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CHAPTER 8

FAIRNESS IN LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Although the notion of preferential treatment (a) underlies the development and differentiation of LMX quality and (b) is inextricably tied to the way in which individuals form fairness judgments, we surprisingly lack a solid understanding of the interplay between leader-member exchanges (LMX) and fairness across multiple levels of analysis. With that in mind, this chapter is a critical and integrative review of the role of fairness in leader-follower relationships. We begin by discussing the theoretical relevance of fairness to individual LMX quality and LMX differentiation at the group-level. We then provide an integrative quantitative summary of the research linking LMX quality with fairness. Finally, we identify several paradoxes and “blind spots” in extant theory and research bridging fairness with leader-member exchange, providing fruitful areas for future research.

Over the past 40 years, leader–member exchange and organizational fairness¹ have undeniably been among the most popular lenses utilized to examine the way in which leaders interact with and disseminate resources to followers (Colquitt et al., 2005; Colquitt & Zipay, 2015; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Liden et al., 1997). Indeed, a Web of Science (ISI) search reveals over 3,000 published leader–member exchange and over 1,500 published organizational fairness articles over that span. Interestingly, while both are prominent approaches to examining the leader–follower interface, they typically approach the phenomena from different perspectives and contribute their own unique insights.

Leader–member exchange (LMX) is rooted in the notion that leaders differentiate exchange quality within workgroups in order to make the most efficient use of their limited personal resources (such as information, influence, tasks, latitude, support, and attention; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Wilson et al., 2010). More specifically, leaders invest additional resources in a select group of high LMX, “informal assistants” who help the leader achieve his/her workgroup goals (Graen, 1976; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). As a result, LMX quality within each workgroup typically ranges from high quality (whereby socio-emotional relationships are built upon mutual trust, loyalty, respect, and liking and include the exchange of supplemental resources such as information, influence, tasks, latitude, support, and attention) to low quality (whereby transactional relationships exist and the rules of exchange in these dyads follow what is defined in the employment contract; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen, 1976; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Supporting this perspective, research shows that 80% to 90% of work units are differentiated in this manner (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Liden & Graen, 1980).

While the LMX literature focuses on the way in which leaders go about differentiating personal resources in workgroups and developing varying types of dyadic exchange quality, the organizational fairness literature considers the extent to which the leader’s treatment of a follower (or followers) is appropriate (Colquitt & Rodell, 2015; Colquitt & Zipay, 2015). More specifically, overall fairness captures the overall, global perception of appropriate treatment, and distributive, procedural, informational, and interpersonal justice reflect the appropriateness of decision outcomes (as indicated by equity, equality, and need rules; Adams, 1963, 1965; Leventhal, 1976a), decision-making procedures (as indicated by rules such as voice, consistency, bias suppression, accuracy, and correctability; Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), explanations offered for procedures (as indicated by justification and truthfulness rules; Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1993), and

interpersonal treatment (as indicated by respect and propriety rules; Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1993) in decision contexts, respectively.

Given that the LMX literature is built on the idea that leaders provide preferential treatment to a select group of high LMX employees (Bolino & Turnley, 2009; Gooty & Yammarino, 2016; Liden et al., 2006; Liden & Graen, 1980; Rosen et al., 2011; Scandura, 1999), the intersection of justice and LMX scholarship naturally raises the question: do employees see that treatment as appropriate and fair? Indeed, preferential treatment is often a subject of fairness-related processing (Blader & Rothman, 2014; Hideg & Ferris, 2017; Spranger et al., 2012). For this reason, and given the prevalence of both of these perspectives in examining the leader–follower interface, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a body of scholarly work linking LMX quality with fairness and vice versa. However, despite burgeoning work in this area, the literature still lacks an integrative theoretical and empirical review of the interplay between leader–member exchange and justice. Indeed, although some theoretical developments in the leader–member exchange literature have integrated justice components (Matta & Van Dyne, 2020; Scandura, 1999) and quantitative reviews have considered associations between LMX and fairness (Colquitt et al., 2013; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Rockstuhl et al., 2012), the literature requires a systematic review to clarify what we do know, what we don’t know, and where we go from here.

With the above in mind, the goal of this chapter is to provide an extensive and comprehensive qualitative and quantitative review of the role of fairness in leader–follower relationships. To achieve that end, we first conducted a literature search using ISI, PsychINFO, and Google Scholar using alternative combinations of keywords focused on leader–member exchange (e.g., “leader–member exchange,” “vertical dyad linkage,” “LMX”) and fairness (e.g., “fairness,” “justice”). This search process yielded 138 articles that were potentially relevant to our review. From this initial pool of articles, we then narrowed our focus onto manuscripts that could be both qualitatively and quantitatively reviewed (e.g., empirical papers which report individual-level correlations between LMX and fairness), resulting in 98 articles. In the next section, we first provide a qualitative review of the theoretical perspectives most often applied in these articles. From there, to provide a quantitative summary of the literature, we conduct a meta-analytic review of 108 independent samples taken from the 98 articles (see Table 8.1). Finally, we close by describing how our qualitative and quantitative reviews reveal that—despite the expansive body of work linking leader–member exchange and fairness—we are still left with many more questions than we are answers.

TABLE 8.1 Studies Included in the Individual-Level Qualitative and Quantitative Review

Authors	N	Correlation of LMX With						Time Separation	Theory
		DJ	PJ	InfJ	IntJ	IJ	OF		
Al-Atwi (2018)	322					.52		Justice → LMX	LMX and Social Identity
Andrews & Kacmar (2001)	418	.26	.30					—	LMX
Baran et al. (2012)	291					.70		—	Relational Systems and Social Exchange
Bayraktar (2019)	269		.62					—	LMX, Social Exchange, and Conservation of Resources
Bryant & Merritt (2021)	378				.77			—	LMX and Social Exchange
Burton et al. (2008)	258	.46	.49			.75		—	
Chang & Cheng (2018)	159						.71	Justice → LMX	Social Comparison, Fairness Heuristic, Social Exchange, LMX
Chang et al. (2020)	160					.72		—	Social Exchange
Chen et al. (2013)	309					.70		—	
Chen & Jin (2014)	264	.25	.29		.46			—	
Chen et al. (2018)	192		.38					—	LMX, Role, Social Exchange, and Justice
Chen & Zhang (2021)	273		.73					—	Group Engagement Model
Chi & Lo (2003)	104	.15	.38					—	
Choi et al. (2020) S1	463						.66	—	Allocation Preference (Equality Rule) and LMX

(continued)

TABLE 8.1 Studies Included in the Individual-Level Qualitative and Quantitative Review (continued)											
Authors	N	Correlation of LMX With						Time Separation	Theory		
		DJ	PJ	InfJ	IntJ	IJ	OF	Ave			
Choi et al. (2020) S2a	260						.82	.72	Allocation Preference (Equality Rule) and LMX	—	
Choi et al. (2020) S2b							.80			—	
Choi et al. (2020) S2c							.61			LMX → Justice	
Choi et al. (2020) S2d							.65			Justice → LMX	
Choi et al. (2020) S3	235	.62						.62	Allocation Preference (Equality Rule) and LMX	—	
Cobb & Lau (2015)	366	.57	.67			.68		.64	LMX	—	
Deluga (1994)	86						.12	.12	Social Exchange, Equity, and LMX	Justice → LMX	
Dust et al. (2020)	193				.53			.53	Psychological Attraction and Social Identity	—	
Dusterhoff et al. (2014)	71						.78	.78	Moral Reasoning	—	
El Akremi et al. (2010)	602	.36	.41	.59	.54			.48	Social Exchange	Justice → LMX	
Elicker et al. (2006)	188	.45	.50			.51		.49	Fairness Heuristic	LMX → Justice	
Emery et al. (2019)	244						.80	.80	LMX and Justice	LMX → Justice	
Erdogan & Liden (2006)	100	.32				.76		.54		—	
Erdogan et al. (2006)	263	.45				.77		.61	LMX, Social Exchange, and Fairness	—	
Erdogan & Bauer (2010)	276	.47	.66					.57	LMX and Justice	—	
Fein et al. (2013)	105	.20	-.03			.57		.25	LMX	—	
Furunes et al. (2015) S1	409						.73	.73	LMX and Social Exchange	—	
Furunes et al. (2015) S2	1,024						.67	.67	LMX and Social Exchange	—	

(continued)

TABLE 8.1 Studies Included in the Individual-Level Qualitative and Quantitative Review (continued)

Authors	N	Correlation of LMX With						Time Separation	Theory
		DJ	PJ	InfJ	IntJ	IJ	OF		
Georgalis et al. (2015)	100		.07	.30	.27			—	LMX and Field
Graen et al. (2006) a	117	.61	.34					—	LMX
Graen et al. (2006) b		.30	.38					—	
Ha et al. (2020)	158						.39	—	Social Exchange
Haggard & Park (2018)	253					.84		—	LMX and Justice
Haynie et al. (2014)	90	.58	.44				.51	—	LMX, Information Processing, and Attraction-Selection-Attrition
He et al. (2017)	203	.28	.36			.59		—	Social Exchange and Deontic Justice
Heck et al. (2005)	302	.66	.81				.74	—	Self and LMX
Horan et al. (2013)	197	.46	.54			.55	.52	—	LMX and Justice
Hsiung (2012)	404		.34				.34	—	Authentic Leadership
Huang et al. (2015)	203		.38		.45		.42	—	LMX and Social Comparison
Inelmen et al. (2017)	203	.41	.63		.63		.56	—	Social Exchange
Ionescu & Iliescu (2021)	274	.31	.28	.48	.47		.39	LMX → Justice	LMX and Social Exchange
Johnson et al. (2009)	154						.70	—	Fairness Heuristic, LMX, and Social Exchange
Kacmar et al. (1999)	196						.45	—	
Kalshoven et al. (2011)	150						.59	—	
Kang et al. (2012)	282	.46	.38			.70	.51	—	Social Exchange
Kauppila et al. (2021)	667						.56	—	Servant Leadership and Social Learning

(continued)

TABLE 8.1 Studies Included in the Individual-Level Qualitative and Quantitative Review (continued)										
Authors	N	Correlation of LMX With						Time Separation	Theory	
		DJ	PJ	InfJ	IntJ	IJ	OF			
Kim et al. (2009a)	293	.66				.65		—	LMX and Social Exchange	
Kim et al. (2009b)		.43				.47				
Koopman et al. (2015) S2	384			.55	.47		.47	—	Social Capital and Social Exchange	
Koopman et al. (2015) S3	230			.32	.31			—	Social Capital and Social Exchange	
Lee (2001)	280	.29	.68				.49	—	LMX and Equity	
Lee et al. (2010)	250	.86	.90				.88	—		
Li et al. (2010)	200		.47				.47	—	Relational Approach and Trait Activation	
Li et al. (2014)	275						.46	—	LMX	
Lian et al. (2012)	260		.50		.58		.54	LMX → Justice	Self-Determination, Social Exchange, Justice	
Liao et al. (2017)	949		.61				.61	—	LMX, Social Comparison, Social Exchange	
Luo et al. (2013)	585				.67		.67	—	Social Exchange	
Luo et al. (2014)	585				.67		.67	—	LMX and Social Exchange	
Ma & Qu (2010a)	203					.44	.21	—	LMX	
Ma & Qu (2010b)						-.03		—		
Mansour-Cole & Scott (1998)	133	.28	.32				.30	LMX → Justice	Group Value Model and LMX	
Masterson et al. (2000)	651		.38			.67	.53	—	Social Exchange	
Meng & Wu (2015)	581	.39	.65				.52	—	Social Exchange and LMX	

(continued)

TABLE 8.1 Studies Included in the Individual-Level Qualitative and Quantitative Review (continued)									
Authors	N	Correlation of LMX With						Time Separation	Theory
		DJ	PJ	InfJ	IntJ	IJ	OF		
Murphy et al. (2003)	124	.37				.64	.51	—	Social Exchange and LMX
Ohana & Meyer (2010)	101	.63					.63	—	LMX
Oren et al. (2012)	120						.42	—	LMX, Similarity Attraction, and Social Exchange
Orayc & Wong (2014)	2,067						.38	—	
Piccolo et al. (2008)	283		.60			.61	.61	—	Social Exchange
Pichler et al. (2016)	218		.54				.54	—	LMX
Pillai et al. (1999) S1	240	.29	.64				.47	—	
Pillai et al. (1999) S2	160	.38	.64				.51	—	
Pillai et al. (1999) S3	80	.26	.40				.33	—	
Pillai et al. (1999) S4	85	.40	.57				.49	—	
Pillai et al. (1999) S5	190	.32	.41				.37	—	
Reb et al. (2019)	227				.48		.48	—	Social Exchange
Roch & Shanock (2006)	272	.42	.50	.84	.72		.62	—	Social Exchange and Justice
Rosen et al. (2011)	157	.31	.46				.39	—	Uncertainty Management and Social Exchange
Sarti (2019)	255	.40	.56				.48	—	Social Exchange and LMX
Selvarajan et al. (2018) S1	203	-.02	-.10			.27	.05	—	LMX, Social Exchange, and Self-Determination
Selvarajan et al. (2018) S2	219	.51	.45			.61	.52	—	LMX, Social Exchange, and Self-Determination

(continued)

TABLE 8.1 Studies Included in the Individual-Level Qualitative and Quantitative Review (continued)

Authors	N	Correlation of LMX With						Time Separation	Theory
		DJ	PJ	InfJ	IntJ	IJ	OF	Ave	
Shan et al. (2015)	69	.64	.72			.87		.74	Equity and Social Exchange
Shkoler et al. (2021) S1	93	.33	.55			.60		.49	LMX and Social Exchange
Shkoler et al. (2021) S2	3,293	.55	.53			.58		.55	LMX and Social Exchange
Sindhu et al. (2017)	185						.24	.24	LMX (Role and Social Exchange)
Son et al. (2014)	158				.62			.62	Conservation of Resources
Song et al. (2017)	258		.09					.09	Engagement
Sparr & Sonnentag (2008)	99	.55	.49	.49	.49			.51	LMX and Social Exchange
Spector & Che (2014)	146	.59	.59					.59	
Sun et al. (2013)	238		.19					.19	Social Exchange
Trybou et al. (2016)	130	.34	.45					.40	Social Exchange
Tse et al. (2018)	177		.13					.13	LMX, Social Comparison, Symbolic Model of Justice Climate
Tziner et al. (2008)	75						.60	.60	LMX and Social Exchange
Tziner et al. (2015)	716	.54	.49			.72		.58	LMX and Social Exchange
Walumbwa et al. (2009)	398	.17	.31	.22	.28			.25	Social Exchange and Social Identity
Walumbwa et al. (2011)	201		.37					.37	Social Exchange, Social Learning, and Social Identity
Wang et al. (2010)	793	.50	.60			.68		.59	Social Exchange
Wang et al. (2017)	118						.57	.57	Cognitive Learning, LMX, and Social Exchange

(continued)

TABLE 8.1 Studies Included in the Individual-Level Qualitative and Quantitative Review (continued)										
Authors	N	Correlation of LMX With						Time Separation	Theory	
		DJ	PJ	InfJ	IntJ	IJ	OF	Ave		
Wang et al. (2018)	208						.78	.78	LMX	
Waskito et al. (2020)	150	.45	.62	.37	.58			.51	LMX and Social Exchange	
Wat & Shaffer (2005)	183	.25	.25			.16		.22	LMX and Social Exchange	
Wayne et al. (2002)	211	.48	.51					.50	Social Exchange	
Werbel & Henriques (2009)	304						.48	.54	Social Exchange and Agency	
							.60			
Williams et al. (2016)	407		.61			.68		.65	LMX	
Wittmer et al. (2010)	4,276		.36					.36	Social Exchange	
Xie et al. (2019)	461					.46		.46	Equity-Equality and Social Interdependence	
Xu et al. (2012)	54					.41		.41	Social Exchange and LMX	
Yaldiz et al. (2018)	243		.40					.40	Conservation of Resources, Selection-Optimization-Compensation, and Socio-emotional Selectivity	
Yeo et al. (2015)	560	.42				.75		.59	LMX and Equity	
Zeb et al. (2019)	290	.35	.22			.34		.30	Social Exchange	
Zhang & Morand (2014)	147						.57	.57	Social Exchange, LMX, and Fairness Heuristic	

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LMX QUALITY AND FAIRNESS

From examining the 98 articles included in our review—beyond referring to LMX theory (referred to in 56 articles) and justice theory (referred to in 9 articles) broadly—the most popular theoretical lenses utilized to link LMX with fairness and vice versa are social exchange theory (referred to in 56 articles), social comparison theory/equity theory (referred to in 9 articles), and allocation preferences theory (referred to in 9 articles). Notably, all of these theoretical perspectives hail from either the LMX (e.g., social exchange theory) or justice (e.g., social comparison theory, equity theory, allocation preferences theory) domains. For a full list of theories used, see Table 8.2. Below, we briefly summarize the way in which these specific lenses have been utilized in the literature.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory posits that, in order for relationships to evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments, interpersonal interactions (such as those between a leader and follower) must be guided by rules of exchange (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). More specifically, high quality social exchanges represent a highly invested relationship built upon—and motivated by—the obligatory exchange of unspecified benefits and favors (Colquitt et al., 2014). Given that justice rule adherence is exactly the type of unspecified and intangible resource discussed within social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the theory serves as a particularly useful lens for examining the role of fairness enactment in influencing LMX quality as well as LMX quality in influencing fairness enactment.

When it comes to fairness enactment predicting LMX quality, scholars have positioned fair treatment (i.e., justice rule adherence) as a benefit or favor that leaders provide in order to foster a high exchange quality (Colquitt et al., 2013). Indeed, when leaders treat employees fairly, employees are not only likely to experience a sense of trust in their leaders, they are likely to sense an obligation to reciprocate this unspecified benefit (Konovsky & Pugh, 1994; Moorman, 1991; Organ & Konovsky, 1989). Thus, social exchange theory is often relied upon to position fairness enactment as an antecedent of LMX quality (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2013; Erdogan et al., 2006; He et al., 2017; Masterson et al., 2000; Wayne et al., 2002).

Interestingly, social exchange theory has also often been used to position LMX quality as a predictor of fairness (e.g., Dulebohn et al., 2012; Koopman et al., 2015; Lian et al., 2012; Ma & Qu, 2010; Sun et al., 2013). Indeed,

TABLE 8.2 Theoretical Perspective Summary of LMX and Fairness for Individual-Level

Theoretical Lens	Utilization
Leader–Member Exchange Theory	56
Social Exchange Theory	56
Social Comparison Theory (and Equity Theory)	9
Justice Theory	9
Allocation Preferences Theory (Equity/Equality)	9
Fairness Heuristic Theory	4
Self-Determination Theory	4
Social Identity Theory	4
Conservation of Resources Theory	3
Psychological/Similarity Attraction Theory	3
Group Engagement/Value Model	2
Role Theory	2
Social Capital Theory	2
Social Learning Theory	2
Agency Theory	1
Attraction-Selection-Attrition Theory	1
Authentic Leadership Theory	1
Cognitive Learning Theory	1
Deontic Justice Theory	1
Engagement Theory	1
Fairness Theory	1
Field Theory	1
Information Processing Theory	1
Moral Reasoning Theory	1
Relational Approach	1
Relational Systems Theory	1
Selection-Optimization-Compensation Theory	1
Self Theory	1
Servant Leadership Theory	1
Social Interdependence Theory	1
Socio-Emotional Selectivity Theory	1
Symbolic Model of Justice Climate	1
Trait Activation Theory	1
Uncertainty Management Theory	1

because high quality social exchange relationships (which are centered on the obligatory exchange of unspecified benefits and favors) necessitate regular maintenance in order to maintain their strength (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), scholars have emphasized that leaders use fair treatment (i.e., justice rule adherence) as a means to maintain the flow of resources and to reciprocate the unspecified benefits and favors that flow from a high quality exchange (Koopman et al., 2015).

Although social exchange theory does provide one potential explanation for why LMX and fairness are interrelated, this perspective (as studied in the literature) is not without limitations. For instance, one theme that emerged from our review is that most studies do not unpack the causal direction of the relationship (e.g., “Is LMX quality driving fairness enactment or is fairness enactment driving LMX quality?”), and social exchange theory is suggestive that the causal flow could move in either direction. As another example, although social exchange theory often provides the underlying logic for why certain relationships between LMX and fairness hold, examinations unpacking the actual social exchange dynamics implicit in the theory (e.g., specific socio-emotional resources contributed by both parties, felt obligation, motives for exchange) are largely absent from the literature. As a final example, while applications of social exchange theory often theorize fair treatment is exchanged to garner high LMX quality, these applications appear to be largely agnostic to any potential differences across the specific dimensions of justice. Likewise, when social exchange theory is applied to examine LMX quality influencing the fairness a follower receives, it is unclear what this means for specific justice dimensions. Given that some dimensions of justice are more social in nature (Greenberg, 1993) and are more at the discretion of leaders (Scott et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2014), this seems like an important feature to consider when testing theories of *social* exchange.

Social Comparison Theory and Equity Theory

Social comparison theory posits that individuals are driven by a motive to self-evaluate, and in situations where insufficient objective information is available to determine one’s status, people instinctively rely on comparisons with referent others as means to evaluate standing (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Festinger, 1954). Given that the differentiation of LMX quality is based on an unequal distribution of inherently intangible resources (such as information, influence, tasks, latitude, support, and attention; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Wilson et al., 2010), this context is particularly ripe for

social comparisons to occur (Matta & Van Dyne, 2020). Indeed, because coworkers observe differences in relationship quality within workgroups (Duchon et al., 1986), but no objective criteria exists for determining what a high quality exchange looks like, “When leaders differentiate, the varied levels of LMX quality within the group are likely to trigger social comparison processes” (Vidyarthi et al., 2010, p. 849).

Social comparison theory holds particular utility in linking LMX quality to fairness. Indeed, numerous justice theories are rooted in—and extensions of—social comparison theory, including equity theory (Adams, 1963, 1965), relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976), referent cognitions theory (Folger, 1986a, 1986b), and fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, 2001). Importantly, each of these perspectives suggest that social comparisons play a key role in the formation of fairness judgments. For instance, equity theory (Adams, 1963, 1965) proposes that justice judgments are determined based on comparing output/input ratios between oneself and referent others.

When it comes to the application of social comparison and equity theories to the specific relationships between LMX quality and fairness, this research has positioned fairness as an outcome of social comparisons made on LMX quality and/or LMX-related resources (Bolino & Turnley, 2009; Huang et al., 2015; Lee, 2001; Matta & Van Dyne, 2020; Vecchio et al., 1986). More specifically, when making LMX social comparisons, employees who recognize they receive larger amounts of information, influence, tasks, latitude, support, and attention than their referent peers (i.e., high LMX employees) feel fairly treated (Lee, 2001; Vecchio et al., 1986), whereas those who receive lesser amounts (i.e., low LMX employees) feel relatively deprived (Bolino & Turnley, 2009; Huang et al., 2015; Tse et al., 2018).

In contrast to social exchange theory, one point of clarity that social comparison perspectives have is that they position LMX quality as an antecedent and fairness as an outcome. That said, though more *theoretical* clarity is provided for causal ordering, ambiguities still exist in applications of social comparison theoretical perspectives. For one, applications of the social comparison theory in the literature again appear to be agnostic on specific dimensions of justice. That said, dimensional distinctions once again seem relevant to the theory. For instance, some forms of justice are more social in nature (e.g., interpersonal justice; Greenberg, 1993), which may make them more natural outcomes of *relational* comparison. Alternatively, other forms of justice have comparisons at their core (e.g., distributive justice and the “equity” rule; Colquitt, 2001), which may result in stronger effects for these dimensions. Another limitation of applications of social comparison theory in the literature is that the referent of the social comparison is most often unspecified and/or unmeasured (and, in the rare cases it is, the workgroup average LMX is used). Thus, the social comparison itself is largely

absent from these studies. As a final limitation, although the relationship between LMX and fairness remains the same (a strong and positive association) regardless of which theoretical lens is applied, social comparison theory and social exchange theory provide very different rationales for why these associations emerge. Specifically, social exchange theory focuses heavily on what is occurring with high LMX employees (suggesting that fair treatment is used as a social exchange resource and acts as a currency in high quality exchanges) whereas social comparison theory isolates the processes occurring with low LMX employees (suggesting that low LMX employees feel relatively deprived, and thus treated unfairly, when comparing their own circumstances to that of their high LMX peers). Interestingly, when it comes to empirical evidence, we know very little about whether it is primarily the dynamics offered in one rationale, the other, or both accounts that are driving the LMX-fairness relationship.

Allocation Preferences Theory and Equity/Equality Frameworks

Allocation preferences theory (Leventhal, 1976a, 1976b; Leventhal et al., 1980) posits that the allocation strategy chosen by leaders for distributing resources within groups has important implications for the goals the leader hopes to accomplish. More specifically, the theory specifies how relying on an equity allocation strategy (whereby resources and rewards are allocated based on relative contributions) is particularly effective in maximizing collective productivity, whereas an equality allocation strategy (whereby resources and rewards are evenly shared regardless of individual contributions) is better suited to preserve group harmony (Yu et al., 2018). Indeed, when resources are allocated according to an equity rule, group productivity is likely to be maximized because the members contributing most to group objectives are provided additional resources that they are able to use to further group objectives. In contrast, when resources are allocated according to an equality rule, group harmony is likely to be maximized because equal allocations optimize mutual self-esteem and signal that each individual is of equal value to the workgroup—fostering positive feelings, emphasizing a common fate for all members, and minimizing group conflict.

Although social exchange and social comparison theories are particularly well-suited for the individual or dyadic level of analysis, allocation preferences theory is uniquely well-suited for considering the group-level effects of LMX differentiation. Indeed, recent meta-analytic work has utilized allocation preferences theory as a framework for understanding the group-level effects of LMX differentiation on group processes, emergent states, and ultimately performance (Yu et al., 2018). More specifically, Yu et

al. (2018) apply allocation preferences theory to the LMX differentiation phenomenon to posit that differentiation represents an equity/equality tradeoff for leaders. Choosing to differentiate LMX quality and resources to a greater extent moves leaders to more of an equity norm and away from an equality norm, prioritizing group productivity at the expense of group harmony. In contrast, choosing not to differentiate LMX quality and resources moves leaders to more of an equality norm and away from an equity norm, prioritizing group harmony at the expense of group productivity. Their meta-analytic results supported this perspective, demonstrating that LMX differentiation had a null total effect on group performance resulting from the paradox described above. Specifically, LMX differentiation had a negative indirect effect on group performance via group processes and emergent states (due to violating the equality rule and harming solidarity) but had a positive direct effect on group performance (due to adhering to an equity norm and enhancing productivity). We also note that when it comes to the effects of LMX differentiation on group-level fairness climate specifically, the meta-analysis categorized justice climate as an emergent state tied to the equality rule and showed strong negative effects of LMX differentiation on justice climate ($r = .41$; $\rho = .44$; 90% CI = $-.56, -.25$; 80% CV = $-.82, -.07$).

Much like social exchange theory, one limitation of allocation preferences theory is that, although it clearly has theoretical relevance to LMX differentiation and group outcomes, actual examinations of equity versus equality in this context are still needed. That is, the logic invoked under allocation preferences theory hinges on leader use of different allocation “rules” when developing LMX relationships (and group member perceptions that these rules are being employed), yet scholars have not begun to actually measure the leader’s use and group member’s perceptions of these “rules.” Moreover, although the negative pathways via group processes and emergent states (i.e., the “equality path”) are well-supported, the mechanisms underlying the positive direct pathway between LMX differentiation and group outcomes (i.e., the “equity path”) remain purely theoretical.

To briefly recap, social exchange theory contends that high LMX quality facilitates fairness (and vice versa), social comparison theory posits that low LMX quality hinders fairness, and—at the group-level—allocation preference theory suggests that minimizing discrepancies in and maximizing LMX quality for all is optimal for the fairness of the workgroup. Thus, in summarizing the above theoretical perspectives (all of which flow from the LMX and fairness literatures), one thing becomes clear: Each suggests a strong, positive individual-level relationship between LMX quality and fairness. That said, these perspectives share independent and collective ambiguities as well. The two largest likely being establishing the causal direction of the relationship and potential dimensional differences.

With that in mind, we now shift to a comprehensive and up-to-date quantitative summary on the relationship between LMX quality and fairness and seek to—at least empirically—speak to some of these ambiguities. To that end, we revisited the 98 studies identified linking LMX with fairness and conducted a meta-analytic review of the relationship.

QUANTITATIVE REVIEW ON LMX QUALITY AND FAIRNESS

As noted above, we first conducted a literature search using ISI, PsychINFO, and Google Scholar using alternative combinations of keywords focused on leader–member exchange (e.g., “leader–member exchange,” “vertical dyad linkage,” “LMX”) and fairness (e.g., “fairness,” “justice”). From the 138 articles that we identified, 98 articles and 108 independent samples drawn from those articles (see Table 8.1) were deemed relevant to the meta-analysis and could be quantitatively reviewed (e.g., empirical papers which report individual-level correlations between LMX and fairness). Leader–member exchange was measured almost exclusively with the LMX-7 (Bauer & Green, 1996; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden et al., 1993; Scandura & Graen, 1984) or the LMX-MDM (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). The most typical organizational justice measures utilized were the Colquitt (2001) and Moorman (1991) items. For our meta-analytic review of the articles we identified, we report the number of samples (k), the total number of individuals (N), a sample-size weighted estimate (r), and a 90% confidence interval (CI) around the point estimate (Whitener, 1990) to assess statistical significance (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004). Moreover, to detect whether moderators may be present, we also report the percentage of variance attributable to artifacts (Vart) and the 80% credibility interval (CV). Study-level moderators are likely present if study artifacts fail to account for 75% of the variance in meta-analytic correlations or the credibility interval is wide and/or includes zero. Given the ambiguities surrounding temporal ordering (LMX → Fairness; Fairness → LMX) and differences across dimensions noted above, we coded for these aspects at the study-level to examine them as potential moderators. Consistent with recent organizational justice meta-analyses (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2013), we relied on seminal definitions and measurement discussions to code for the justice dimensions (e.g., Adams, 1965; Bies & Moag, 1986; Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1993; Leventhal, 1976a; Leventhal, 1980). We coded direct assessments of overall fairness (e.g., “Overall, I am treated fairly by my supervisor” or “my supervisor behaves like a fair person would”; Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Choi, 2008; Colquitt et al., 2015) and indirect assessments of latent overall justice (i.e., a second order variable with distributive, procedural, informational, and interpersonal justice as lower order indicators; Colquitt & Shaw, 2005;

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Koopman et al., 2019) as overall fairness. To test moderation, we created confidence intervals for the difference in meta-analytic correlations (De Jong et al., 2016; Sweeny & Krizan, 2013; Zou, 2007).

Meta-analytic results are presented in Table 8.3. Across all dimensions of fairness/justice, as each of our theoretical perspectives would suggest, LMX and fairness exhibit strong positive influences on one another ($r = .50$; 90% CI = .48, .53). Moreover, somewhat to our surprise, we found no significant differences based on the temporal design of the studies (i.e., same time, LMX measurement preceding justice, justice measurement preceding LMX). That said, we did find differences across dimensions of justice. Specifically, when it comes to specific dimensions, the effect sizes (in descending order) are: interactional justice ($r = .62$; 90% CI = .57, .66), interpersonal justice ($r = .55$; 90% CI = .49, .61), overall justice ($r = .54$; 90% CI = .48, .60), informational justice ($r = .49$; 90% CI = .37, .61), procedural justice ($r = .46$; 90% CI = .43, .50), and distributive justice ($r = .44$; 90% CI = .40, .48). We also tested whether any of these differences were significant by creating confidence intervals for differences across dimensions. Specifically, interactional justice, interpersonal justice, and overall justice exhibited significantly stronger effects than procedural justice (CI for difference versus interactional justice = .091, .211; CI for difference versus interpersonal justice = .011, .157; CI for difference versus overall justice = .003, .149) and distributive justice (CI for difference versus interactional justice = .114, .233; CI for difference versus interpersonal justice = .033, .179; CI for difference

TABLE 8.3 Meta-Analytic Results for LMX Quality and Organizational Justice							
Criteria	<i>k</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i>	90% CI		Vart	80% CV
Organizational Justice	108	37,736	.50	.48	.53	7.1	.32 .69
Distributive Justice	50	15,336	.44	.40	.48	11.1	.27 .61
Procedural Justice	64	23,962	.46	.43	.50	6.7	.27 .66
Interactional Justice	32	12,276	.62	.57	.66	5.8	.45 .78
Informational Justice	9	2,509	.49	.37	.61	6.4	.26 .71
Interpersonal Justice	19	5,565	.55	.49	.61	8.9	.38 .70
Overall Fairness	23	7,924	.54	.48	.60	6.3	.35 .73
Time Separation of Constructs							
No separation	94	34,161	.51	.48	.54	7.0	.33 .69
Fairness → LMX	7	1,926	.46	.34	.58	8.8	.27 .66
LMX → Fairness	6	1,429	.46	.28	.65	4.9	.18 .75

Notes: *k* = number of independent effect sizes; *N* = total number of individuals; *r* = sample-size weighted mean uncorrected correlation; *CI* = confidence interval around uncorrected correlations; *Vart* = percentage of variance in correlations attributable to study artifacts; *CV* = credibility interval around corrected correlations.

versus overall justice = .025, .172). Informational justice demonstrated no significant differences from interactional justice, interpersonal justice, and overall justice nor from procedural justice and distributive justice.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, our meta-analytic results demonstrate that LMX and fair treatment are inextricably linked. That said, our review extends beyond the limited quantitative reviews that have included associations between LMX and fairness (Colquitt et al., 2013; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Rockstuhl et al., 2012). We not only provide a much more thorough and comprehensive demonstration of strong associations between LMX and fairness, but we also reveal that stronger relationships exist for certain forms of justice—namely, those that are more social in nature and that managers have more discretion over. Indeed, interactional and interpersonal justice are operationalizations of the “social side” of fairness (Greenberg, 1993). Moreover, the justice actor model contends that **mangers** have the largest discretion over interpersonal justice, followed by informational, procedural, and distributive justice (Scott et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2014), aligning almost identically with the rank ordering identified in the magnitude of our meta-analytic effects. Thus, these meta-analytic results provide suggestive evidence that leaders and followers are more likely to (a) exchange and (b) make comparisons on the more social and discretionary dimensions of justice (e.g., interactional and interpersonal).

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“BLIND SPOTS” AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The theoretical and empirical reviews of the literature presented thus far highlight at least three key conclusions: (a) the primary theoretical perspectives linking LMX with fairness are those most closely linked to the LMX literature (e.g., LMX theory, social exchange theory) and the justice literature (e.g., justice theory, social comparison theory, equity theory, allocation preferences theory), (b) LMX and fairness exhibit strong positive interrelationships that are agnostic to the direction of the relationship, and (c) these relationships are stronger for interactional and interpersonal forms of justice relative to procedural and distributive forms.

The patterns identified in our review suggest some potential “blind spots” as well as new opportunities for research. First, given that nearly half of the studies in our review applied social exchange theory in some fashion—with most others relying on theories from the justice literature—we see value in integrating theoretical perspectives that lie outside of LMX and justice scholarship to answer questions that these frameworks cannot. For example, while social exchange theory provides an excellent framework for describing the relevance of fairness to social exchange quality and social exchange quality to fairness enactment, it does little to unpack temporal

ordering and largely sidesteps matters of how these specific exchange dynamics operate. As scholars draw from and extend existing models moving forward, we think it is particularly critical to develop theory that “peers under the hood” of how LMX influences fairness and how fair treatment influences LMX quality—that is, theory that spans beyond the notion that fairness is a social exchange resource that leaders use to foster and maintain high LMX quality.

With that in mind and with our review as a backdrop, one important question we are left with is: Do leaders treat those they have better exchange relationships with more fairly as a result of their high-quality relationship (i.e., LMX → fairness)? Or is it that better exchange relationships ultimately develop with the employees that leaders treat more fairly (i.e., fairness → LMX)? Alternatively, is it some combination of both (i.e., reciprocal)? In many ways, our review of existing theoretical applications suggests that we are faced with a “What came first—the chicken or the egg?” issue. Unfortunately, this issue is only exacerbated by the fact that nearly 90% of the literature measures both constructs at the same time and positions them based on convenience. As such, we challenge researchers moving forward to not only develop or introduce new theory to better clarify these dynamics but also implement research designs and analytics to better address questions of “What comes first?” In terms of research designs, it would be fruitful to utilize more longitudinal or repeated measures designs better tailored to unpack the role of time. In terms of analyses, these types of data may be analyzed using cross-lagged and auto-regressive models, multilevel models, or growth models. Indeed, showing a significant cross-lagged effect (in a cross-lagged and autoregressive analysis of repeated measures data) would provide the strongest indication of causal ordering possible in field data (Finkel, 1995; Lang et al., 2011; Zablah et al., 2016)—and would clarify the strength of the relationship in each direction if reciprocal.

We suspect that leveraging theories outside the LMX and justice realms may help paint a more complete picture of the justice-fairness relationship and how it unfolds over time. That said, more work is still needed within the confines of the “popular” lenses (e.g., social exchange theory, allocation preferences theory) reviewed as well. Indeed, it appears important to not only use the current theoretical perspectives to explain the presence of a relationship between LMX quality and fairness enactment (as has been the status quo), but to test the mechanics of those theories in the context of LMX quality and fairness. For instance, a natural next step would be to explicitly operationalize and test the forces at play according to social exchange theory (e.g., specific socio-emotional resources contributed by both parties, felt obligation, motives for exchange) and allocation preference theory (e.g., equity, equality) to gage whether these specific theories are

really the “*why*” behind the relationships that exist and whether they fully or partially or do not explain the association.

Another potential blind spot that hasn’t been addressed theoretically or empirically is whether the linkages between LMX and fairness flow primarily from the benefits of high LMX quality or the detriments of low LMX quality. For instance, do we see a relationship between LMX and fair treatment because being a high LMX employee allows one to be treated particularly fairly (i.e., provided with information, influence, tasks, latitude, support, and attention) or because being a low LMX employee causes one to feel that they are treated unfairly (i.e., relatively deprived of information, influence, tasks, latitude, support, and attention)? Given the emerging consensus that reactions to fairness and justice adherence reflect different constructs than reactions to unfairness and justice violations (Colquitt et al., 2015; see also Dulebohn et al., 2009; Gilliland et al., 1998), this seems particularly important to untangle. Interestingly, current perspectives in the literature would likely provide a different answer to this question depending upon whether one applies a social exchange lens (whereby fair treatment is used as a social exchange resource in high quality exchanges) or a justice lens (whereby low LMX employees compare their treatment to that of their high LMX peers). Although both perspective can be used to explain the association between LMX and fairness, this hasn’t been unpacked to actually show whether one explanation is better supported than the other (or if they are equally responsible). As such, future work here would be particularly fruitful.

Another area for scholarly inquiry flowing directly from the results of our meta-analytic review is to consider what is driving differences in effect sizes across the different dimensions of fair treatment. Indeed, one of the most robust results from our meta-analysis was that the linkages between LMX and fairness are stronger for interactional and interpersonal forms of justice relative to procedural and distributive forms. As noted previously, a potential explanation for this result is that (a) these encapsulate the more social aspects of fairness and (b) leaders have greater discretion over their adherence to interactional and interpersonal justice compared to procedural and distributive justice. In other words, because these aspects of justice tend to be better equipped for social exchange (Greenberg, 1993) and are more at a leader’s disposal (Scott et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2014), leaders likely have greater flexibility in using them to facilitate—or to maintain—a high quality social exchange. While this serves as one potential explanation (and one that requires empirical exploration, at that), there are likely other theoretical explanations as well. Thus, although this meta-analysis has identified a clear and robust pattern, we need theoretical development and testing to better establish *why* this result emerged.

One noticeable omission from our review was the lack of research examining LMX agreement and fairness. LMX agreement was recently introduced to the literature in response to meta-analytic evidence showing that leaders and employees tend to disagree more than they agree about LMX quality (i.e., only 8–13% of variance in perceptions of LMX quality are shared by leaders and employees; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Sin et al., 2009). Interestingly, Matta et al. (2015) drew from role theory to demonstrate that—when it comes to employee engagement and citizenship behavior—it was better for employees and leaders to agree that LMX was of low quality (i.e., agree that they had a strictly transactional relationship based on the employment contract) than to disagree about the relationship (even if the employee felt LMX was high). Thus, one takeaway here is that employees are able to more appropriately enact their roles (i.e., engage and perform) when LMX agreement is high. Given that LMX agreement seems relevant for enacting appropriate role behavior (Graen, 1976; Matta et al., 2015), it follows that it may also allow followers to see their treatment from the leader as being more appropriately enacted (i.e., fair; Colquitt & Rodell, 2015). Thus, we see a focus on LMX agreement specifically as another way in which to extend our understanding of LMX and fairness.

Returning to our opening remarks, preferential treatment (a) underlies the development and differentiation of LMX quality and (b) is inextricably tied to the way in which individuals form fairness judgments. That said, the differentiation of LMX quality is not always seen as being unfair and preferential (Chen et al., 2018; Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Matta & Van Dyne, 2020). Given the paradox that differentiating LMX quality (a) results in a more efficient use of leader resources and is performance enhancing for teams but (b) often comes at the expense of workgroup fairness perceptions (Yu et al., 2018), leaders and organizations may be able to “have their cake and eat it too” if they are able to minimize the extent to which differentiating LMX quality is seen as preferential favoritism. This is a final, and particularly practically relevant, future research direction that we hope to see pursued. For instance, at the group-level, researchers might consider whether some forms of LMX differentiation are able to maintain the performance-enhancing benefits of LMX differentiation while mitigating the tax paid on group processes and emergent states. Alternatively, scholars might examine this at the individual-level, considering whether particular actions by high LMX employees trigger or mitigate perceptions that they are being treated preferentially as a result of receiving additional information, influence, tasks, latitude, support, and attention.

CONCLUSION

Leader–member exchange (LMX) and fairness are undeniably linked—theoretically, empirically, and practically. While our review affirms a strong association that at times may seem obvious and omnipresent, it also reveals that we actually know much less than we may have thought. Indeed, our literature seems to take the association between LMX and fairness for granted—applying theory to justify the presence of a relationship rather than expending the effort to truly understand and unpack the *how* and the *why*. We have utilized this review to identify numerous ways that scholars may be able to advance the literature, and we hope this spawns a new wave of scholarly inquiry to address the many lingering unknowns surrounding this association.

NOTE

1. We use the terms “fairness” and “justice” interchangeably (for similar, see Beugre, 2009; Rupp et al., 2017; Whiteside & Barclay, 2018). That said, we do acknowledge the potential distinction in that fairness reflects a global perception of appropriateness, whereas justice reflects the perceived adherence to rules that reflect appropriateness in decision contexts (Colquitt & Rodell, 2015).

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