

# **The role of leadership between the employees and the organization: a bridge or a ravine? -an empirical study from China<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The relationship between the leaders and members, not only affects employee performance, but also can affect the relationship between employees and organizations. To explore the impact of LMX on affective commitment, we introduced psychological empowerment as a mediate variable. The result showed a significant mediate role. Psychological empowerment can partially mediate the relationship between LMX and affective commitment. The introduction of POS for the moderate variable was conducted. The results showed that moderate role is not significant. POS can not moderate the relationship between LMX and affective commitment. LMX is very important for the employees - organizational relationships.

Keywords: leader-member relationship, perceived organizational support, psychological empowerment, affective commitment

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<sup>1</sup> Fund Support: soft science research projects of Shandong Province in China (2008RKA198)

## 1 Introduction

Leadership is essentially the core and spirit of organizations. As the people in charge, they not only manage the organization's affairs but also deal with the general employees face to face. Entrusted with the task to communicate organizational goals, visions and ideas to employees, leaders are responsible for maintaining and implementing organizational rules and systems and even have the final say on promotion, retention and dismissal. Therefore, in a sense, leaders at all levels are spokespersons of their own organizations, serving as the bridge and link connecting employees. In the eyes of employees, can leaders represent their organizations? To what extent does the relationship with the leadership influence employee's attitude towards his or her organization? These are questions this study undertakes to explore and answer.

The Leader - Member Exchange theory (referred to as LMX) believes that the relationship between leaders and members in an organization develops over time through a series of observations, tryouts, interactions and conversations (Graen, 1987). When a leader is close to his or her subordinates, they will consider each other "in-group"; the other subordinates to the leader will become "out-group". LMX is based on the Social Exchange Theory. When leaders and their subordinates have closer relationships, the latter will tend to receive better performance evaluations and more promotion opportunities, and mutual trust, respect and care are more likely to happen between subordinates and their bosses (Graen, 1982); in return, subordinates will show more loyalty and respect for the leadership, resulting in higher leadership effectiveness. Studies show that "in-group" members are generally 20% more efficient job performance and 50% more satisfied with their jobs than "out-group" members (Mayfield, 1998).

In the Chinese culture, power is worshiped and familism and authoritarianism are emphasized. In this context, can we draw the same conclusion? In Chinese organizations, the leader - subordinate relationship can be more than just a hierarchy or job affiliation; it may be complicated by moral human relations. Compared with westerners, Chinese are more focused on emotions allowing leaders in Chinese organizations to establish closer emotional relationships with their subordinates that transcend the organizations themselves. To be the "in-group" member is the ideal that is aspired after. However, can affection strengthen employees' commitments to the organization?

The paper using Psychological Empowerment as the mediator variable and Perceived Organizational Support as the moderator variable discusses how the leader - member exchange relationship influences attitudes towards organizations and tries to unravel its impact mechanism.

## 2 Theories and Hypotheses

### 2.1 LMX and organizational affective commitment

Graen and Dansereau et al. first proposed the Leadership - Members Exchange Theory (LMXT) in 1972. LMX suggests that leader will take different approaches in dealing with subordinates, while subordinates may response in different way. Hence, different categories of relationship between leaders and subordinates may emerge. Due to the limit of resources and time, leaders can only establish special relations with a small proportion of members within organizations. This small proportion is considered "in-group", who will receive more favor, trust, respect and benefits. In return, the favored subordinates will show more trust, respect and care towards their leaders. In this way, a high level of interaction is created. Dienesch and Liden believe that LMX has 3 dimensions, namely, affection, contribution and loyalty (Dienesch, 1986). Based on this and the approach of key incident interview, Liden and Maslyn (1998) added a fourth dimension: professional respect. High quality leader - member relationship not only benefits the leadership, but also has positive impact on member's attitude towards the organization. Researches by Major, Kozlowski, Chao & Gardner (1995), Lee (2001) and other scholars indicate that high quality leader - member exchange relationship is positively correlated with organizational commitment and negatively correlated with turnover. Element analysis made by Gerstner and Day (1997) also shows that LMX are positively correlated with organizational commitment.

Allen and Meyer(1990) proposed a three-factor model of organizational commitment, including: affective commitment, continuous commitment and normative commitment, of which affective commitment refers to employees' emotional dependence, recognition and engagement towards organizations and more focused on the affection side of organizational commitment. Leader is the agent of the organization and his or her words and behaviors represent and follow organizational decisions. The improvement of leader - member relationship will enhance members' affection towards the organization. Hence, LMX and organizational affective commitment are interrelated and represented through the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: LMX has a positive impact on organizational affective commitment.

### 2.2 The Mediating Effect of Psychological Empowerment in LMX's Impact on Affective Commitment

Psychological empowerment was proposed by Thomas (1990) and others in 1990. Thomas et al. pointed out that psychological empowerment was multidimensional and specifically manifested in four cognitive dimensions, namely, meaning, self-efficacy or competence, self-determination and impact. As a psychological sense, psychological empowerment stems from a very important source, that is, the perception on self - other relation, the individual's interpretation or reaction psychologically projected on structural empowerment (Hechanova, 2006). Many studies have shown that high-quality LMX relationships will enable subordinates to sense more empowerment (Liden, 2000; Ayree, 2006; Wat, 2005). In high LMX relationship, subordinates have more freedom in decision-making, more influence and flexibility. These advantages enable subordinates to

feel the ability to control their own destiny, and therefore more perceived empowerment.

Psychological empowerment and organizational commitment are also closely related. Janssen (Janssen, 2004) believed that psychological empowerment can promote employees' organizational commitment. A large number of studies have shown that employees who feel that they have been empowered are likely to remain more committed to their organizations (Allen, 1990; Liden, 2000). Empowered employees will consider themselves more capable of influencing their work and organization in a more meaningful way and more willing to stay in the organization. Chan (2004) also found that psychological empowerment was positively correlated with affective commitment. Employees' perception of being considered important, as well as their initiative and competence will increase their level of emotional attachment to the organization.

It can be inferred from the analysis that high-quality leadership and subordinate relationship will enable subordinates to feel more empowered while the perception of empowerment will make a positive impact on employees' emotional dependence on the organization. Studies conducted by Liden et al. (2000) also found that the significance dimensions of psychological empowerment plays an intermediary role between job characteristics, satisfaction and organizational commitment. This can be represented through the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: The association between LMX and affective commitment is mediated by psychological empowerment.

### **2.3 The moderating effect of POS in LMX's impact on affective commitment**

Organizational support theory (OST) believes that in the course of work, employees tend to form a comprehensive awareness on how organizations evaluate their contribution and whether organizations care about employee benefits (Eisenberger, 1986). Perceived organizational support (POS) is based on the humanized qualities of organizations in employees' eyes, manifested by culture, rewards and punishments, system, benefits and payments of organizations. When employees become aware of their organizations' attention, admiration, support and respect towards them, they show positive return to that. Through his research on customer service employees, McMillan (1997) added to Eisenberger and others' theory. He argues that the POS they proposed focuses only on close support and respect support, and that employees will finally develop dissatisfaction and sense of frustration towards organizations if they could not finish their tasks due to the lack of essential instrumental supports such as information, training, tools, funds, equipments, etc.

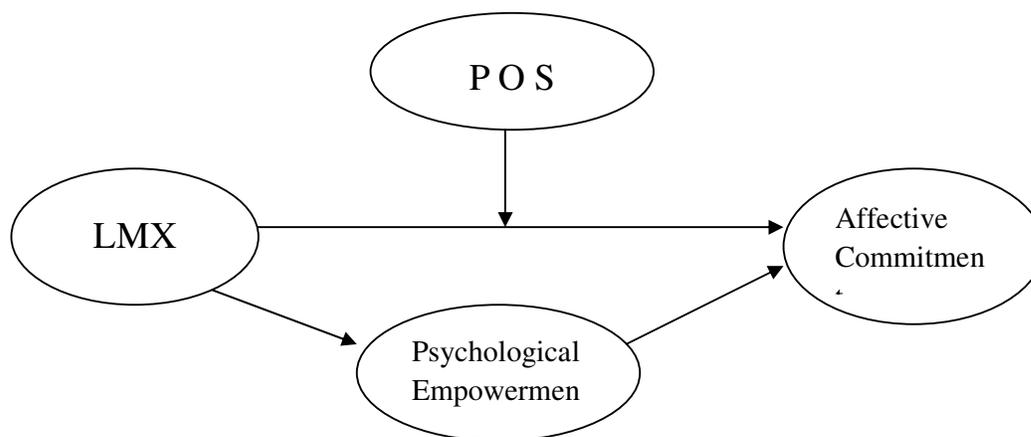
POS differs from LMX, in that LMX focuses on the quality of employee-manager exchange relationship and is based on affect support and the exchange of useful resources, while POS focuses on the exchange relation between employees and organizations and conceptualizes the relation into employees' general perception on how organizations care about their contributions and benefits. Wayne (2002) et al. carried out a study on the relation between POS and LMX with structural equation model and found that there were different cause and result variables for the two exchange relations. Developmental experiences, job promotion and organization working age are the significant predictors of POS, while preference, expectation, and duration of the establishment of leader-member relationship are the significant predictors of LMX. Further study reveals that: procedural justice and

distribution justice both affect POS; only distribution justice could affect LMX; discreet rewards showing organizations' trust and approval on employees is related to POS while unexpected rewards is related to LMX(Wayne, 2000). In addition, though both POS and LMX are related to extra-role behavior, LMX has greater impact on in-role behavior than POS. Thus, LMX and POS have their own distinctive features.

POS and organization affective commitment are positively correlated. The study of Bishop et al. (2005) showed that: organization support could stimulate same-level organization commitment. The study of Kraimer and Wayne (2004) proves that the organizations' concern and support in financial and career development respects towards employees could enhance their affective commitment to organizations. Randall's study (1997) also proves that stronger affective commitment is obviously related to stronger POS. Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe (2003), based on their analysis with the principal of reciprocity in interpersonal relationship, argue that stronger POS influences employees' affective commitment to organizations mainly through three mechanisms. Firstly, POS develops employees' sense of responsibility to realize organization benefits and achieve organization objectives, and urges them to repay their organizations with stronger organization commitment and harder work. Secondly, POS promotes employees' affective commitment by fulfilling their social-emotional needs, such as respect, approval and belonging, and .gives them a strong sense of belonging to organizations. Thirdly, POS fosters a series of positive emotional experience for employees brought by co-workers' support and understanding and recognition of their abilities. The positive emotional experience is closely related to organizations and thus enhances employees' organizational commitment.

From the above discussions, we can see that POS and LXM are different from each other but both have positive correlation with organization affective commitment. Therefore, POS might moderate the impact of LMX on affective commitment. That's to say, lower POS would reduce organization affective commitment produced by high-quality LMX. On the opposite, employees with low-quality LMX but stronger POS might have stronger affective commitment. Thus, it is concluded as the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: The association between LMX and affective commitment is moderated by POS.



**Figure 1. Hypothesized model.**

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Sample

Subjects were full-time employees at 4 organizations in China with a minimum of 1 years of work experience. A total of 500 surveys were distributed to Subjects, with 468(93.6%) responses from individuals. After removing subjects with missing data, the usable sample consisted of 423 individuals—41.4% women and 58.6% men, whose average age was 35.4 years (SD=7.65). Subjects' average tenure at their current organizations was 13.9 years (SD=8.59).

#### 3.2 Measures

LMX were measured using 16 items from Hui et al.'s (1999) LMX scale ( $\alpha = .931$ ). Responses were recorded using a 5-point scale (1 = "strongly disagree", 7 = "strongly agree").

Psychological empowerment were measured using 12 items from Spreitzer's (1995) psychological empowerment scale ( $\alpha = .835$ ). Responses were recorded using a 5-point scale (1 = "strongly disagree", 5 = "strongly agree").

Affective commitment were measured with 8 items based on Allen and Meyer (1991) scale ( $\alpha = .782$ ). Responses were recorded using a 5-point scale (1 = "Strongly disagree," 7 = "Strongly agree").

Perceived organizational support were measured using 8 items from Rhoades, Eisenberger and Armeli (2001) perceived organizational support scale ( $\alpha = .850$ ). Responses were recorded using a 5-point scale (1 = "strongly disagree", 7 = "strongly agree").

Controls: Age, gender, salary, education level and work experience were controlled, due to their potentially spurious influence on the study variables.

#### 3.3 Data analysis

Correlation Analysis and Hierarchical Regression Analysis are employed to test mediating effect and moderating effect on the basis of controlling the role of occupational statistics variables and demographic variables. In the test of moderating effect, data is decentralized, or minus the average value, as is suggested by Aiken and West (1991).

### 4 Results

#### 4.1 Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficient

As is shown in Table 1, there is positive correlation among affective commitment, POS, LMX, and psychological empowerment, which means the four variables are closely related. In demographic variables, wage level is positively correlated with both psychological empowerment and LMX, indicating that with the increase of wage, employees feel more powerful and develop better quality relationships with leaders. Work experience has negative correlation with LMX. Education has positive correlation with psychological empowerment and LMX, but negative correlation with POS. That means the more educated employees are,

the more empowerment and better quality LMX they have, but the less POS. The reason might be that with the increase of academic training, employees tend to have higher requirements for organization support.

**Table1 Descriptive statistics and correlations**

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.Age	35.42	7.653	1								
2.Gender	1.42	.494	-.301**	1							
3. Work Years	13.94	8.589	.860**	-.273**	1						
4. Salary	1.94	.730	.272**	-.092	.220**	1					
5.Education	2.36	.618	-.329**	.127**	-.333**	.214**	1				
6.Psychological Empowerment	4.697	.816	.020	.054	-.022	.310**	.192**	1			
7.POS	4.387	.701	.032	-.031	.033	-.010	-.114*	.303**	1		
8. Affective Commitment	4.743	.725	.004	.044	-.007	.092	.021	.497**	.451**	1	
9.LMX	4.724	.920	-.078	-.010	-.130**	.245**	.230**	.581**	.285**	.455**	1

**Two-tailed for the control variables, n=423, \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01**

#### 4.2 LMX's impact on affective commitment

First, education variable is recoded to two dummy variables. In hierarchical regression equation, affective commitment is taken as the dependent variable. The first step is to introduce the two dummy education variables and the four demographic variables (sex, age, work experience, and wage level) into the equation as control variables; the second step is to introduce LMX into the equation as the independent variable. It is shown in Model I of Table 2 that the impact of control variable on dependent variable is insignificant. The introduction of LMX greatly enhances the explanatory power of the equation ( $\Delta R^2 = .209, p < 0.001$ ). The standard regression coefficient of LMX on affective commitment is positive and significant ( $\beta = .481, t = 10.550, p < 0.001$ ), which means that LMX has positive impact on affective commitment and hypothesis 1 is supported.

#### 4.3 The mediating effect of psychological empowerment in LMX's impact on affective commitment

It could be seen from Table 2 that demographic variables do not have much impact on affective commitment. As is shown in Model I: the regression coefficient of LMX on affective commitment is significant ( $\beta = .481, t = 10.550, p < .001$ ). In Model II, the regression coefficient of LMX on mediating variable psychological empowerment is also significant ( $\beta = .538, t = 13.259, p < .001$ ). In Model III shows that in the joint regression of LMX and psychological empowerment on affective commitment, the regression coefficient of psychological empowerment is significant ( $\beta = .375, t = 7.205, p < .001$ ), and the regression coefficient of LMX is also significant ( $\beta = .279, t = 5.439, p < .001$ ), but less than that of the separate regression ( $.279 < .481$ ). This means that psychological empowerment plays mediating

role in LMX's impact on affective commitment, and hypothesis 2 is supported. The degree of mediating effect depends on the proportion of mediating effect in the overall effect, i.e. 42% (.538x.375/.481), which is a relatively large number.

**Table 2 Results of hierarchical regression analysis for relationship between LMX and affective commitment, psychological empowerment as a mediator**

Variables	Step 1: Controls		Step 2: Main effects		Step 3: Mediating effect	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
<b>Controls</b>						
Age	-.018	-.202	.037	.475	-.032	-.382
Work years	.073	1.590	.083	2.039	.052	.633
Salary	.057	.656	.014***	.177***	-.050	-1.046
Gender	.014	.277	.171*	3.838*	.042	.959
High school	-.032	-.376	-.073	-.956	-.005	-.060
Undergraduate	-.118	-1.292	-.010	-.120	-.114	-1.327
$\Delta R^2$		.012		.123***		.012
<b>Main effects</b>						
LMX	.481***	10.550***	.538***	13.259***		
$\Delta R^2$		.209***		.261***		
<b>Mediator</b>						
LMX					.279***	5.439***
Psychological empowerment					.375***	7.205***
$\Delta R^2$						.087***
$R^2$		.221		.384		.308
F		16.796***		36.949***		22.988***

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

#### 4.4 The moderating effect of POS in LMX's impact on affective commitment

In Table 3, after control demographic variable, LMX and POS are introduced into regression equation, both with significant standard regression coefficients ( $\beta = .337, t = 6.975, p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta = .345, t = 7.975, p < 0.001$ ). Their interaction is then introduced to

the regression equation, showing that the interaction effect between LMX and POS is not significant ( $\beta=-.062$ ,  $t=-1.369$ ,  $p=.172$ ). As suggested by Aiken and West, we choose the four points of the standard deviation of LMX and POS's average as the benchmark for drawing interaction relational graph to test the interaction between them. From Graph 2, we can see that: the two straight lines are basically parallel, with the straight slope of high POS group and low POS group being similar. Thus it is concluded that employees with higher POS do not necessarily have more affective commitment than those with lower POS. Thus hypothesis 3 does not hold.

**Table 3 Results of hierarchical regression analysis for relationship between LMX and affective commitment, POS as a moderator**

Variables	Step 1: Controls		Step 2: Main effects		Step 3: Moderating effect	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
<b>Controls</b>						
Age	.016	.161	-.010	-.116	-.014	-.170
Work years	.051	.995	.072	1.693	.070	1.657
Salary	-.036	-.373	.044	.540	.050	.617
Gender	.105	1.900	.021	.454	.018	.396
High school	-.005	-.054	-.048	-.598	-.055	-.677
Undergraduate	-.023	-.222	-.058	-.678	-.067	-.783
$\Delta R^2$		.12				
<b>Main effects</b>						
LMX			.362***	8.039***	.337***	6.975***
POS			.348***	8.046***	.345***	7.975***
$\Delta R^2$				.314***		
<b>Moderator</b>						
LMX× POS					-.062	-1.369
$\Delta R^2$						.003
R <sup>2</sup>		.12		.326		.329
F		.826		25.046***		22.518***

\* $p<0.05$ , \*\* $p<0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p<0.001$

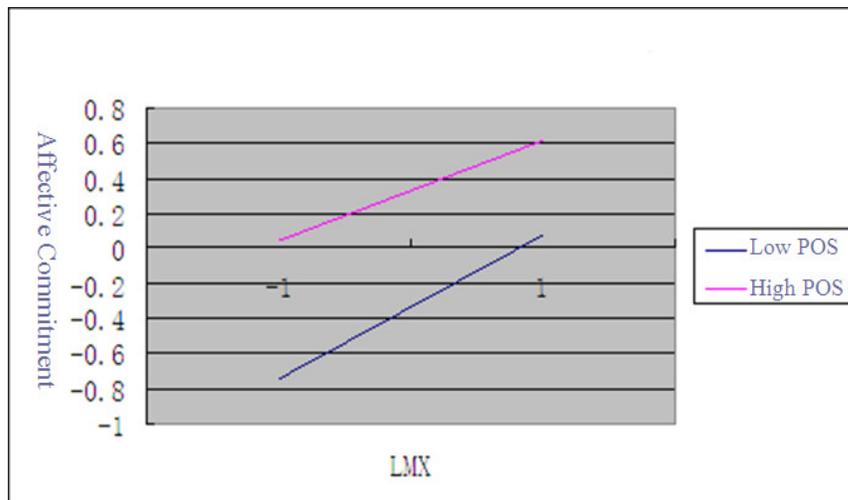


Figure 2

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Results and Discussion

The result, consistent with previous researches, shows that the relationship between leaders and employees has a positive impact on employees' affective commitment towards organizations. Leader - member exchange theory believes that when leader have established close relations with some subordinates, these subordinates become "in-group". The leaders will give more trust and care to the "in-group". In return, they receive more support and respect. In the process of mutual exchange, they tend to have more emotional communications. As agents of organizations, leaders are bridge and link connecting organizations with employees. Therefore, employees' affection to leaders will be translated into emotional dependence and commitment towards organizations.

How does this process of transformation take place? We will discuss the issue by introducing psychological empowerment. The result shows that LMX influences employees' affective commitment towards organizations by way of psychological empowerment. With high quality LMX, employees will feel more trust and support that influence the aspects of psychological empowerment. Employees are likely to show more initiative at work, considering themselves capable of influencing organizational decision-making and development which will further provide them with more sense of competence, value and significance in what they are doing. When employees feel that they have more autonomy with their work and create positive values for the organization, internal incentives are more likely to happen. Thus, he or she will be willing to stay in the organization and have a more sense of belonging and attachment towards the organization. The findings also show that psychological empowerment is the only part of the mediating effect. LMX will influence organizational affective commitment through other factors.

Will the improvement of employees' affective commitment contributed good leader - subordinate relations be affected by other factors in the organization? The problem will be discussed by the introduction of perceived organizational support as a moderator. The result shows that POS fails to play a significant role in regulating the process where LMX

influences affective commitment. In other words, POS, either low or high, will not affect the way LMX works on employees' affective commitment. That means that even though the organization fails to care enough for the employees, those with high LMX are very likely to stay in the organization due to "favors" from the leader. Conversely, poor relationship with leaders will hardly create employees' attachment to organizations even if the organizations offer all kinds of benefits. The reason is because organizational systems are conveyed and eventually implemented by leaders, with whom the employees have to deal face to face while receiving tasks, performance appraisals and remunerations. In case of unsatisfactory corporate policies, subordinates in close relations with leaders can receive compensation or even "flexible" privileges. Leadership support can greatly increase initiative at work and organizational loyalty, which is reflected by the saying "a gentleman is ready to die for his bosom friends". Leaders play an important and irreplaceable role in retaining employees and promoting their organizational commitment. Conversely, even in organization with a high level of organizational support, "out-group" employees receive less care and, according to the social exchange theory, response low affective commitment to the organization (not only leaders). Therefore, regardless of organizational environment, it is the immediate leadership that subordinates always face. In the eyes of employees, the leader is the representative of the organization, or the personified organization.

## 5.2 Practical Significance

This study shows the important role leaders playing in retaining talents. High quality relationship with leaders can increase employees' organizational loyalty. Therefore, in corporate management practices, attention has to be paid to fostering relationships between leaders at all levels and their subordinates, as the loyalty to leaders can be transformed into loyalty to organizations. As agents of their organizations, leaders work directly with employees. Good LMX can create employee loyalty to organizations even in spite of other organizational factors. Therefore, companies can train managers at all levels to enable them to establish solid relations with their subordinates. Meanwhile, it is necessary to create good superior-subordinate relationships by enhancing mutual communications and breaking bureaucracy.

However, we should also recognize the other side to the important role of leadership. Employees under Chinese cultural background pay more attention to power and human sentiments. The worship of power and human sentiment leads to phenomenon where "a gentleman is ready to die for his bosom friends". Just as the findings of this study, organizational support, however high it may be, will not prevent LMX from bringing low organizational affective commitment. This is true for the "out-group" of leaders at all levels. In addition, the negative effect that "a gentleman is ready to die for his bosom friends" is that "a gentle is also ready to hop jobs for his bosom friends". When a well established leader quit his or her job, the "in-group" loyalty to the organization will diminish or even disappear. When company executives quit, they tend to take away a number of key employees. This is a reality which always happens. Therefore, while organizations encourage healthy, sound superior - subordinate relationship, it is important to avoid divided groups within the organization. At the same time, we must attach importance to the value of the core management staff and retain such core management as far as possible.

In this process, we should pay attention to the subordinate "Psychological Empowerment." It not only can greatly mobilize the enthusiasm of employees, but also increase their sense of belonging and responsibility. Companies should grant empowerment such that employees feel like being "empowered." When employees feel the sense of autonomy and competence and understand their significance in the organization, they will more likely to stay in the organization. Psychological empowerment is an important way to translate good superior-subordinate relationships into organizational commitment.

### 5.3 Limitations and Prospects

This study has its limitations. As the study focusing on the feelings of employees, all variable data comes from the same employee questionnaire, leading to potential problems of same source bias or common method variance, though some scholars argue that same source bias or common method variance does not necessarily impose a significant impact on the conclusion. However, such errors can be minimized by bi-directional measurement or matched pair design of leaders and subordinates.

In addition, this study discusses leader - member relationship's impact on employees' attitude towards organizations only from emotional perspectives. Outcome variables do not involve other dimensions of organizational commitment. In future researches, LMX and psychological empowerment impacting on normative commitment and continuance commitment can be further explored.

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