member relationships. Such research may employ open-ended questions that are then content coded into categories or may use the extensive list of LMX relationship factors that Schriesheim et al. (1999) developed from their analysis of the LMX literature. An ideal study, of course, might use both open- and close-ended approaches to increase confidence in the obtained results. Regardless of how the data are collected, however, this research would need to test for differences in mention frequencies between the leader and subordinate respondents.

Given Proposition 4, one question that can be raised concerns what specific types of dimensions are more likely to capture leaders' or subordinates' attention. The sections that follow are devoted to this question.

**Two fundamental dimensions of LMX.** There are two basic dimensions that appear to be generally used to perceive human behavior and interaction: task and social. This apparent distinction has been utilized in many organizational typologies, such as leadership behavior, group functions, and exchange relationships. For example, the Ohio State leadership studies identified the consideration and initiating structure dimensions of leadership behavior (Halpin & Winer, 1957), while the Michigan studies uncovered two similar behavioral dimensions: production and employee orientation (Katz & Kahn, 1952). Furthermore, early group research recognized two basic functions that are necessary for small groups to survive and operate. They were labeled as expressive (or social-emotional) and instrumental (or task-oriented) (Bales & Slater, 1955). Research in social exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) also proposes that an exchange relationship can involve economic resources (e.g., money, good, service, and information) and /or more socioemotional resources (e.g., love, status, devotion, and affection).

The task-social distinction has also been applied in some major LMX theoretical models. For example, Graen and Cashman (1975) proposed that the leader-member exchange process involves interlocking leader and member behaviors and the forming of working relationships that are characterized by different levels of support, sensitivity, and trust. Similarly, Graen and Scandura's (1987) LMX model described two dimensions of leader-member interaction: "quality" and "coupling". The quality of the dyadic interaction is reflected by loyalty, support, and mutual trust. The coupling dimension refers to the reciprocal influence system by which the behaviors of the dyadic members become interdependent. Empirical indicators for this dimension are decision influence, delegation, latitude, and innovativeness, among others. Consequently, it seems plausible that leader-member dyads perceive their working relationship from these two fundamental perspectives. It also seems plausible that perhaps that the numerous LMX

subdimensions that are mentioned in the literature (and catalogued in Table 1 of Schriesheim et al., 1999) can be classified as either social- or task-focused.

**Differential focuses on task and social LMX dimensions.** Although differential focuses between leaders and members have not been directly studied in LMX research, research on LMX antecedents has generated some evidence supporting the possibility of differential focuses. Dockery and Steiner (1990) conducted a laboratory study to examine initial interaction components (i.e., ability, liking, and three upward-influence tactics) of the LMX developmental process from both leader and member perspectives. They found that member ability and being liked were consistently related to LMX quality from the leader's perspective. However, all five variables except self-assessed ability were related to LMX quality from the member's perspective. This finding suggests that members tend to place more importance on emotional or interactive aspects of the exchange relationship, whereas leaders generally weigh performance-oriented considerations more heavily than do members. In another laboratory study on initial exchange formation, Day and Crain (1992) discovered that leader LMX ratings were best predicted by the interaction between member ability and negative affect, while member LMX ratings were best predicted from the leader's positive affect scores. Accordingly, it appears that ability plays less of a role in members' exchange quality judgments than in leaders' ratings.

Additionally, similar findings are also provided in the mentoring literature (Kram, 1985). There are two broad categories of mentoring behaviors, labeled career-related and psychosocial support, which roughly correspond to the task and social dimensions discussed above. Career-related behaviors include coaching, protecting, providing challenging work assignments, and enhancing visibility. Examples of psychological support include activities such as role modeling, counseling, and acceptance. Young and Perrewé (2000) examined the association between career

and social support behaviors exhibited and the resulting perceptions of mentoring relationship effectiveness. They found that, when assessing effectiveness, mentors are more influenced by protégés' career-related activities than their social behavior, while the opposite was the case for the protégés. Young and Perrewé offered several reasons for this disparity in perspective.

Mentors have many time constraints and responsibilities and taking on a protégé may seem to add another task for the mentor. It makes sense that mentors value behavior from the protégé that enhances the protégé's progress and success. On the other hand, protégés are novices and usually do not have as clear knowledge of tangible and practical projects and assignments as do their mentors. Moreover, protégés are often placed in an uncertain situation where social support behaviors (such as encouragement or friendly personal discussions) may be highly reinforcing. Although these are findings about the mentor-protégé relationship, they still help elucidate the differences between leader and member perspectives since mentoring relationships commonly exist between leaders and their direct reports (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994).

As a result of these findings, it seems reasonable to predict that supervisors are more concerned with task-oriented LMX subdimensions since they contribute more directly to performance. On the other hand, subordinates are more likely to focus on social subdimensions, due to their desire for appreciation and support. Therefore, the following are proposed:

*Proposition 5A: Supervisors are more likely to use task-related exchange factors to judge LMX relationships than are subordinates.*

*Proposition 5B: Subordinates are more likely to use socially-related exchange factors to judge LMX relationships than are supervisors.*

Furthermore, even if leaders and members share the same set of LMX subdimensions, they may weight them differently in arriving at an overall assessment of the leader-member

exchange process. In particular, leaders may perceive the task-oriented aspects of the working relationship as more important, whereas members are more likely to give higher weight to socially-oriented dimensions. Thus, two more propositions seem reasonable:

*Proposition 5C: Supervisors tend to weight task-related exchange subdimensions as more important when judging LMX relationships than do subordinates.*

*Proposition 5D: Subordinates tend to weight socially-related exchange subdimensions as more important when judging LMX relationships than do supervisors.*

Research testing Propositions 5A and 5B could employ the same data and analytic approach used to test Proposition 4, after the different factors are first classified as being either task-related or socially-related. Several methods could be employed for such classifications but the approach suggested by Schriesheim et al. (1993) would appear particularly well suited. To test Propositions 5C and 5D, the same data collection approach can be used as employed for testing Propositions 4 and 5A and B, except that supervisor and subordinate respondents should be asked to also indicate the importance of each factor to their judgment of exchange quality, perhaps by providing an importance rating based on a 1 to 5, 1 to 7, or other magnitude rating scale. Tests of differences in mean importance ratings across the task and social dimensions (for leaders and followers) would then provide appropriate evidence for assessing Propositions 5C and 5D.

**Potential Shift in the Differential Focuses over Time.** According to the role-making model of LMX (Graen & Scandura, 1987), LMX relationship development is a complex and dynamic process that involves multiple interactions between leaders and members and moves through several stages. Therefore, it is possible that different evaluative criteria may be used at different stages during the course of a dyadic relationship (cf. Duarte et al., 1994). As a

consequence, differential evaluative focuses may not only occur between leaders and members at any given point in time but they may change over time as well. Specifically, in the initial stage of the dyadic relationship--the role-finding phase (characterized by limited and strictly contractual interactions between leaders and members; cf. Graen & Scandura, 1987)--bosses and subordinates bring in their own unique evaluative criteria and the differential focuses between them should be most evident.

As the relationship advances into the role-making stage (in which the interactions are no longer purely contractual and more social exchanges occur between the dyad members), more and more interactions, communication, and cooperation occur and dyad members may start to adopt each other's evaluative focuses. For example, bosses may begin to look at social aspects of the relationships, whereas their subordinates may start to recognize the importance of task accomplishment. Nevertheless, a high degree of mutual respect, trust, and obligation has still not been fully developed and both members are still trying to define the nature of their relationship through multiple exchange episodes. Therefore, even though fewer differences between bosses and their subordinates can be expected during this phase of dyadic development, strong convergence in the two perspectives is not likely.

Finally, for those dyadic members who manage to have a mature "partnership" (characterized by high quality LMX, reciprocal influence, a great amount of shared information, and strong mutual trust and affect), high agreement should exist between leader and member judgments of the relationship (because of the shared understanding between them concerning the relationship). Therefore, the following is proposed:

*Proposition 6: As the relationship progresses through the LMX development process to the last phase of dyadic development (the mature partnership relationship), fewer differential focuses can be expected between bosses and their subordinates.*

Proposition 6 could be readily tested using data collected to test Propositions 4 and 5, supplemented by a measure of the stage of LMX development that characterizes respondents' leader-member relationship. The respondents' LMX relationships would then need to be classified as falling into the role-finding, role-making, or partnership stages. Then, the extent of differential focuses could be tested for each LMX stage, with the expectation being that differences in focus should be diminish as the relationships progress from new to mature in nature.

It should, perhaps, be mentioned at this point that our emphasis on the dimensionality of the LMX process is not meant to imply that other factors should not be investigated. To the contrary, differential perceptions of LMX dimensionality are only one plausible explanation for the lack of leader-member agreement on LMX reports. Another major explanation mentioned in the performance appraisal literature concerns the effects of rating difficulty (Viswesvaran et al., 2002), which may be caused by several factors, such as differences in cognitive architecture and social information processing (e.g., Engle & Lord, 1997), automatic and controlled processing (e.g., Feldman, 1981), and various attributional processes (e.g., Martinko & Gardner, 1987). Therefore, the next section discusses rating difficulty effects and provides additional propositions for future investigations of SLMX-LMX agreement.

### **OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES OF LOW AGREEMENT**

Following the previous discussion, even with complete measurement equivalence, aligned scale referents, and construct level convergence (the same subdimensions being used and

being weighted in the same manner), leaders and their followers may still disagree on ratings of the working relationship between them.

### **Different Levels of Rating Difficulty**

In order to examine LMX agreement in greater depth, leader-member relationship subdimensions should be measured from both supervisor and subordinate perspectives, so as to allow the investigation of leader-member agreement on specific subdimensions. However, even when raters are assessing the same LMX subdimension, the level of agreement may vary across subdimensions because of different levels of rating difficulty. In other words, the correlation between supervisor and subordinate LMX subdimension ratings may be lower for some subdimensions than others because they are difficult to rate reliably (with the attendant measurement error reducing supervisor-subordinate correlations; cf. Viswesvaran et al., 2002).

Although there has been no research in the literature regarding the levels of rating difficulty associated with LMX subdimensions, research on social-information processing (e.g., Bandura, 1977) and automatic and controlled processing (e.g., Feldman, 1981) provides some useful ideas. Social cognitive researchers suggest that social perceptions occur along an automatic-controlled continuum of information processing (Hall & Lord, 1995). The processes resulting in leader-member relationship perceptions, a specific type of social perception, can also range from relatively automatic to more controlled (Hall & Lord, 1995). Controlled processing is based on conscious and effortful piecemeal evaluation that is highly dependent on short-term memory resources; the resulting perceptions can be easily altered and even reversed by subjects.

In contrast, automatic processing is typically based on unconscious and effortless cognitive categorization (i.e., categorizing an individual who matches a particular prototype; Larson, 1982) that is relatively independent of short-term memory (Lord & Maher, 1990); the



resulting perceptions are generally resistant to change. Therefore, LMX subdimension perceptions that are formed using a more automatic information-processing strategy would tend to be more stable and reliable. Conversely, more controlled processes may produce perceptions of subdimensions that are subject to continuous real-time changes and thus be less reliable.

As discussed earlier, LMX subdimensions could be classified as either people-oriented or task-oriented. The people-oriented dimensions (e.g., Affect, Loyalty, Trust, and Support) are generally more abstract and socially charged in nature (Greenberg, 1993). Thus, dyad members are likely to rely on their general impressions rather than on the memory of specific behaviors in making judgments about these dimensions. As a result, the people-oriented dimensions should tend to be perceived by employing more automatic processing and obtain more reliable ratings, which would lead to relatively higher supervisor-subordinate correlations. On the other hand, task-oriented subdimensions (e.g., Contribution, Professional Respect, Cooperation, and Constructive Feedback) usually represent more objective and concrete working behaviors. Thus, they may be conceptualized by using more controlled piecemeal processing. This results in relatively frequent and incremental alterations of perceptions and thus lower supervisor-subordinate correlations (Hall & Lord, 1995). Consequently, the following proposition is advanced for future research:

*Proposition 7: Socially-oriented LMX subdimensions will obtain higher SLMX-LMX agreement than will task-oriented subdimensions.*

Proposition 7 could be tested by first administering a mixture of socially-oriented and task-oriented leader-member exchange description items to matched supervisor and subordinate respondents (see the discussion concerning testing of Propositions 5A and 5B above). Then, correlations could be computed between the leader and member socially-oriented descriptions

and between the leader and member task-oriented descriptions. The significance of differences in the correlations should then be tested by employing a test for correlated samples (McNemar, 1969).

### **Different Variable Levels of Analysis**

Although Dansereau (1995) has clearly specified that the unit of analysis for LMX is the dyad, supervisor-rated LMX may not be operative at the same level of analysis as is subordinate-rated LMX (Yammarino et al., 2005). In general, a supervisor manages a group of subordinates and develops a different LMX relationship with each subordinate. Thus, it seems reasonable for a leader to consciously or unconsciously make comparisons among these LMX relationships (i.e., to use a relative comparison standard; Schrader & Steiner, 1996) and to rate the relationship with one follower relative to the relationship with other followers in the unit (cf. Festinger, 1957). However, each follower may view the same relationship more independently (as a one-on-one relationship) and employ an internal comparison standard since he/she is not directly involved in the leader's relationships with the other followers in the unit (Yammarino & Dubinski, 1992). These differential comparison standards may very well result in rating disagreements. As a consequence, the following proposition is offered:

*Proposition 8: Supervisor-perceived LMX is a dyad-within-group variable whereas subordinate-perceived LMX is operative at an independent dyad level.*

To test this proposition, matched (supervisor and subordinate) LMX descriptions would need to be collected from both the supervisor's and the subordinate's perspectives (see the earlier discussion concerning Proposition 3). Statistical testing would entail using an analytic system such as within and between entities analysis (WABA; Dansereau et al., 1984); items akin to

SLMX1A and SLMX1B (presented above) would be used to test supervisor-perceived exchange and items like LMX1A and LMX1B used to test subordinate-perceived exchange.

### **Other Suggestions**

Based on attribution theory, this section identifies several additional variables that may affect LMX agreement. The degree of perceptual congruence within leader-member dyads has been positively related to the amount of similarity among leader and member attributions (Martinko & Gardner, 1987). However, as previously mentioned, leader and member attributions usually differ because of biases in the attribution process (such as actor/observer bias, self-serving bias, and false consensus effect). Therefore, approaches that can be used to reduce the impact of these attribution biases will increase the similarity of leader and member attributions and thus result in higher leader-member perceptual agreement (Martinko, 2002). Research on attribution biases has suggested that the more a leader feels psychologically close to a subordinate, the more his or her attributions will be in agreement with that subordinate (Martinko & Gardner, 1987). Additionally, increasing levels of interaction and communication can reduce the psychological distance between dyad members and result in a greater amount of perceptual agreement (Homans, 1950). Therefore, several variables may relate to SLMX-LMX agreement because of their effects on the level of interaction and communication between dyad members.

The first is propinquity or frequency of interaction. Pulakos and Wexley (1983) found that increased frequency of interaction tends to reduce psychological distance and leads to increased perceptual congruence between leader- and self-performance ratings. Although not in the same domain, it can be argued that similar effects may apply to leader-member agreement on LMX ratings. That is, the more frequently a leader interacts with his/her subordinate, the more likely they will perceive their working relationship in the same way.

The second variable is task interdependence, a structural feature of the instrumental relations that exist between team members (Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993; Guzzo & Shea, 1992). Team members are task interdependent when they must share materials, information, or expertise in order to achieve the desired output (Brass, 1985). The degree of task interdependence typically increases as the work becomes more difficult and greater assistance is required from others to perform a job. Thus, superiors and subordinates working interdependently should have more opportunities to interact and observe one another, which in turn leads to more similar views of the LMX relationship (Yammarino & Dubinsky, 1992).

The last variable to be discussed here is duration of LMX. The longer the time spent in a supervisor-subordinate relationship, the more likely the dyad members have had opportunities to interact and communicate with each other and then share the same understanding of the relationship. Moreover, a positive relationship between duration of LMX and SLMX-LMX agreement may exist regardless of the quality of the relationship. That is, no matter what quality LMX relationship has been developed within a leader-member dyad, both dyad members should have more similar perceptions of this relationship if they have spent a longer time interacting together. In conclusion, the following proposition can be suggested for future research:

*Proposition 9: Higher levels of (a) propinquity and (b) task interdependence, and (c) longer relationship duration are associated with higher levels of SLMX-LMX agreement.*

Proposition 9 could be tested in much the same way as Proposition 6. Interaction frequency, task interdependence, and relationship duration would have to be measured, in addition to subordinate-perceived exchange (LMX) and supervisor-perceived exchange (SLMX). Subgroups based upon frequency of interaction (e.g., high versus low), task interdependence, and relationship duration could be created and differences in SLMX-LMX agreement correlations

tested across these subgroups. Alternatively, the interaction frequency, task interdependence, and relationship duration variables could be retained in continuous form and moderated multiple linear regression used to test Propositions 9A, 9B, and 9C. Such regressions would involve a standard moderator design. For example, in one analysis LMX could be the dependent variable and interaction frequency the moderator variable. The first step in the regression would involve using SLMX as the initial predictor. The second step would add interaction frequency as a second predictor. The third and final step would add the interaction of LMX and interaction frequency as a third predictor. Proposition 9A would be supported if a statistically significant increase in explained variance was obtained at the third step over the explained variance obtained at the second step.

It should be noted that the three variables mentioned above are by no means an exhaustive list of variables that might affect SLMX-LMX agreement. Likewise, the variables discussed in this paper are only some of the potential explanations for poor supervisor-subordinate LMX agreement. Additional theorization is clearly needed to identify other possible researchable explanations for the poor LMX agreement phenomenon.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **General Issues Concerning Leadership Description Agreement**

Thirty years ago, it was noted that “We know from a number of studies ... that subordinate descriptions of leader behavior tend to be statistically unrelated to descriptions by independent observers, and are also unrelated to descriptions by the leaders themselves” (Schriesheim & Kerr, 1977, p. 36). This finding has been shown in a number of leadership subdomains, and its importance would appear (on the surface) to vary considerably according to the theory or framework involved (cf. Bass, 1957; Bass & Avolio, 1988; Campbell, 1956; Ilgen

& Fukii, 1976, Mitchell; 1970; see Bass, 1990, pp. 515, 888-890; and Schriesheim & Kerr, 1974, for reviews).

For example, in research that employs the Ohio State leadership studies approach (cf. Schriesheim, Cogliser, & Neider, 1995), leader behavior is treated stylistically, as behavior that is displayed toward groups of subordinates and that effects both individual and group processes. For leadership treatments such as this, agreement among subordinates on how the leader acts toward the group is obviously a major concern. On the other hand, in the path-goal theory of leadership (House, 1971, 1996), there is no stated expectation that leader behavior should be perceived similarly by subordinates and others (leaders, observers, etc.). Thus, a lack of description agreement may not be seen as theoretically problematic. Looking at a more recently developed theory, the same is apparently true for transformational leadership behavior, even though Bass and Avolio (1988) found that leaders generally see themselves as more transformational than do their subordinates.

The applicability of the issues considered in this paper to other leadership approaches that explicitly assume some degree of shared perception seems obvious. However, even if a theory does not explicitly require some degree of agreement between observers as to a leader's behaviors or a relationship's attributes, a lack of agreement raises serious concerns about the construct validity of the leadership variables that are employed. Simply put, most leadership theory deals with constructs—hypothetical or latent variables that are not directly observable and that are employed in our theorizing and empirical research. Construct validity refers to an overall judgment that is made, based upon all available evidence, about the reasonableness of interpretations concerning a construct and its measure (see Schriesheim & Cogliser, 2008 for a brief review on construct validity in leadership). Ultimately, all constructs need to be linked to

observable behavior if they are to have merit for the scientific investigation of leadership phenomena (Campbell, 1977; Ghiselli, Campbell, & Zedeck, 1981).

What this means is that although we have examined the lack of supervisor-subordinate agreement in descriptions of leader-member relationship quality, this issue needs to be explored by other approaches to the study of leadership phenomena so that construct validity can be addressed. Otherwise, as suggested by Campbell (1977), we are “assuming some kind of isomorphism between the behavior and the perception of it” (p. 227) which is unlikely to hold. The result may be theories and empirical findings that lack a fundamental rooting with respect to the validity of their key variables and which, therefore, are not scientifically valid theories at all (Ghiselli et al., 1981).

### **Specific Issues Related to Agreement in LMX Descriptions**

One of the reasons why we chose the LMX area to serve as the basis of our analysis is that it has been explicitly stated that the relationship between leader and follower is central to LMX theory and that it is conceptualized as being objective in nature (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This makes the issue of LMX description agreement clearly germane since some degree of intersubjective verifiability should characterize supposedly objective events.

Despite this obvious importance of agreement for LMX theory and research, however, little theorizing has been done on the well-established lack of leader-member agreement that is apparent throughout the LMX literature. Given the seriousness of this phenomenon, it seems time to revisit the conceptual foundations of the LMX approach and to explore possible explanations for poor LMX-SLMX rating agreement. As suggested by relevant literatures, we identified and focused on two primary explanations: measurement deficiencies and perceptual differences related to the LMX construct.

First, the agreement issue may reflect measurement inequivalence of LMX and SLMX scales and/or differences in the scale referents that are employed. The SLMX scales that are generally used in the research literature are typically developed from an LMX scale using the approach recommended by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). Usually, the researchers try to develop SLMX items that have the same meanings and content as do the LMX items from which they are derived (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). However, the issue of referent is usually not considered and we have yet to see a direct examination of the measurement equivalence of LMX-SLMX measures reported anywhere in the literature. Even assuming that LMX and SLMX items are constructed with parallel meanings and content and appropriate referents, leaders and members may still interpret these items differently and therefore differ in their responses. If the lack of agreement is mainly due to measurement problems, the SLMX-LMX correlation should be enhanced when inequivalent items are eliminated and when proper scale referents are employed. Therefore, Propositions 1 through 3 were specified to test the plausibility of these psychometric explanations. Future research can collect LMX data using both uni- and multi-dimensional LMX scales and examine measurement equivalence by various methods, such as Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Item Response Theory (IRT) (for a review of these methods, see Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). We should be aware that even if LMX convergence is not enhanced by the employment of invariant items or proper scale referents, future research still needs to first ensure measurement equivalence and referent alignment before testing substantive hypotheses. The reason for this is that only through the assurance of measurement invariance and referent alignment do we know that we are truly measuring the proper construct in the same manner.



On the other hand, the lack of SLMX-LMX agreement may be caused by differential perceptions of LMX dimensionality, the possibility of which cannot be ruled out by establishing measurement invariance or alignment of scale referents. Perception and attribution research has suggested that disagreement among raters may occur because they have different perspectives and different criteria for evaluation (London, 1995; Lord & Maher, 1991). Thus, it is very likely that each member of a supervisor-subordinate dyad may focus on different aspects of the exchange and describe the exchange differently. In fact, some researchers have recently suggested that supervisors and subordinates focus on different exchange dimensions to evaluate the working relationships between them: supervisors may emphasize more work-related dimensions, and subordinates more socially-related dimensions (Day & Crain, 1992; Dockery & Steiner, 1990; Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Thus, Propositions 4, 5A, 5B, 5C, and 5D were developed to examine dimension-based differences in supervisor and subordinate LMX perceptions. Furthermore, Proposition 6 was proposed to examine the possibility of shifts or changes in the differential evaluative focuses of supervisors and subordinates during the LMX development process.

Although two previous LMX studies (Dockery & Steiner, 1990; Day & Crain, 1992) help to shed light on the differential focuses of leaders and members, generalization from their results is somewhat difficult because both laboratory studies employed undergraduate student samples with relatively short interaction times. A less limiting research design for testing these propositions would probably involve a field experiment or study with already established leader-member dyads. In future research, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods may also be used to collect data from both members of the LMX dyad. Specifically, interviews and surveys can be employed with working managers and their subordinates. Both members of the

dyad should be asked to describe and evaluate the working relationship between them. In fact, except for a handful of studies (cf. Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Liden & Graen, 1980; Liden & Maslyn, 1998), most previous LMX research has studied only the subordinate perspective and data drawn from both members, using both perspectives as referents, is needed to compare how leaders and subordinates view their relationship both qualitatively and quantitatively. Additionally, a longitudinal design could be employed by collecting multiple wave interview and survey data to examine the possible changes in evaluative criteria that may occur during the relationship development process.

The testing of the propositions concerning differential perceptions can be very useful since any obtained findings may have implications for both academic research and management practice. According to the propositions developed herein, supervisors and subordinates tend to focus on different subdimensions to evaluate the relationship between them. Depending on which dimensions they choose to include in their evaluations, the perceived quality of the LMX relationship may be determined by a different set of antecedents and then result in different associations with organizational outcomes. For example, we believe that it is likely that subordinates tend to focus more on the Affect/Liking subdimension to judge LMX relationships than do their bosses. Therefore, demographic similarity or perceived similarity (that usually leads to higher affection or liking between dyad members; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993) may be more likely to have a positive association with subordinate-rated LMX than with supervisor-rated LMX (which is more task-oriented). Similarly, subordinate-rated LMX may be more positively related to satisfaction with supervision, due to its emphasis on the Affect/Liking subdimension (McAllister, 1995). Thus, the propositions contained herein should encourage

future research to examine the antecedents of specific exchange subdimensions and their effects on different outcome variables.

In addition, any such findings may help to lay a foundation for interventions designed to assist managers and/or their subordinates improve the working relationship between them. Even though informal social relationships have long been acknowledged as essential to organizational processes (because they constitutes a necessary counterpart and complement to control systems maintained by the management structure; Burns, 1977), these affective factors have often been seen as somehow less important. As a result, research focus has generally been concentrated on the working aspects of relationships, such as task achievement, task instrumentality, and task competence (McAllister, 1995). In contrast, as delineated in this paper, employees may have a different understanding and react more to the social nature of working relationships. Once managers realize that their subordinates are more likely to rely on socially-oriented aspects to build and judge LMX relationships, they can work on these subdimensions so as to enhance LMX quality from their subordinates' perspective (and thereby benefit from an improved social relationship). Similarly, once subordinates understand that their supervisors tend to perceive task-oriented subdimensions as more important when judging LMX relationships, they can focus on these aspects and improve their supervisors' perceptions of the working relationship accordingly.

Although the discussion above hopefully provides some useful insights about poor SLMX-LMX agreement, there remain a number of unexplored issues. Leaders and their followers may still disagree even when they interpret LMX measures in the same way, when they are using the same subdimensions to evaluate LMX, and when the subdimensions are weighted the same. As long as one construct is measured from more than one source, complete

agreement among the sources is not a realistic expectation (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

However, the extent of agreement may vary in accord with systematic patterns that can be observed and tested. Therefore, Propositions 7, 8, and 9 were specified to explore other factors that may help explain perceptual differences between leaders and their followers. All of these propositions can be tested by collecting matching survey data from both supervisors and their subordinates in future research, something generally recommended in recent reviews (e.g., Gerstner & Day, 1997).

In summary, this paper has discussed several theoretical explanations for poor to modest convergence in supervisor and subordinate LMX descriptions and has developed testable propositions for each. Our hope is that these propositions will be subject to extensive testing in the future and that they will be applied to research on approaches other than leader-member exchange. However, it should be noted that our explanations concern only some of the factors that might affect leader-follower agreement and that there are undoubtedly a number of others that might be investigated. Therefore, this paper should be viewed as a starting point for future research on agreement in leadership ratings and descriptions. By exploring the agreement phenomenon (with respect to LMX and other leadership approaches) in much greater depth, we are likely to gain important knowledge that will help us advance both leadership theory and the practice of developing effective leader-subordinate partnerships in the workplace.

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