



# The Dark Side of LMXSC: Investigating High LMXSC Promotes Subordinates' Shortcuts Behaviors

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**Abstract.** The relationship between leaders and their employees in organization is important. However, extant research exaggerated its benefits and overlooked its dark side. Drawing upon attribution theory, we challenge this consensus by identifying that downward social comparisons of leader-member exchange (i.e., leader-member exchange social comparisons; LMXSC) can also lead to shortcuts behaviors. We identify that, in subordinates with high self-serving attribution of LMXSC, LMXSC triggers psychological entitlement, which in turn motivates subordinate shortcuts behaviors. We found support for our hypotheses across a three-wave time lagged study.

**Keywords:** leader-member exchange social comparison (LMXSC); self-serving attribution; psychological entitlement; shortcuts behaviors

## 1 Introduction

Decades of research focus on the effects of Leader-member-exchange, but recently, leader-member exchange social comparison (LMXSC) catches more and more scholars' eye, the subjective perception of relative position of LMX quality compared with colleagues<sup>[18]</sup>. Specifically, when subordinates have the perception of a superior LMX quality compared with LMX of their colleague with the same supervisor, they experience downward social comparisons of leader-member-exchange (high LMXSC). Conversely, when they have the perception of a relatively inferior LMX quality, they experience upward social comparisons of LMX(low LMXSC).

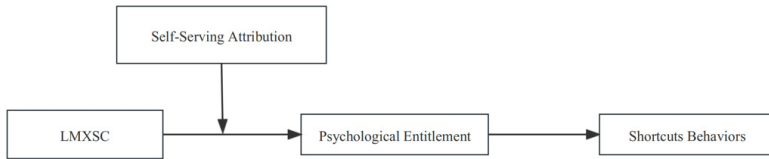
While prior research has shown that employees with low LMXSC produce more harmful behaviors<sup>[17][15]</sup> and those with high LMXSC demonstrate more promotive behaviors<sup>[18][1]</sup>, little is known about the drawbacks of high LMXSC apart from a recent study that demonstrates its negative effects<sup>[8]</sup>. In this research, we argue that LMXSC literature overlooks the costs of high LMXSC and overstates its merits. Consequently, the study try to answer the call for exploring the circumstances and mechanisms through which high LMXSC leads to negative outcomes<sup>[8]</sup>(Fig.1).

The model is tested via a three-time lagged study and provides some contributions to LMXSC literature and attribution application on leadership.

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**Fig. 1.** Proposed research model

## 2 Theoretical Overview

### 2.1 Theoretical Grounding

According to the literatures on self-enhancement<sup>[16]</sup> and attribution<sup>[13]</sup>, individuals tend to make a self-serving attribution to positive treatment received from others (i.e., high LMXSC). Moreover, people prefer to attribute favourable issues to themselves and ignore other possible attribution styles which are likely to explain these positive treatment<sup>[11]</sup>. Therefore, we are interested in examining how self-serving attribution of high LMXSC interacts with high LMXSC to influence subordinate attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

### 2.2 LMXSC, Self-Serving Attribution and Psychological Entitlement

When subordinates perceive high LMXSC, those who believe their capabilities and strengths determine their LMX quality, particularly recognizing their self-worth after receiving supervisor praise and appreciation, are likely to interpret high LMXSC as being more successful than their coworkers and a demonstration of a relatively higher status within their group (i.e., superiority)<sup>[15]</sup>. Therefore, these subordinates are more likely to perceive inflated self-worth, which explicit psychological entitlement<sup>[6]</sup>.

On the other hand, subordinates in a low self-serving attribution of high LMXSC manner prefer not to attribute high LMXSC to themselves (e.g., uniqueness). Consequently, they have less tendency to perceive exaggerated self-capabilities and thus tend not to feel entitled. Based on these views, we suggest the following:

Hypothesis 1: Subordinate self-serving attribution of high LMXSC moderates the positive relationship between LMXSC and psychological entitlement, such that the relationship is significant when self-serving attribution is high and will not exist when subordinate self-serving attribution is low.

### 2.3 Psychological Entitlement as a Driver of Shortcuts Behaviors

Huseman et al.<sup>[7]</sup> suggested that the outcomes of psychological entitlement can be explained by equity theory<sup>[2]</sup>. Despite being sensitive to equity, individuals with a momentary sense of entitlement disrupt equity by insisting on a higher outcome-to-input ratio and unrealistic expectations<sup>[12]</sup>. Therefore, when such inflated expectations are not fulfilled, shortcuts behaviors—completing a task by shortening

standard procedures in the price of safety and quality<sup>[14]</sup>—might be a natural response to achieve the goals[4]. To summarize, we propose our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Psychological entitlement will mediate the interactive effect of LMXSC and subordinate self-serving attribution on shortcuts behaviors, such that the indirect effect will be significant in subordinate with high self-serving attribution of LMXSC and will not significant in subordinate with low self-serving attribution.

### 3 Methods

#### 3.1 Participants and Procedure

We collected three waves of data through the online platform (Credamo with more than 3 million active users) in China. 530 full-time employees were invited to participate in this research. Each of the three waves was separated by 2 weeks. At Time 1 (T1), we measure participants' LMXSC, self-serving attribution of LMXSC, and reported demographic information. At T2, participants fulfilled measures of psychological entitlement. At T3, participants completed measures of shortcuts behaviors.

We gained 314 employees' samples (62.1% female,  $M_{\text{organizational tenure}}=6.0\text{years}$ ,  $M_{\text{dyadic tenure}}=4.7\text{years}$ ) after matching the three waves of data. Participants are predominantly 31-40 years old (46.5%) and most (70.4%) held a bachelor's degree. Most participants worked in manufacturing (35.7%) and information technology (31.5%).

#### 3.2 Measures

All items were measured with seven Likert type (1=totally disagree,7=totally agree). Based on back translation procedure of Brislin<sup>[3]</sup>, we translated the items into Chinese.

**LMXSC(T1).** Employees rated their relationship with leader with six items developed by Vidyarthi et al.<sup>[18]</sup>(Cronbach's alpha = 0.91).

**Self-Serving Attribution(T1).** Self-serving Attribution of LMXSC adapted from the self-serving Attribution Scale for Humble Behavior of Leaders developed by Xin Qin et al.<sup>[19]</sup>with 6-item (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91).

**Psychological entitlement(T2).** Using Campbell et al.'s<sup>[4]</sup>psychological entitlement scale, except one item involving specific cultural feature ("If I were on the Titanic, I would deserve to be on the first lifeboat")(Cronbach's alpha = 0.96).

**Shortcuts behaviors(T3).** Employees rated shortcuts behaviors with eight items developed by Peter et al.'s<sup>[14]</sup>(Cronbach's alpha = 0.93).

**Control variables.** Demographic variables (sex, age, education, organizational tenure, dyadic tenure with supervisors, and industry of work), LMX quality using the seven items LMX scale<sup>[5]</sup>(Cronbach's alpha =0.84) and negative affect using the five items developed<sup>[9]</sup>(Cronbach's alpha =0.81) was controlled.

## 4 Analyses and Results

### 4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

We conducted CFAs to assess the measurement model of study variables. The results suggested that our hypothesized four-factor model (i.e., leader-member-exchange social comparison, subordinate self-serving attribution, psychological entitlement and shortcuts behaviors) fit the data well ( $\chi^2 = 958.074$ ,  $df=371$ ,  $CFI=0.923$ ,  $TLI=0.915$ ,  $RMSEA=0.071$ ,  $SRMR=0.066$ ).

### 4.2 Hypothesis Testing.

Table 1 shows the variables' means, standard deviations and correlations, and Table 2 is the results of hierarchical linear modeling.

As we can see in Model 3 in Table 2, the interaction of LMXSC and subordinate self-serving attribution of LMXSC in predicting subordinate psychological entitlement was significant ( $b=0.14$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Simple slopes presents that the relationship between LMXSC and psychological entitlement was stronger when subordinate self-serving attribution was high than subordinate self-serving attribution was low (Fig. 2). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Reported in Model 4, 5 and 6 in Table 2 are the consequence for the predictors of subordinate shortcuts behaviors. The Monte Carlo results showed that the indirect effect of LMXSC on subordinate shortcuts behaviors via subordinate psychological entitlement was significant when subordinate in high self-serving attribution (effect=0.044, 95%CI[0.006, 0.090]) but was not significant when subordinate in low self-serving attribution (effect=0.024, 95%CI[-0.009, 0.062]). The difference between these indirect effects was also significant ( $b=0.017$ , 95%CI[0.003,0.035]). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

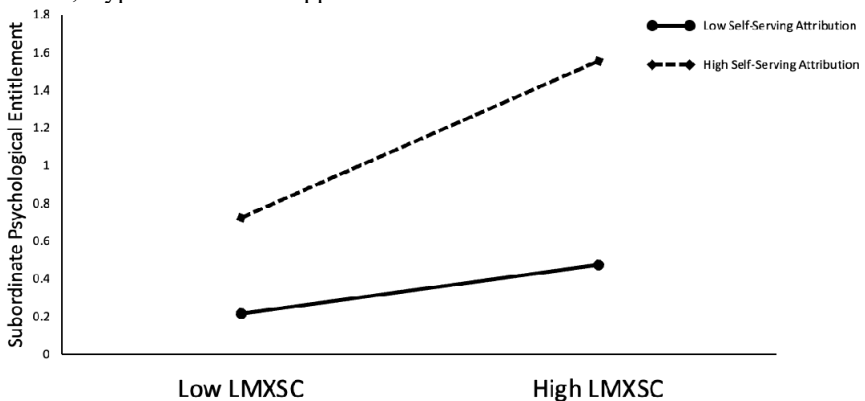


Fig. 2. The interactive effect of LMXSC and self-serving attribution

## 5 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, our study contributes significant theoretical implications to the existing literature on leader-member-exchange social comparison, psychological entitlement, shortcuts behaviors and attribution. First, this research answered the call for the negative effects of high LMXSC<sup>[8]</sup>, we further prove the potential dark side of high LMXSC (e.g., increased shortcuts behaviors). Second, this research use attribution theory in the organizational sciences by answering the call of Martinko et al.<sup>[10]</sup>for more research on investigating subordinates' attributions. Third, previous research has suggested that either their own behaviors (e.g., OCB<sup>[20]</sup>) or others' negative behavior (e.g., mistreatment<sup>[21]</sup>) can result in psychological entitlement. However, we reveal that positive relationship (e.g., high LMXSC) can also lead to psychological entitlement when subordinates make self-serving attribution to these positive treatments. Finally, this research extends the shortcuts behaviors literature by revealing that positive relationship with leader (i.e., high LMXSC) may lead to shortcuts behaviors.

Practically, due to the potential downsides of high LMXSC, leaders should be mindful of subordinates' attribution tendencies, and exercise caution when offering positive treatment to subordinates who might attribute it to their own strengths and uniqueness. For example, leaders could emphasize treating all subordinates equally rather than showing preference to certain individuals. Furthermore, demonstrating similar quality of Leader-Member Exchange with different subordinates across contexts may decrease subordinates' self-serving attribution by highlighting leaders' consistent behavior rather than situational factors.

## 6 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has numerous strengths, including three-wave time lagged study, there are several limitations that future research should address. First, self-report measures can produce common methods bias. Future research can adapt multi-source data. Second, this study focused on self-serving attribution to examine the impact of LMXSC. Future research should investigate other types of attribution, such as external attribution, which might affect the relationship between LMXSC and subordinate outcomes. Finally, we recommend that future LMXSC research consider a longitudinal perspective, for leaders may adapt their behavior over time based on subordinates' attribution styles<sup>[19]</sup>.

## 7 Conclusion

Depending on attribution theory, our study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that favorable LMXSC has negative consequences. We identify that, in subordinates with high self-serving attribution of LMXSC, LMXSC triggers psychological entitlement, which in turn motivates subordinate shortcuts behaviors.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender (T1)	1.6	0.5											
2. Age (T1)	2.6	0.9	-0.02										
3. Edu (T1)	3.1	0.6	0	-0.09									
4. TOI(T1)	4.1	3	-0.02	-0.08	-0.07								
5. DT (T1)	6.1	4.8	-0.05	0.72**	-0.14*	-0.16**							
6. OT(T1)	4.7	3.2	-0.08	0.63**	0.01	-0.25**	0.74**						
7. NA (T1)	1.6	0.7	0.06	-0.31**	-0.03	0.17**	-0.24**	-0.32**					
8. LMX(T1)	5.7	0.8	-0.02	0.24**	0.11	-0.18**	0.14*	0.24**	-0.46**				
9. LMXSC (T1)	5.5	1.1	-0.08	0.20**	0.17**	-0.21**	0.11	0.27**	-0.50**	0.78**			
10.SSA (T1)	5.7	0.9	-0.04	0.22**	0.13*	-0.14*	0.12*	0.28**	-0.53**	0.73**	0.84**		
11. PE (T2)	4.6	1.5	0.1	-0.22**	0.25**	0.04	-0.17**	-0.11	0.12*	-0.03	0.05	0.05	
12.SB (T3)	2.7	1.2	-0.05	-0.26**	-0.19**	0.16**	-0.17**	-0.26**	0.38**	-0.70**	-0.62**	-0.56**	0.13*

Note. N=314. For gender, 0=male; 1=female. Edu=Education. TOI=Type of Industry. DT=Dyadic Tenure. OT=Organizational Tenure. NA= Negative Affect. LMX= Leader-Member-Exchange. LMXSC= Leader-Member-Exchange Social Comparison. SSA=Self-serving Attribution. PE=Psychological Entitlement. SB=Shortcuts Behaviors. T1/2/3=Time 1/2/3. \*\*p<0.01. \*p<0.05.

**Table 2.** Regression Results

Variables	PE (T2)									SB (T3)								
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5			Model 6		
	b	SE	t	b	SE	t	b	SE	t	b	SE	t	b	SE	t	b	SE	t
Constant	2.27	1.01	2.25*	1.91	1.05	1.82	0.74	1.24	0.6	9.68	0.58	16.56***	10.52	0.69	15.25**	10.42	0.67	15.48**
Gender (T1)	0.3	0.17	1.77	0.32	0.17	1.91	0.3	0.17	1.8	-0.17	0.1	-1.76	-0.19	0.1	-1.97*	-0.23	0.1	-2.44*
Age (T1)	-0.35	0.14	-2.54*	-0.34	0.14	-2.53*	-0.3	0.13	-2.3	-0.09	0.08	-1.08	-0.09	0.08	-1.15	-0.04	0.08	-0.57
Edu (T1)	0.62	0.15	4.1*	0.58	0.15	3.98**	0.5	0.15	3.75**	-0.27	0.08	-3.17**	-0.22	0.08	-2.65**	-0.29	0.08	-3.8**
TOI(T1)	0.03	0.03	0.66	0.03	0.03	0.92	0.03	0.03	0.87	0.01	0.02	0.37	0	0.02	0.25	0	0.02	0.05
DT (T1)	0.05	0.03	1.5	0.03	0.03	0.25	0.03	0.03	0.13	0	0.02	-0.12	0	0.02	-0.26	-0.01	0.02	-0.29

OTI	0.0		0.			0.		0.3		0.0	-0.7		0.0	-0.4		0.0	-0.	
TI)	3	0.04	7	0.01	04	0.34	0	0.04	7	-0.02	2	2	-0.01	2	1	-0.01	2	51
			4				0.											
NA	0.1		1.		0.			1.6		0.0		1.17	0.08	0.0	0.86	0.04	0.0	0.4
TI)	8	0.15	2	0.28	15	1.85	2	0.15	6	0.1	9	9	0.08	9	0.86	0.04	9	9
			2				5											
LM	0.0		0.		0.		-0		-1.		0.0		-13.	0.1		-7.2		-6.
X	5	0.13	4	-0.26	18	-1.47	.3	0.18	88	-1	7	69**	-0.76	1	1**	-0.71	0.1	91
TI)			2				4					*		1	*			
LM							0.		1.6									-3.
XSC				0.2		1.24	2	0.16	8				-0.26	0.0	-2.8	-0.3	0.0	25
TI)				16			7							9	0**		9	6*
																		**
10.S					0.		0.	1.9						0.1	-1.1		0.1	-1.
SA			0.18		1		4	0.21	1				-0.14	2	3	-0.19	2	6
TI)																		
11.							0.		1.9									-3.
PE							1	0.07	8*					0.0	-2.5	-0.12	0.0	02
TI2)							4						-0.1	4	2*		4	7*
																		*
R <sup>2</sup>		0.12			0.14			0.15			0.52			0.54				0.57
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		0.1			0.11			0.12			0.51			0.53				0.55
F		5.08***			4.74***			4.71***			41.51***			32.43***				32.65***

Note: N=314. For gender, 0=male; 1=female. Edu=Education. TOI=Type of Industry. DT= Dyadic Tenure. OT= Organizational Tenure. NA= Negative Affect. LMX= Leader-Member-Exchange. LMXSC=

Lead-er-Member-Exchange Social Comparison. SSA=Self-serving Attribution. PE=Psychological Entitlement. SB=Shortcuts Behaviors. T1/2/3=Time 1/2/3. \*\*p<0.01. \*p<0.05.

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