

When My Supervisor Dislikes You More Than Me: The Effect of Dissimilarity in Leader–Member Exchange on Coworkers' Interpersonal Emotion and Perceived Help

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According to balance theory (Heider, 1958), when 2 coworkers develop different levels of leader–member exchange (LMX) relationships with their supervisor, a triadic relational imbalance will arise among the 3 parties that may result in hostile sentiments and poor social interactions between them. This study examines the consequences and psychological processes of (dis)similar levels of LMX on the interpersonal interactions between coworkers. Using data from 2 independent studies, the results of social relations analyses show that (a) actual (dis)similarity in LMX between Coworkers A and B increases Coworker A's feelings of contempt for Coworker B and decreases Coworker A's perception of help received from Coworker B (Study 1); (b) Coworker A is more likely to experience contempt for Coworker B when Coworker A perceives that he/she has a higher or lower level of LMX compared to Coworker B than when Coworker A perceives that his/her level of LMX is similar to Coworker B's (Study 2); and (c) these relationships only hold true for employees with a high social comparison orientation (SCO) in both Studies 1 and 2. Particularly, in Study 1, we also show that contempt is a crucial mediator that transmits the interactive effect of LMX (dis)similarity and SCO on perceptions of help received from coworkers. Furthermore, an average level of perceived help from coworkers is positively related to the sales performance of individual employees.

Keywords: leader–member exchange (LMX), social comparison orientation (SCO), contempt, helping behavior, coworker dyads

Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory emphasizes that leaders develop a differential quality of dyadic relationships with followers such that within work groups, they form low-quality transactional relationships with some and high-quality socioemo-

tional relationships with others (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975). Previous research has demonstrated that LMX quality has strong implications for employees' work attitudes and behaviors (see Gerstner & Day, 1997; Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; Rockstuhl, Dulebohn, Ang, & Shore, 2012). This research has particularly focused on the positive effects of LMX on vertical dyadic partners. However, our everyday experiences often highlight its negative effects: When a leader has a better quality of LMX with, and thus provides more support and resources to, Subordinate A than to Subordinate B, the different exchange qualities of the two supervisor–subordinate dyads may have detrimental effects on the relationship of the third subordinate–subordinate dyad. To date, research on the potentially adverse impact of LMX beyond the leader–member dyad remains sparse (e.g., Henderson, Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2008; Vidyarthi, Liden, Anand, Erdogan, & Ghosh, 2010). Therefore, the main contribution of this study is to increase our understanding of the negative consequences of LMX dissimilarity on coworker interactions.

Drawing primarily on balance theory (Heider, 1958), we propose that dissimilarity in LMX between two supervisor–subordinate dyads will create relational imbalance in the triadic relationships among the supervisor and the two subordinates. Such triadic relational imbalance may provoke “hostile” interpersonal emotions (such as contempt, Heider, 1958, p. 190) between the

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subordinates, which in turn, will make each subordinate perceive the other as being less helpful. By contrast, similarity in LMX may reduce contempt and increase perceptions of interpersonal help. Figure 1 depicts our theoretical model. Investigating the effect of LMX (dis)similarity on coworkers' interpersonal emotions and perceived interactions is theoretically important because these emotions and perceptions have been shown to have implications for both intrapersonal (e.g., work motivation and effort intensity; Dirks, 1999) and interpersonal (e.g., trust, commitment, and conflict; see Reis & Collins, 2000; helping behaviors; see Van der Vegt, Bunderson, & Oosterhof, 2006) outcomes that ultimately determine how well teams function (Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanasy, 2005). Our study also adds value to the existing LMX research by showing that perceptions of poor interactions resulting from the (dis)similarity in coworkers' LMX may hinder the performance of individuals over time.

Building on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), we further extend and enrich balance theory by proposing and examining the social comparison processes that underlie and shape the degree of influence of the relational balance/imbalance in a triad in two independent studies. In Study 1, we indirectly infer the operation of social comparison by examining the interactive effect of Coworker A's and Coworker B's LMX on Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B in order to demonstrate how (dis)similarity in levels of LMX leads to interpersonal "hostile" emotions (Heider, 1958, p. 190). Moreover, in Study 2, we directly assess the operation of social comparison by measuring Coworker A's comparison of his/her LMX with that of Coworker B and how such a comparison is related in a U-shaped curvilinear fashion to Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B. In addition, we qualify this effect of comparison processes by investigating the moderating role of individual employees' social comparison orientation (SCO; i.e., having a strong tendency to compare one's status with that of others; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) in both studies.

In a nutshell, the present article contributes to the literature by examining the detrimental consequences of leaders' differential exchange relationships with their subordinates on the interpersonal interactions between subordinates in work groups, by revealing *how* and *when* LMX (dis)similarity will have an impact on per-

ceptions of received help, and by extending balance theory through testing social comparison explanations for the effect of triadic relational imbalance.

Theory and Hypothesis Development

Balance Theory and Social Comparison

The LMX literature suggests that interpersonal exchange relationships between supervisors, subordinates, and coworkers are interrelated and embedded within work groups (Henderson et al., 2008; Venkataramani, Green, & Schleicher, 2010; Vidyarthi et al., 2010). The exchange quality of one dyad, however, can influence the relationship quality developed in the other two dyads (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This triadic relationship can be explained by balance theory (Heider, 1958). A balanced triadic relationship occurs when both Subordinate A and Subordinate B form the same positive (or negative) relationship with Supervisor C. In such a triad, both subordinates tend to experience a harmony that induces more positive and less negative sentiments toward each other. All other combinations of triadic relationships lead to relational imbalance and will therefore trigger negative sentiments (e.g., emotions, attitudes).

We contend that the psychological process causing such a relational balance or imbalance in triads is social comparison. Researchers in social psychology and social structure have suggested that people are aware of the patterns of surrounding social ties (Freeman, Freeman, & Michaelson, 1988; Heider, 1958). In particular, in a mutually shared environment (i.e., a work group), people can detect the social relationship structure in order to obtain social comparison information that will help them to understand their relative standing in the group (Hogg, 2000; Wood, 1996). Consistent with this assumption, LMX scholars have also suggested that individual members are aware, through observations and nonverbal communications, of the LMX quality of each peer-leader relationship (Duchon, Green, & Taber, 1986; Tse, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough, 2012; Vidyarthi et al., 2010). Along with this line of research, affective events theory (AET; Ashton-James & Ashkanasy, 2008; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and emotion re-

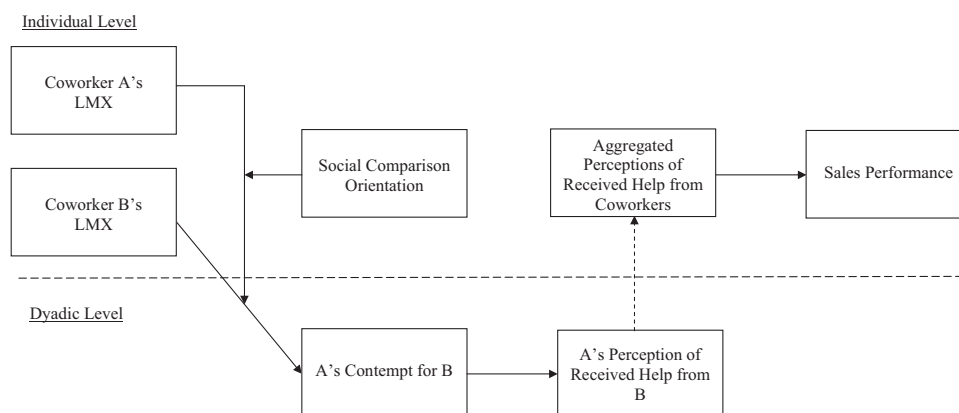


Figure 1. Hypothesized model linking coworkers' leader-member exchange (LMX), contempt, and perceptions of received help in coworker dyads. The dashed arrow reflects an aggregation mechanism.

search (Elfenbein, 2007) suggest that when the immediate work environment includes other people (Elfenbein, 2007), carries important social cues (Stratton, 2005), or provides social comparison information (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007; Spence, Ferris, Brown, & Heller, 2011), it is likely to have a salient impact on the individual's emotional experiences with others. Therefore, the actual (dis)similarity of coworkers' LMX may trigger comparative evaluation processes between them which in turn will influence interpersonal sentiments. Accordingly, Heider (1958) has suggested that it is reasonable to expect actual similarity in certain traits and qualities (such as LMX) to be associated with coworkers' sentiments.

Only one study to date has used balance theory to understand LMX in a triadic leader-coworker relationship. Sherony and Green (2002) have demonstrated that two subordinates will develop positive coworker exchange quality (CWQ) when they have similar LMX experiences. By contrast, two subordinates will have a negative CWQ if they form dissimilar LMX with their leader. Their study provides insights into the impact of LMX (dis)similarity on the quality of coworkers' relationships and attitudes (e.g., work commitment and satisfaction). However, what Sherony and Green did not specifically explore is whether, and if so how, LMX (dis)similarity influences interpersonal emotion exchanges between subordinates. Indeed, the original hypothesis of balance theory focuses on how the degree of balance in a triad broadly influences interpersonal sentiments (Heider, 1944, 1946). Sentiment here refers to the way one person feels about or evaluates another. Specifically, relational imbalance in a triad may elicit negative sentiments, including "disliking and hostile feelings" directed at the interacting target (Heider, 1958, p. 190). Therefore, in the present study, we investigate how LMX (dis)similarity can influence subordinates to experience a hostile interpersonal emotion, namely contempt (i.e., anger, disgust, hatred; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) toward each other.

Contempt has been defined as an "exclusively social emotion" (Hess, 2009, p. 100; Roseman, 2001) which is often targeted toward members who have violated the social norms of hierarchical relations (Melwani & Barsade, 2011; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Contempt typically conveys a sense of disapproval, psychological detachment, social exclusion, and a negative view toward the interacting target (e.g., Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Melwani & Barsade, 2011). It may be the most theoretically relevant emotion to understanding the consequences of triadic imbalance. Balance theory (Heider, 1958) suggests that a harmonious, balanced relationship reflects "the requirement of justice" (p. 235), implying that the quality of hierarchical relations among two individuals in a triad is expected to be equal (as reflected by the LMX similarity). In contrast, any individual who deviates from such equitable communal relationships deserves to be disapproved of, socially excluded, and negatively evaluated—typically expressed in the emotional form of contempt. In line with balance theory, the emotion literature has linked contempt with the perceived violation of communal codes such as the integrity of the social order and the expected equity in a hierarchy (Rozin et al., 1999). In particular, research has highlighted that contempt often occurs in competitive relationships (Fiske et al., 2002; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). Given that a coworker who has dissimilar LMX violates an actor's expectation of balanced hierarchical relations and the unequal LMX status also indicates that two coworkers are

competing for the benefits of a high-quality exchange relationship with a leader (Erdogan & Bauer, 2010), an actor's contempt toward the target coworker is likely to be triggered.

Based on balance theory, we argue that Coworker A will experience more contempt toward Coworker B if both coworkers have different levels of LMX with their supervisor. The dissimilarity in coworkers' LMX (i.e., if Coworker A's LMX is high and Coworker B's is low or if Coworker A's LMX is low and Coworker B's is high) reflects the difference in the coworkers' standing in the triad and may drive the individual to contrast him/herself with the comparison target coworker and focus on the distinguishing features of the target. Such a contrastive comparison may activate an independent self/differentiation mindset, highlighting the self-other LMX discrepancy and relational imbalance and exacerbating the levels of psychological discomfort and tension (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Byrne, 1971; Shah, 2003).

Furthermore, the differentiation mindset activated by LMX dissimilarity may enact the two social-distancing functions of contempt: excluding the low LMX coworker from social relationships and reducing the status of the high LMX coworker (Melwani & Barsade, 2011). Experiencing contempt for a low LMX coworker implies the accompanying cognitions that the coworker is inferior, weak, and unimportant and has failed to meet the interpersonal standards required to be included in the in-group (Ekman, 1994; Fischer & Roseman, 2007). When interacting with a high LMX coworker, experiencing contempt can trigger perceptions of strength and superiority over the other, boosting one's status and weakening the superior status enjoyed by the high LMX coworker (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). In both ways, contempt helps the actor to safeguard his/her status and defend him/herself from feelings of inferiority and thus reestablish the psychological social balance in the triadic leader-member relationship (Melwani & Barsade, 2011). In sum, the actor's contempt will be experienced toward a fellow coworker who has a better or worse relationship with a leader (i.e., LMX dissimilarity).

By contrast, Coworker A would feel less contempt for Coworker B if both have a similar level of LMX (either high or low) with their supervisor. The similar LMX signals that both have a similar standing in the triad. Hence, in the comparison process, the focal employee will focus more on the commonalities between him/herself and the target, triggering feelings of attraction, closeness, and harmony. This relational balance will consequently activate shared schemas that increase relational identification (Aron et al., 1991; Shah, 2003). Such an assimilation effect may suppress the formation of a negative impression and thus reduce Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B.

The Moderating Role of Social Comparison Orientation (SCO)

Given that the balance dynamic is inherently linked to the process of social comparison, a more complete understanding of the effect of LMX (dis)similarity requires consideration of the SCO of the interacting actors. SCO is a dispositional factor representing individuals' inclination to compare their accomplishments, experiences, and situations with those of others (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Likewise, the recent development of AET highlights the importance of understanding how social comparison processes operate in a complex work environment (such as leader-

coworker triadic relationships) to generate emotions and the role of individual disposition in these processes (Greenberg et al., 2007). Based on these ideas, we propose that SCO will moderate the effect of LMX (dis)similarity on contempt.

Individuals with high SCO are sensitive to the behavior of others and have a tendency to reduce uncertainty about their self-concept by actively engaging in self-affirmation (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001; Buunk, Zurriaga, Peiro, Nauta, & Gosalvez, 2005; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Research shows that high-SCO individuals, who usually have low self-esteem and strong self-consciousness, are more inclined to engage in comparison with other coworkers (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). On this basis, we argue that individuals with high SCO are more likely to experience a heightened emotional reaction to the LMX (dis)similarity in triads than those with low SCO because they are more sensitive to their relative standing with respect to their own LMX in relation to that of other coworkers. As a consequence, a high-SCO individual will experience more contempt for another coworker in a triad when they have dissimilar LMX, while relatively less contempt will be experienced when their LMX is seen to be similar. In contrast, low-SCO individuals have relatively high self-esteem, strong self-consciousness, and low neuroticism and do not tend to rely on social comparisons to obtain a good self-understanding (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Buunk et al., 2005; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Accordingly, a low-SCO individual is less sensitive to the (dis)similarity in LMX within a triad and so is less likely to experience contempt for the coworker. Therefore, for a low-SCO individual, LMX (dis)similarity will be less strongly related to contempt.

Taken together, the effect of LMX (dis)similarity on contempt is expected to be attenuated when SCO is lower and amplified when it is higher. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: SCO moderates the impact of (dis)similarity of coworkers' LMX on interpersonal contempt. That is, when SCO is high, the LMX (dis)similarity between two coworkers (increases) decreases Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B. When SCO is low, the LMX (dis)similarity between two coworkers is less related to Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B.

Contempt and Perceptions of Received Help

We further propose that contempt will be negatively associated with perceptions of received help (i.e., an individual's perception of whether or not a coworker has voluntarily helped him/her to deal with work-related tasks or personal problems; Settoon & Mossholder, 2002). According to Schwarz and Clore (1996), individuals often rely on emotional states to guide their thoughts, judgments, and evaluations. More importantly, emotions can substantially bias individuals' access to and use of the thoughts, ideas, memories, and interpretations (Forgas, 2002) that influence their information processes, attitude formation, and categorical evaluations of others (Forgas & Smith, 2003). Recent research has also demonstrated that individuals (actors) tend to evaluate a target more positively or negatively and categorize the target as more or less helpful depending on their emotional states (Krosnick, Betz, Jussim, & Lynn, 1992; Petty, 1995). In particular, it has been shown that hostile emotions (e.g., contempt) evoke tension and

disliking (Roseman, 2001) and also trigger negative perceptions about a target's behavior (Silvester, 1997). In addition, contempt is associated with seeing the target as unfriendly and lacking warmth (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007) and therefore negatively biases perceptions of receiving help from the target (Lyons & Scott, 2012). The above discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The interpersonal emotion of contempt experienced by Coworker A toward Coworker B is negatively related to Coworker A's perception of help received from Coworker B.

The Mediating Role of Contempt

The above consideration sketches a complex picture of the consequences of relational (im)balance in a triad. We argue that LMX (dis)similarity may interact with SCO to trigger feelings of contempt between subordinates. Contempt, in turn, may also influence coworkers' perceptions of the help they get from each other (Lyons & Scott, 2012; Neuberg & Cottrell, 2002). Taken together, it is logical to predict a conditional indirect relationship. This prediction is in line with the AET framework (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). AET suggests that discrete emotion helps individuals interpret the meaning of environmental cues, determining their judgment formation and the behavioral consequences. Following this logic, we propose that contempt will transmit the indirect effect of LMX (dis)similarity on perceptions of received help and that the strength of this indirect linkage will hinge on the level of SCO. Specifically, a high-SCO individual is likely to experience less (more) contempt toward another coworker in a triad if their levels of LMX are similar (dissimilar), therefore increasing (decreasing) their perceptions of help received from the coworker. By contrast, low SCO may help to mitigate the indirect effect of LMX (dis)similarity on perceptions of received help because a low-SCO individual is less emotionally sensitive to the social comparison information in the LMX processes.

In sum, the positive and negative indirect linkages between LMX (dis)similarity and perceptions of received help, as mediated by contempt, should be more pronounced when SCO is high rather than low. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: The LMX (dis)similarity between Coworkers A and B is (negatively) positively and indirectly related to Coworker A's perception of help received from Coworker B (through contempt). These indirect relationships are more pronounced when SCO is high rather than low.

Perceptions of Received Help and Individual Performance

Given that perceptions of received help have not been commonly theorized and tested as an outcome variable in the literature (see de Jong, Van der Vegt, & Molleman, 2007; Lyons & Scott, 2012), it is important to explore their implications for individuals' work behaviors. Halbesleben (2006) has suggested that when individuals perceive that their coworkers are not willing to help them, this represents a lack of support or a threat of resource loss which motivates them to protect their resources by withdrawing from work and reducing their performance levels (Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007). In contrast, the perception that one is receiving

help from coworkers can increase one's willingness to work with others and exchange information and resources that may facilitate effective work performance (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). This line of reasoning suggests that the degree to which a member, *on average*, perceives that he/she has received more help from other team members will be positively related to his/her performance. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: A team member's average level of perception of perceived help is positively related to his/her individual performance.

Study 1

Method

Respondents and procedure. The sample for this study consisted of sales associates and their team members within a large telecommunication services company in China. Two types of data¹ were collected to test our hypotheses. All of the respondents were first asked to respond to items measuring their individual LMX and SCO as well as several control variables. They were then asked to provide responses to social network items assessing their contempt for specific coworkers in dyads within work groups and their perceptions of the help received from these coworkers using a round-robin design (Warner, Kenny, & Stoto, 1979). To meet the design requirements, we selected teams with at least four members (a maximum of five). In a team of four, each individual rated three targets, and so 12 direct assessments of contempt and perceptions of received help were obtained. These round-robin peer-rating data were then matched to an individual's responses on LMX, SCO, sales performance, and the control variables. The data of 12 dyads were removed because their questionnaires were incomplete. Therefore, the final sample for this study consisted of 408 dyadic relationships (from 128 individuals in 31 work groups), yielding an effective response rate of 97%. The mean age and organizational tenure of the respondents were 25 and 1.2 years, respectively. Forty-four percent of them were female, and 44% had a high school education or above. The average length of the dyadic relationships was 5 months.

Measures. All of the measures used in this study were developed originally in English and subsequently back-translated into Chinese by bilingual experts to obtain semantic equivalence and agreement (Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973).

Individual-level measures.

Control variables. We controlled for the demographic variables of gender, age, dyadic tenure, and team size because these variables have been shown to influence group processes (Richter, West, van Dick, & Dawson, 2006). We also controlled for actors' positive and negative affectivity using the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) because these personality traits may have confounding effects on contempt. The respondents indicated how they generally felt with regard to particular positive and negative emotions.

LMX (dis)similarity. We used the LMX-7 scale developed by Scandura and Graen (1984) and adapted by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) to measure an individual's perception of the quality of the exchange relationship with his/her supervisor in a work group. This scale consists of seven items. A sample item is "How would

you characterize your working relationship with your leader?" (1 = *extremely ineffective*, 5 = *extremely effective*). Because of the potential problems associated with the use of different scores (Edwards, 1994, 2001), we followed previous research (de Jong et al., 2007; Huang & Lun, 2006; Van der Vegt et al., 2006) and used the interaction term between the LMX scores for Coworkers A and B to reflect the nature of the (dis)similarity of their LMX.

Social comparison orientation (SCO). We adapted 11 items from the SCO scale developed by Gibbons and Buunk (1999) to measure this construct. This scale is designed to measure the extent to which individuals make comparisons between their opinions, abilities, and general aspects of their selves and those of others on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). A sample item is "I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how my coworkers do things."

Sales performance. We obtained monthly sales records (number of telecommunication services packages sold) from the company for all respondents 1 month after the paper surveys had been collected.

Dyadic measures (round-robin peer-rating). We measured contempt and perceptions of received help in coworker dyads. Following previous research using a round-robin design (e.g., de Jong et al., 2007; Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007), we used an abbreviated version of the measures for both constructs based on a pilot study.² Items were selected for the present study if they had a factor loading of .80 or higher on their respective factors in a confirmatory factor analysis.

Contempt. We adapted three hostile emotion items (i.e., angry, disgusted, and hateful) from Fiske et al.'s (2002) scale to measure contempt using a 5-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). The respondents consecutively indicated how often they experienced the respective emotions with each of their fellow team members.

Perceptions of received help. We adapted three items from Settoon and Mossholder (2002) to assess person-focused interpersonal help received from other coworkers. These three items were used by de Jong et al. (2007) to reflect the dyadic level of analysis. Each respondent was asked to rate the extent to which each of their fellow teammates intentionally engaged in activities to help him or her on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). A sample item is "[X] takes time to listen to my problems and worries."

Results

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs). Before testing the hypotheses, we first conducted a set of CFAs to evaluate the discriminant validity of the two peer-rated variables (contempt and perceptions of received help). The results showed that the hypothesized two-factor model (comparative fit index [CFI] = .99, goodness-of-fit index [GFI] = .98, root-mean-square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .05) yielded a better fit than the one-factor model, with a change in chi-square, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 634.95$, $p <$

¹ Some of the survey data in Study 1 were used in the research by Lam, Van der Vegt, Walter, and Huang (2011) investigating the relationship between social comparisons and harming behavior. We note that none of the focal variables in Study 1 overlap with any variable used in this previous research.

² Sample details of the pilot study can be made available upon request.

.01. Finally, we confirmed the overall hypothesized measurement model by loading each item onto its respective factor (i.e., LMX, SCO, contempt, and perceptions of received help). We also compared the chi-square and fit indices of our hypothesized four-factor model to the one-factor model. Again, the latter did not fit the data well ($CFI = .36$, $GFI = .68$, $RMSEA = .19$), whereas our hypothesized measurement model fitted the data significantly better ($CFI = .95$, $GFI = .93$, $RMSEA = .05$), with a change in chi-square, $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 1,524$, $p < .01$, than the other models. These CFA results provided support for the distinctiveness of the four variables for the subsequent analyses.

Descriptive statistics. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities of all of the study variables. As shown in the table, Coworker A's perception of received help from Coworker B was positively related to Coworker A's LMX and negatively related to Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B. Furthermore, there was a positive bivariate relationship between perception of received help and sales performance.

Analytical strategy. The round-robin data collected for the purpose of this study has a complex nested structure, with dyadic relationships with other members nested within individuals, and individuals nested within work teams. We therefore analyzed our multilevel modeling using social relations modeling (SRM; see Kenny, 1994; Kenny & La Voie, 1984), which is a specific method for analyzing relational data in which the substantial portion of the variance in the dependent variables is located at the dyadic level (i.e., depends on the characteristics of the dyadic relations between actor and target; Kenny & La Voie, 1984). The unique feature of SRM is to isolate variance in a social network and test hypotheses at multiple levels of analysis: actor (Coworker A), target (Coworker B), dyad (Coworker A's and Coworker B's relationship), and group. Actor (or perceiver) variance is the proportion that arises from the tendency of an actor to rate all other members in a particular way. Target variance refers to the proportion arising from the tendency of a target to receive similar ratings from other members. Dyadic variance arises from the particular relationship between the perceiver and the target. Group variance arises from group membership, which is influenced by group norms (see Kenny, 1994; Kenny & La Voie, 1984). This specific feature of SRM enables researchers to address questions about how much of

the variance in dyadic variables is due to individual-level effects (e.g., LMX, dispositional characteristics, etc.) and how much comes down to questions about reciprocity or mutuality.

We used MLwin in conjunction with SRM to analyze our data (see Snijders & Kenny, 1999, for technical details). MLwin helped to justify the multilevel structure of our data by distinguishing between different levels of analysis as well as between random and fixed effects estimates. The random effects estimates indicate the percentages of the total variance in an actor's (i.e., Coworker A) contempt for, and perceptions of help received from, Coworker B that are attributable to the characteristics of the actor, the target (at the individual level), the dyadic relationship, and the team. The fixed effect estimates indicate the strength of the relationship between the independent variables (i.e., the [dis]similarity in LMX between two coworkers and their SCO) and the dependent variables (i.e., Coworker A's contempt for, and perceptions of received help from, Coworker B). These estimates are comparable to the unstandardized regression coefficients in an ordinary least squares regression analysis and were used to test our study hypotheses (Snijders & Kenny, 1999).

To conduct an SRM analysis, we first calculated a null model which was used to partition the variance of contempt and Coworker A's perception of help received from Coworker B into actor, target, dyadic, and team variance (see Table 2). Next, we used SRM to examine Hypotheses 1 and 2 (see Tables 3 and 4). We tested for a decrease in log-likelihood between each of the models described in Tables 3 and 4 by means of a chi-square difference test, evaluating the statistical significance of improvements in model fit. To test Hypothesis 3, we built on the procedure outlined by Krull and MacKinnon (2001) to test the conditional indirect relationships. First, we derived the simple slopes of the relation between the independent variable (Coworker B's LMX) and the mediator (Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B) at high (+1 SD) and low values (−1 SD) of the two moderators—Coworker A's LMX and SCO. We also drew on the relationship between contempt and perceptions of received help found when testing Hypothesis 2. Based on Selig and Preacher's (2008) Monte Carlo method, we then employed these estimates to derive percentile confidence intervals for the population values of the conditional indirect relationship between the independent (Coworker

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Intercorrelations, and Reliabilities of Study Variables (Study 1)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	0.44	0.50	—											
2. Age	25.24	5.15	−.09	—										
3. Positive affectivity	3.02	0.75	−.14**	.19**	(.75)									
4. Negative affectivity	2.36	0.73	.05	−.02	.07	(.70)								
5. Dyadic tenure	5.07	8.24	−.01	.16**	.07	.09	—							
6. Team size	5.39	0.78	−.04	−.11*	−.22**	.11*	.16**	—						
7. Coworker A's LMX	3.41	0.97	−.15**	−.09	.34**	−.12*	.06	−.08	(.74)					
8. Coworker B's LMX	3.41	0.97	−.04	.08	.07	.01	.07	.08	−.03	(.74)				
9. SCO	3.50	0.76	−.10*	−.00	.14**	.20**	.06	.07	−.04	.03	(.64)			
10. Contempt	1.37	0.66	.02	.06	−.01	.24**	.11*	.06	−.05	.04	−.02	(.87)		
11. Coworker A's perception of received help from Coworker B	3.08	0.87	−.11*	.04	.18**	−.11*	.13**	−.03	.27**	−.04	.07	−.25**	(.94)	
12. Sales performance	34.72	22.7	.11*	.04	.11*	−.04	.20**	−.10*	.10	.11*	.06	−.17**	.13**	—

Note. LMX = leader-member exchange; SCO = social comparison orientation.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Variance Partitioning for Coworker A's Contempt for Coworker B and Coworker A's Perception of Received Help From Coworker B (Study 1)

Source of variance	Contempt		Coworker A's perception of received help from Coworker B	
	<i>B</i> (%)	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i> (%)	<i>SE</i>
Group variance	.03 (7)	.03	.07 (9)	.03
Actor variance	.11 (26)	.03	.20 (26)	.03
Partner variance	.03 (6)	.02	.02 (3)	.02
Dyadic variance	.26 (61)	.03	.47 (62)	.03
Deviance	758.99		933.17	

Note. *N* = 128 individuals in 408 dyads within 31 teams.

B's LMX) and dependent (Coworker A's perception of received help from Coworker B) variables, through the effect of the mediator (Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B), at high and low levels of the two moderators (Coworker A's LMX and SCO). The use of such confidence intervals is considered superior to traditional methods (e.g., Sobel's, 1982, test) in examining (conditional) indirect relationships because it ameliorates the power problems introduced by non-normal sampling distributions of an indirect relation (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004).

Finally, following the analytical procedure outlined by Lam, Van der Vegt, Walter, and Huang (2011), we used ordinary hierarchical regression analysis to examine Hypothesis 4 because both the predictor (average perception of help received from team-

mates) and the outcome variable (individual sales performance) for this hypothesis were located at the same level of analysis (i.e., the individual level).

Variance partitioning. Table 2 presents the partitioning of the variance in Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B and Coworker A's perception of the help received from Coworker B at the actor, target, dyadic, and team levels of analysis. As shown in Table 2, 61% of the total variance in contempt and 62% of the perceptions of received help were located at the dyadic level. These findings show that the specifics of the relationship between Coworker A and Coworker B have the strongest influence on contempt for, and perceptions of help received from, another teammate.

Hypotheses tests. Hypothesis 1 predicted that SCO would moderate the effect of LMX (dis)similarity on interpersonal contempt. Statistically, we captured the LMX (dis)similarity between Coworker A and Coworker B in terms of the interaction of their LMX and then examined how SCO moderated the interactive effect of Coworker A's and Coworker B's LMX on Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B. As shown in Table 3, the three-way interaction term of Coworker A's LMX, Coworker B's LMX, and SCO was significantly associated with Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B (see Model 3; $B = -.08, p < .01$) after considering the control variables, main effects, and two-way interaction terms. Figure 2 illustrates the pattern of this interaction (Aiken & West, 1991). As expected, under the condition of high SCO (see Figure 2a), higher Coworker B's LMX was associated with lower contempt toward Coworker B from Coworker A when Coworker A's LMX was high (i.e., similarity in LMX; simple slopes test: $B = -.14, SE = .07, p < .05$). However, when Coworker A's LMX was

Table 3

Social Relations Model Analyses for Coworker A's Contempt for Coworker B (Study 1)

Steps and variables	Contempt					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Control variables						
Coworker A's gender	-.05	.08	-.04	.08	-.03	.09
Coworker A's age	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01
Positive affectivity	-.05	.06	-.05	.06	-.05	.06
Negative affectivity	.18**	.06	.18**	.06	.17**	.06
Coworker B's gender	-.15**	.06	-.15**	.06	-.15*	.06
Coworker B's age	.00	.01	.00	.01	.00	.01
Dyadic tenure	.01	.00	.01	.00	.01	.00
Team size	.02	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01
Main effects						
Coworker A's LMX	.00	.05	-.01	.05	.00	.05
Coworker B's LMX	.01	.03	-.01	.03	-.01	.03
SCO	-.03	.04	-.03	.04	-.03	.04
$\Delta\chi^2(11)$	26.70					
Two-way interactions						
Coworker A's LMX \times Coworker B's LMX			-.03	.03	-.02	.03
Coworker A's LMX \times SCO			.03	.05	.03	.05
Coworker B's LMX \times SCO			.05	.03	.04	.03
$\Delta\chi^2(3)$			5.10			
Three-way interaction						
Coworker A's LMX \times Coworker B's LMX \times SCO					-.08**	.03
$\Delta\chi^2(1)$					6.95**	

Note. *N* = 408 dyads. LMX = leader-member exchange; SCO = social comparison orientation.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 4

Social Relations Model Analyses for Coworker A's Perception of Received Help From Coworker B and Conditional Indirect Relationships (Study 1)

Steps and variables	Coworker A's perception of received help from Coworker B	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Step 1		
Coworker A's gender	-.05	.11
Coworker A's age	.03	.01
Positive affectivity	.14	.08
Negative affectivity	-.09	.07
Coworker B's gender	.13	.08
Coworker B's age	.01	.01
Dyadic tenure	.01	.01
Team size	-.01	.01
Coworker A's LMX	.19**	.06
Coworker B's LMX	-.05	.04
SCO	.05	.05
$\Delta\chi^2(11)$		41.1**
Step 2		
Coworker A's LMX \times Coworker B's LMX	.05	.05
Coworker A's LMX \times SCO	-.07	.06
Coworker B's LMX \times SCO	-.01	.03
$\Delta\chi^2(3)$		2.28
Step 3		
Coworker A's LMX \times Coworker B's LMX \times SCO	.09**	.03
$\Delta\chi^2(1)$		7.07**
Step 4		
Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B	-.24**	.06
$\Delta\chi^2(1)$		35.42**
Conditional indirect relationship between Coworker B's LMX and Coworker A's perception of received help from Coworker B, through Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B ^a		
Moderators		Coworker A's perception of received help from Coworker B
SCO	Coworker A's LMX	Indirect effect Sobel <i>Z</i> 95% CI ^a
High (+1 <i>SD</i>)	High (+1 <i>SD</i>)	.04 1.90* [.01, .08]
High (+1 <i>SD</i>)	Low (-1 <i>SD</i>)	-.04 -1.94* [-.08, -.01]
Low (-1 <i>SD</i>)	High (+1 <i>SD</i>)	.00 .00 [-.04, .04]
Low (-1 <i>SD</i>)	Low (-1 <i>SD</i>)	.02 .98 [-.01, .06]

Note. *N* = 408 dyads. LMX = leader-member exchange; SCO = social comparison orientation.

^a Based on 20,000 Monte Carlo samples (Selig & Preacher, 2008); -1 *SD* = one standard deviation below the mean; +1 *SD* = one standard deviation above the mean.

* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01.

low, higher Coworker B's LMX was positively related to Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B (i.e., dissimilarity in LMX; simple slopes test: $B = .14$, $SE = .07$, $p < .05$). In contrast, under the condition of low SCO (see Figure 2b), Coworker B's LMX was unrelated to Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B at both low (simple slopes test: $B = -.07$, $SE = .07$, *ns*) and high (simple slopes test: $B = .00$, $SE = .07$, *ns*) levels of Coworker A's LMX. These results provide support for Hypothesis 1, showing that the more (less) similar the LMX experienced by two coworkers, the

less (more) contempt a coworker may feel toward the other when SCO is high rather than low.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B would be negatively associated with Coworker A's perception of the help received from Coworker B. As shown in Table 4, this relationship was indeed negative ($B = -.24$, $p < .01$) even after incorporating several control variables, main effects, and the respective interaction terms. Hence, Hypothesis 2 received support.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that SCO would moderate the indirect relationship between LMX (dis)similarity and perceptions of received help as transmitted by contempt. Based on the analytical strategy outlined above, we inspected the conditional indirect relationship between Coworker B's LMX and Coworker A's perception of help from Coworker B at two levels of Coworker A's LMX and SCO, namely one standard deviation below and above the mean. The results are reported in the lower section of Table 4. When SCO was higher, the indirect relationship between Coworker B's LMX and Coworker A's perception of help from Coworker B (via Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B) was positive ($B = .04$) when Coworker A's LMX was higher (i.e., similarity in LMX); it became negative ($B = -.04$) when Coworker A's LMX was lower (i.e., dissimilarity in LMX), as indicated by

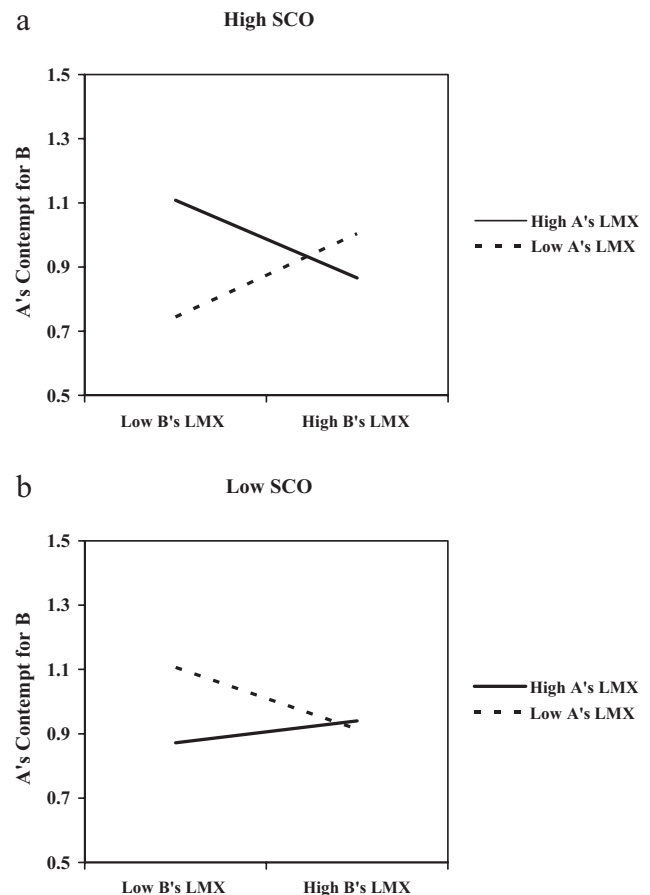


Figure 2. Three-way interaction between Coworker A's leader-member exchange (LMX), Coworker B's LMX, and social comparison orientation (SCO) on Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B (Study 1).

both a significant Sobel test and a percentile confidence interval that excluded zero. In contrast, when SCO was lower, these indirect effects were insignificant regardless of Coworker A's LMX. Thus, Hypothesis 3 also received support.

To completely follow the spirit of balance theory, we also examined the reciprocal relationships between contempt and perceptions of received help between any two group members. We tested the dyadic reciprocations by computing within-dyad covariance divided by dyadic variance (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006; Snijders & Kenny, 1999). We found evidence for within-dyad reciprocity in levels of contempt ($r = .23, p < .05$) and perceptions of received help ($r = .62, p < .01$) between any two coworkers within any work group in our sample. These results suggest that contempt and perceptions of received help as triggered by (im)balanced LMX are reciprocated between two coworkers.

Finally, we tested Hypothesis 4, which looked at the relationship between perceptions of help received from coworkers and individual-level sales performance. Intra-class correlation and inter-rater reliability tests were conducted to identify the appropriateness of aggregating dyadic-level perceptions of received help as an individual-level construct. The results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that there was significant between-person variance in perceptions of received help, $F(127, 407) = 2.71, p < .01$. Table 2 also shows that 26% of the variance in perceptions of received help can be attributed to between-person differences (i.e., ICC_1). Furthermore, both the reliability of individuals' mean ratings ($ICC_2 = .73$) and the median within-individual agreement index for perceived receipt of help (median $r_{wg(j)} = .83$) exceeded the recommended values for construct aggregation (e.g., Bliese, 2000; James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984). Based on this statistical support, we aggregated the perception of received help as an individual-level construct representing the degree to which a person *on average* perceives him/herself as receiving help from other team members. We then standardized individuals' sales records (at Time 2—a month after the surveys had been collected) and regressed this on the individual-level perceptions of received help (Time 1), controlling for team size and respondents' age, gender (0 = male, 1 = female), and organizational tenure. The results showed that the perception of received help from coworkers ($B = 1.91, p < .05$) was positively related to sales performance. This suggests that an individual's perception of the help received from other coworkers in a work group has a positive impact on his/her actual sales performance over time. Hypothesis 4 was therefore supported.

Study 2

In Study 1, we argued that the actual (dis)similarity in LMX (operationalized using the interaction term of two coworkers' LMX) between a focal employee and coworker influences the former's hostile feelings toward the latter. This is because the (dis)similarity in LMX may trigger social comparison processes among the interacting dyadic members. Although research suggests that an employee is constantly comparing and evaluating his/her relative LMX standing in a team (i.e., whether his/her LMX is higher or lower than a target coworker) and that this subjective comparison is highly correlated to objectively measured LMX (dis)similarity between coworkers (Vidvarthi et al., 2010), we did not measure and test these comparison processes in Study 1.

Therefore, we also conducted Study 2 to directly measure the *perceptual comparison of coworkers' LMX* by directly asking employees to compare their LMX with the LMX of each of their respective coworkers in their work group (i.e., LMX social comparison; Vidvarthi et al., 2010). We would expect the subjective comparison of LMX (LMXSC) to exert a similar influence on contempt as the objective LMX (dis)similarity explored in Study 1.

More specifically, when an employee perceives that his/her LMX is better or worse than that of a target coworker, he/she is likely to be aware of the relational imbalance in the triad (i.e., the dissimilar level of LMX between him/herself and the target coworker), thus invoking a higher level of contempt for the target. However, when the employee perceives that his/her LMX is at a similar level to that of the target coworker (i.e., medium levels of LMXSC), he/she is likely to feel less contemptuous. Hence, LMXSC may have a U-shaped relationship with contempt, in that the latter will be highest at both the lowest and highest levels of LMXSC. Furthermore, in line with Hypothesis 1, we propose that such a U-shaped link between LMXSC and contempt will be stronger for employees with higher levels of SCO because they will be more sensitive to information about their comparative standing in the work group. By contrast, for employees with low levels of SCO, we predict that LMXSC will be less related to contempt. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: SCO moderates the curvilinear relationship between LMXSC and contempt. That is, when SCO is high, Coworker A experiences more contempt for Coworker B at both low and high (rather than medium) levels of LMXSC. When SCO is low, Coworker A's LMXSC is less related to contempt for Coworker B.

Method

Data were collected from engineers working in research and development (R&D) project teams in a high-technology company located in the southern part of China. The company's core business is developing new software and network designs for telecommunication services providers, local government, and businesses. Out of 70 questionnaires distributed, our final data set contained 68 individuals (260 dyadic relations) across 17 teams (96% effective response rate). The mean age of the respondents was 26 years, and the mean organizational tenure was 1.2 years; 29% of the respondents were female, and all respondents had a high school education or above. The average length of the dyadic relationships was 8 months. As in Study 1, respondents provided their self-ratings of SCO (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) and other control variables (gender, age, dyadic tenure, team size, and positive and negative affectivity; Watson et al., 1988). Ratings for LMXSC (Vidvarthi et al., 2010) and contempt (disgusted, contemptuous, hostile, and angry; 1 = *never*, 5 = *always*; Fiske et al., 2002) were collected using a round-robin design. We used six items from Vidvarthi et al.'s (2010) scale to measure LMXSC. The respondents were asked to assess the quality of their relationship with their supervisor compared with that of each of their teammates on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). A sample item is "I have a better relationship with my manager than [X]." Table 5 depicts the descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities of all Study 2 variables.

Table 5

Means, Standard Deviations, Intercorrelations, and Reliabilities of Study Variables (Study 2)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	0.29	0.46	—								
2. Age	25.56	3.07	-.09	—							
3. Positive affectivity	3.35	0.63	.03	.04	(.80)						
4. Negative affectivity	2.75	0.64	-.14*	-.08	.09	(.76)					
5. Dyadic tenure	7.74	4.21	-.12*	.09	.00	.29**	—				
6. Team size	5.41	1.50	.09	-.36**	.10	-.11	-.23**	—			
7. Coworker A's LMXSC	2.75	0.94	-.23**	-.16**	.18**	.15*	.04	.07	(.95)		
8. SCO	3.43	0.52	.03	-.04	.27**	.21**	.05	.08	.08	(.73)	
9. Contempt	1.36	0.80	-.17**	-.05	.19**	.54**	.25**	.07	.33**	.24**	(.97)

Note. LMXSC = leader-member exchange social comparison; SCO = social comparison orientation.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Results

Before testing the hypothesis, we first conducted a CFA to evaluate the discriminant validity of our hypothesized measurement model (i.e., LMXSC, SCO, contempt). The results showed that the hypothesized three-factor model ($CFI = .91$, $GFI = .88$, $RMSEA = .08$) yielded a good fit to the data that was substantially better than an alternative one-factor model ($CFI = .46$, $GFI = .58$, $RMSEA = .19$), with a change in chi-square, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 3,209.91$, $p < .01$. These findings supported the discriminant validity of the study variables. Second, we conducted variance partitioning for contempt. Table 6 shows that 24% of the total variance in contempt was located at the dyadic level. This indicates that a considerable portion of the variance in contempt depended on the characteristics of the dyadic relationship between actor and target.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that SCO would moderate the curvilinear relationship between LMXSC and contempt. As shown in Table 7 (Model 3), the interaction term of the squared LMXSC and SCO was significant for contempt ($B = .08$, $p < .05$). We further examined the simple slopes of the regression curve corresponding to all possible combinations of high (+1 *SD*), medium (mean), and low (−1 *SD*) levels of LMXSC with high and low levels of SCO (Aiken & West, 1991). The results showed (see Table 8 and Figure 3) that in the case of high SCO, Coworker A exhibited higher levels of contempt at both low and high levels of LMXSC. Increasing LMX similarity (ranging from low to medium LMXSC) was negatively related to contempt ($B = -.29$, $p < .05$). After LMXSC had reached a medium level, increasing LMX dissimilarity (from medium to high LMXSC) was positively related to

contempt ($B = .37$, $p < .05$). By contrast, when SCO was low, LMXSC was unrelated to contempt. These findings provided support for Hypothesis 5.

General Discussion

In the present study, we have examined how LMX (dis)similarity between coworkers influences their feelings of contempt for, and perceptions of help received from, each other. Our results generally support the relationships hypothesized in our model (see Figure 1). We highlight several important findings. First of all, we have demonstrated the role of LMX (dis)similarity in the development of interpersonal contempt in two independent studies. Specifically, we found that when SCO was high (rather than low),

Table 7

Social Relations Model Analyses for Coworker A's Contempt for Coworker B (Study 2)

Steps and variables	Contempt					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Control variables						
Coworker A's gender	-.17	.16	-.16	.16	-.15	.15
Coworker A's age	.00	.02	.00	.02	.00	.02
Positive affectivity	.07	.12	.07	.12	.07	.11
Negative affectivity	.51**	.12	.50**	.12	.50**	.12
Coworker B's gender	.03	.07	.03	.07	.03	.07
Coworker B's age	.02	.01	.02	.01	.02	.01
Dyadic tenure	.02*	.01	.02	.01	.02	.01
Team size	.06	.05	.06	.05	.06	.05
Main effects						
Coworker A's LMXSC	.09	.05	.09	.06	.11	.06
Coworker A's LMXSC ²	.00	.04	.00	.04	.02	.04
SCO	.07	.07	.07	.07	.02	.07
$\Delta\chi^2(11)$	915.51**					
Two-way interaction						
Coworker A's LMXSC \times SCO			.02	.05	.07	.06
$\Delta\chi^2(1)$	0.09					
Quadratic interaction term						
Coworker A's LMXSC ² \times SCO					.08*	.04
$\Delta\chi^2(1)$	4.89*					

Note. $N = 260$ dyads. LMXSC = leader-member exchange social comparison; SCO = social comparison orientation.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 6

Variance Partitioning for Coworker A's Contempt for Coworker B (Study 2)

Source of variance	Contempt	
	<i>B</i> (%)	<i>SE</i>
Group variance	.00 (0)	.00
Actor variance	.56 (74)	.01
Partner variance	.01 (2)	.01
Dyadic variance	.18 (24)	.00
Deviance	1,234.90	

Note. $N = 68$ individuals in 260 dyads within 17 teams.

Table 8
Tests of Simple Slopes (Study 2)

Moderator value SCO	Predictor value LMXSC	Contempt	
		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
High	Low	-.29*	.13
High	Medium	.06	.06
High	High	.37*	.17
Low	Low	.16	.09
Low	Medium	.04	.06
Low	High	-.09	.13

Note. SCO = social comparison orientation; LMXSC = leader-member exchange social comparison; High = one standard deviation above the mean; Low = one standard deviation below the mean; Medium = mean value.

* $p < .05$.

Coworker A was more likely to feel contemptuous of Coworker B when Coworker A's LMX was higher or lower than Coworker B's (Study 1) or when Coworker A perceived his/her LMX to be higher or lower than Coworker B's (Study 2). In addition, Study 1 further demonstrated the psychological processes and performance implications of LMX (dis)similarity. We found that the interactive effect between LMX (dis)similarity and SCO indirectly, via contempt, influenced perceptions of the help received from the coworker. Furthermore, the average level of received help was positively related to the sales performance of individual employees.

Theoretical Implications

Our findings contribute to the literature in several ways. Although LMX theory has increased our understanding of how leaders contribute to individual employees' work attitudes and performance (see Gerstner & Day, 1997, for a review), most of the empirical studies have typically treated each dyadic LMX relationship in isolation and overlooked its potential impact on the surrounding social context (Schriesheim, Castro, Zhou, & Yammarino, 2001). In response to calls for research to examine the potential influences of LMX on the broader social networks of work groups (Henderson et al., 2008; Sherony & Green, 2002; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997; Tse et al., 2012), we attempted to go beyond the supervisor-subordinate dyads to investigate how different levels of LMX within a work group could undermine the interactions between in-group and out-group members. Our findings suggest that LMX dissimilarity is likely to induce hostile interpersonal emotions between coworkers that may have a negative impact on their perceptions of the help received from each other. Since they are less likely to experience help and support from coworkers with different LMX levels, the ultimate consequence is decreased performance.

Second, we extend balance theory (Heider, 1958) by examining the social comparison mechanisms that provide more nuanced explanations for the dynamics of triadic relationships among Coworker A, Coworker B, and their supervisor. Specifically, in both studies, we consistently found that the SCO of individual employees played a critical role in influencing the effect of LMX (dis)similarity. More precisely, in Study 1, LMX (dis)similarity had a significant effect on contempt and perceptions of received help only for the employees who had high levels of SCO; this was

because those employees were more sensitive to social comparison information about their social standing. In addition, in Study 2, we directly measured the social comparison mechanisms underlying balance theory by asking the respondents to assess their own LMX in comparison to that of every other member of the work group. Again, the influence of perceived LMX (dis)similarity was more salient for employees with high rather than low SCO. In short, these results suggest that social comparison is the key mechanism driving the triadic balance underpinned by balance theory. Therefore, we suggest that future research should adopt the theoretical lens of social comparison to understand the intricacies of triadic relationships in relation to LMX.

Third, we make a unique theoretical contribution to the LMX differentiation literature. In practice, managers usually differentiate between their subordinates to some extent and tend to provide more support and resources for high LMX members with the expectation of high performance in return (Ma & Qu, 2010; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). However, our research suggests that LMX dissimilarity may aggravate subordinates' performance. If managers form different relationship qualities (ranging from low to high) with different members, the objective performance of both low and high LMX members may suffer because the resulting interpersonal hostile feelings will undermine interactions between in- and out-group members. To the extent that LMX dissimilarity triggers dysfunctional emotions and interactions between coworkers, it will have a tangible negative impact on performance with the potential to inflict serious harm on organizations. By considering the relational and emotional impact of differential coworkers' LMX and the role of social comparison, our study offers new insights into the complexity and far-reaching consequences of LMX differentiation.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, we used abbreviated scales to measure

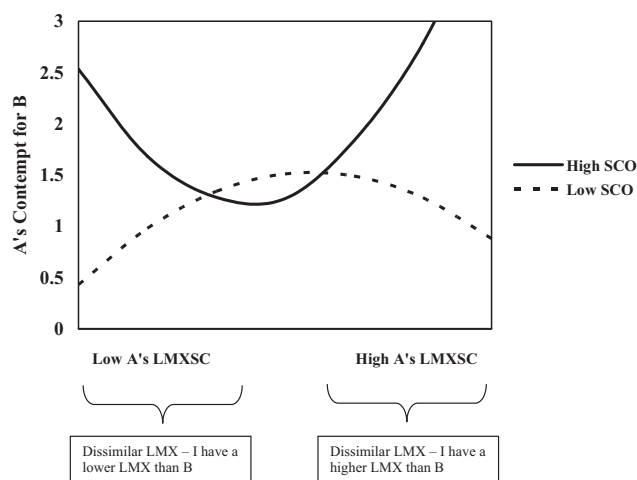


Figure 3. Curvilinear interactive relationship between Coworker A's leader-member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) and social comparison orientation (SCO) on Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B (Study 2).

contempt and perceptions of help received from coworkers. Although these were examined in the pilot study, we acknowledge that the shortened scales may not be as reflective of their theoretical concepts as the original scales are, and thus inflated their measurement error for parameter estimation. Given that the round-robin research design is laborious and requires respondents to provide ratings for each of their coworkers, we followed previous research by using shortened scales to minimize participant fatigue (see de Jong et al., 2007; Lam et al., 2011; Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007). Notably, our items were adapted from well-established scales that have reported strong reliability and validity (de Jong et al., 2007; Fiske et al., 2002). Overall, we believe that the use of abbreviated scales has not resulted in any measurement concern that would invalidate our findings. Nevertheless, future studies may find it fruitful to utilize full scales to measure all of the variables tested in this study.

Second, common method bias may have influenced our findings because we used self-report measures. However, several strengths of our study (e.g., the objective measure of sales performance; independent ratings of LMX; discriminant validity shown in CFAs) may outweigh such a concern. Third, the interpretation of the causal relationship may be limited due to our cross-sectional design. Future studies could use a cross-lagged panel or experimental design and include multisource data.

Finally, our samples were drawn from two organizations in China, a country whose culture is known to be highly collectivistic (Hofstede, 2001). It is uncertain whether this might set a ceiling effect on the extent to which an employee would report his/her LMX with the supervisor and perceptions about his/her LMX compared with that of another coworker (i.e., LMXSC). This is possible because LMXSC in Study 2 and the interaction between Coworker A's and Coworker B's LMX in Study 1 were found to be unrelated to Coworker A's contempt for Coworker B. It may be of benefit to replicate the present investigation by including cultural values such as power distance or collectivism/individualism as team-level boundary conditions to examine whether or not the hypothesized relationships change in different cultural contexts.

Beyond addressing these limitations, future research could also expand the present model by considering other moderators. Besides the individual differences in SCO, other individual or contextual factors may regulate how employees respond to their coworkers' (dis)similar LMX, including personal factors such as neuroticism (Buunk et al., 2009), self-esteem (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993), and the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cornelis, Van Hiel, & De Cremer, 2012), and contextual features such as the degree of task interdependence between team members (Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006), teams' task and relationship conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), justice climate (Erdogan & Bauer, 2010), and LMX median (Liden, Erdogan, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2006).

Of particular interest are relational factors such as asymmetry in task dependence (de Jong et al., 2007) and expertise diversity (Van der Vegt et al., 2006) that convey a power difference between two individuals (Emerson, 1962). A balance theory viewpoint would suggest that coworkers in a triadic leader-member relationship would expect equal status (i.e., LMX similarity). Deviation from this setting would motivate employees to fight for a balance in LMX status by expressing contempt in order to maintain high status and avoid a drop of status. However, legitimate power

differences between two coworkers may play a role in their reactions to LMX dissimilarity. For example, the low-power individual (e.g., low skill, less experiences) may see the LMX dissimilarity as normative and legitimate in the hierarchy, making him/her conform and submit (submission rather than contempt) to the coworker who has higher LMX (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). By considering the role of power-related factors, scholars can explore the differential effects of LMX dissimilarity on employees' emotional experiences.

Alternatively, future research could extend this study by considering a broader range of emotions. Balance theory suggests that while triadic imbalance causes negative interpersonal sentiments, triadic balance induces positive interpersonal emotions. We chose to focus only on the hostile emotion of contempt in the current study because the emotion literature suggests that negative emotions may have more powerful and lasting effects than positive ones (e.g., Basch & Fisher, 2000; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Moreover, employees tend to pay more attention to the antecedents of negative emotions and to be more responsive to them generally (Lian et al., 2012). Thus, future research may benefit from further examining how LMX (dis)similarity shapes different types of positive and negative interpersonal emotions, thereby addressing calls for greater consideration of discrete emotions in organizational research (Goody, Gavin, & Ashkanasy, 2009).

Practical Implications

This study has important implications for leadership and management in organizations. Our results indicate that the relationship between LMX (dis)similarity and the emotional reactions between two coworkers hinges on employees' levels of SCO. Coworkers with high levels of SCO are more likely to feel contempt for each other because they are more sensitive to their relative standing in the context of (dis)similar LMX. Since contempt decreases coworkers' perceptions of receiving help from others and eventually affects performance, it is important to promote similar levels of LMX in a team setting. Although social comparisons among high SCO coworkers may be unavoidable in most work situations, managers could enhance the positive and curtail the negative implications associated with such social comparison processes by creating a fair team context and a positive affective climate (Tse et al., 2005; Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanasy, 2008). Specifically, research argues that managers can reinforce the value of LMX by promoting a justice climate (Erdogan & Bauer, 2010), demonstrating fair LMX differentiation criteria (e.g., performance standards rather than subjective preferences; Tse et al., 2005), and ensuring the criteria are consistent with the goals, demands, and norms of the work group, organization, and market (Henderson et al., 2008). These practices can increase employees' acceptance of differential LMX quality and help them better adjust the development of LMX based on the criteria. Alternatively, organizations may provide functional human resources initiatives to reduce employees' reliance on leaders to attain valued resources, thus giving the role of LMX differentiation less influence over subordinates (Henderson, Liden, Glibkowski, & Chaudhry, 2009). By helping teams to manage LMX differentiation effectively, organizations may render LMX dissimilarity less likely, reducing its negative impact on coworkers' interpersonal emotions, interactions, and performance.

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