

# Yelling at Your Manager?

## Subordinate-Manager Negotiating Relationships and Aggression in the Workplace

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### Abstract

The aim of the research was to discover whether the manager-subordinate dyadic negotiating relationship can predict aggressive behavior of subordinates towards their managers. The research is based on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which focuses on dyadic relationship between leaders and followers.

The study's sample was comprised of 144 Israeli-born employees, employed in 19 Israeli community centers, which all share similar forms of organization and functioning. The independent variables were: age, gender, seniority, education, and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX). The dependent variable, the level of aggression, was measured according to the Workplace Aggression Tolerance Questionnaire (WATQ). As a result of Factor Analysis employed on the Workplace Aggression Tolerance Questionnaire (WATQ), we distinguished between direct and indirect aggression. We expected that a high level of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), i.e. a closer and less formal negotiating relationship between managers and employees, would reduce the level of direct and indirect aggression of employees towards their managers, whereas low LMX would increase the level of direct and indirect aggression.

As expected, a negative significant correlation was obtained between the level of LMX and the level of direct aggression. Furthermore, a negative significant correlation was obtained between the level of LMX and the justification of direct aggression towards managers in the workplace. A weaker, negative, although significant, correlation was obtained between the level of LMX and the display of indirect aggression. It seems that LMX is a significant predictor of employees' aggression towards their managers in the workplace. Therefore, in order to reduce levels of both direct and indirect aggressiveness of employees towards their manager, more attention should be paid to manager-employee negotiating relationships, as expressed by the quality of Leader-Member exchange (LMX)

### Introduction

The aim of this research was to discover whether the manager-subordinate dyadic negotiating relationship can predict aggressive behavior of subordinates towards their managers. While aggression displayed by subordinates towards their managers is not a new phenomenon, recent decades have shown a rise in such aggression. This is probably due to the gradual loss of managerial authority, and respectively the rise of individualism (Galin&Avraham,2009), resulting in an increased need for a manager-subordinates quality of exchange.

Our research is based on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the impact of LMX on workplace aggression. Relationships between

supervisors and subordinates have been frequently studied within the context of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, originally developed by Dansereau, Graen and Haga (1975), as Vertical Dyad Linkage theory. It was then further developed by various researchers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX theory focuses on dyadic relationship between leaders and followers, which in our case can be translated to the dyadic negotiating relationship of managers-subordinates. According to LMX theory, managers treat individual subordinates differently. Some subordinates have informal close negotiating relationship with their manager. This type of relationship usually establishes a high-quality manager-subordinate exchange. Other subordinates have more formal, distanced negotiating relationships with their manager. This type of relationship usually establishes a low-quality manager-subordinate exchange. In most previous studies, LMX impacts are related to various outcomes, such as job satisfaction, job anxiety turnover, and organizational performance and success. In the present study, we investigated whether low-level LMX and more formal, distanced manager-employee exchange, triggers direct and indirect organizational aggression of employees toward their managers. We expected that a high level of LMX, i.e. a closer and less formal negotiating relationship between managers and employees, would reduce the level of direct and indirect aggression of employees towards their managers, whereas low LMX would increase the level of direct and indirect aggression. We also expected that justification of direct and indirect aggression towards managers would be negatively correlated with high LMX subordinates, while low LMX subordinates would be more willing to justify both direct and indirect aggression towards their managers. More specifically, the less formal and close the negotiating relationship between managers and employees is, the higher the level of aggression and the higher the justification for such aggression will be.

## **Methodology**

The study's sample was comprised of 144 Israeli-born employees, employed in 19 Israeli community centers, which all share similar forms of organization and functioning. To analyze our data statistically, we employed Factor Analysis, and Multiple Regressions Analysis. The independent variables were as follows: age, gender, seniority, education, and LMX.

Manager-subordinates quality of exchange was assessed by the 14-item LMX scale developed by Ilsev (2003). Respondents reported their relationship with their manager on a five-point Likert scale (1=disagree, 5=strongly agree), measuring formality and closeness of relationship with their managers. For example, respondents were asked questions, such as: "I have a close working relationship with my supervisor", "My supervisor treats me as his/her equal", and "My relationship with my supervisor goes beyond formal roles".

The levels of aggression and the dependent variables (DVs) were measured according to the Workplace Aggression Tolerance Questionnaire (WATQ) developed by Coombs and Holladay (2004). As a result of the Factor Analysis employed on the WATQ, we distinguished between direct and indirect aggression.

Direct aggression involves inflicting pain through direct acts of verbal or physical assault. Examples of items that measure direct aggression are: "I yell at my manager," and "I insult my manager" or "I swear at the manager". Indirect displays of aggression are designed to cause harm through largely unnoticeable means, such as spreading rumors or gossiping. Examples of questions that measure indirect aggression are: "I spread nasty rumors about my manager," and "I don't warn my manager about a potential problem" or "I delay work to make my manager look bad". Respondents report the frequency of direct and indirect aggression on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5= very often).

We investigated not only the levels of direct and indirect aggression, but also the justification of such aggressive behaviors as appropriate. It has been argued by Coombs and Holladay (2004) that people's perception of the appropriateness of various forms of aggression varies. Direct aggression may be perceived as inappropriate, whereas indirect aggression may be perceived as appropriate or vice versa. Moreover, investigating the level of aggression is not always sufficient. In many cases, self reports of negative behavior, such as displays of aggression, are affected by social desirability or fear of the consequences of such a report. Therefore, it is worthwhile to supplement an analysis of responses regarding negative behavior in real situations by an analysis of beliefs of the appropriateness of such behaviors. It may be assumed that employees who avoid reporting their own aggressive behavior may justify the same aggressive behavior as appropriate when presented with examples of the same behavior in others. Therefore, our respondents were also asked to justify an imaginary scenario describing employees' aggressive reactions towards their manager.

Both the level of aggression (direct and indirect), and the justification of aggression (direct and indirect) towards managers, were measured by the Workplace Aggression Tolerance Questionnaire (WATQ).

### **Main Results**

LMX yields significant impacts on direct displays of aggression. As expected, a negative significant correlation was obtained between the level of LMX and the level of direct aggression. Furthermore, a negative significant correlation was obtained between the level of LMX and the justification of direct aggression towards managers in the workplace. When low LMX exists, employees tend to display more direct aggression towards their managers than when high levels of LMX exist. Moreover, employees have a higher tendency to justify direct aggression as appropriate when LMX is low.

A weaker, negative (although significant) correlation was obtained between the level of LMX and the display of indirect aggression. Apparently, low LMX affects employees' indirect aggressions somewhat less than it affects direct aggression. When low LMX prevails, employees tend to display more indirect aggression towards their managers than when high LMX prevails. However, there is no significant impact of LMX on the justification of indirect aggression in the workplace. Surprisingly, age emerges as a significant factor influencing both indirect aggression and the justification of indirect aggression as appropriate. The younger the employees, the higher the level of indirect aggression, and the higher the justification of indirect aggression will be. The impact of age on workplace aggression has also been found in previous research (Inness et al., 2005); however, these findings indicate that it is important to differentiate between the impacts of age on direct versus indirect aggression.

### **Main Conclusions**

LMX is a significant predictor of employees' aggression towards their managers. Relative to other predictors of aggression examined in this study - education, seniority and gender - LMX was found to be the most significant predictor of levels of direct aggression, indirect aggression, and the justification of direct aggression. Age was found to be a significant predictor of indirect aggression and the justification of indirect aggression. It is noteworthy that by and large the level of indirect aggression in the workplace is higher than the level of direct aggression. However, the impact of LMX on indirect aggression is relatively low. Apparently,

We expected subordinates to avoid self-reporting actual direct aggressive behavior towards managers out of fear from possible consequences. We also expected them to justify such aggressive behavior in others as appropriate. The findings did not indicate a significant difference between the self-reporting of actual aggressive behavior and the justification of such behavior, even though the level of justification was found to be higher than the level of self-reported actual behavior. Low LMX subordinates do not abstain from self-reporting and justifying direct aggression towards their managers.

### **Managerial Implications**

By comparing the level of the impacts of high and low LMX, we can conclude a significant influence of LMX on a rapidly developing problem in organizations - namely aggressiveness. In order to reduce levels of both direct and indirect aggressiveness of employees towards their manager, more attention should be paid to manager-employee negotiating relationships, as expressed by the quality of exchange (LMX), as well as to younger aged employees. Managers' heightened awareness of LMX byproducts, as well as young subordinate trainees, may reduce aggressiveness towards managers and increase the well-being of organizations and their workforces alike.

### **References**

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