Perceived Psychological Distance in Leader-Subordinate and Teacher-Student Relationships

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Perceived Psychological Distance in Leader-Subordinate and Teacher-Student Relationships

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Abstract

The purpose of this conceptual paper is two pronged; first it surveys the current research literature on perceived psychological and physical distance and its relationship to leader-subordinate interaction and job performance. Secondly, the review suggests that the phenomenon of perceived distance also applies to the teacher-student relationship and school performance. A synthesis of the literature and suggestions for future research are also presented.
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The central thesis of this paper is focused on leader-subordinate relationship in terms of distance. Distance is a multidimensional tenet that can be summarized by dividing it into two subcategories: psychological and structural distance. Physical distance is largely tangible and thus, less subjective. On the other hand, psychological distance is based on subjective perception, and is influenced by a variety of underlying properties that may moderate or mediate subordinate performance and relations with a leader figure (e.g., affect, respect, or trust) (Ferris et al. 2009). Before delving into the topic, some definitions of terms are offered for the purpose of conceptual clarity.

Definition of Terms

In this study, *distance* is defined (relevant to the workplace) as the quality of closeness or separation in space and time (Ferris et al. 2009). *Spatial* distance reflects how closely two people work in terms of physical location and supervisor’s opportunity to observe subordinate’s performance (Judge & Ferris, 1993); while *psychological* distance refers to the closeness or separation of the perceptions, attitudes, and feelings of two people (Ferris et al., 2009). Perception is understood as immediate or intuitive recognition or appreciation of psychological qualities. Regarding working relationship, a *leader* is defined as anyone who has a supervisory or leadership position including a teacher (also interchangeably used with supervisor or boss), while a *worker* refers to employee or subordinate, i.e., someone who answers to a leader, including a student (Thorougood et al., 2012). Finally, work relation is defined as patterns of exchange...
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between two interacting members or partners, whether individuals, groups, or organizations, typically directed at the accomplishment of some common objectives or goals (Ferris et al. 2009).

Although there is ample evidence in the literature that a variety of leadership styles exist, such as democratic, autocratic, transformational, and laissez faire leader type (Antonakis & Atater, 2002; Casimir & Waldman, 2007; and Lewin, 1939), an exhaustive review of leadership styles is beyond the scope of this literature review. The review explores the distance and interaction of the leader from the subordinate’s point of view, because regardless of the leadership style what seems to matter is how the subordinate perceives the relationship.

Napier and Ferris (1993) describes perception as follows:

“Perceptions of perceived and actual similarity or psychological closeness lead to increased attention or affect. Structural distance is a measure of the propinquity, or opportunity for, frequency of, and type of interaction in the dyad. Propinquity and proximity have been studied in regard to their effect on communication frequency and effectiveness and interpersonal attraction. Functional distance is a measure of the quality and closeness of the working relationship which develops in the dyad partially as a result of psychological and structural distance.” (pg. 327)

Given, the foregoing, what factors play a role in the perception of distance (physical and psychological) in leader-subordinate relationship? To understand this relationship, researchers often examine four constructs, leader-member exchange (LMX),
trust in the supervisor (TS), perceived organizational support (POS) and reward systems (RS) (Gómez & Rozen, 2001; Rhodes & Eisenberger, 2002).

**Leader-Member Exchange (LMX).** LMX is the perception an employee holds regarding the quality of his or her relationship with a leader, e.g., level of acceptance and treatment (Gómez & Rozen, 2001). Because this evaluation relies on personal opinion and feelings, it differs from person to person, making the exchange even more complex. Research shows that leaders give subordinates preferential treatment based on skills, motivation, and the level of trust (Liden & Graen, 1980). Once LMX is established, a subordinate may feel empowered. Without LMX, subordinates may perceive leaders as distant and formal in their communications with employees, which is suspected to contribute to low motivation and strained communication (Winter & Jackson, 2006).

Research also shows that perceptions of LMX among subordinates are subject to the effect that referents have on an individual’s perception. In other words, individuals may engage in comparisons and may use social information derived from referents when evaluating the fulfillment of their psychological contract (perceived promises, mutuality, and informal obligations) and inducement-contribution (obligations and entitlements between leader and subordinate, i.e., the perception that inducements being received are greater than the contribution) (Ferris et al. 2009). When there is high variation of LMX within a group, subordinates with high LMX tend to feel that they are treated special in comparison to their peers (Erdogan & Liden, 2002). The exchange element in LMX is fundamental, because it allows the development of mutual trust and respect, which encourages information exchange. As such, trust and LMX cannot be separated; they act as both source and product of the other. When a subordinate perceives high LMX,
he or she sees it as a reward for good job-performance and fulfillment of the psychological contract (Henderson et al., 2008).

However, Liden and Maslyn (1998) claimed affect and liking to be a dimension of relationships, whilst Wayne and Ferris (1990) operationalized affect and liking as an antecedent to relationships. Ferris et al. (2009) later concluded that both suggestions may be essential for both the formation and maintenance of high LMX relationships, because LMX must first be established through a give-take interaction. It is likely that positive affect and liking contribute to more exchange.

Researchers in the past have attempted to construct some sort of theoretical basis for LMX, and there have been proposals for a single dimension (Graen & Uhlbien, 1995) to a multidimensional framework (Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999). Yet, despite a surfeit attribution to the foundational influence of LMX theory, trust (Mcallister, 1995; Sheppard & Sherman, 1998) and respect (Liden et al. 1997; Liden & Maslyn, 1998) are the most widely accepted psychological variables that contribute to leader-subordinate relationship.

It is evident that LMX can have an effect on subordinate performance, but so can TMX (team-member exchange). TMX refers to the social exchanges with the individual and team members in terms of reciprocal input of ideas, feedback, and assistance (Seers, 1989). A number of researchers have studied and found considerable evidence positing the idea that high-quality TMX may, by itself, account for an increase in employee organizational commitment, job performance, and organizational citizenship behavior.
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**Trust in Supervisor (TS).** When a subordinate trusts a leader, it results in a psychological state based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of a leader. If there is no trust, the employee may be precautious or be reluctant to perform (Elmuti, 1997). It is generally expected that trust is built overtime and will be reciprocated by the employee. As trust in an employee increases, supervisors tend to respond by providing the employee with more responsibilities, which boosts self-esteem and motivation to perform (Gómez, & Rosen, 2001). This empowerment is understood to be the result of trust and LMX. Future studies may want to investigate the possibility that the leader-subordinate psychological dynamics may have a reciprocal pattern that is more complex. Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005) extended the Social Exchange Theory (SET) to explain the reciprocal nature of leader-subordinate relationship. SET proposes that in a leader-member relationship, individuals involved seek to obtain satisfaction, that is, both parties pursue self-interest (through reciprocity in terms of interdependent exchanges). In other words, one’s actions are dependent on another’s behavior. For instance, if differential treatment of subordinates occurs based on trust or if both the leader and the subordinate perceive distance, the relationship may be compromised resulting in ineffective leadership and low performance.

**Perceived Organizational Support (POS).** The extent to which employees believe that their leader cares about them and appreciates their contributions is known as Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002). Employees tend to assess interactions with their supervisor as positive
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or negative to have a sense of how they rank (Rhodes & Eisenberger, 2002). High POS is perceived when employees feel that they have more positive interactions with their supervisors (e.g., more compliments than complaints). In this respect, Rhodes and Eisenberger (2002) concluded that favorable treatment from a supervisor is synonymous with support, which raises the value of POS among employees. Regardless of the leader style, employees perceive fairness, support, rewards, and favorable job conditions as a sign of high POS, because POS act as an emotional reward to employees for their loyalty and performance (Rhodes & Eisenberger, 2002).

However, it is important to note that the perception of the subordinate determines what is or is not a POS. For instance, the perception of voluntary support is related to high POS, while the perception of mandated support is related to low POS. Overall, high POS is a predictor of happier and more productive employees, who report higher levels of perceived trust (Rhodes & Eisenberger, 2002).

**Reward System (RS).** All of the constructs discussed above are linked to a reward system by either being rewards themselves (POS, LMX), or being part of the construct of trust in supervisor (TS). RS is another form of supervisor-employee interaction, the leader gives rewards to subordinates, and subordinates respond to those rewards.

POS and LMX are forms of positive reinforcement, because they are increased as an employee fulfills their psychological and occupational contracts. Thus, increases in support (POS and LMX) that correspond to job productivity are seen as rewards (Gómez & Rozen, 2001). When employees determine their level of TS, they pay attention to
reward distribution, because employees must feel that they are rewarded fairly for their contributions in order to assess that the supervisor has their best interest.

Research shows RS (psychological, e.g., praise or tangibles, e.g., bonus) has a positive correlation with job productivity. As Industrial Psychologists say, rewards are used to show appreciation to employees for work well done and or to motivate employees to produce more (Elangovan & Xie, 1999). The relationship among the four constructs, leader behavior, employees’ performance and perception are discussed are diagramed below (Figure 1).

The implication of distance is far reaching. For instance, Hui Liao et al. (2010) found that TMX had a direct effect on employee self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as “an individual’s belief in one’s capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy leads to success due to the self-fulfilling prophecy; that is, if one perceives high probability for personal success he/she will set out to fulfill that perception. Self-fulfilling prophecy is also characterized by belief valence. The behavior is dependent on whether the initial belief is positive or negative (Wilard et al., 2008). There is further research suggesting that self-fulfilling prophecy can be influenced by outside sources as well. Eden’s (1990) field experimentation showed that leader’s raised expectations boosted subordinate’s performance. It could be possible then that if a leader can induce positive valence (or self-efficacy) positively influencing performance, then they also have the power to induce negative valence.
In summary, similar to any other interpersonal relationships, perception seems to play a role in leader-subordinate relationship in the work place. However, the consequences of actions that are based on perception, rather than facts, may at times be costly. The literature review thus far suggests that when a subordinate perceives a fair and supportive environment, loyalty and work performance increase. On the other hand, perceived psychological and physical distance has the potential to result in difficult leader-subordinate relationship and lowered performance. In other words, perceived distance may result in positive or negative performance. The leader-subordinate interaction discussed thus far suggests that there is a relationship between this interaction and distance (psychological and physical), which in turn is suspected to be related to performance; i.e., the more a subordinate perceives that he or she has a good relationship with a supervisor, trusts the supervisor, feels a sense of support from the supervisor, and
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is rewarded for being loyal and a good worker, the better the interaction between the leader and subordinate and performance (Rhodes & Eisenberger, 2002).

In general, studies on distance can be applied to most situations where there are leaders and subordinates. In these situations, the interactions and reciprocal actions seem to be related to the perception and performance of the subordinate (Ferris et al., 2009). Therefore, it is proposed that the constructs (LMX, TS, POS, and RS) that are involved in the leader-subordinate relationship in organizations and industries are also found in teacher-student relationship. In a dated study, Jenkins and Lippit (1951) said that the classroom can be considered a type of organization where the teacher retains authority status over students. In the remainder of this paper, the review will focus on teacher-student interaction, and its relationship to perceived distance (psychological and physical) by the student and performance.

Perceived Distance in the School Setting

In the school setting, it is assumed "that decreased physical and/or psychological distance between teachers and students is associated with enhanced learning outcomes" (Gorham & Zakahi, 1990, p. 354). This assumption is similar to the findings that distance (psychological and physical) between leader-subordinate is related to performance (Ferris et al. 2009). In the teacher-student dyad, distance is measured by teacher immediacy, which is a set of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that shows a teacher's willingness to approach and be approached by students; which in turn increases closeness and positive attitudes by decreasing the physical or psychological distance between the teacher-student dyad (Christophel, 1990). What do non-verbal and verbal immediacy look like?
Nonverbal immediacy is expressed through such behaviors as voice, smiling, eye contact, face-to-face body position, and so on. Verbal immediacy on the other hand includes praise, accessibility to students, feedback, and so on. Teachers with verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors appear more human to their students. Research has demonstrated the relationship between teacher immediacy and student achievement (Richmond, Lane, & McCroskey, 2006). Although both types of immediacy are indicated to be related to learning, nonverbal immediacy is found to have a higher correlation with learning than verbal immediacy (Christensen & Menzel (1998), which is interesting. Is it possible that children depend more on their perception to make sense of non-verbal behaviors, similar to perceived distance discussed above? Future studies may want to investigate the role of perception in nonverbal teacher-student relationship.

Teachers seem to have influence on children in a variety of areas. For instance, teachers’ evaluation of children predicts children’s self-concept possibly by creating expectancies, relationships, and positive and negative experiences, which can affect children’s self-concept (HaileMariam & Burgener, 2010). In a study by Suldo et al. (2009), middle school students completed a self-report of their subjective well-being as well as their perceived social support from teachers. The results demonstrated that 16% of the total variance in the student’s subjective well-being was accounted for by teacher support. Next, junior high students were asked four questions: how teachers show that they care about them, how teachers show that they treat kids fairly, how teachers make them feel comfortable asking questions, and how teachers make sure that they learn something well. The students were then asked negative form of each question (e.g., “what do teachers do to make you feel like they don’t care about you?”). Results suggested that
students perceived teachers to be supportive mostly when teachers emotionally connected with students, used a variety of teaching practices, helped students succeed academically, treated students fairly, and encouraged questions from students.

Overall, as discussed above, the perceived distance (and its relationship to work performance) literature is mostly about the work place (i.e., supervisor-employee interaction); and it is mostly qualitative in nature. Further, the teacher-student relationship, which is presumed to be similar to the supervisor-employee relationship, has not been researched.

**Suggested Study for the Future**

In this conceptual paper, it is suggested that future studies assess the relationship between distance (immediacy) in teacher-student relationship and student achievement. In order to do so, a school system can be approached to participate in the research. Two criteria would be required for participation: Self-reflection and cognitive ability. Children do not self-reflect until about age 9 or so (DeMoulin, 1999); and students with cognitive limitation, e.g., mental retardation, would not be included. Only students who could self-reflect (4th grade or higher) and without Individual Education Plan, i.e., do not receive special education support would be included in the proposed study.

The study would have two parts, a measure of teacher distance (physical and psychological) and student perception of distance. Trained observers would observe the teacher-student interactions in multiple classrooms over several days. The observation would be based on the constructs that have been indicated in the leader-subordinate relationship. In other words, the following constructs that indicate psychological distance would be observed: These are leader-member exchange (LMX), e.g., teacher
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seeking input from the student and the student giving input, trust in the supervisor/teacher (TS), e.g., student asking for help, perceived organizational/teacher support (POS), e.g., following teacher directives, and reward systems (RS), e.g., teacher giving praise and compliments. To assess physical distance, teacher student proximity, eye contact, and so on would be targeted.

These constructs must first be operationalized, i.e., they must be defined in observable and measurable terms for observers to see, recognize, and code the behaviors the same way. For ease of data collection, a form that lists the target behaviors with columns for recording the behavior, 1 indicating the behavior was observed and 2 indicating the behavior was not observed would be designed. To establish inter-rater reliability, multiple observers would be used. These data would then be compared to students’ state achievement test scores and grades. The expected outcome would be that students who have good relationship with teachers (i.e., no physical or psychological distance) would have higher achievement scores and grades than those who experience distance.

The second phase of the study would assess students’ perception of distance (psychological and physical). Therefore, students would complete a questionnaire that is designed to assess their perception of their relationship with their teachers. The sample questionnaire would include items on physical and psychological distance, such as my teacher looks at me when she speaks to me, my teacher gives me a high five, I like my teacher, my teacher is funny, and my teacher is fair. These would be on a Likert Scale, 1 being Agree and 4 being disagree. It would be expected that student perception of distance would predict student achievement (i.e., state achievement test scores and grade
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point average). Students who perceive distance would have lower achievement scores and grade point average than those who perceive no distance. And if perception of distance truly predicts student achievement, those who perceive distance in the absence of distance (based on the observation data, phase one above), would have lower achievement score and grade point average than those who perceive no distance when in actuality distance was observed.

**Figure 2. Teacher Distance and Student Performance**

**Limitation, Implication, and Conclusion**

Although the suggested study would contribute to the literature on the relationship between perceived teacher distance and student achievement, it is a correlational design that does not indicate directionality or causation. It is possible that there are other explanations, such as students’ intrapersonal qualities, that may be responsible for the distant teacher-student relationship and not the teacher. Empirical studies are greatly needed in this area, because of the implication it has on children’s future.

One of the implications of the suggested study is intervention. In other words, if results support the assumption that teachers’ have power over children, and how they
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interact with them in part could possibly impact student achievement, training could be
designed to educate teachers about establishing rapport and decrease distance in teacher-
student interaction.

In conclusion, it is plausible that positive and close teacher-student interaction
may reduce mental health issues, low achievement, or school dropout. One of the
primary goals of schools is to nurture and educate children to become well-adjusted and
productive members of society. Thus, research like the proposed study is expected to
find answers for supporting such a goal.
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