The relationship between followers’ perceived quality of relationship and preferred leadership style

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Abstract
Purpose – Although leaders and followers are both essential elements within the leadership process, there has been limited research regarding followers and their role in the process. The purpose of this paper is to answer specific calls for research in the studies of followership, leadership, and the follower/leader relationship through the examination of the relationship between followers’ perception of quality of relationship with their leaders and followers’ preferred leadership style from their leaders.

Design/methodology/approach – The study utilized a quantitative, correlational approach using the LMX-7 questionnaire to measure followers’ perceived quality of relationship with their leader and the MLQ-5x to measure followers’ preferred leadership style from their leader. The test sample was 105 CPAs working in the USA for companies over 1,000 employees in size.

Findings – The study determined positive, significant levels of relationship between follower’s perceived quality of relationship and follower’s preference for transformational leadership style. The study additionally determined that the level of preference for transactional leadership style, at the composite scale level, remained relatively consistent, regardless the quality of relationship.

Research limitations/implications – Because of the specific characteristic of the chosen research sample, the research results may not be generalized across other populations. Recommendations for future studies across different samples are identified.

Originality/value – This study is unique in that it adds to the body of knowledge of leadership studies through the perspective of the follower.

Keywords Leadership, Followership, Leadership style

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction
The Hogg (2001) assertion that “leaders exist because of followers and followers exist because of leaders” (p. 185) illustrates the symbiotic nature of the relationship between leaders and followers. Most current definitions of leadership also include both leaders and followers with the concept that leadership is a process whereby leaders influence followers’ thoughts and/or behavior (Northhouse, 2007; Yukl, 2002). Although both leaders and followers are essential to the leadership process, there has been a division in research oriented toward understanding leaders and followers. While there has been a long running focus on research aimed toward understanding leaders as evidenced through the development of leader-centric theories including trait theory (Stogdill, 1948), skills theory (Katz, 1955), behavioral theory (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Fleishman, 1953), contingency theory (Fiedler, 1967), and situational theory (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969), there has been a lesser, separate research focus on understanding followers (Baker, 2007; Yukl, 2002). Burns (1978) noted this division between leader-centric and follower-centric research focus in his charge that “one of the most serious failures in the
study of leadership is the bifurcation between the literature on leadership and the literature on followership” (p. 3).

Researchers are increasingly recognizing the need to understand the role and significance of followers within the leadership process. Kelley (1988) highlighted the role of followers with his assertion “not all corporate success is due to leadership” (p. 1) in his argument that organizational success is due in part on “how well their followers follow” (p. 2). Hollander (1992) spoke about the “essential interdependence of leadership and followership” (p. 71) in his analysis of leadership as a process within the contextual elements of “the qualities and responsiveness of followers, with their needs, expectations, and perceptions” (p. 71). Uhl-Bien (2006) noted that organizations continue to become more complex, increasing our need to develop our understanding of “what are the relational dynamics by which leadership is formed throughout the workplace?” (p. 672).

Leadership theories have progressively included leaders and followers, as well as their relationship within the leadership process (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hollander, 1995, 2008). Leader member exchange (LMX), a relational leadership theory, recognizes the elements of leader, follower, and the quality of their relationship (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). The relationship-based approach to leadership recognizes “a two-way influence relationship between a leader and a follower aimed primarily at attaining mutual goals” (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 656). While there is recognition of a two-way influence, research has predominately been leader-centric with leadership as an independent variable with a resulting follower response as a dependent variable (Dvir and Shamir, 2003).

The focus on leader-centric research has limited the understanding of both the follower and the relationship within the leadership process (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006). To help overcome that limitation, the objective of this research was to test the relationship between the follower’s perception of the quality of relationship with their leader (direct supervisor) and the follower’s preference for leadership style from that same leader, which had not yet been explored in the research literature.

2. Theory and hypothesis development

Figure 1 depicts the research design model demonstrating the relationship between follower’s perception of quality of relationship with their leader and the level of follower’s preference for leadership style of that leader.

In this section, the rationale underlying the model development and theoretical arguments supporting the hypothesized relationships is developed. This section begins by discussing the concepts of followership and leadership. Next the concept of the leader-follower relationship is discussed, followed by identifying several hypotheses describing the relationship between the follower’s perception of quality of relationship with their leader and the level of follower’s preference for leadership style of that leader.
2.1 Followership theory

Kellerman (2008) provided a current definition of followership as “the response of those in subordinate positions (followers) to those in superior ones (leaders). Followership implies a relationship between subordinates and superiors, and a response of the former to the latter” (p. xxi). Kellerman’s definition of followership includes the three elements (leader, follower, relationship) that have come to be common to many current studies of both leadership and followership (Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 2004; Burns, 1978; Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hollander, 2008; Hollander and Julian, 1969; Kellerman, 2008).

Passive and active followership. Baker (2007), in her development of a theoretical foundation for a contemporary construct of followership, found that much of the leadership studies in the twentieth century were primarily focussed on leaders and their active roles with passive followers. This leader-centric focus may have helped to perpetuate what Meindl et al. (1985) referred to as the romance of leadership distorting “what leaders do, what they are able to accomplish, and the general effects that they have on our lives” (p. 79). Much of the active-leader/passive-follower research explored leaders’ traits, behaviors, and responses within situational contexts (Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2007; Yukl, 2002).

Other researchers recognized a variety of follower types in more active roles within the leader-follower relationship. Burns (1978) identified passive followers who offered “undiscriminating support,” participatory followers who offered selectively “bargained support,” and close followers who “were in reality subleaders” (p. 68). Hansen (1987) reinforced the thought that followers were more than passive elements in his illustration of the power of followers in their ability to “confer legitimacy” to the leader by granting them authority. Kelley (1988) raised the profile of active followership in his assertion “organizations stand or fall partly on how well their leaders lead, but partly also on the basis of how well their followers follow” (p. 2). He suggested leadership and followership are organizational roles by illustrating that most managers act as both leaders and followers within their organizations. He introduced the idea of effective followership through the identification of followers that would rate high in both critical thinking and levels of active followership and be “distinguished as enthusiastic, intelligent, and self-reliant in the pursuit of the organizational goal” (Kelley, 1988, p. 3).

Need for further research regarding followership. Lord and Emrich (2001) spoke to the importance of understanding followers in their words “if leadership resides, at least in part, in the minds of followers, then it is imperative to discover what followers are thinking” (p. 551). While the definition of leadership includes the existence of followers, studies of leadership have paid little interest to the characteristics of followers (Dvir and Shamir, 2003; Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001; Yukl, 2002). Yukl addressed the lack of research aimed toward followership in his analysis, “only a small amount of research and theory emphasizes characteristics of the follower” (p. 16). Dvir and Shamir spoke to the lack of research using followers’ characteristics as independent variables with the propensity for research to typically include followers’ characteristics as “dependent variables affected by the leader […] rather on follower characteristics, predispositions, or attitudes” (p. 328). Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) spoke to the lack of follower-focussed research, specifically the lack of research aimed toward understanding follower preferences of leadership styles in their description of the state of leadership research: “[…] there are areas where our knowledge base remains deficient. One of these areas is the topic of subordinate preferences for styles of supervision” (p. 327).
2.2 transactional and transformational leadership theories

Burns (1978) continued to build on the concept of leader-follower relationships through his assertion “leaders engage with followers on the basis of shared motives and values and goals” (p. 36). Burns introduced his theory of leadership bounded by the mutually exclusive concepts of transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Transactional leaders, in Burns’ perspective, relate to followers “for the purpose of and exchange of valued things” (p. 19). These exchanges, which could be economic, political, and psychological in nature, are arrived at through a bargaining process in which both leader and follower maintain equal standing. The bargainers (leaders and followers) do not have an enduring, binding relationship beyond the bargained agreement, and may go separate ways after fulfillment of the bargain. There is not a continuing, mutual pursuit of a higher purpose. Transformational leadership, in Burns’ perspective, transforms the follower by raising the follower’s level of consciousness about the importance and value of both outcomes and way of reaching those outcomes through engaging with them in ways that “both leader and follower are raised to higher levels of motivation and morality” (Burn’s, 1978, p. 20). The transformational leader is able to influence the followers to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the larger team or organizational goal.

Bass’s (1985) concept of transactional and transformational leadership, while built on Burn’s (1978) work, differs from Burns’ perspective of the relationship between transactional and transformational styles. Bass argues that transactional and transformational leadership are separate, complimentary concepts (as opposed to Burns’ concept of transactional and transformational leadership being mutually exclusive), and carries this argument even further with the claim that the best leaders are both transformational and transactional in style (Bass, 1985, 1990, 1995, 1999). Bass (1998) suggests it is transactional leadership, through honoring commitments of contingent rewards, creates trust, dependability, and perceptions of consistency, which in turn form the basis of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership, through its focus of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration augments transactional leadership by contributing to the extra effort and performance of followers.

Need for further research regarding leadership theories. There are a number of researchers across various disciplines calling for movement toward new ways of looking at leadership. Maintaining the leadership elements of leader, follower, and relationship, researchers are suggesting a need to find new ways of enabling the organization. Russell’s (2003) research of leadership within educational settings as a relational process, suggests “whilst there is increasing recognition of relationships in leadership […] followers are too frequently treated as a single group. This suggests leaders in the field need to be aware of the various followership groups within their particular organization, and their relationships and motivations” (p. 31). Uhl-Bien (2006) declares “relationships – rather than authority, superiority, or dominance – appear to be the key to new forms of relationships” (p. 672) and suggests we need to address the question “what are the relational dynamics by which leadership is developed throughout the workplace?” (p. 672). Avolio (2007) called more integrative strategies for leadership theory-building in which he asserted “leadership theory and research has reached a point in its development of integration – considering the dynamic interplay between leaders and followers, taking into account the prior, current and emerging context – for continued progress to be made in advancing both the science and practice of leadership” (p. 25).
2.3 Leader-follower relationship

Foundational work researching leader-follower relationships includes vertical dyad leadership theory (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995) that recognized leaders do not use a consistent, average leadership style with all direct supports, but rather develop differentiated, dyadic relationships with subordinates resulting in a range of exchange processes (Dansereau et al., 1975; Liden and Graen, 1980). LMX, based on this type of two-way influence relationship, focuses on how these relationships develop (Dienesch and Liden, 1986; Graen and Scandura, 1987; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1991) and the benefits these relationships bring (Epitropaki and Martin, 2005; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Gerstner and Day, 1997).

LMX, is considered a relational approach of leadership (Northouse, 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Yukl, 2002). Relational approach theory is based in part on the concept that social behavior is the result of an exchange process between two parties. Exchange process, as applied in leadership studies, describes relationships existing as exchanges of desirable outcomes between leaders and individual followers (Blau, 1960, 1986; Cook and Whitmeyer, 1992; Homans, 1958).

Several models have been proposed to explain the process of relationship development between leaders and members. Dienesch and Liden (1986) proposed a process-oriented model of LMX development with steps including initial interaction, leader delegation, member behavior and attribution, and leader’s attribution for member’s behaviors. Graen and Scandura (1987) proposed a three-phase model of LMX development including role-taking, role-making, and role-routinization phases.

The leadership making model (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1991, 1995) explains the process of relationship development across a life cycle of relationship maturity. The LMX life cycle begins with a stranger phase in which leader and follower relations are mostly transactional in nature in which leaders provide followers only what is required to perform task and followers only perform as required. The second phase in the cycle is the acquaintance phase, in which there is a mix of the transactional relations as well as the beginnings of more mature social exchanges that include shared information and resources. The third and last phase of the maturity cycle is the mature partnership phase, in which exchanges between leader and follower are highly developed and characterized by mutual loyalty, support, and are both behavioral and emotional in nature demonstrating elements of mutual respect, trust, and obligation. Not all relationships progress through this life cycle; and those that do progress do so at differing speeds (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Need for further research regarding LMX. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) acknowledged the imbalance of research toward the leadership domain and issued a call for research in their analysis “in leadership research to date, a plethora of studies have been conducted on the leader, but in comparison there has been a dearth of studies in the other two areas. Clearly, more research is needed on followers and the leadership relationship” (p. 222). Schriesheim et al. (1999) also issued a call for research that extends beyond the leader in their words “this review clearly indicates the need for improved theorization about LMX and its basic process” (p. 102). Northouse’s (2007) criticism that while “it is suggested that leaders should work to create high-quality exchanges with subordinates, the guidelines for this is done are not clearly spelled out” (p. 160) provides the basis for areas of future study to more fully understand followers perceptions of quality of relationships with their leaders. All of these criticisms and calls for research speak to the need for more understanding of the follower and relationship domains within LMX leadership theory.
2.4 Research question – hypotheses rationale and development

This study responded to various calls for research in the areas of followership, leadership, and the relationship between leaders and followers. These calls include the Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) declaration that “clearly, more research is needed on followers and the leadership relationship” (p. 222), the Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) notice of the lack of follower-focused research, specifically the deficiency in “the topic of subordinate preferences for styles of supervision” (p. 327) and the Uhl-Bien (2006) question “what are the relational dynamics by which leadership is developed throughout the workplace?” (p. 672).

There are multiple reasons for integrating both LMX and transactional/transformational theories into this study. While LMX and transactional/transformational leadership theories are different theories (and clearly have had separate columns of research), integrating both theories into research studies provides the ability to yield new insight into the concepts of followership. For example, this study utilized LMX (with its measurement of the quality of relationship) as a tool that allowed researchers the flexibility to construct leadership research with a follower-perspective focus into both quality of relationship and leaders’ behaviors, thus helping to develop a more robust set of follower-centric findings in the study of followership.

There is also a level of intersection between LMX and transactional/transformational theories that allow a natural combination of them into this study. They are both modern theories that address leadership as processes between leaders and followers. Both Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), Gerstner and Day (1997), and Bass (1999) have compared and contrasted LMX and transactional/transformational theories. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) assert that “LMX is both transactional and transformational: it begins as transactional social exchange and evolves into transformational social exchange” (p. 238). Gerstner and Day (1997), in their meta-analysis, found that “Our review supports the suggestion made by others (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995) that LMX should incorporate both transactional and transformational processes” (p. 838). Bass (1999) describes more distinction between LMX and transactional/transformational in “the transactional/transformational paradigm is independent conceptually from the concept of leader-member-exchange (LMX), although empirical correlation with them may be found to some extent” (p. 13). Although there exists a level of disagreement as to the exact areas of intersection between the theories, major researchers in the field (Bass, 1999; Gerstner and Day, 1997; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995) all propose there is an intersection between some of the elements within LMX and transactional/transformational leadership theories, and that proposed intersection provides an additional basis for the inclusion of those leadership theories into this study.

Given the Bass (1999) assertion that “LMX unfolds in several stages […] in the first stage, LMX is transactional. If the last stage is reached, it is transformational” (p. 14), then one could reasonably expect to see some level of correlated movements of measurements using the LMX and MLQ instruments. In light of these issues and calls, this study proposed the following hypotheses:

\[ H1. \] There is a relationship between the follower’s perceived quality of relationship with their leader (direct supervisor) and that follower’s preference for transformational leadership style from that same leader.

\[ H2. \] There is a relationship between the follower’s perceived quality of relationship with their leader (direct supervisor) and that follower’s preference for transactional leadership style from that same leader.
2.5 Discussion of independent and dependent variables within research design

This study’s research design construct used perception as the independent variable and preference as the dependent variable. The questionnaire was designed to first focus on the perceived quality of relationship (IV) and subsequently on the preference of leadership style (DV). This design sequence reflected the thought that perception predicates preference between two choices.

Perception is a cognitive process used to interpret and understand surroundings. Object perception is focussed on understanding objects, while social perception is focussed on the process of “how people make sense of other people and themselves” (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2013, p. 181). The perception process can be described in a four-stage information-processing sequence consisting of attention through conscious awareness, interpretation through the use of schema, retention into memory, and retrieval for judgment and decision (Lord, 1985). For example, social perception allows one to develop an understanding of their relationships with others within organizational contexts, and this study utilized perception allowing each respondent to develop a sense of the level of quality of relationship with their supervisor.

Vroom (1964) provided a working definition of preference in his wording “preference, then, refers to a relationship between the strength of a person’s desire for, or attraction toward, two outcomes” (p. 15). Given that interpretation and judgments are made in the latter stages of the perception process, it could be expected that the preference process would utilize those social perception judgments for the development of strength of attraction toward choices of outcomes. This study used that line of thought in designing a research construct to determine the relationship between the independent variable (perceived quality of relationship with their leader) and dependent variable (follower’s level of preference for leadership style from that same leader).

3. Method

3.1 Participants

All 105 participants in this study were certified public accountants, employed at US companies >1,000 employees in size, and were members of the e-Rewards Market Research Panel. A demographic assessment of the sample revealed that the respondents were predominantly female (61.9 percent, n = 65), and between the ages of 25-49 years (81.9 percent, n = 86). The respondents all held college degrees, predominately at the bachelor’s degree level (58.1 percent), with most (66.7 percent) having reported to their current leader for over one year.

3.2 Instrumentation/measures

Three scales were used to gather the data for this study. The follower’s perceived quality of their relationship with their direct supervisor was measured using the LMX-7 questionnaire, which is the construct recommended by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) to measure the quality of dyadic relationships. This version of the LMX questionnaire uses seven items to measure the overall quality of relationship. This questionnaire uses the follower as the referent to assess the quality of the relationship from their perspective by rating the seven items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from a low level (1) to a high level (5). The scoring reflects the perceived quality of the relationship along a continuum within the following ranges: very high = 30-35, high = 25-29, moderate = 20-24, low = 15-19, and very low = 7-14 (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

The follower’s preference for the use of transactional leadership behavior from their leader was measured using the transactional leadership scale from the MLQ (Form 5X)
questionnaire, and the follower’s preference for the use of transformational leadership behavior from their leader was measured using the transformational leadership scale from the MLQ (Form 5X) questionnaire. This study used 32 items from the MLQ (Form 5X) to measure eight leadership behavioral factors categorized across transformational and transactional groupings. This questionnaire’s 32 items are rated using a five-point Likert scale with anchors labeled 0 = not at all, 1 = once in a while, 2 = sometimes, 3 = fairly often, 4 = frequently, if not always (Bass and Avolio, 2004).

3.3 Data collection

The LMX-7 instrument and the MLQ (Form 5X) transactional and transformational scales were combined into a single research instrument and administered through an online survey tool via e-Rewards Market Research. e-Rewards Inc. provides permission-based digital data collection and reporting services. It offers online sampling and survey data collection services ranging from programming and hosting to sample delivery and scripting to online reporting for research projects; and operates various panels that can be designed to fulfill prescriptive research sample requirements. The survey tool included qualifying questions to ensure final participants met the study’s requirements and accepted the first 105 completed surveys, representing 55.6 percent of the qualified participants.

3.4 Sample size considerations

This study considered the values of significance level, effect size, and power to determine adequate sample size (n). Using Cohen’s (1992) recommendations regarding significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), effect size (moderate = 0.30), and power (0.80) along with Cohen’s (1988) suggestions regarding sample size, the specified minimum sample size for this study is 85 pairs of observations (Table I). The 105 usable questionnaires received was a greater number than the required minimum of 85, allowing the ability to discard unusable questionnaires and still be able to maintain the minimum sample size of 85 pairs of observations. Subsequent data screening using boxplots of the variable distributions were examined, using the definition of outlier as “extending more than 1.5 box-lengths from the edge of the boxplot” (Pallant, 2006, p. 61), and three cases were identified as outliers (two cases for the LMX-7 scale data, one case for the transformational scale data, and no cases for the transactional scale data). The distribution of outliers, coupled with the fact that no one case contains more than one (scale) outlier suggests the legitimacy of the data. Comparison of the mean vs 5 percent trimmed mean of the variables indicated little impact to the mean from outliers and the decision was made to include all 105 cases in the data set. Including all 105 questionnaires in the study, rather than 85 as

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Table I. Sample size planning table

Source: Cohen (1988)
per the research design, affected the study by lowering the allowable Type 2 error from 0.20 to 0.15, thus improving the power to 0.85 (Cohen, 1988).

3.5 Data analysis
The Research Questionnaire’s questions 1 through 7 contain questions relating to the respondent’s perception of the quality of their relationship with their leader. The researcher summed the scores for questions 1 through 7 within the Research Questionnaire for each respondent. The sum of a respondent’s scores can range from 7 to 35. Although the scoring is on a continuum, the questionnaire total score may be associated with the following groupings, indicating the perceived quality of relationship: very high = 30-35, high = 25-29, moderate = 20-24, low = 15-19, and very low = 7-14 (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

The Research Questionnaire’s questions 8 through 39 contain questions relating to the respondents level of preference for transactional and transformational leadership behaviors from their leader. The researcher summed the scores for both the transactional leadership scale and transformational leadership scale for each respondent. The sum of each respondent’s scores can range from 0 to 48 for the transactional leadership scale (with higher scores indicating a greater preference for transactional leadership behaviors from their leader) and range from 0 to 80 for the transformational leadership scale (with higher scores indicating a greater preference for transformational leadership behaviors from their leader) (Bass and Avolio, 2004).

This study utilized Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient $r$ to determine direction and strength of all correlations between variables. Strength of relationships were determined using the following guidelines suggested by Cohen (1988): $r = 0.10-0.29$ or $r = -0.10-0.29$ (small strength); $r = 0.30-0.49$ or $r = -0.30-0.49$ (medium strength); $r = 0.50-1.0$ or $r = -0.50-1.0$ (large strength). This study used two-tailed $t$-tests to test the significance of the sample correlation coefficient (Bluman, 2004).

4. Results
4.1 Hypothesis tests
Table II presents the sample size, Chronbach’s $\alpha$ reliability coefficient ($\alpha$) for each scale, means, standard deviation, and correlations ($r$) for the study variables. As shown in the table, several of the correlations were significantly correlated at the small (i.e. $0.10 < r < 0.290$) and medium strength level (i.e. $0.250 < r < 0.490$). The strongest correlation (0.358) was between the variables perceived quality of relationship and preference for contingent reward.

$H1$ predicts there is a relationship between the follower’s perceived quality of relationship with their leader (direct supervisor) and that follower’s preference for transformational leadership style from that same leader. As shown in Table I, this study found a positive, significant relationship between follower’s perceived quality of relationship with their leader (direct supervisor) and follower’s preference for a transformational leadership style from that same leader. This was true at both the transformational composite scale level (0.268) and at each of the individual transformational subscale levels (0.190, 268, 295, 240, 268). These findings provide support for $H1$.

$H2$ predicts a relationship between the follower’s perceived quality of relationship with their leader (direct supervisor) and that follower’s preference for transactional leadership style from that same leader. As shown in Table II, this study, using the transactional composite scale, found no significant relationship between follower’s
perceived quality of relationship with their leader (direct supervisor) and follower’s preference for an overall transactional leadership style from that same leader (0.037). However, in reviewing the individual subscale scores, a positive, significant relationship was determined between the follower’s perception of quality of relationship with their leader and the transactional leadership subscale dimension of contingent reward (0.352), and a negative, significant relationship was determined between the follower’s perception of quality of relationship with their leader and the transactional leadership subscale dimension of management by exception, passive (−0.229). Bass and Riggio (2006) acknowledge “the transactional factors tend to be more independent of each other” (p. 25), and this study’s differing strengths and direction between transactional subscales support their assertion.

4.2 Supplemental analysis

The correlational analysis described the data from the entire sample perspective. The follower’s perceived quality of relationship can be grouped within five ranges from very low to very high (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). These groupings allow us to subgroup our data and view it using a methodology that explains the data’s relationship within each grouping as opposed to an overall correlation.

This study provides comparison of the results using the transformational, transactional, contingent reward, and management-by-exception (passive) scales via transforming the results into relative data. Using a ratio methodology, the relative strength of preference for leadership style can be determined by the ratio actual score/highest available score. This ratio determines the percentage of actual level of preference as compared to the highest available level of preference. Using this ratio, questionnaire results using different scales (and subscales) can be compared and conclusions as to follower’s relative strength of preference for leadership styles can be made.

The scores for the follower’s preference for transformational leadership style, transactional leadership style, contingent reward, and management-by-exception (passive) leadership behaviors were determined and the means calculated for each perceived quality of relationship range.

Table III illustrates the relative strength of follower’s preference for transformational, transactional, contingent reward leadership, and management-by-exception (passive)
styles within ranges of follower’s perceived quality of relationship with their leader. Transformational and contingent reward leadership styles, which have both been found to have a correlational relationship with quality of relationship, are also very similar in their relative strength of preference profiles. The results indicate that the relative strength of follower’s preference for transactional leadership (at the composite level) remains consistent (42.92-48.60 percent) across all levels of quality of relationship. However, this consistency at the composite level is further explained by the relative strength of follower’s preference for contingent reward (45.00-76.50 percent) and management-by-exception passive (42.50-26.44 percent). Both contingent reward and management-by-exception are subscales of the composite transactional leadership scale, but their relative strength calculations are moving in opposite directions (Table III), thus allowing the transactional composite strength calculation to remain consistent.

Analysis of the relative strength of the subscale data provides more insight into how the preference for contingent reward behaviors increases and the preference for management-by-exception (passive) behaviors decreases as the perceived quality of relationship increases.

5. Discussion
5.1 Summary of results
In answer to multiple calls for more research with the goal of gaining a greater understanding of followers within the leadership process (Avolio, 2007; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Russell, 2003; Uhl-Bien, 2006), this study utilized LMX theory, transformational leadership theory, and transactional leadership theory to explore the relationship between a follower’s perceived quality of relationship with their leader (direct supervisor) and that follower’s preferred leadership style from that same leader.

This study found a positive, significant relationship between follower’s perceived quality of relationship with their leader (direct supervisor) and follower’s preference for a transformational leadership style from that same leader. This study also found positive, significant relationships between follower’s perceived quality of relationship with their leader and preference for transformational leadership subscale factors of idealized influence (attributed and behavioral), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and idealized consideration.

No significant relationship was found between follower’s perceived quality of relationship with their leader (direct supervisor) and follower’s preference for an overall transactional leadership style from that same leader as measured at the composite level. However, a positive, significant relationship was determined between the follower’s perception of quality of relationship with their leader and the transactional leadership style preferred by that leader.
leadership subscale dimension of contingent reward, and a negative, significant relationship was determined between the follower's perception of quality of relationship with their leader and the transactional leadership subscale dimension of management by exception (passive).

The findings suggest that follower's preferences for transformational leadership behaviors, which involve building trust, inspiring a shared vision, encouraging creativity, and recognizing accomplishments, are correlated to the follower's perception of the quality of relationship with their direct supervisor. The highest correlation, $r(103) = 0.295$, $p < 0.05$ (Table II) is with the leadership factor inspirational motivation, which includes the behaviors of talking optimistically about the future, talking enthusiastically about what needs to be accomplished, articulating a compelling vision of the future, and expressing confidence that goals will be achieved (Bass and Avolio, 2004).

The leadership behaviors within the contingent reward subscale include: first, provides assistance in exchange for efforts; second, discusses in specific terms who is responsible for achieving performance targets; third, makes clear what one can expect to receive when performance goals are achieved; and fourth, expresses satisfaction when follower meets expectations (Bass and Avolio, 2004). The study results for contingent reward $r(103) = 0.352$, $p < 0.05$ (Table II) suggests that supporting and clarifying behaviors supporting achievement and/or rewards are the type of behaviors most correlated with the follower's perceived quality of relationship.

The findings also suggest that follower's preferences for management-by-exception (passive) leadership behaviors, which involve waiting until there are significant problems before interfering, are inversely correlated, $r(103) = -0.229$, $p < 0.05$ (Table II), with the follower's perception of the quality of relationship with their direct supervisor.

LMX quality can be viewed within ranges from very low to very high (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). This study indicates followers in very low quality relationships have the lowest preference (mean = 44.6) (Table III) for transformational leadership styles; followers in the mid-range levels (low, moderate, and high ranges) all have a very similar level of preference (mean = 54.9-55.33) (Table III) for transformational leadership behaviors; and followers within very high quality of relationships have the highest preference (mean = 60.33) (Table III) preference for transformational leadership behaviors. These findings suggest that the followers' preferences for transformational leadership behaviors are more tiered rather than simply following a continuously upward sloping line.

This study indicates that follower's preference for transactional leadership subscale contingent reward behaviors follows a similar three-tiered scoring as demonstrated for preference for transformational leadership. The study indicates followers within very low-quality relationships have the lowest preference (mean = 7.2) (Table III) for contingent reward behaviors; followers in the mid-range levels (low, moderate, and high ranges) all have a very similar level of preference (mean = 10.37-11.18) (Table III) for contingent reward behaviors; and followers within very high quality of relationships have the highest preference (mean = 12.24) (Table III) for contingent reward behaviors.

5.2 Managerial implications

The study found that the follower's preference for transformational leadership behavior was positively correlated, $r(103) = 0.268$, $p < 0.05$ (Table II) with the follower's perception of quality of relationship. These findings suggest followers' levels of preference for transformational leadership varies and leaders desiring to reflect follower's preference for leadership styles may wish to include less transformational
behaviors in lower quality relationships and more transformational behaviors in higher quality relationships.

The study’s findings that the follower’s preference for transactive leadership behavioral factor contingent reward, with its supporting and clarifying behaviors, had the highest positive correlation, \( r(103) = 0.352, \ p < 0.05 \) (Table II) with the follower’s perception of quality of leadership. These findings suggest that contingent reward behaviors are more strongly correlated to follower’s perceived quality of relationship than transformational leadership behaviors are, and leaders desiring to reflect follower’s preference for leadership styles may wish to include less contingent reward behaviors in lower quality relationships and more contingent reward behaviors in higher quality relationships.

The study found that the follower’s preference for management-by-exception (passive) leadership behavior was negative correlated, \( r(103) = -0.229, \ p < 0.05 \) (Table II) with the follower’s perception of quality of relationship. These findings suggest followers’ levels of preference for management-by-exception (passive) leadership varies and leaders desiring to reflect follower’s preference for leadership styles may wish to include more management-by-exception (passive) behaviors in lower quality relationships and less management by exception, passive behaviors in higher quality relationships.

The study’s findings in support of a relationship between follower’s perception of quality of relationship and preference for certain leadership behaviors (transformational, contingent reward) may be interpreted in terms of expectancy theory. House (1971), in his analysis of expectancy theories of motivation, identified the common central concept as “a person will engage in certain behaviors because of his expectancy that satisfaction will follow” (p. 322). The finding of a preference for specific behaviors may be explained by: first, the expectation of the follower that these behaviors will have certain outcomes (expectancy); and second, the level of desirability of these outcomes to the follower (valence). It is the interaction of expectancy and valence that yields force, the follower’s level of effort for a specific endeavor (Vroom, 1964). Leaders may view this study’s findings through the lens of expectancy theory as a strategy to understand and react to the follower’s factors of expectancy and valence in order to impact the follower’s level of effort.

5.3 Limitations and future research directions

Several limitations of this study pertain to the population, sample, and the statistical test used to examine the relationship between variables. The sample consists of Certified Public Accountants that are physically located in the USA, working for US organizations with more than 1,000 employees, and are members of e-Rewards Research Panel. One limitation of this study is the inability to generalize the results across other work groups due to the unique requirements of the professional group (CPA’s) used as the test population and sample. One recommendation is to construct a similar study, using a different population type to explore the research question across different types of work groups.

One limitation of this study is the inability to generalize the results across cultures due to the uniquely western culture of the group used as the test population and sample. One recommendation is to construct a similar study, using a different population and sample to explore the research question across different cultures. Studies can be constructed using both congruent and noncongruent cultures of the leaders and followers.
One finding of the study was that follower's level of preference for transformational leadership varies in correlation with follower's perceived quality of relationship. One recommendation is to construct a study to examine individual and organizational consequences resulting from followers having or not having their level of preference for transformational leadership behaviors met.

One implication of the study is that the finding of a preference for specific behaviors may be explained by the expectancy theory factors of: first, the expectation of the follower that these behaviors will have certain outcomes (expectancy); and second, the level of desirability of these outcomes to the follower (valence). One recommendation is to construct a study to explore the follower's expected outcomes of leadership behaviors leading to their preference of transformational and contingent reward leadership behaviors.

These limitations notwithstanding, the present study makes two important contributions.

First, this study is significant in that it addressed identified gaps in the existing literature and responded to calls for research. The study's focus from the perspective of the follower addressed researchers' assessments that research in leadership studies has been predominately leader-centric and there exists a need for research aimed toward followers (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Vecchio and Boatwright, 2002). The use of the follower's perception of their relationship with their leader as the independent variable addressed Dvir and Shamir (2003) concern about the lack of research using follower's characteristics as independent variables. The study's research question and findings directly addressed the Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) assessment that our knowledge is deficient in the topic of subordinate preferences for styles of leadership, and this study expanded the knowledge in the topic. The study’s research design, in its use of follower’s perceptions as the independent variables, follower’s preferences as the dependent variable, and the employment of the LMX-7 to measure the quality of relationship directly responded to the Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) call for more research on followers and the leadership relationship.

Second, these findings are significant to researchers in that they demonstrate the relationship between that followers' perception of quality of relationship with their leader and the follower' preferences for transformational and transactional behaviors, which had not been previously addressed in research. These two contributions provide a pathway for future research toward gaining a greater understanding of followers, leaders, and their relationship.

References


**Further reading**


**About the author**

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