

A CONCEPTUAL PAPER ON THE INFLUENCE OF MUTUAL RESPECT ON LEADER-SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIP IN THE MALAYSIAN PUBLIC SERVICES

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Abstract

Respect has a crucial role in a dyadic relationship, especially between leader and subordinate, because of the reciprocal costs in the relationship when respect is gained or earned. Leaders can be respected because of their position or fair treatment given to their subordinates. Respect has been featured in the leadership literature; however, few touches on the perspective of mutuality in respect, especially in a dyadic leader-subordinate relationship. The impact of the leader-subordinate relationship is significant in the Malaysian public services, as the scheme of grades determines the employees' hierarchy. The Malaysian public services organizations' issues often arise from employees' behavior and working relationships that affect their delivery. A high exchange of the dyadic leader and subordinate relationship correlated with desirable outcomes such as positive performance and attitudinal outcomes. One of the significant elements of the subordinates' response is the attitude of respect towards the leader. Hence, this paper aimed to investigate the influence of mutual respect on the leader-subordinate working relationship in the public services that has implications for performance and service delivery.

Keywords: Mutual Respect, Dyadic, Leader, Subordinate, Public Services

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■ 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian public services are the backbone of the Malaysian government, with roles from policymaking and policy implementation to monitoring enforcement of the law. Malaysian public services are dynamic as it changes according to the increasing and complex stakeholders' needs and globalization impact (Ismail, 2011). In recent years, the change in the ruling party brought changes in policies and governance which impacted the Malaysian public service delivery (Nadzri, 2018). Public service officers are under pressure to find efficient methods to deliver services due to frequent changes in the elected officials (Fernandez et al., 2010). The Malaysian public services have experienced several transformations and reforms to strengthen public service delivery. However, the World Bank found that most reforms did not improve public service delivery (Siddiquee, 2019). Malaysia's reforms tried to improve public service initiatives, implemented in a top-down method and neglecting the cause of the service delivery problems (Siddiquee et al., 2017). World Bank Economic Report suggested that Malaysia's government reforms need to improve human capital to accelerate productivity growth and improve its service delivery (World Bank Group, 2019).

Human capital can be interpreted as individuals with knowledge, experience, and training in an organization (Daly et al., 2018). Human capital is an integral part of the intangible assets of an organization (Philips & Philips, 2015). In public services, where it is considered as knowledge-based organizations, intangible assets are more appreciated than tangible assets (Goldin, 2016). Human capital or employees are integral in the Malaysian public service to achieve an effective delivery system (Hashim, 2021). According to the scheme of grades, Malaysian public services practice the divisional organizational structure with multiple layers of employees' positions (Public Service Department, 2016). The layers of employees create multiple levels of leader and subordinate relationships. The leader-subordinate relationship is a social system in the working organization that is not isolated but exists within the group (Bakar & Mohamad, 2004). The leaders' and subordinates' relationships and attitudes in the workplace are crucial, reflecting their psychological and physical state towards works and commitment to the organization (Karia & Asaari, 2019).

Behaviour, personality, and leadership issues have been identified as one of the causes affecting the Malaysian public service delivery performance (Abdullah et al., 2019). However, there is no clear solution to improve Malaysian public services delivery even though studies have looked into issues from behavior to motivation (Abdullah et al., 2019; Ghaffari et al., 2017). Having respect can be a feeling or attitude shown through actions and behaviors. Respect is one of the prominent leadership characteristics and performance in a workplace (Clarke, 2011). Respect is an essential element in the leader-subordinate relationships where people who feel valued participate more in the group's performance (Grover, 2014). Leaders and subordinates who are aware of their accountability and belonging within their groups, to a certain extent, have to respect each other (Magrì, 2019). Therefore, the cooperation, awareness, and attitude of respect between leaders and subordinates can potentially impact the organizational goals.

■ 2.0 PROBLEM STATEMENTS

Respect has gained an increasingly important role in ethical and political literature in recent years, especially the idea of equal respect in societies (Giorgini & Irrera, 2017). Equal respect is often included in the human interactions in a society rooted in the fundamental values of equality, freedom, and dignity. Respect is also featured in many organizations and governments, from promoting diversity to supporting flexibility, but the leadership literature has seen modest attempts to explore the concept (Clarke, 2011). In addition, respect is associated with individual and organizational behavior in the workplace, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and citizenship behavior (Clarke & Mahadi, 2017a; Enzo et al., 2019; Magrì, 2019).

Generally, people are content to observe respect one-sided by how it is given to others or how people respect others—seldom looking on both ways (DeLellis, 2000). Previous studies did not address the importance of mutuality in respect, as suggested by recognition respect (Clarke & Mahadi, 2017a). Mutuality involves the idea of shared interests of two or more interdependent parties while recognizing that they have other potentially different interests (Guest & Peccei, 2001). Mutuality in the workplace suggested that leaders and subordinates understand the reciprocal cost and benefit of the relationship that can be gained by pursuing similar objectives. Mutuality exists where both leader and subordinate concur with their commitment to achieving the organization's objectives.

The Malaysian public services received an increasing number of complaints from the public, as reported by the Public Complaints Bureau, from 6,387 in 2018 to 8,992 in 2019 (Public Complaints Bureau, 2019). Furthermore, the Public Complaints Bureau recorded 4,939 complaints on Malaysian ministries in 2019 compared to 3,869 complaints in 2018. These complaints refer to the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of public service delivery. It shows that Malaysia public service delivery inefficiency is still a significant issue where amongst the possible causes are unethical behaviors (such as corruption, unprofessional, and unresponsiveness) (Abdullah et al., 2018; Ahmad & Saad, 2019; Khalid et al., 2016) and needs to improve its performance (Ghaffari et al., 2017; Hassan et al., 2020). Monte (2017) states that an organization's management failures occur when cooperation parties such as leaders and subordinates differ in attitudes and behavior. Therefore, the relationship between leaders and subordinates is crucial to affect Malaysian public services performance.

This conceptual paper aims to contribute to the theory and practice of mutual respect in the dyadic relationship between leader and subordinate in the Malaysian public services. This paper makes a theoretical contribution by extending the social identity theory and social exchange theory by understanding mutual respect in leader-subordinate relationships. The present paper is expected to benefit the Malaysian public services' human resources management by including the element of mutual respect in the leadership and workforce training.

■ 3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

■ 3.1 *Mutual Respect*

Respect is one of the most important characteristics valued by employees in an organization, higher than even income and career opportunities (Rogers & Ashforth, 2017). It is an essential indicator to assess the quality of the relationships between two parties (Clarke & Mahadi, 2017b). In a common term, respect is understood to be feelings of deep admiration for someone or something. Respect arises from a consolidated disposition of response prompted by previous identification and evaluation of specific properties. Respect is an attitude that is not merely about its object but is focused on it, and to respect something is to appreciate it, recognize its value and regard it as necessary (Dillon, 1992). Respect may derive from the situation where people are motivated by not just what others do to them but also what others think about them (Eriksson & Villeval, 2012). For example, respect can be expressed by praising employees' good efforts to build a relational relationship with that particular employee.

Research on respect has evolved from being seen as an implicit leadership dimension where the attribute is associated with the leadership characteristics that the leader possesses to become an explicit leadership dimension where the attribute shifted as a social relationship that emphasizes relational qualities (Clarke, 2011). The respect concept is generally rooted in the appraisal of the qualities possessed by the leader, subordinate, or both. Darwall (1977) suggests that each person is endowed with equal authority in relationship with another person by considering equal respect. Therefore, Darwall (1977) presented two kinds of respect–recognition respect and appraisal respect. Recognition respect is when an individual has the right to take others seriously and adequately weigh up that he deliberates what to do, which is bound by his / her behavior and moral duties. Appraisal respect is the high regard for someone having the merit of quality or position having no conception of that person's behavior. Clarke (2011) suggested that respect is multidimensional because it is associated with different leadership outcomes. The concept of multidimensionality in respect can be seen in the different dimensions of appraisal respect and recognition respect.

Mutuality has been a necessary element of a healthy relationship and functions well under stress (Henson, 1997; Wynne, 1984). In an organization, mutuality norms presume that leaders and subordinates understand the values and implications of maintaining the relationship to gain shared objectives (Campbell, 1997), and it is a shared belief regarding the extent of one's obligation to each other (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). Mutuality offers positive psychological outcomes, implying a high degree of acceptance by the other party (Clarke et al., 2019). Mutuality, therefore, is essential and confer additional benefits in contributing to the leader-subordinate relationship. Mutual recognition respect is an interpersonal and relational property that accrues because of being treated in a morally correct, unbiased, and fair treatment (Clarke, 2011). Meanwhile, mutual appraisal respect is the relational relationship based on the merit or worth of the leader's qualities (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Clarke & Mahadi (2017a) introduce the mutual recognition respect between leaders and subordinates, which differs from how respect is being perceived and measured in previous organization studies, and they found that mutual recognition respect predicted job performance and well-being. Clarke et al. (2019) found that mutual respect influenced the leader-subordinate relationship between upward influence tactics and both job performance and flexible working arrangements.

■ 3.2 *Leader-Subordinate Relationship*

The leader-subordinate relationship can be described as a relational and dyadic process where roles and expectations are developed for both leader and subordinate. A high-quality leader-subordinate relationship often produces enhanced levels of satisfaction, effectiveness, and mutual influence. Meanwhile, a low-quality relationship resulted in dissatisfaction, restricted information, and job turnover (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). The leader-subordinate relationship is an important concept in the literature because it recognizes the intensity and quality of the relationship's mental adjustment that goes beyond formal obligations and monetary incentives (Mumtaz & Rowley, 2019). The importance of the leader-subordinate relationships in the literature links to the output such as employee performance and productivity (Morganson et al., 2017; Varma et al., 2020), behavioral (Ete et al., 2020), and psychological outcomes (Liang, 2017).

The Malaysian public services comprise select posts of administrative members appointed by law, such as Chief of Justice of Malaysia, followed by the top management posts such as Secretary-General of ministries. Next is the administrative and professional management comprises officers within the scheme of grades 41 to 54. Finally, the support management comprises the clerical, driver, and other administrative posts with a scheme of grades 19 to 40 (Public Service Department, 2019). Thus, Malaysian public services are managers and leaders at different layers and grade levels, where higher grade officers become the immediate supervisor for the lower grade officer. The dyadic relationship investigated in this paper is the relationship between public services as leaders and subordinates.

■ 3.3 Mutual Respect and Leader-Subordinate Relationship

Respect has been recognized as a relational phenomenon rather than individual property (De Jong & Dirks, 2012). Hence, respect needs to be measured at the dyadic level of analysis instead of the individual level (Clarke et al., 2019). In this context, the dyadic level is the differences between individual leader-subordinate levels rather than within groups of leaders and subordinates. Team performance outcomes may be improved if members feel respected and within a positive team atmosphere (Chiamaka et al., 2020; Janssen et al., 1999). The quality dyadic leader-subordinate relationship creates significant outcomes such as performance, job satisfaction, organization citizenship behavior, turnover intention, creativity, organizational commitment, and affective commitment (Martin et al., 2016; Mumtaz & Rowley, 2019). Michel & Tews (2016) suggested that subordinates' action is based on how they perceive their leader's behaviors of the leader-subordinate relationship.

A high-quality leader-subordinate relationship reflects the quality of the socioemotional exchange relationship portrayed by trust, mutual respect, and obligation (Colquitt et al., 2014). Research shows that mutual respect, trust, and reciprocity between leaders and subordinates are the main facets of relational exchanges where employees perceived themselves to be valued by the organization (de Vries et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2020). Respect has been described as care, and attentiveness, task competency, and acknowledgment of employee performance have been considered as ways for a leader to express their respect for their subordinates (Clarke et al., 2019).

4.0 UNDERPINNING THEORY

■ 4.1 Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory concerns the perception of fit between groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The main idea of social identity theory is that how individuals identify themselves with a particular social group affects their behavior regarding group membership (Ellemers et al., 1999). At the core of Tajfel's social identity theory is the knowledge that the individual belongs to particular groups, including the emotional and value significance to him/her of the groups (Hogg, 2016). In a leader-subordinate relationship, feeling respected is a positive behavior responsible for positive outcomes (Glasø & Einarsen, 2006). The feeling of being valued (and respected) means he/she will be motivated to contribute more to the group (Huo et al., 2010). It involves the belief that respect contributes to one's positive feelings on self-identity and subsequently leads to self-worth and self-esteem (Haslam & Ellemers, 2006). Research on social identity theory underpins the leader-subordinate relationship behavior of mutual recognition respect and mutual appraisal respect (Clarke et al., 2019), trust, influence, conflict (Evans et al., 2021), and employee-organization processes such as employees behavior (Jones et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2017). Hence, social identities are essential in intragroup relations of leader-subordinate relationship where the leader and subordinate identify themselves as members of the group with similar objectives.

■ 4.2 Social Exchange Theory

The action taken by both leader and subordinate to meet one another's expectations is positively related to exchange quality (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Social exchange theory has been used to describe the concept and quality of leader-subordinate relationships (Martin et al., 2016). Under the social exchange theory, the underlying perspective is that exchanges are based on actions by two parties where each of them may initiate and reciprocate exchanges (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Blau (1964) posits that leaders will respond favorably to those subordinates with whom they have relationships they value. Leaders and subordinates engaging in social exchange expect future returns that are not just one-off exchanges but long-term benefits such as consistent salary payoff and a good working environment (Sharma et al., 2021). The leader-subordinate perspective in the social exchange theory argues that the leader has more control over the quality of exchange in the relationship (Liden et al., 1997). Liden et al. further argued that leader characteristics or behavior are essential in influencing subordinate desire to accept a high-quality exchange in the relationship.

Researches have shown that leader-subordinate exchange is frequently used to study the leader-subordinate relationship behaviors such as organizational citizenship (Cooper et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2017), positive organizational behavior (Wu & Lee, 2017), and job engagement (Yin, 2018). In the social exchange theory, the norm of reciprocity occurs when individuals feel obligated to respond to a similar amount of favor given by another party (Blau, 1964), contributing to mutual expectations and behaviors (Sacconi, 2007). Clarke et al. (2019) posit that leaders will respond similarly to the respect received by showing gratitude to the subordinates. These findings suggested that a leader's behavior, such as mutual respect, is critical to increase exchange relationships and encourage subordinates to engage similarly with helping behavior.

■ 5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Respect is one of the core characteristics of human behavior, and this paper portrays how it is being perceived through the different parties in the workplace environment. This paper focuses on the mutual respect element that affects leaders and subordinates when treated with fairness or because of their position. This paper is among the few studies investigating the effects of mutual respect between leaders and subordinates at a dyadic level. Previous research on mutual respect studied the relationship with job performance (Clarke et al., 2019; Clarke & Mahadi, 2017b) and with emotional intelligence, affective commitment, and job satisfaction (Clarke & Mahadi, 2017a). Previous studies also relate to respect either within a group or individual standing, and they adopted an individualistic orientation. In considering respect, this paper argues that mutuality has a significant and central role in the leader-subordinate relationship. Therefore, an empirical study on the dyadic relationship of leaders and subordinates made it a significant contribution to the body of knowledge.

Subordinates' actions and the outcome can be further narrowed down to how they embrace a different kind of respect for their leaders. For instance, the type of respect shown influenced how the subordinate responds and accepts instructions either out of their willingness or feeling intimidated. The literature's important idea is that leader-subordinate behavior in the workplace relates to the expected outcome of the organization. In other words, performance is determined based on employees' behaviors and actions that either contribute or detract from organizational goals. Thus, subordinates are willing to fully commit to their job scope by having leaders who care for their subordinates' welfare.

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