

SUBORDINATE ATTRIBUTIONS FOR UNEXPECTED BEHAVIORS IN SUPERVISOR-SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIPS*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine subordinate attributions made for unexpected supervisor behaviors in established supervisor-subordinate relationships. Data for this study were collected from employees through a questionnaire. Results of the analysis suggest that favorability of the supervisor behavior inconsistent with subordinate expectations along with the quality of the LMX (Leader-Member Exchange) relationship influence attributions made for unexpected behaviors. Perceived favorability of deviation had a positive and direct effect on attribution to positive intentions. Furthermore, quality of the LMX relationship was found to have a moderating effect on this relationship and the relationship between perceived favorability of deviation and internal attribution.

Keywords: Leader-member exchange, attributions, deviation from expectations, unexpected behaviors

Özet

Amir-Ast İlişkisinde Astların Beklenmeyen Davranışlar İçin Yaptıkları Atıflar

Bu çalışmanın amacı çalışanların amirlerinin beklenmedik davranışlarını hangi faktörlere atfettiklerini incelemektir. Anket yöntemiyle toplanan verilerin analiz sonuçları amirin davranışının çalışanın beklentileriyle olan uyumsuzluğunun algılanan çekiciliği ile lider-üye değişiminin kalitesinin beklenmeyen davranış için yapılan atıflara etkide bulduklarını göstermektedir. Uyumsuzluğun çekiciliğinin amirin olumlu/olumsuz niyetine yapılan atıfları olumlu yönde etkilediği saptanmıştır. Ayrıca, lider-üye değişimi ilişkisinin kalitesinin hem bu ilişkiyi hem de uyumsuzluğun çekiciliğiyle içsel atıflar arasındaki ilişkiyi düzenleyici etkisi olduğu bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Lider-üye değişimi, atıf, atfetme, beklentilerle uyumsuzluk, beklenmeyen davranışlar.

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INTRODUCTION

An important component of employees' work experiences is their relationships with their supervisors. Studies have shown that employees' relationships with their supervisors have important effects on their work attitudes and their well-being (Gerstner and Day, 1997; Liden, Sparrowe, and Wayne, 1997; Tepper, 2000). Supervisor-subordinate relationships have been extensively studied within the context of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory (Dansereau, Graen, and Haga, 1975; Graen and Cashman, 1975; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). The theory focuses on the development and effects of dyadic relationships between a leader and the members of the work group or unit. According to this theory, unique relationships of varying quality develop between leaders and members as a result of their workplace interactions. Quality of the relationship refers to the extent to which the relationship goes beyond formal roles, rules, and obligations.

Quality of the LMX relationship is shown to have positive effects on important work outcomes (Gerstner and Day, 1997; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Thus, research has focused on the antecedents and development of LMX (e.g., Graen and Scandura, 1987; Bauer and Green, 1996). However, research in this area has some limitations. First, LMX research has largely focused on the initial stages of leader-member relationships and have investigated the determinants of and the processes underlying the development of LMX quality (e.g., Bauer and Green, 1996; Liden, Wayne, and Stilwell, 1993); while, the interactions and the processes that might occur in developed dyads or during later stages of LMX relationships have been overlooked.

Second, the theory has a rather static view of LMX relationships that have passed the initial stages where the parties are getting acquainted with each other. LMX theory maintains that once the roles of the dyadic members are defined, the quality of the exchange, and thereby the relationship, remains stable, because the leader and the member develop an understanding and clear mutual expectations (Graen and Scandura, 1987). The contemporary view in the social psychology literature, however, is that interdependent and close relationships are ongoing processes that respond constantly to changes in partners, their interactions, and their lives (Duck and Sants, 1983), and "are no longer viewed as static states that two people are located 'in' or a fixed possession that two people 'have' (Planalp and Rivers, 1996: 299)".

While supervisors might act, as the LMX theory argues, based on the mutual understanding and clear expectations that have developed over the course of the relationship, their behaviors may not constantly and continually be within the boundaries of this understanding. Whether it is due to external or

individual factors, it is quite likely that supervisor behavior might not conform to subordinates' expectations. In fact, research on violation of trust suggests that unexpected behaviors by supervisors are common in the workplace and have profound consequences for organizations (Bies and Tripp, 1996; Jones and Burdette, 1994). This study attempts to advance prior work in LMX theory in order to gain a better understanding of such instances that are likely to occur in developed LMX relationships. Building on the literatures on LMX, unexpected behaviors, and attributions, this study aims to determine how unexpected behaviors exhibited by supervisors are interpreted by subordinates and to investigate the impact of the quality of LMX on these interpretations. It should be noted here that this study focuses on established supervisor-subordinate relationships rather than newly formed ones, since the proposed relationships require the presence of a history of interactions between the supervisor and the subordinate.

In the following sections, first, relevant literature on LMX Theory, unexpected events, and attributions for unexpected events are reviewed and the hypotheses of this study are presented. Then, the methodology of the study is described and the results of the data analysis are presented. Finally, findings of the study along with implications for research and practice are discussed.

1. LMX THEORY

LMX theory (Dansereau, Graen, and Haga, 1975; Graen and Cashman, 1975; Graen, Novak, and Sommerkamp, 1982) focuses on the dyadic relationship between a leader, usually a supervisor, and a follower, usually a subordinate. The central premise is that leaders develop different types of relationships with their subordinates, contrary to the prevailing approach to leadership, which assumed that leaders behave in the same way toward all the subordinates in their work units. These relationships range from low to high quality. Low quality relationships are characterized by unidirectional downward influence and role-defined relations, and are governed by the formal employment contract understood and endorsed by each party. The leader uses legitimate authority and standard organizational rewards to influence the subordinate and the subordinate performs only what is required by the job description. High quality relationships, on the other hand, are characterized by reciprocal influence, mutual trust, respect and liking, and common fate. Each party gives and receives contributions of time, effort, and supportiveness that go beyond those stipulated by formal role definitions (Dansereau, Graen, and Haga, 1975; Graen and Schiemann, 1978, Kim and Organ, 1982). According to the theory, the quality of LMX relationship positively influences employees' behaviors and experiences at work (Liden and Graen, 1980; Graen and

Cashman, 1975). Empirical research in general has supported this positive impact (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Gerstner and Day, 1997).

LMX theory asserts that based on the day-to-day interactions between the leader and the subordinate, the quality of the relationship becomes defined. Over the course of the relationship the interactions become routine and habitual, and the leader and the member develop an understanding and clear mutual expectations. Each party interprets the other's behavior and acts on it in terms of the dyadic understanding. In other words, the quality of the relationship remains stable from this point on (Graen and Scandura, 1987). A meta-analysis of LMX studies, however, has found a low degree of agreement between leaders and members concerning the quality of their relationships (Gerstner and Day, 1997). This finding suggests that leaders and members may not necessarily come to a mutual understanding and develop clear expectations over the course of the relationship. Moreover, it is possible that, due to external or individual factors, the behaviors and the interpretations of either party may, at times, be inconsistent with the dyadic understanding. LMX research, however, has not yet looked at such instances.

Therefore, this paper focuses on inconsistent or unexpected behaviors, how they are perceived, and whether they are interpreted in terms of the dyadic understanding. While either the supervisor or the subordinate might exhibit unexpected behaviors, this paper looks at unexpected behaviors exhibited by leaders and how such behaviors are interpreted by subordinates.

2. UNEXPECTED EVENTS AND ATTRIBUTIONS

In general, expectation is defined as one's belief about what will occur in the future (Locke, 1969). It refers to an event or an outcome anticipated as the most probable occurrence from a class of possible events or outcomes (Harvey and Clapp, 1965). In the context of relationships, expectations refer to the behaviors or actions each party believes that the other will exhibit (Burgoon, 1993). While these expectations may be general and apply to all types of relationships, this paper focuses on expectations unique to a particular relationship, which develop out of the specific patterns of experiences in the relationship itself (Jones and Burdette, 1994).

Expectations play an important role in defining and shaping interpersonal interactions (Burgoon, 1993). One important effect of expectations is their impact on individuals' perceptions and evaluations of others' behaviors. The interpersonal relationships literature (e.g., Baldwin, 1992; Planalp and Rivers, 1996) suggests that individuals develop relational schemas based on their

interpersonal experiences. Relational schemas refer to cognitive structures representing specific knowledge about the relationship (Planalp and Rivers, 1996), and include images of self and the other in the relationship as well as cognitive generalizations representing regularities in patterns of interpersonal interaction, derived from repeated similar interpersonal experiences (Baldwin, 1992). Events that take place in relationships are interpreted and understood based on relational schemas. Partners form expectations for future events in accordance with the relational schemas, which provide continuity among interactions (Planalp, 1987).

Confirmation or disconfirmation of these expectations has certain consequences for the individual. First of all, confirmation of expectations makes them more certain (Olson, Roese, and Zanna, 1996). If an event confirms the expectation often enough, the individual, by experience, will predict that the same event will happen in the future (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, and Lowell, 1953). Second, confirmation of expectations induces heuristic information processing (Hilton, Klein, and von Hippel, 1991). Since information that the event provides is consistent with expectations, the individual is less likely to have a need to pay close attention to relevant information and engage in careful, systematic analysis of the event.

On the contrary, when events deviate from expectations, individuals tend to engage in deeper and more careful information processing (Belmore, 1987; Fletcher and Fincham, 1991; Hemsley and Marmurek, 1982; Hilton, Klein, and von Hippel, 1991). Events that disconfirm expectations are atypical and novel, because they do not fit into relational schemas that might have worked well in the past to help individuals understand events. This inconsistency provokes explanatory processes so that the schema can be updated, modified, or changed (Planalp and Rivers, 1996). Therefore, when faced with unexpected events, individuals tend to analyze and interpret inconsistent information, and understand why the disconfirmation occurred; that is, they make causal attributions for the unexpected event (Hastie, 1984; Olson, Roese, and Zanna, 1996). In the attribution literature, numerous studies (e.g., Hastie, 1984; Pyszczynski and Greenberg, 1981; Wong and Weiner, 1981) have shown that unexpected events promote attributional processing. In other words, individuals are more likely to search for causes of events in an effort to understand and explain them when events disconfirm expectations than when they confirm expectations.

One commonly used causal attribution is related to the perception of where the cause of the event is located and involves internal (dispositional) or external (situational) attributions. When individuals make internal attributions, they perceive that other's behavior is caused by factors internal to that person,

such as personality, moods, and effort. On the other hand, when they make external attributions, they attribute the behavior to factors external to the other person, such as chance or pressure from others (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973).

Some researchers (Bradbury and Fincham, 1990; Fincham, 1985) maintain that, in the context of interpersonal relationships, individuals not only try to understand why the other person behaved in an unexpected way, but are also concerned with whether or not that person is responsible for the unexpected behavior. Thus, it is argued that individuals make responsibility attributions as well as causal attributions for a partner's unexpected behaviors. Responsibility attributions deal with the accountability or answerability for the behavior (Fincham and Bradbury, 1987), and involve an *evaluation* of the other's actions (Shultz, Schleifer, and Altman, 1981). Research in this area suggests that responsibility attributions involve judgments of intentionality, which refers to the perception of the degree to which the other's behavior was purposeful and deliberate (Fincham and Jaspars, 1980). Some researchers (Bies and Tripp, 1996; Bradbury and Fincham, 1990) further distinguish between positive and negative intent; that is, the degree to which other's behavior is perceived to be done with the purpose of benefiting or harming the individual.

When a behavior deviates from an individual's expectations, the kind of explanations the individual makes for that unexpected behavior is influenced by the favorability or the desirability of the deviation from the individual's expectations. According to Locke (1969), unexpected outcomes produce surprise. Whether the surprise is pleasant or unpleasant depends on the direction of the discrepancy between the outcome and the expectation. Specifically, if the outcome is in the direction of what one values; that is, if the outcome is better than expected, surprise is pleasant. On the contrary, if the outcome is worse than expected, surprise is unpleasant. Harvey and Clapp (1965) argue that individuals evaluate events in terms of their preferences, hopes, and values. Events that are perceived as facilitating attainment of a preference, hope, or a valued end are evaluated positively; whereas, events that are perceived as refuting preferences or values are evaluated negatively. Therefore, it can be predicted that when the unexpected behavior of a supervisor is desirable or favorable, the subordinate is more likely to view it in a positive way. Specifically, the subordinate is more likely to attribute the unexpected behavior to the positive intentions of the supervisor when the deviation is a favorable one. On the other hand, an unfavorable unexpected behavior is more likely to be viewed negatively, and thus be attributed to the negative intentions of the supervisor. Therefore,

Hypothesis 1: Perceived favorability of the deviation from subordinate expectations is positively related to attribution to positive intentions of the supervisor.

It should be noted here that favorability of the deviation is not hypothesized here to influence causal (i.e. internal or external) attributions. A subordinate may give credit to his or her supervisor for a positive unexpected behavior by attributing it to internal, dispositional factors. At the same time, the subordinate may also blame his or her supervisor for a negative unexpected behavior and attribute the behavior to internal factors again. This might be due to the fundamental attribution error, which refers to the tendency to overattribute others' behaviors to internal and controllable factors rather than external factors (Ross, 1977). It seems more plausible that the favorability of the deviation influences the type of the internal factor (i.e. positive or negative intention) the behavior is attributed to rather than whether or not the behavior is attributed to an internal factor.

Another important factor that might affect the attributions made for unexpected supervisor behaviors is the nature or the quality of the LMX relationship between the subordinate and the supervisor. LMX theory argues that over the course of the supervisor-subordinate relationship the interactions between the parties become routine and habitual, and both parties develop an understanding of mutual expectations and obligations. Each party acts according to the dyadic understanding and interprets the other's behavior in terms of that understanding (Graen and Scandura, 1987). This dyadic understanding is cognitively represented as a relational schema, which is a cognitive generalization based on repeated experience with similar patterns of interactions. This relational schema influences interpretations of others' behavior (Baldwin, 1992). In other words, interpretations of another's behavior would be different depending on what expectations are represented in the relational schema. Thus, in different LMX relationships, a given supervisor behavior is likely to be interpreted differently since the relational schema subordinates develop would be different from each other.

A number of studies (e.g., Karney and Bradbury, 2000; Floyd and Voloudakis, 1999) conducted in this research area have found that individuals in closer relationships are more likely to make favorable, relationship-maintaining attributions for partners' behaviors. In other words, partners in closer relationships tend to maximize the impact of positive behavior and minimize the impact of negative behavior. Specifically, partners in closer relationships give their spouses credit for their positive behavior by attributing it to internal, dispositional factors and positive intentions to explain it. On the other hand, they view negative behaviors as being situational, and unintentional, thus

reducing its negative effect. In this case, even though the behavior is negative, the individual tends to believe that his or her partner did not act maliciously and attribute the behavior to the positive intentions of the other.

Consistently, it can be argued that subordinates in higher quality LMX relationships are highly likely to view their supervisors' behaviors in a more positive light than those in lower quality LMX relationships because higher quality LMX relationships involve higher levels of mutual trust, liking, and support, and are closer LMX relationships compared to lower quality LMX relationships. Therefore, it is proposed here that subordinates in higher quality LMX relationships are more likely to attribute favorable unexpected behaviors to internal factors and unfavorable unexpected behaviors to external factors not under the control of the supervisor. Furthermore, employees in higher quality LMX relationships are likely to view the intentions of their supervisors in a more positive way. In other words, compared to those in lower quality LMX relationships, they are more likely to attribute unexpected behaviors to positive intentions even when the unexpected behavior is perceived as unfavorable. Therefore, the following are hypothesized:

Hypothesis 2: Quality of LMX moderates the relationship between the perceived favorability of deviation from subordinate expectations and attributions such that the perceived favorability of deviation has a stronger positive association with internal attributions for higher quality LMX relationships than for lower quality LMX relationships.

Hypothesis 3: Quality of LMX moderates the relationship between the perceived favorability of deviation from subordinate expectations and attributions to positive intentions such that the relationship is stronger for higher quality LMX relationships.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sample

Data for this study were collected from 173 MBA students at two large southeastern US universities. Overall, the sample was 59% male and 41% female, and 66% of the sample were under age 30, 25% were between ages 30 and 39, and 9% were age 40 and over. The mean age of the participants was 27.69. The sample was 55.8% white and 22.1% African-American. The remaining part of the sample had Hispanic, Asian, or other racial backgrounds. As for the educational level, 27.5% of the respondents had a high school

diploma, 24% had an associate's degree, 43.9% had a bachelor's degree, and 4.6% had a graduate degree.

All the students that participated in the study had work experience. Overall, organizational tenure averaged 3.4 years, and 25.6% of the participants had a managerial position. The mean length of relationship with their supervisors was 3 years. The participants worked with their supervisors an average of 37.8 hours per week.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

Data for this study were collected through a questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire included a scenario that described a hypothetical situation that takes place between the participant and his or her supervisor. Respondents were asked to think about their current supervisors and to imagine that they were actually in the situation described in the scenario. This methodology has been utilized in various studies (e.g., Kramer, 1994; Bradbury and Fincham, 1992) that investigate the attributions and reactions in interpersonal relationships. Respondents were asked to think about their most recent supervisors if they were not currently employed.

The specific situation described in the scenario was a project assignment, since this situation is representative of typical interactions between employees and their supervisors. In the scenario, the respondents learn about a project that will be assigned to one or more employees in their department. The project was described in neutral terms in order to prevent it from appearing as highly desirable or highly undesirable. Two different scenarios that represented unexpected supervisor behaviors were used in the study in order to maximize the variability in perceptions of the favorability of the deviation. The first scenario indicated that the subordinate anticipated to be assigned to the project, but was not assigned to it. The second scenario indicated that the subordinate did not anticipate to be assigned to the project, but was assigned to it. Participants were randomly assigned to each scenario. The scenarios are presented in the Appendix.

The second part of the questionnaire included scales that measured the perception of the favorability of the deviation, attributions for the unexpected behavior, quality of LMX relationship, and control variables. The items of the scales are presented in the Appendix. In the last part, respondents were asked to provide general demographic and background information such as gender, race, age, educational level, organizational tenure, rank, length of their relationships with their supervisors, and the number of hours they worked with their supervisors per week.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Favorability of Deviation

Subordinates' perceptions of the favorability of the deviation were measured with three items. Participants were instructed to answer these questions based on the information given in the scenario and their relationships with their supervisors. A sample item was: "This decision was a pleasant surprise to me." Responses ranged from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5). Responses were recoded so that high values indicate positive, desirable deviations. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.83.

3.3.2. Quality of the LMX Relationship

Quality of the LMX relationship was measured by 14 items. This was achieved by adopting relevant items from existing scales and developing new items. These new items assessed whether the relationship is limited to formal rules and roles or whether it goes beyond these formal stipulations and thus is a closer relationship. Items 4, 8, 9, 12, and 14 from the LMX-MDM scale developed by Liden and Maslyn (1998); items 2 and 6 from Duchon, Green, and Taber (1986); items 7 and 11 from Bhal and Ansari's (1996) Quality of Interaction Scale; and item 10 from Kim and Organ's (1982) Noncontractual Social Exchange Scale were adopted. Sample items were: "My supervisor is the kind of person one would like to have as a friend," and "I give suggestions to my supervisor about improving the work." The new items developed to measure the quality of LMX relationship were: "I have a close working relationship with my supervisor," "I am comfortable interacting with my supervisor on a social basis," "My relationship with my supervisor goes beyond formal roles," and "My supervisor treats me as his/her equal." Responses ranged from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5).

Since LMX is argued by some researchers to be a multidimensional construct (e.g., Liden and Maslyn, 1998), exploratory factor analysis was conducted in order to determine whether the scale developed in this study measures multiple dimensions of the quality of the LMX relationship. According to the factor analysis, all items loaded on one factor, and therefore did not measure multiple dimensions. In addition, all the factor loadings were greater than 0.50. Thus, the items were averaged to form a scale, which had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.94.

3.3.3. Attributions

Attributions made for the supervisor's behavior were measured with an 11-item scale developed for the study. The items in the scale were designed to tap into the internal/external and positive/negative intent dimensions. Participants were again instructed to answer the questions in this section based on the information given in the scenario and their relationships with their supervisors. Responses to the items ranged from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5).

Exploratory factor analysis with principal components method and varimax rotation was conducted on these 11 items. The analysis produced a 2-factor solution. The first factor seemed to tap into the internal versus external causes of the supervisor's behavior. These items assess whether the respondents believed the behavior was caused by the supervisor or by external factors that were not completely under his or her control. Thus, the seven items that loaded on this factor were averaged to form the internal attribution index. The items were recoded so that high values represent attributions to factors internal to the supervisor. Sample items were: "My supervisor made this decision because that is the kind of person he/she is," and "I think my supervisor's decision was influenced by upper management." Cronbach's alpha for this index was 0.79.

The second factor included items that assess whether the respondents believed that the supervisor acted with a positive intention or a negative intention. Sample items were: "I think my supervisor meant to do something good for me," and "I think my supervisor planned to hurt me." The items were recoded so that high values represent attributions to positive intent. The four items that loaded on this factor were averaged to form the attribution to positive intentions index, which had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76.

3.3.4. Control Variables

Employees' evaluations of the decision regarding a project assignment might be affected by their growth-need strength. For example, employees with stronger growth-need might perceive the deviation as more unfavorable if they are not assigned to a challenging project as compared to those with lower growth-need strength. Therefore, growth-need strength was controlled in this study. Growth-need strength was measured by 5 items taken from Warr, Cook, and Wall (1979) and Hackman and Lawler (1971). Responses were made on a scale ranging from "Not at all important" (1) to "Extremely important" (5). The items were averaged to form a scale, which had a reliability coefficient of 0.89.

Attributions have been shown to be influenced by negative affectivity (Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, and Sullivan, 1994); therefore, this personality trait was used as a control variable. Negative affectivity was measured by 4 items from Benet-Martinez and John's (1998) neuroticism scale. A sample item was "I see myself as somebody who worries a lot." Responses ranged from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.73.

In addition, organizational tenure was controlled for, since it has been shown to affect the attributions made by employees (Kramer, 1994). Furthermore, since the hypotheses of this study apply to developed supervisor-subordinate relationships and the sample included a number of employees with relatively new relationships, the length of the relationship between the participant and his or her supervisor was also used as a control variable.

Finally, desired outcome was used as a control variable because this variable might have some effects on deviation perceptions. Desired outcome was measured with 4 items that assessed the degree to which the respondent wanted to be assigned to the project. A sample item was: "This project was something I really wanted to take on." Responses ranged from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5). Responses were recoded so that high values indicate high levels of desire to be assigned to the project. The reliability of the scale was 0.83.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. Perceived favorability of deviation was significantly associated with attribution to positive intentions ($r = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$). In addition, quality of LMX relationship had significant correlations with internal attribution ($r = -0.18$, $p < 0.05$) and attribution to positive intentions ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Favorability of Deviation	2.75	1.10								
2. Quality of LMX	3.30	0.89	0.01							
3. Internal Attribution	3.30	0.76	0.09	-0.18*						
4. Attribution to Positive Intentions	3.75	0.75	0.18*	0.63***	-0.13					
5. Growth-Need Strength	4.39	0.64	-0.08	0.09	0.11	0.08				
6. Negative Affectivity	2.90	0.81	-0.02	-0.09	0.11	-0.09	-0.08			
7. Desired Outcome	3.52	0.86	-0.26***	0.06	0.01	0.08	0.32***	-0.08		
8. Tenure	3.35	3.60	-0.15	-0.04	0.00	-0.18*	0.13	-0.12	0.19*	
9. Length of Relationship	2.16	2.84	-0.20**	0.04	0.02	-0.11	0.11	-0.03	0.16*	0.63***

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

Moderated regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses of this study. Two separate regression equations were predicted for internal attribution and for attribution to positive intentions as dependent variables. In both analyses, control variables were entered first, followed by main effects predictors variables, and, finally, the interaction effect.

Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 3 related to the direct effect of perceived favorability of the deviation on attribution to positive intentions and the moderating effect of the quality of LMX on this relationship. The results of the analysis conducted to test these two hypotheses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the Moderated Regression Analysis for Attribution to Positive Intentions

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Growth-Need Strength	0.07	0.03	0.03
Negative Affectivity	-0.10	-0.04	-0.03
Desired Outcome	0.08	0.10	0.10
Tenure	-0.05*	-0.03	-0.03
Length of Relationship	0.00	-0.01	-0.01
Favorability of Deviation		0.12**	0.41**
Quality of LMX		0.52***	0.76***
Favorability of Deviation x Quality of LMX			-0.08*
<i>F</i>	2.16	20.12***	18.36***
<i>df</i>	5	7	8
<i>R</i> ²	0.06	0.46	0.48
ΔR^2		0.40***	0.02*

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

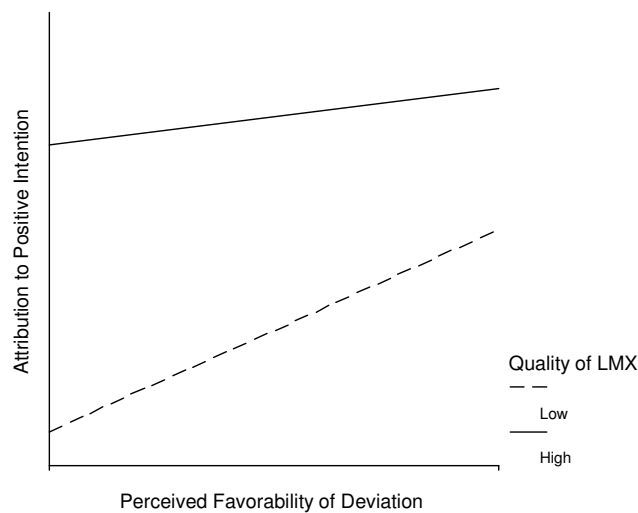
Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive direct effect of perceived favorability of deviation on attribution to positive intentions. The beta coefficient for perceived favorability of deviation was significant and in the predicted direction ($b = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Subordinates who perceive that the deviation is favorable are more likely to attribute the behavior to positive intentions of their supervisors than those who perceive that the deviation is unfavorable.

Hypothesis 3 stated that the relationship between perceived favorability of deviation and attribution to positive intentions would be moderated by the quality of the LMX relationship. As can be seen in Table 2, the inclusion of the interaction term in the regression equation explained a statistically significant proportion of variance in attribution to positive intention. Change in R^2 when the interaction term was included ($\Delta R^2 = 0.02$, $p < 0.05$) and the beta coefficient for the interaction term ($b = -0.08$, $p < 0.05$) were all significant. These results show that the quality of the LMX relationship is a significant moderator of the relationship between perceived favorability of deviation and attribution to positive intentions.

In order to interpret the form of the moderated relationship, the interaction effect was plotted, using one standard deviation above and below the mean of the quality of the LMX relationship to capture high and low levels of this variable (Aiken and West, 1991). Figure 1 depicts this interaction plot.

The plot suggests that employees in higher quality LMX relationships tend to attribute both favorable and unfavorable deviations to positive intentions of their supervisors. Those in lower quality LMX relationships, on the other hand, are more likely to make positive intention attributions when the deviation is favorable than when it is unfavorable. When the deviation is unfavorable they seem to attribute it to negative intentions. Although the moderation effect was significant, it was contrary to the prediction of a stronger relationship for higher quality LMX. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was partly supported.

Figure 1. Moderating Effect of Quality of LMX on the Perceived Favorability of Deviation-Attribution to Positive Intention Relationship

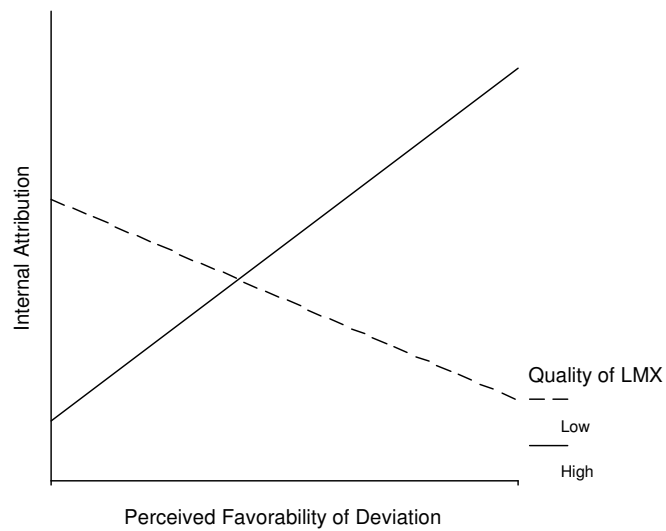


Hypothesis 2 proposed a moderating effect of the quality of LMX on the relationship between perceived favorability of the deviation and internal attribution. The results of the analysis conducted to test this hypothesis are presented in Table 3.

As can be seen in Table 3, the inclusion of the interaction term in the regression equation explained a statistically significant proportion of variance in internal attribution. Change in R^2 when the interaction term was included ($\Delta R^2 = 0.09$, $p < 0.001$) and the regression coefficient for the interaction term ($b = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$) were all significant. These results suggest that the quality of the LMX relationship is a significant moderator of the perceived favorability of deviation-internal attribution relationship. Figure 2 shows this interaction effect.

Table 3. Results of the Moderated Regression Analysis for Internal Attribution

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Growth-Need Strength	0.18	0.18	0.19*
Negative Affectivity	0.11	0.10	0.08
Desired Outcome	-0.03	0.00	-0.02
Tenure	0.00	-0.01	-0.01
Length of Relationship	0.01	0.02	0.01
Favorability of Deviation		0.08	-0.70***
Quality of LMX		-0.15*	-0.78***
Favorability of Deviation x Quality of LMX			0.22***
<i>F</i>	1.06	1.83	3.76***
<i>df</i>	5	7	8
<i>R</i> ²	0.03	0.07	0.16
ΔR^2		0.04*	0.09***

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$ **Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Quality of LMX on the Perceived Favorability of Deviation-Internal Attribution Relationship**

The interaction plot in Figure 2 shows that the interaction effect was in the predicted direction for higher quality LMX relationships. For these relationships, perceived favorability of deviation had a positive influence on internal attribution. Employees in higher quality relationships made internal attributions for favorable deviations and external attributions for unfavorable deviations. For lower quality LMX relationships, however, the effect was in the opposite direction. Employees in this type of relationship attributed favorable deviations to external factors and unfavorable deviations to internal factors. In other words, for lower quality LMX relationships, perceived favorability of deviation had a negative effect on internal attributions. Since Hypothesis 2 predicted a weaker positive association between favorability of deviation and internal attribution, this hypothesis was partly supported.

A surprising finding here was that the favorability of deviation and quality of LMX both had negative direct effects on internal attributions. Employees attributed positive unexpected behaviors to external factors and negative ones to internal factors. Furthermore, employees in higher quality LMX relationships made more external attributions. This might be due to the way the internal attribution items were interpreted by the respondents. It is possible that the respondents focused more on negative internal factors such as negative intentions or selfishness when responding to the internal attribution items. Thus, they might have blamed their supervisors for negative unexpected behaviors and explained positive unexpected behaviors by external factors out of control of the supervisor rather than negative internal factors. Similarly, focusing on negative internal factors, employees in lower quality LMX relationships might have explained the unexpected behavior by negative internal factors rather than positive ones and those in higher quality relationships might have believed that the unexpected behavior was due to some external factor rather than negative internal factors.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the impact of unexpected supervisor behaviors and the nature of the LMX relationship on the interpretations of subordinates. The results indicated that the nature of the LMX relationship, along with the desirability of the supervisor behaviors inconsistent with subordinate expectations, influence the attributions made for the unexpected behavior.

The results suggest that explanations for unexpected behaviors depend on a number of factors. One important factor is the perceived desirability of the behavior to the subordinate. The impact of this factor was demonstrated by the significant direct and positive relationship between the perceived favorability of

deviation and attribution to positive intention. As predicted, unexpected behavior is more likely to be attributed to positive intention of the supervisor when the behavior is perceived as desirable.

Another important factor that seems to influence the explanations of subordinates is the nature or the quality of their LMX relationship with their supervisors. In fact, the quality of the LMX relationship influenced the effects of the favorability of deviation on not only internal attributions but also attributions to positive intentions of supervisors. The results of this study suggest that subordinates in higher quality LMX relationships tend to believe that their supervisors perform unexpected behaviors with positive intentions even when the unexpected behavior is perceived as unfavorable. Those in lower quality LMX relationships, on the other hand, are more likely to make positive intention attributions when the deviation is favorable than when it is unfavorable. When the deviation is unfavorable they seem to explain it by negative intentions of their supervisors.

The results also suggest that the effect of perceived favorability of deviation on internal attributions depends on the quality of the LMX relationship. Specifically, subordinates in higher quality LMX relationships explained favorable unexpected behaviors by internal factors and unfavorable unexpected behaviors by external factors not under the control of their supervisors. Those in lower quality LMX relationships, however, attributed favorable deviations to external factors and unfavorable deviations to internal factors.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the quality of the LMX relationship is a key factor that shapes employees' perceptions of the unexpected behaviors of their supervisors. Although favorable unexpected behaviors are likely to be evaluated more positively than unfavorable ones, the results suggest that the quality of the LMX relationship may alter this effect. Employees in higher quality relationships tend to give credit for their supervisors for favorable unexpected behaviors and justify unfavorable ones by attributing them to positive intentions or factors external to their supervisors. On the other hand, employees in lower quality relationships are likely to blame their supervisors for unfavorable behaviors and attribute them to negative intentions or other internal factors. In other words, subordinates in higher quality LMX relationships tend to view their supervisors' behaviors in a more positive light as compared to those in lower quality relationships.

This study advances our understanding of supervisor-subordinate relationships in several ways. First, it addresses the day-to-day interactions within established supervisor-subordinate relationships and the processes that

occur during these interactions. While previous research investigated the determinants of and the processes underlying the development of supervisor-subordinate relationships, or the quality of LMX relationships, this study specifically focused on the processes that occur after the relationship has developed. Second, it expands research on supervisor-subordinate relationships from the typical focus on the viewpoint of supervisors by examining the subordinates' viewpoints. Previous research has emphasized the impact of evaluations supervisors make of their subordinates' behaviors on the supervisor-subordinate relationship. This study attempted to understand the subordinates' evaluations of their supervisors' behaviors.

Third, this paper is expected to fill a gap in the research on LMX theory by addressing the impact of unexpected behaviors on subordinates' interpretations. LMX theory proposes that both parties in the relationship come to a mutual understanding and develop clear expectations over the course of the relationship. This dyadic understanding, in turn, serves as a reference point for the interpretations and evaluations of the other party's behaviors. This study is the first to investigate this proposition by focusing on unexpected behaviors performed by supervisors. This study empirically demonstrated that subordinates interpret their supervisors' behaviors in terms of the quality of their relationships with their supervisors, or the dyadic understanding as perceived by the subordinates. For example, the results of this study indicate that whether the subordinates explain their supervisors' behaviors by attributing them to positive or negative intentions depends of the quality of the LMX relationship.

One weakness of this study is the sample used to test the hypotheses. The results would be more generalizable with a greater representation of employees with more organizational tenure, longer relationships with their supervisors, and relatively older age than the participants of this study. Another limitation regards the measurement of attributions. Currently, there is no widely accepted measure of interpersonal attributions that might be used for work relationships. The attribution measures used in this study were new scales developed for this research. Although the present scales are internally consistent, the construct and criterion-related validity of these scales have not been established. Future research needs to clearly differentiate between attribution dimensions that are relevant in the context of interpersonal relationships so that scales developed to measure the dimensions will have better psychometric properties.

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Appendix

Scenarios and Items of the Scales

The following paragraph contains a brief description of a work event. In reading the description, try to imagine that you and your current (or most recent, if not working) supervisor are actually in the situation described. That is, think about your actual supervisor while reading the description and try to imagine how you would feel if you were in this situation.

You have learned that there is a project that is about to be assigned to one or more employees in your department. You have heard that this project is a difficult one and will require hard work and dedication. **You anticipate that you will be assigned to it** and you think you will probably be responsible for half of it. A few days later, your supervisor informs you that **you have been selected for this new project**. He or she also tells you that you have the complete responsibility for the whole project.

Favorability of Deviation Items

1. Compared to what I expected, this decision was more satisfying to me.
2. This decision was a pleasant surprise to me.
3. Given my expectations, I was disappointed with my supervisor's decision.

Quality of LMX Relationship Items

1. I have a close working relationship with my supervisor.
2. I give suggestions to my supervisor about improving the work.
3. I am comfortable interacting with my supervisor on a social basis.
4. My supervisor defends my work actions to a superior, even without complete knowledge of the issue in question.
5. My relationship with my supervisor goes beyond formal roles.
6. My supervisor is willing to help me solve work-related problems.
7. I am comfortable talking with my supervisor about personal issues.
8. My supervisor would come to my defense if I were "attacked" by others.
9. I like my supervisor very much as a person.
10. My supervisor will not make changes in my duties without first talking it over with me.
11. I seek advice from my supervisor on personal problems.
12. My supervisor would defend me to others in the organization if I made an honest mistake.
13. My supervisor treats me as his/her equal.
14. My supervisor is the kind of person one would like to have as a friend.

Internal Attribution Items

1. My supervisor made this decision because that is the kind of person he/she is.
2. I think the project assignment was under my supervisor's control.
3. My supervisor made this decision because of his/her character.
4. I think the project assignment was determined by policies or factors beyond my supervisor's control.
5. My supervisor could have made a different decision.
6. I think my supervisor's decision was influenced by upper management.
7. I think this decision was made by upper management.

Attribution to Positive Intention Items

1. I think my supervisor intended to act positively towards me.
2. I think my supervisor meant to do something good for me.
3. I think my supervisor planned to hurt me.
4. I think my supervisor did what he/she did just to harm me

Growth-Need Strength Items

1. The feeling of worthwhile accomplishment in your job.
2. The opportunity to learn new things.
3. Challenging work.
4. Extending your range of abilities.
5. The opportunity for personal growth and development on your job.

Negative Affectivity Items

I see myself as *someone who*...

- Can be moody.
- Worries a lot.
- Gets nervous easily.
- Can be tense.

Desired Outcome Items

1. I had no desire to work on this project.
2. This project seemed like a good one to work on.
3. I hoped I would be assigned to this project.
4. This project was something I really wanted to take on.