

## ABSTRACT

Communication Expectations between Younger Superiors and Older Subordinates

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One of the most important workplace relationships is that of superiors and subordinates. However, it is not clear if this relationship becomes more complex if traditional age roles are reversed and a younger superior manages an older subordinate. This study has been designed to explore the extent to which age complicates the communication dynamic between superiors and subordinates in regards to expectations of appropriate communication, and power and respect. Through the use of qualitative research, interviews were conducted and analyzed. The results revealed the important communication dynamics that exist between older subordinates and younger superiors. Themes such as adequate experience, reciprocal respect, training and development and collaborative communication were interpreted from the data and can be used to further explore scholarly concepts such as LMX and assist in practical senses.

Communication Expectations between Younger Superiors and Older Subordinates

by

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A Thesis

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts

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May 2013

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

One of the most critical organizational relationships is that of superior-subordinate, chiefly, because superiors and subordinates continuously interact with one another and engage in behaviors that can impact respect, power, and attitudes towards the organization. Historically, this relationship has been characterized by an age norm of the superior being older than the subordinate (Collins, Hair, & Rocco, 2009). However, with a change in workforce demographics, organizations are seeing a rise in older subordinates and younger superiors, creating a unique relationship that, by extension, may have distinct communication dynamics. By that I mean, older subordinates may hold different expectations when it comes to communicating with younger superiors. For example, older subordinates may expect special privileges because of their age or expect to be communicated with differently. As someone who has directly experienced this relationship from the vantage point of a younger superior, I am curious about whether there are differing expectations of the superior-subordinate communication dynamic from the older subordinate's point of view. Thus, this study seeks to identify and examine subordinates' potentially differing expectations regarding communication within this unique but increasingly prevalent relationship.

By the year 2020, nearly 40 percent of the workforce will comprise of what society deems older workers (James, McKechnie, & Swanberg, 2011). As baby boomers continue to age and the economy continues to suffer, an increasing number of adults are finding that instead of retiring at a younger age, they are forced to continue working to

support themselves and their families. At the same time, however, younger managers often enter organizations as superiors to these older subordinates. This trend has created an age-reversal dyad within modern day workforces wherein older subordinates are reporting to younger superiors (Collins, Hair, & Rocco, 2009). Within this dyad come conflicting ideals of power, respect and workplace politics such as promotions have come to light.

Organizational leaders must consider the likelihood that older workers perceive they have paid their dues, have exhibited loyalty toward their organizations, and/or should be exempt from continued training and other changes within their organizations (James, McKechnie, & Swanberg, 2011). Previous studies in both the management and sociology fields suggest that such mindsets spur expectations of job security and incremental pay increases for their remaining career (DeArmond, Tye, Chen, Krauss, Rogers, Sintek, 2006; James, McKechnie, & Swanberg, 2011; Loi & Shultz, 2007; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Depending on whether these expectations are met or not, older workers have historically been afforded several options late in their career: potentially remain in their current employment, move to a new or alternate job, or cease working altogether. Unfortunately, recent economic conditions make the latter retirement option a diminishing alternative. Thus, older workers tend to stay where they are in the workforce or move to a new and different position. The choice between these two options is sometimes affected by the superiors that older workers interact with. If superiors are meeting the needs of older workers, older workers may be more likely to remain with them but if they find that their needs and expectations are not being met, they will most likely seek other opportunities (DeArmond et al., 2006).

While older workers are facing a dilemma based on whether their expectations are being met or not, younger workers are entering the workforce with a different mindset. Within the workforce, younger workers are often looking to continually develop within their field and seek out additional training (James, McKechnie, & Swanberg, 2011). As the broader workforce continues to age, the current generations entering the workforce are finding themselves placed in supervisory managerial roles. Younger workers are often internally motivated to take career initiative and enhance themselves accordingly (Fischer, 1995; James, McKechnie, & Swanberg, 2011). In the same respect, however, the newer generation of workers is more willing to leave a company if a better opportunity arises, and these individuals tend to have a lower sense of loyalty to companies that are not fulfilling their personal needs and objectives (James, McKechnie, & Swanberg, 2011).

Together, the newer and seasoned generations interface in a potentially tenuous dynamic as younger professionals find themselves supervising older workers. That is, this unique relationship brings to light various issues concerning expectations for interaction, power, respect and message-sharing behaviors. Organizations must be prepared for the inevitability of this type of relationship, and their leaders need to understand whether adjustments should be made to accommodate this relational dynamic. The present study seeks to discover if there are any unique expectations within this relationship from the vantage point of the older subordinate in order to uncover if subordinates' age has an impact on their thoughts of power and respect with superiors. In traditional age dynamics, power and respect tend to be given to superiors because of their tenure (Bedeian & Kacmar, 1992), however when the age dynamic is reversed, older

subordinates may give power and respect differently which makes looking at this study from the point of the older subordinate important.

Beyond the practical implications of this research, there are several scholarly contributions to the present study. Foremost, this relationship and its departure from the traditional superior-subordinate age structure present opportunities to potentially enhance, deny, or advance new theories of superior-subordinate communication. Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) states that leadership success is dependent on the exchange relationship shared between leaders and followers within organizations (Zacher, Rosing, Henning, Frese, 2011) and speaks to the tension that exists within this unique relationship in regards to power and respect. By studying this unique relationship, LMX may be further developed to understand the differing exchanges, if any, that occur amongst superiors and subordinates. LMX does not necessarily define the age structure of superiors and subordinates, but a large portion of their work is focused on the traditional older superior and younger subordinate dyad (e.g., Bakar, Mustaffa, & Mohamad, 2009; Bakar, Dilbeck, & McCroskey, 2010; Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; Fix & Sias, 2006; Mueller & Lee, 2002; Olufowote, Miller, & Wilson, 2005; Schyns & Day, 2010; van Breukelen, Schyns, & Le Blanc, 2006). As such, studying this new relational dynamic may prompt reconsideration of LMX and assist in the development of new theories.

For the practical community, this study offers insight into what older subordinates expect out of their superiors and the effects that can have on workplace attitudes. If organizational leaders understand the expectations older subordinate carry, leaders can better train and prepare superiors so that those expectations can be met. Toward this end,

I conduct a qualitative analysis of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals who have had managers younger than themselves.

The subsequent literature review further synthesizes extant knowledge of superior-subordinate relationships, chiefly through the lenses of LMX. After articulating the research questions that guide this study, I outline the methods for conducting the study and analyzing the results. Following the methods, I move into the results of the research and what I interpreted from the data collected which is then followed with the discussion of how the data can have scholarly and practical implications.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of Literature

Superiors within organizations reportedly spend nearly 90 percent of their day partaking in verbal communication with others (Morand, 2000). In today's world, where technology is prevalent, the percentage of time spent communicating verbally may be lower but that does not mean that the time spent communicating is lower. Instead, superiors are using different methods to engage in communication (e.g., emailing and texting). Superiors are constantly having conversations with other superiors, subordinates, and other stakeholders. In light of this, it is essential for leaders to understand that organizational functioning relies on successful communication. Leader-member exchange theory, or LMX, provides specific insight into superior-subordinate communication and is addressed in turn. The first section of the literature review will show how LMX assists in understanding various types of power that exist and emerge within organizations, which warrants research on power in the workforce. Following this, I synthesize the interdisciplinary research on ageism in the workplace and address the degree to which LMX can account for the emerging reverse-age dyad.

#### *Leader Member Exchange Theory and Superior-Subordinate Communication*

LMX is an influential theory tied to superior-subordinate communication. As Zacher, Rosing, Henning, and Frese (2011) state, LMX seeks to understand the way in which superiors communicate and build relationships with their subordinates. LMX sheds light on superior-subordinate communication in that it provides insight into a

person's place within an organization and the behavior that takes place. LMX also speaks to dynamics of power and respect within organizations, which are ultimately shaped through communication. For more than twenty-five years, LMX has guided numerous empirical studies that allowed researchers to look not only at leaders' but followers' perspectives, as well (e.g., Bakar, Mustaffa, & Mohamad, 2009; Bakar, Dilbeck, & McCroskey, 2010; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; Fix & Sias, 2006; Mueller & Lee, 2002; Schyns & Day, 2010; van Breukelen et al., 2006). Looking at both perspectives of the relationship is important because it allows for LMX to be understood on all sides. Superiors and subordinates, according to Bakar and colleagues (2010), tend to look at power and respect differently so it is important for LMX to be studied from both parties.

Communication is critical when it comes to exchanges between superiors and subordinates, especially when it comes to superiors sharing information with subordinates (Bakar, Dilbeck, & McCroskey, 2010). Subordinates look to their superiors for information on evolving organizational goals, for feedback on performance, and for what duties or activities they need to get accomplished. By studying a company in Malaysia, Bakar and colleagues (2010) looked at how superior communication led to high group and organizational commitment. They conducted their study using survey that asked how subordinates felt about their superiors' communication and how superiors felt about their subordinates' commitment to the organization. By combining the results of the two surveys, Bakar and colleagues saw that there was a connection between superior communication and subordinates' commitment. Bakar and colleagues' (2010) study in this vein demonstrated that successful communication within LMX leads to

higher employee commitment to the organization, which, in turn, influences the power and respect subordinates imbue to their superiors.

LMX has been conceptualized in terms of high and low exchanges (Bakar, Mustaffa, & Mohamad, 2009; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989). In order to connect LMX to power, it is important to understand what dynamics need to be in play within the relationships to allow for power to exist. High and low LMX provide the best descriptions of these dynamics. High LMX shared between superiors and subordinates is defined as a relationship with high loyalty, respect and partnership (Bakar et al., 2009). This type of relationship has also been defined as an “in-group” relationship where there is a high level of trust, mutual influence, support from both sides, and a giving of rewards (Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989). Ideally, relationships with high LMX and in-group tendencies are the most productive and are the type of relationships organizations want to have present between their superiors and subordinates. When high LMX exists, subordinates tend to view their superiors with more respect and a higher degree of power (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009).

On the other hand, there is also a low LMX which is defined by high levels of supervising, less desired assignments for the subordinate and higher turnover (Bakar, Mustaffa, & Mohamad, 2009). Low LMX can also be described as an “out-group” relationship where there are very clear labels on the parties, formal authority, and low trust (Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989). Organizations have to constantly battle with low LMX and out-group tendencies because they have negative impacts on workplace environment such as negative attitudes, low productivity, and decreased moral (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009).

LMX helps explain the behaviors that take place between superiors and subordinates, and the way in which superiors' styles can influence power and respect received from subordinates. However, LMX does not make assumptions regarding the impact age dynamics may play in these relationships. Thus the dynamics of high and low LMX may not be the same for older subordinates with younger superiors. Past LMX studies have tended to focus on the dynamics of the relationship and not the impact that outside factors such as age and expectations can have on the relationship (Bakar, Dilbeck, & McCroskey, 2010; Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989). As current research on LMX does not speak specifically to age, some of the assumptions about the superior-subordinate communication dynamics in these studies may be based on implicit traditional age dynamics. The element of age may impact the behaviors and relationships between superiors and subordinates and, thus, spur distinctively different expectations regarding their communication. Older subordinates may expect to be communicated to differently or treated differently than younger subordinates within the same field. Most LMX research has come from a traditional age dyad and therefore, may include assumptions that may not hold up in different relational contexts. In light of this I pose the first questions to guide this study:

RQ1<sub>a</sub> What are the differences, if any, in expectations of older subordinates regarding the appropriate relationship with their supervisor?

RQ1<sub>b</sub> In what way, if any, do older subordinates feel like supervisors adapt their communication style appropriately to fit the relationship?

The next section of this review underscores key considerations regarding power in the workforce and how the dynamics of power appear to be changing with the age-reversal dyad.

### *Power in the Workforce*

In the past, the hierarchy of organizations was more defined by age than level of education or experience. Tenure and management positions were typically held by older individuals who had worked their way up within the organization (Bedeian & Kacmar, 1992). Participants in Bedeian and Kacmar's study (1992), which surveyed 821 university employees on how they felt about the relationship between tenure, age, and job satisfaction, revealed that individuals in tenured positions were highly satisfied with their jobs and positions because they had invested high amounts of time and work into the organization. Superiors who fell into this category were often seen as loyal organizational members and had the respect of their subordinates because they had worked their way up the organizational ladder over time.

However, current trends are placing younger less experienced individuals in managerial roles; thus shifting the positional power dynamic in the relationship of superiors and subordinates (Gandz & Murray, 1980). The age reversal dynamic in workplace hierarchy could possibly be creating a strain on superior-subordinate relationships, because subordinates that are older than their superiors are now placed in a relationship where they have to respect and give power to someone who may have less experience than them. Positional power may no longer be given to the superior who has worked their way up the organizational ladder; instead it could be given to a superior right out of training regardless of experience.

This situation has also brought into question if power is afforded based on a title or if it is earned through actions and interactions. According to LMX theory, higher degrees of communication lead to a positive relationship which in turn leads to higher

perceived power and respect (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009). So it would be expected that power is linked to superior subordinate interaction rather than title alone. Thus, the age of superiors could have an effect on subordinates' perception of power given if they feel superiors are not interacting accordingly. The following question will help to guide this study in regards to power and respect:

RQ2 How does the ongoing communication between superiors and subordinates shape the subordinates' levels of respects towards the younger superior?

The next section of this review underscores key considerations regarding age in the workforce and its potential implications for superior-subordination communication.

### *Ageism in the Organization*

One possible reason behind relational concerns with superiors and subordinates could be related to the generational differences between older and younger workers which can lead to ageism within organizations. Ageism is best described as discrimination towards individuals because of their age (Day, 2007). Ageism within organizations has come under high scrutiny in recent years due to the aging workforce. According to Day (2007), there appears to be a disconnect between younger and older workers which leads to an uncomfortable working environment for both parties. With an older workforce growing and expanding, there has been a correlation of age discrimination cases increasing as well (McCann & Giles, 2007). A major factor in age discrimination cases been centered around the communication that take place between co-workers in regards to older workers (McCann & Giles, 2007). Ageist discourse (e.g., jokes about age), attitudes towards older workers, and overall age discriminating practices have led to a number of lawsuits in the past decade. McCann and Giles (2006,

2007) studied the ageist communication that exists in organizations with older workers. Both studies were conducted using questionnaires that were filled out by workers of a bank on how they felt they communicated with various age groups and how they felt about different age groups. Based on the results of the questionnaires, the researchers concluded that younger workers saw communication with older workers as problematic and more difficult (McCann & Giles, 2007). They also contend that younger workers have the perception that older workers carry a negative attitude towards younger employees and have less positive communication (McCann & Giles, 2006).

This problem of ageism that exists between younger and older workers could pose an issue for superior-subordinate communication in reverse-age contexts. Considering that, younger workers may feel older workers are more negative in their communication, harder to train, and too cautious to new ideas or change (Day, 2007), it follows that younger superiors may share the same thoughts, creating a problematic relationship between younger superiors and older subordinates. For example, older workers may perceive that they are discriminated against or left out of everyday communication by younger superiors. In light of this research, I pose the following research question to explore if exchanges among superiors and subordinates affect subordinates' attitudes about their work:

RQ3 How does ongoing communication between superiors and subordinates shape the subordinates' attitudes about their work?

One of the most important social systems within organizations is the relationship shared between superiors and subordinates and the work/task relationship they develop in the workforce (Lee, 1998) because it is what keeps information flowing and employees apprised of important organizational matters. However, little has been studied in regards

to superior-subordinate communication when the age-dyad is reversed. Reversing the traditional age approach to superior-subordinate relationship may alter the communication dynamic between both parties- especially in regards to subordinates' expectations of appropriate communication, and their understandings of respect and power in the relationship. The following section explores the methods of this study and the interpretation of results.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methods

Taking a qualitative approach to this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who had worked under younger superiors. The interviews were then coded and analyzed using a grounded theory approach. This chapter starts with information on the participants followed by how the data was collected. The final section discusses what tactics were used to analyze and interpret the data collected.

#### *Participants*

The participation pool for this study was drawn from multiple sources, using a snowball sampling strategy. The only qualification for this study was that the individual must have had a younger immediate manager. Twenty participants were interviewed until I reached a point of saturation, defined as the point in which the data received is largely redundant and the researcher is no longer surprised by subsequent iterations of data collection (Hood, 2007). Of the twenty participants, twelve were women and eight were men with age ranges of late thirties to mid-sixties. A large portion of the participants worked in the retail industry (e.g., cashiers, stockers, bank tellers, janitors etc.) while others worked in the education field (e.g., teachers) and some in the medical field (e.g., nurses and patient care assistants). All of the participants had worked in their respective fields for at least five years with some having been in their position for over twenty years and they had all had a manager that was at least ten years younger than them.

### *Data Collection*

Using word of mouth and email, I reached out to as many individuals as possible so that they could share my information with potential participants. Once a potential participant contacted me, we established a time to meet and conduct the interview. After being informed of their rights and obtaining consent, I conducted semi-structured individual interviews which were audio-recorded, with consent of each participant, and then transcribed for analysis. Nothing in the interview identified the participant, and once the interview was transcribed, not even the voice was recognizable. Voice recordings were secured solely in my possession and transcribed personally. Twenty interviews were conducted until findings began to repeat themselves.

The semi-structured individual interviews were focused on the respondent (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Using open-ended questions, I sought to get the participants to express their concepts and opinions on younger-supervisors, what affected or caused this opinion, and how their views and opinions shape and affect respect and power. Some questions were nondirective, for example: How long have you worked for said company? Why did you decide to come to said company? Other questions were hypothetical situation-based questions such as: A manager comes up to an employee first thing in the morning, and the only thing the manager says is “build a display of charcoal” and walks away. Then after the partner has completed the task, the manager comes to the display and does nothing but critique it. How would you react to the situation and why? If the question had not yet been addressed, the final question of the interview was more sensitive in nature: What is the worst relationship you have had with a manager? By saving this sensitive question for the end, I had hoped to have developed enough rapport

throughout the interview that the participant gave an open and honest answer to the question (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

### *Analysis*

Using a grounded theory methodological approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the data collected from the interviews was analyzed. A central goal of grounded theory is to develop categories and central themes from collected data that systematically speak to a phenomenon, process, or construct of interest. While this research did not culminate in a mid-range theory as some grounded theory studies seek to do, it provided theoretical insight that may be explored, developed, and further refined in future studies.

The first stage of the analysis process was transcribing the interviews. The names of the participants were changed to pseudo names so that the participants could not be identified. Once the interviews were transcribed, open coding was done to look for message-related behaviors that exist in the data. Once behaviors/major concepts were coded, I then looked to see what theoretical ideas existed, both new and old. I anticipated seeing some behaviors and ideas that link back to major theories such as LMX. However, there was always the possibility that some new concepts and ideas would be discovered that could require future research and development with the use of other sites and studies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In this study, in addition to the interviews, I also pulled from my personal experiences as a younger superior and the various situations I have observed. The use of my personal experiences and observations combined with the interviews provided me with a more accurate account of what special behaviors exist within this group (Maxwell,

2005). My personal bias came in most when discussing the practical implications of this study and its effects on communication.

Once coding was completed and some analysis had been done, I conducted member checks to make sure that the findings I am concluding were consistent with the participants' responses and that the participants find them true and accurate (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I participated in member checking with four participants who supported the key concepts and themes I was analyzing. This allowed for me to continue on with my analysis of the data.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

The general focus of this research was to see if subordinates held any unique expectations in regards to communication with younger superiors. Several major themes emerged from the data that revealed what subordinates expected out of their relationships with superiors; 1) appropriate experience, 2) reciprocal respect, 3) training and development, and 4) appropriate adaptation. Contrary to what I initially expected, the results of this study showed that age was not a major concern to older subordinates when it came to their superiors. RQ1<sub>a</sub> asked whether or not subordinates had unique expectations for their superiors. The themes interpreted from the data are not unique to superior subordinate relationships; however, the way in which the participants portrayed them was unique. While age was not a factor in the participants' responses about the relationship; participants shared that they expected that their expectations of experience, respect, and appropriate adaptation would be met. The remaining results section is divided into four sections that go into more detail about each theme and its relation to the research questions.

#### *Appropriate Experience*

In light of the scholarly research, I suspected that age would be a compelling issue for subordinates in shaping their relationship expectations with superiors. However, participants interviewed mentioned experience as being a critical factor for the relationship because they expect that their superior has the necessary experience to be in

the position in which they hold. Michelle, a school teacher, stated that subordinates “look at the experience because sometimes that makes it kind of awkward if they don’t have the experience we feel is needed”. Michelle was not alone in her thoughts about superiors having high levels of experience. Other subordinates made it evident in the interviews that they preferred superiors who had worked their way up to their position and had done the duties in which they were asking subordinates to perform. One participant, Glen, even verbalized that expectation when he stated “I like to think that they are not asking you to do to do something that they haven’t already done and I have found that nearly 95% of my supervisors are from that cut mold of philosophy in life as well”. Many participants had spent several years in their current roles and felt that they had high levels of experience in the respective roles so they felt that superiors should have that same level of experience if not more. Several respondents such as Peter made the comment that “just because of my age I’m not expecting special privileges per se as anyone else but I would ask that I am respected because of my years of service [...]I have been doing my job for several years and know it like the back of my hand. I would expect my manager to know the job just as well if not better”. These kinds of comments only strengthened the conversation regarding the importance of experience over age.

### *Reciprocal Respect*

The expectation of experience directly linked to the expectation of respect in the relationship between superiors and subordinates. The theme of reciprocal respect also coincided with RQ2, which sought to see if communication between superiors and subordinates affected respect and power. What was seen was that when respect was

reciprocated through communication and actions, then subordinates were more willing to extend power to superiors beyond title and positional power.

Respondents saw respect as an expectation that should be reciprocal in nature, where respect went both ways in the relationship. When discussing what an ideal relationship between a superior and subordinate would look like, Kathy made the comment that “the best relationship a manager and employee could have is one where they respect each other and work together and help each other do better”. In this study, relationships that contained respect were related to more positive stories and discussions about superiors and subordinates regardless of the age dynamic.

While respondents admitted to giving respect to superiors because of their title and role, they also responded that title and role alone did not warrant respect. Instead, respect was something that needed to be earned as Tara stated, “trust and respect need to be earned beyond the respect that the title automatically gives them”. Several responses stemmed from the idea that the subordinates felt they had enough experience to warrant being respected. Participant Glen introduced the concept of experience being a factor of respect when he commented, “just because my age I’m not expecting special privileges per se as anyone else but I would ask that I am respected because of my years of service and that be taken into consideration when they’re addressing me or asking me questions”. Years of service reflect the amount of experience a subordinate has had in the role and several respondents felt that that was an important factor for warranting respect from a superior. Having high levels of experience, justified subordinates being trusted to do their job and not be monitored by the superior. Sheila made the comment regarding superiors and respect when she stated “I hope they realize that I know my job since I

have been doing it for a while so I do not need constant supervision like a new person”. Participants felt that it was demeaning if their superior did not acknowledge their experience and that would in turn link to a weakened relationship. When the superior acknowledged the subordinate’s experience, the relationship between superiors and subordinates tended to be linked to higher levels of respect. Subordinates also tended to give more power to their superiors when there were higher levels of mutual respect.

The interviews also showed that power was linked to respect because subordinates stated that they were more likely to give more power to the superior if there was mutual respect in the relationship. Chase shared his opinion of respect and power when he stated, “I will always respect a manager for being in their position but they need to understand that they do not know everything necessarily. If they respect me and others then I will be more likely give them the power that they warrant beyond what their title gives”. If a superior keeps the lines of communication respectful towards subordinates, subordinates will be more likely to give over power.

Participants also shared their experiences with power without respect. The best examples of this stemmed from superiors thinking they were entitled to power because of their title or position and did nothing to try to earn power from the subordinates. A superior’s title or position may justify some power and respect, but participants seemed to care very little about positional power and respect. In fact, respondents had very negative tones when discussing how some superiors let their positional power affect the way in which they communicated and worked with subordinates. Steve in particular had a negative experience with a superior who went off of positional power alone; “It was like she thought she was up higher than me because of her title and that meant she could talk

to me however”. In this particular case, the superior was younger than Steve and he attributed the age factor to the superior’s attitude as was seen by his statement; “Sometimes I think that younger people just assume they are better because of a title. They do not know what all we have done throughout our lives”. Claire expanded on this notion by stating that this concept of positional power held by superiors would be the one thing she would want to see change; “I think the one thing I would change is the power perception that comes with having a manager title. I mean sometimes managers believe that they have all this power because of their title and feel like they do not have to help out or do anything”. The negative attitudes and feelings towards superiors who feel that a title alone brings upon power suggests that subordinates seek superiors who will communicate and work towards gaining respect and power.

### *Training and Development*

A third theme that emerged through the data was continuous training and development. Participants shared that they often times look forward to getting a new younger supervisor because subordinates hope that the new superior will bring new ideas and perspectives. Kathy was not only excited to get new managers but praised younger managers for bringing in new ideas; “It is always good to get new perspectives from different people and typically younger managers come in with new and different ideas”. Participants saw new managers, particularly younger managers out of training, as bringing new ideas and processes that subordinates were eager to use and try.

Participants also shared a desire to keep learning and developing within their current role and that they expected their superior to help them continue developing. When discussing what an ideal relationship would look like with a manager, Sarah said,

“The manager would help to ensure that the employee learned how to do the job better and they would give good feedback”. Participants saw their growth and development as being placed in the hands of their superior, and that subordinates’ development should be a priority for superiors.

### *Appropriate Adaption*

A final theme that emerged from the data was that superiors appropriately adapt their communication when communicating with subordinates. RQ1<sub>b</sub> asked if subordinates felt their superiors adapted their communication to fit the relationship appropriately. Participants answered this question by stating that appropriate communication styles used by superiors were collaborative and clear in expectations. Not only did subordinates appreciate superiors when they adapted their communication accordingly but it was linked to attitudes towards work. RQ3 sought to understand how communication affected subordinates’ attitudes towards work and this data showed that when communication was appropriate for the relationship then attitudes towards work seemed to be more positive. When communicating with superiors, subordinates preferred that superiors partook in a collaborative orientation and communicated clear expectations.

Collaborative communication, from the subordinate’s stand point, meant that superiors and subordinates could both talk and listen openly and honestly. Honesty was a commonly repeated term that respondents used to show the importance of superiors being truthful and not hiding things when talking with them. Jennifer shared her feelings about the importance of honesty and she appreciated her manager being honest with her, “I have never known her to lie to me or keep things secret. She is always open with us

whether it is good or bad and by bad meaning she will let us know when there has been a complaint or issue that I was not aware of“. Jennifer appreciated having an honest manager who would be upfront with her. Honesty between superiors and subordinates, especially when coming from the superior, helped to strengthen the relationship between the two.

Collaborative communication was an important concept discussed by participants because they wanted to ensure that both parties of the relationship were heard and able to share their side of the story. Paul and Amanda shared some positive collaborative communication situations when discussing their managers. Paul appreciated the fact that he was given the option to tell his side of the story rather than the communication with his manager being one sided; “If I had done something wrong, I was allowed to tell my side of the story and not just listen to my manager tell his side”. Amanda had situations where the communication was not collaborative, but the current relationship she had was collaborative and it was evident that she was happy with the relationship; “I have had managers where they wanted to do all of the talking when we discussing things. My current manager is awesome because she takes the time to listen to my side of the story and has a conversation with me”. Two-way communication allowed for respondents to feel that they were being heard by their superiors and to engage in better dialogue that strengthened their relationships. This also appeared to lead to a higher positive of work attitudes because subordinates felt they could engage with their superiors.

In addition to collaborative communication, the communication of clear expectations also appeared to be linked to positive attitude towards work. During the interview process with participants several hypothetical questions were asked. The first

question set up a situation where a manager told a subordinate to complete a task without giving any expectations or directions. Once the task was complete, the manager came back and did nothing but critique the subordinate's work. The second hypothetical question set up a situation where a manager took time to explain to a subordinate what it was they were asking for and what their expectations for the task were.

Responses to the first hypothetical situations displayed participant's negative attitudes towards this type of manager. Mike was honest in saying that this manager's behavior and lack of communication would impact the rest of his day when he said "They gave me no direction but then they did nothing but critique (my work). I would have wanted more communication and clearer expectations but now I am just going to the basics that are required of me". Participants revealed that they want to do well and that they want expectations to be communicated to them so they can perform their jobs to the standards of the superior. When answering the second hypothetical situation, Wendy was very pleased with the manager's approach of communicating expectation and predicted that this would help him create a stronger relationship with his team; "This is a manager that is going to have good productivity because he has a good communicative relationship with his employees. Clearly communication is essential for productivity". Participants had stronger positive attitude towards their work when the superior's expectations were communicated to them rather than when no direction was given. When there was little or no communication of expectations, responses showed that attitudes towards work became negative and often times lead to subordinates not wanting to work for their superiors. Subordinates want to know what it is that their superiors expect out of them and they want that direction so that they can do well and be

successful. By not sharing their expectations, superiors risk putting the relationship they have with the subordinate at risk.

Through their responses, participants felt that if superiors were keeping the lines of communication open and collaborative, and communicating expectations, then the superior was doing an adequate job of adapting their communication style appropriately for the relationship. However, if communication was not adapted appropriately, then participants told a very different story where the relationship with a superior was strained and attitudes towards work negative.

The findings up this study seem to suggest that in the relationship between superior and subordinates, age is not a strong factor of how the relationship will progress. Instead, subordinates are more concerned with appropriate levels of experience, reciprocal respect, being provided with ongoing training and development, and being communicated to appropriately. When these expectations are met, participants shared stories of how a relationship with a superior can be beneficial and highly positive. On the other hand, when these expectations were not met, the stories shared were negative and relationships were strained.

Overall, one of the most surprising results was the lack of importance placed on age by the participants. Instead, of focusing on age, participants were more concerned with the other expectations of experience, respect, training, and communication. The next section will discuss each of these themes in greater detail along with the correlations to LMX.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion

Based on the interpretation of the results, the age of a superior was not a concern for subordinates who participated in this study. Instead, subordinates tended to focus on whether or not certain expectations of the relationship were being met. Concerns such as: *Does my superior have enough experience? Will my superior respect me? Will my superior continue to train and develop me? And will my superior talk to me appropriately?* were all major themes that were interpreted from the participants' responses. Surprisingly, age was not a concern that participants questioned or troubled themselves with because if all other expectations were being met then subordinates were content with the relationship they had with their superiors and held a more positive outlook on their work.

Contrary to what was thought would be consequential for the relationship; age was not something participants worried about because they were more concerned with the experience of their superiors. As was discussed in the literature review, it was suspected that age could be related to unique expectations for this relationship because past research had showed that older and younger workers faced challenges when communicating (DeArmond et al., 2006; McCann & Giles, 2007). In their research, McCann & Giles (2007) found that younger workers had a harder time communicating with older workers because of the perceived difficulties that would exist. However, the way in which I interpreted the participants' responses was that age was not what strained a relationship, but rather a lack of experience and respect were the more closely linked to any

troublesome issues encountered in the superior-subordinate relationship. Participants' responses suggested, that is, that superiors who lack the experience expected by the subordinates may face issues with gaining respect and positional power within the relationship.

The results of this study can be contributed to both the scholarly and practical communities respectfully. Additions to LMX research, the desire for continued training and development, and the importance of communication are all themes from this study that can contribute to the scholarly vein. On the practical side, sharing subordinates' expectations with organizational leaders may assist in creating stronger superior-subordinate relationships.

#### *Scholarly Implications*

Through this research there are three scholarly contributions that are addressed in turn. The first scholarly contribution is to the study and development of leader-member exchange theory. LMX concerns itself with the way in which superiors and subordinates interact within an organization. The theory calls attention to the idea that actions and behaviors of the superior may have a lasting effect on the relationship with a subordinate. Namely, high LMX tends to be associated with strong respectful relationships between superiors and subordinates, while low LMX tends to be associated with negative attitudes and low levels of respect and power. Some areas that LMX may be lacking in research revolve around the age-reversal dynamic of superior-subordinate relationships and subordinates' expectation of their relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine whether there were differing expectations from subordinates with younger superiors, and the results were interpreted that subordinates wanted to ensure that their

expectations were being met. The findings of this study can help to elaborate on LMX concepts in regards to a subordinate's expectation of the relationship because the results reinforce LMX while demonstrating that demographic factors (such as age) may not be consequential to the relationship.

While LMX research has looked at the communicative relationship from a subordinate's perspective, it does not currently look at expectations held by subordinates in regards to the ongoing relationship. Because this study sought out subordinates' expectations, it allows for LMX to take into account relational and communicative expectations from subordinates regarding their superiors entering into the relationship. I interpreted the results to be consequential for LMX on several grounds. First, subordinates' in this study reinforced LMX concepts such as high and low exchanges. During the study, participants shared stories that demonstrated that high and low exchanges do take place with superiors depending on the relationship. Second, this study demonstrated that LMX is not consequential to demographic characteristics such as age. Instead, the study highlights the idea that exchanges are still more dependent on relational dynamics.

The expectations that subordinate's held going into a relationship with a superior was that 1) the superior had adequate experience, 2) there would be reciprocal respect, 3) there would be ongoing training and development for the subordinate, and 4) that a superior would adapt communication appropriately. By taking into account what subordinates expect out of their relationship, LMX may be better able to define what puts a relationship in the high LMX category. Many of the expectations listed are what defines whether a relationship is high or low LMX, but in current LMX research they are

looked at in established relationships, not new or beginning ones (Bakar, Mustaffa, & Mohamad, 2009; Bakar, Dilbeck, & McCroskey, 2010; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989). Bakar, Mustaffa, and Mohamad, (2009) and Bakar, Dilbeck, and McCroskey (2010) both used methods in which current relationships were studied for high and low LMX principles. This research allowed for researchers to define positive versus negative relationships through the use of LMX. However, once relationships are established it is difficult to state what it was that was expected out of the relationship going in. This study opens up the possibility for LMX to be looked at from a new and emerging point of view and what it is that subordinates expect prior to a relationship being established.

Second, I interpreted that older subordinates want to continue to train and develop their skills and abilities in the job. This could potentially be an important implication for scholarly community because it is contrary to what some researchers have stated (Day, 2007; DeArmond et al., 2006; James, McKechnie, & Swanberg, 2011; Loi & Shultz, 2007; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). For example James, McKechnie, and Swanberg (2011) made the argument that older workers are content in their positions and do not openly seek training and development. However, participants of this study revealed that they, as older subordinates, are not content to continue along in their jobs without continuous training and development. Rather, older subordinates may anticipate that their younger superiors will continue to teach them new views and processes and help them to expand and develop their skill sets. This opens up an area of study to see if this is a common view across the board with older subordinates and why there are differing thoughts and conclusions in current research. A possible explanation for these results in this study is that nearly half of the participants worked for a company that was dedicated

to training and development of all employees. Not all organizations may place an emphasis on training and development as that particular one did.

Finally, understanding what this study can contribute to the field of communication is important as well. From a communication studies perspective, this study shows that communication is one of the keys in creating a positive or negative relationship. Through communication, a superior has the ability to meet a subordinate's expectations and ensure a strong and successful relationship or risk having a tumultuous relationship marked with inefficiency and resentment. Since communication is a crucial component of the superior-subordinate relationship, it is important to understand what methods of communication are linked to highly positive relationships. Positive relationships were described, by the participants, as consisting of open two-way methods of communication and clear communication of expectations. I interpreted these methods of communication to be linked with higher levels of mutual respect which is in turn linked to positive relationships. It would be important for the scholarly field to continue to understand methods that can assist in creating mutual respect between superiors and subordinates.

#### *Practical Implications*

While the implications for the scholarly field are important, the practical implications for this study have the ability to change the way in which organizations train and develop managers and engage the aging workforce. Going into my role as a younger superior, I would have appreciated knowing what it was that my subordinates expected out of me and our relationship, and that is one benefit that this study can provide. In current research, particularly in the vein of LMX research, studies look at relationships

that are already established, which leaves a gap in sharing expectations prior to a relationship being created. By uncovering several expectations (appropriate experience, reciprocal respect, training and development, and collaborative communication) that subordinates have when it comes to superior subordinate relationships, organizations are potentially being given a map to ensuring that superior subordinate relationships are strong and that work attitudes are positive.

First, by knowing that subordinates expect a superior who has adequate experience for the position they hold, leaders among organizations can work to ensure that superiors are adequately trained to take on managerial roles. For example, several participants made comments expressing their concern of being asked to do tasks that the manager themselves had never done. The participants in this study viewed a manager as having experience if the manager had done the tasks in which they were asking the subordinates to do. Participants had a difficult time respecting a manager that asked them to do something that the manager had never done or experienced. While subordinates expect experience, from my experiences, I know that it is challenging for a superior to know everything. However, what is important to recognize is that when superiors do not hold the level of experience that subordinate's expect superiors should communicate that and open themselves up to admit that they do not know all the answers and seek the input and advice of their subordinates.

The expectation of reciprocal respect is the expectation that I feel leaders can learn the most from. In my experience as a superior and former subordinate, superiors tend to expect respect because of their title and role in the organization. However, according to the participants and experiences I have been involved with; sometimes

superiors can forget to respect those who are under them. In knowing that reciprocal respect is an expectation held by subordinates, superiors can make conscious efforts to ensure that all organizational members feel respected. Participants shared stories about being respected and how that influenced their feelings and respect for their manager. Glen said it best when he made the comment “just because of my age I’m not expecting special privileges per se as anyone else but I would ask that I am respected because of my years of service [...]”. Glen and other participants wanted to be respected because of the time they had spent in their position and the knowledge they had acquired. When superior-subordinate relationships have high levels of respect, then high LMX can be achieved which has been linked with high organizational efficiency and positive attitudes towards workers’ jobs (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009). High productivity and positive attitudes should be a good incentive for leaders to engage in reciprocal respect.

The third expectation that leaders can learn from is continuous training and development. While some superiors and research (e.g., Day, 2007; DeArmond et al., 2006; James, McKechnie, & Swanberg, 2011; Loi & Shultz, 2007; Posthuma & Campion, 2009) have labeled older subordinates as content with their position, this study has shown that older subordinates may want to continue their training and development while in the workforce. Participants shared their excitement and enthusiasm when discussing the prospect of new superiors. Several participants made comments about looking forward to new superiors because they get to learn new processes and ideas from them. Organizational leaders should keep older subordinates in mind when creating new training and development programs so that subordinates do not feel left behind. By

including subordinates in their training plans, superiors will show subordinates that they are making the effort to ensure that training and development continues.

The fourth expectation of subordinates is collaborative communication. When it comes to communication, superiors need to know that subordinates want and expect to have collaborative communication. Superiors should be willing to talk with subordinates as well as listen to them. By engaging in collaborative communication, superiors and subordinates both get to partake in the communication process which can link to higher levels of respect. For example, Paul appreciated being able to share his side of the story when a situation occurred: “If I had done something wrong, I was allowed to tell my side of the story and not just listen to my manager tell his side”. He went on to discuss how he respected his manager for giving him that opportunity. If all superiors were to engage in collaborative communication, it may help to ensure that relationships from both sides remain open and respectful.

Overall, organizational leaders have an opportunity to learn from this study and its findings to help prepare superiors for relationships with older subordinates. If leaders understand the expectations that subordinates have, then leaders will have the ability to meet those expectations from the beginning rather than trying to change an already established dynamic.

#### *Limitations of Study*

This study is limited on several fronts. First, only twenty participants were interviewed before findings became saturated in repetition. Future studies may wish to conduct a quantitative study with the use of surveys to reach a larger representation of older subordinates. This study was unique in that the participants worked for one of five

companies. By conducting a more expansive quantitative study, researchers could reach older subordinates in various organizations and fields. Secondly, the age of the participants was not narrowed down in this study. The only qualification for this study was that participants had worked under a manager younger than themselves, which allowed for participants to range in age from mid-thirties to early sixties. That wide of an age gap covers several generations which may be affecting the data. By focusing in on one generation or age range, the data may reflect more generational concepts of age and workplace expectations. Thirdly, the age gap of the superiors and subordinates was not set in this study. Age gaps between superiors and subordinates were at least ten years. As with the age of the participants, this allows for several generations to be included in the study. Focusing in on certain ages of superiors may result in different findings that are more concerned with age.

### *Conclusion*

One of the most common relationships within an organization is the superior-subordinate relationship. These parties often have to interact with each other on daily basis and share information about the organization and tasks at hand. LMX is a theory that wraps itself around the sharing of information and relationship of superiors and subordinates, however, little was known about whether an age-reversal dyad had an effect on that relationship. Instead of age being a factor, this study found that subordinates were more concerned about their expectations being met in the relationship than the demographics of their superior. By understanding what expectations subordinates have, superiors have the ability to prepare and account for them during the creation of a relationship.

Future research in this field may want to focus on several areas. First is the desire for older subordinates to have continuous training and development in the workforce. As was stated earlier, prior perceptions have stated that older subordinates did not want additional training since they were content in the positions; however, the participants in this study revealed a strong desire for continuous training. Second, future research may want to seek what expectations subordinates have going into a relationship. This study asked participants about current or previous relationships with superiors, which may have already been tainted with negative experiences. By looking at what subordinates expect going into a relationship, researchers may gain stronger understandings of expectations. And finally, researchers may want to interview subordinates who have had older superiors in addition to subordinates who have had younger superiors to compare results and see if expectations are similar across the board or if subordinates with younger superiors do have differing expectations.

## APPENDIX

## APPENDIX

### Interview Questions

- 1) What experiences have you had where you worked under a manager?
- 2) In a perfect world, what would the relationship between a manager and employee look like?
- 3) What is the best relationship you have had with a manager?
  - a. Where they older or younger than you?
  - b. What made this relationship unique/special?
  - c. What style of communication did the manager use when communicating to you?
  - d. What aspects of the communication did you like/appreciate?
- 4) On a typical day, what do the interactions you have with your manager look like?
  - a. What are some things they say and/or do that you like?
  - b. What are some things they say and/or do that you dislike?
- 5) On your way to work and thinking about interacting with your manager, how does that make you feel?
  - a. If you know your manager is going to be off, do you feel any differently?
- 6) You find out on a Wednesday that you will be getting a new young manager just out of training...
  - a. What are your reactions?
  - b. What about this change in management makes you happy?
  - c. What about this change in management makes you upset?
  - d. What would you do on your first day with this new manager?
  - e. How do you feel this new young manager should treat you?
  - f. Do you feel you should be treated differently than younger partners by this new manager?
    - i. Why?
- 7) How do you know what you are supposed to do throughout your shift?
  - a. How do you know when you have done something wrong?
    - i. When that happens, how does that affect the rest of your work day?
    - ii. How do you think the manager should have handled that situation?
- 8) A manager comes up to an employee first thing in the morning, and the only thing the manager says is “build a display books” and walks away. Then after the employee has completed the task, the manager comes to the display and does nothing but critique it.

- i. How would you react to that situation? Why?
  - ii. What could have gone better?
  - iii. How do you think that partner is going to perform the rest of the day?
- 9) A manager comes in and greets all of his employees in the department and then begins assigning tasks, making sure to give clear details and instructions to his team.
  - i. How would you react to this manger? Why?
  - ii. Is there anything the manager should change?
- 10) What is the worst relationship you have had with a manger?
  - i. Were they older or younger than you?
  - ii. What was hard/frustrating about the relationship?
  - iii. What style of communication did the manager use when communicating to you?
  - iv. What aspects of their communication did you dislike?
  - v. What is the most frustrating aspect of having a professional relationship with a younger manager?
  - vi. If you could change anything about the relationships between managers and partners what would it be



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