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Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Hawthorne is the recipient of the Riemer and Marcia Calhoun Professorship in Education. This research was supported in whole or in part by the Louisiana Board of Regents Endowed Professor/Chair Program.

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Abstract

The focus of this study was the relationship between leaders and their team members and how Deaf identity can predict the quality of that relationship. Employment and personal identity are often linked, and this is true of Deaf identity. This study explores how Deaf identity impacts leader-member exchanges and seeks to identify components of Deaf identity that promote better workplace experiences. The results of a Pearson r correlation analysis supported a significant positive correlation between the Deaf Acculturation Scale score and the Leader-Member Exchange 7 questionnaire score. A linear regression analysis indicated that Deaf identity was a significant predictor of the leader-member relationship and accounted for the variance in the leader-member relationship. Of the predictors investigated, cultural involvement, cultural preferences, cultural knowledge, and language competence were significant.

Keywords

Deaf identity, Deaf culture, Leader-Member Exchange theory, leadership studies

Disclosure Statement

The author has not disclosed a conflict of interest.

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Introduction

Approximately 15% of adults in the United States experience some form of hearing loss, 2% of which have a disabling hearing loss (National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders, 2021). Hearing loss impacts communication, social interaction, and educational advancement, which often limits employment opportunities, resulting in higher unemployment and underemployment for people with hearing deficits (Bradley, et al., 2013; Boutin, 2010). In turn, employment struggles lead to decreases in earning power. Luft (2000) reported that Deaf people face a substantial loss of lifetime earning power, averaging between \$356,000 and \$609,000 less than hearing employees of comparable education. Typically, Deaf employees enter the workforce at a status slightly above that of service workers and make few gains over the next 20 years. Perkins-Dock (2015) found that education helped ameliorate the workplace outcomes, but even that improvement was limited with high school graduates fairsing little better than those who lacked a high school diploma.

Within the Deaf community, the use of the capital “D” in Deaf denotes an individual who chooses to be a member of the Deaf community with a Deaf identity. This person advocates for the sharing of the unique traditions, language, values, cultural norms, and rules of social interaction within that group. The use of the lowercase “d” in deaf, on the other hand, represents anyone who has experienced a significant hearing loss and who considers deafness a pathology, and not as a community with a distinct culture (Leigh, 2009). We follow that convention in this paper.

Although research has identified barriers to employment (e.g., communication difficulties, lack of interpreters, low morale) (Perkins-Dock, 2015), Deaf identity and the interaction with employer leadership styles remains underexplored. In general, Deaf identity refers to how an individual relates to their deafness. Individuals with a strong Deaf identity

believe that being deaf is a difference rather than a disability (National Association of the Deaf, 2014). Members of this group are proud and celebrate their deafness as a characteristic that makes them unique and distinguishable. American Sign Language (ASL) is their mode of communication, and they defend it as a recognized language (Gallaudet University, 2015a; Lane, 1992).

In addition, leaders' skill in gaining the trust of their employees, or followers, is vital to achieving successful work among persons of different cultures and attitudes (LeBlanc & Gonzalez-Roma, 2012). High-quality exchanges between leaders and employees result in the successful completion of projects, improving employee morale and, thus, reducing employee turnover (Kauppila, 2015). High-quality exchanges inspire employees to set and reach goals, improve the employees' relationships with superiors, and increase the organization's scope. Therefore, a key piece of the leadership puzzle lies in understanding and developing leader-follower relationships. Properly understanding the leadership process and the leadership relationship means recognizing the follower's self-identity as a critical relationship factor. It is through the follower's self-identity and self-concept that they derive motivation, values, cognitions, emotions, and perceptions of social justice (Lord & Brown, 2003).

By understanding the interaction between employees' Deaf identity and employers' leadership styles, rehabilitation specialists, counselors, and social workers can better prepare deaf employees to function in the workplace. The leader-follower relationship does not exist without the follower and the follower's culture. The follower's identity plays a major role in the leader-follower connection (Vondey, 2008). Ultimately, understanding and appreciating the employee's identity and culture contributes to leader effectiveness and employee satisfaction (Ehrhart, 2015).

Leadership in the Workplace

At the heart of this study is the leader-follower relationship and elements that indicate its quality. An organization's success is built on two important constructs: how well the leaders truly lead and how well the followers truly follow their leaders. These constructs accentuate the significance of the leader-follower relationship in the context of improving the followers' satisfaction and, thus, their productivity. For example, Oswald et al., (2015), studied employee' productivity and found that happy employees showed a 12% increase in production, which was in sharp contrast to a 10% reduction in the productivity of unhappy employees. These findings were not related to compensation but to the company's willingness to invest in their employees' support and satisfaction with leadership. Google reported an increase of 37% in employee satisfaction when the company made investments in the employees, such as providing skills training, offering flexible schedules, and creating a culture in which employers know their employees well (Akram, n.d., Parkes-Harrison, 2014).

The leader-follower relationship is symbiotic—requiring both for existence. Trust in the culture of the organization and its leaders is a crucial part of employee self-esteem and productivity (Akram, n.d., Clegg et al., 2002; Dibben, 2000; Kramer & Tyller, 1996). In contrast, the lack of a trusting environment harms the foundations of the leader-follower relationship (Martin et al., 2015). People's perceptions of leader-follower relationships, leader preferences, and leadership qualities are not created in a vacuum, but rather are influenced by their life experiences and interactions with prior leaders (Offermann et al., 1994). Given the diversity of people's life experiences and perspectives, their implicit theories will also be diverse and unique.

The level of congruence between the perceived leader-follower relationship and the follower's Deaf identity will affect the follower's judgments about the leader's effectiveness and will influence the follower's willingness to cooperate with the leader. Thus, follower

preferences for leadership should be predicted by Deaf identity. Deaf people who have not developed their own Deaf identity experience identity distortion to varying degrees. Consequently, this is reflected in their leader-follower relationships (Leigh, 1999).

Leader-Member Exchange Model

Leader-member exchange theory stems from the vertical dyad linkage theory (VDL) proposed by Dansereau, Graen and Haga (1975). Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1998) revised and expanded the model into the current Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory. LMX theory highlights the potential differences between the leader and follower using the vertical dyad relationship theory. The model perceives leadership as a variable with relationships that link the followers to the leader. The quality of the association is determined by respect, the extent of trust, obligation, and loyalty. LMX theory emphasizes the quality of exchanges that occur between a leader and an employee. It differs from other leadership theories because it centers on the relationship between this pair (Walumbwa et al., 2011). According to LMX theory, followers fall into two groups: the *in-group* and the *out-group*. The group with a high-quality exchange with the leader is the in-group, whereas the group with a low-quality exchange is the out-group. The ideal leader should attempt to bring every follower into the in-group (Luo et al., 2016).

Leaders' skill in gaining the trust of their groups is vital to achieving successful work among persons of diverse cultures and attitudes (LeBlanc & Gonzalez-Roma, 2012). High-quality exchanges between leaders and followers result in the successful completion of projects, improving employee morale and, thus, reducing employee turnover (Kauppila, 2015). High-quality exchanges inspire employees to set and reach goals, improve the employees' relationships with superiors, and increase the organization's scope. Therefore, a key piece of the leadership puzzle lies in understanding and developing leader-follower relationships. Properly understanding the leadership process and the leadership relationship

means recognizing the follower's self-identity as a critical relationship factor. It is through the follower's self-identity and self-concept that they derive motivation, values, cognitions, emotions, and perceptions of social justice (Lord & Brown, 2003).

“Employees’ self-identities, or the way in which they define themselves relative to others, have implications for the quality of the leader and follower relationships at work” (Jackson & Johnson, 2012, p. 488). Researchers have theorized that followers’ self-identities directly correspond to their relationship with leaders and to their work performance (Chang & Johnson, 2010; Lord et al., 1999; Schyns & Day, 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Indeed, Cha & Roberts (2019) found increased employee and employer satisfaction when employees shine a spotlight on their whole identities. By incorporating aspects of Deaf identity into their workplace, Deaf employees can bridge differences with other employees, find new avenues of support, and avoid burnout.

The current study expands previous literature by focusing on followers’ identities and their predictability of the leader-member relationship. In the context of this study, Deaf employees are the followers of interest, and their supervisors/employers are the leaders. The current study addressed three research questions: (a) *To what extent did participants endorse hearing acculturation items as compared to deaf acculturation items?* (b) *To what extent does overall Deaf identity predict the workplace leader-follower relationship?* (c) *To what extent does each of the subscale scores on the Deaf Acculturation Scale (DAS) predict the workplace leader-follower relationship?* Unlike previous research that seeks to understand the experience of people who are Deaf or hard of hearing through comparisons to hearing persons, the current study focuses solely on the experiences of Deaf employees. Therefore, information regarding the hearing status and communication preferences, along with other demographics relating to the employers, was not collected.

Method

Participants

Participants for the current study were recruited from established organizations that provide services to or represent deaf people. A list with the description of the organizations who participated in the study is available upon request. The sample group comprised 302 adults who self-identified as deaf within the context of having hearing loss and as being currently employed. Most participants strongly agreed or agreed that they called themselves Deaf (84%), preferred using ASL for communication (73%) and reported graduating with a college degree (72%; compared to 24% nationally). Of the 302 participants, 153 (51%) participants were female and 149 (49%) were male (compared to national averages of 43% and 57%, respectively). Regarding racial or ethnic identity, 251 (83%) participants identified as white and the remaining participants (51; 17%) identified as other races or ethnicities (compared to 84% of the Deaf population in the United States identifying as white and 18% identifying as other races or ethnicities). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 78; the mean age was 44 ($SD = 11.4$). Participants were from 11 states: including California, Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Texas, and Utah. Thirty-four participants (11%) reported earning a high school diploma (compared to 33% nationally). Through a review of the email domains of the participants, it was determined most of the respondents (248; 82%) were employed by organizations in Deaf-centric categories (i.e., schools for the deaf, deaf job placement programs, and deaf social service agencies). Overall, the two main differences in demographics were hearing status, which was by design, and educational level.

Instrumentation

Deaf Acculturation Scale (DAS)

Maxwell-McCaw and Zea (2011) developed the DAS, a 58-item instrument that uses a 5-point Likert-type scale designed to measure five Deaf identity subscales: Cultural Identity (e.g., I call myself Deaf. I often wish I could hear better or become hearing.), Cultural Involvement (e.g., How much do you enjoy going to deaf parties/gatherings? How much do you enjoy participating in hearing political activities?), Cultural Preferences (e.g., I would prefer my education to be at a deaf school. I would prefer my children to be hearing.), Cultural Knowledge (e.g., How well do you know important events in American/world history? How well do you know names of famous hearing actors?), and Language Competence (e.g., How well do you sign using ASL? How well do you speak English using your voice?) The scale applies to the assessment of whether an individual is acculturated to the hearing or Deaf culture: DAS hearing (DASh) and DAS deaf (DASd).

The DAS design fits for both the hard-of-hearing and deaf communities because its framework allows the two diverse cultures to be viewed independently in terms of their dimensions and subscale measures. Moreover, the DAS constitutes two main acculturation subscales, the Acculturation to Hearing Culture scale (DASh) and Acculturation to Deaf culture scale (DASd). These two constituents of the DAS are each made up of different subscales that appraise acculturation across as the five identity subscales. These subscales include feelings of belonging to the deaf world and the behavioral response upon exposure to Deaf culture. The DASd ($\alpha = 0.77$ to 0.94 for the subscales and 0.95 for the overall scale) and the DASh ($\alpha = 0.32$ to 0.83 for the subscales and 0.86 for the overall scale) are reliable and valid (Maxwell-McCaw et al. , 2019) and used in various previous studies (e.g., Schmitt & Leigh, 2015; Brice & Strauss, 2022). Other DAS subscales are language competence and cultural knowledge, which measure the hearing culture and other aspects of Deaf culture.

Leader-Member Exchange-7 Scale (LMX-7)

The LMX-7 measures the degree to which followers and their leaders have a sense of trust, mutual respect, and sense of obligation toward each other. The LMX-7 comprises seven queries that are in the 5-point Likert scale format (Bauer & Erdogan, 2016). The seven items describe distinctive characteristics of the working relationship and affiliation between the leader and the follower (e.g., How well does your leader understand your job problems and needs? How would you characterize your working relationship with your leader?)

English to ASL Back-Translation

Presenting an English-based survey in ASL is a complicated process but necessary because the subjects' native language is likely to be ASL and ASL has no written form. Back-translating is the process of translating a source language (English) into a target language (ASL) and back to the source language (English). "ASL is a distinct language from English, and that translation process is very complex" (Glickman, 1993, p. 134). Colonomos and Bienvenu (1991) developed a model for the back-translation process between the English text and ASL used by Glickman (1993) and other researchers.

To validate the translation of the survey items, we used the following steps:

1. We assembled a team of Native American Sign Language (ASL) users who were also fluent in written English and familiar with the various styles of English text.
2. The team translated the DAS and LMX-7 items from English text to ASL. This involved two separate rounds of translation, with the second and third ASL users translating the English text into ASL and recording their translations on video.
3. The video translations were scrutinized by three interpreters who were certified at the national level by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and had the advantage of being children of deaf adults. They then translated the video back into English text.

4. The English text translated from the ASL videos was compared to the original (back-translation) text for content and accuracy.

5. The comparison indicated a 98% agreement regarding the accuracy of the English-to-ASL translation.

Inter-rater Reliability

The back-translation was successful in producing corresponding English and ASL sentences for the DAS, the LMX-7, and a demographic scale. For 78 items (98%), an exact word-for-word back-translation was generated by all three interpreters. For two items (2%), all three interpreters produced a predictable paraphrase. The inter-rater reliability measure was 32.5%. Because back-translation is the most-used method of ensuring equivalence between the original and the translation (Son, 2018) and because the instruments did not involve specialized language, further psychometric examination did not occur.

Procedure

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, a website was created for the purpose of administering the study; the DAS, LMX-7, and demographic items were provided through the website. An invitation to take part in the study and an informed consent letter were placed on the website for 30 days. Since the survey was available online, an electronic signature for consent sufficed. An introductory letter explaining the study's purpose was provided in written English and ASL (via a YouTube video uploaded to the website). Participants received the 80-item online survey, which comprised the DAS and the LMX-7. Participants were notified that a printed version was also available that could be completed and mailed to the researchers; none of the participants opted for the paper copy.

Participants' responses were gathered on and received from a secure encrypted server. Anonymity for the survey participants was achieved by disabling IP address tracking. Each set of responses was assigned a random code for additional confidentiality.

Results

Identity of Sample (Deaf or Hearing)

To what extent did participants endorse hearing acculturation items as compared to deaf acculturation items? People who are deaf or hard of hearing vary in how they regard themselves; therefore, a preliminary question for this study is the extent to which participants identify as deaf or hearing. A paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the participants' scores on the DASd and the DASH. The results indicated that participants scored significantly higher on the DASd ($M = 4.16$, $SD = .62$) than they did on the DASH ($M = 3.1$, $SD = .60$); this indicates that they identify more as Deaf than as hearing, $t(301) = 19.88$, $p < .001$.

Overall Acculturation Scale

An overall acculturation scale score was determined for each participant by combining the DASd and DASH scores. The participants were almost evenly divided between Deaf acculturated ($n = 139$) and bicultural individuals ($n = 138$). The remainder of the sample was split between marginally acculturated ($n = 18$) and hearing acculturated ($n = 7$).

LMX-7 Scores

The LMX-7 measured how much the participants indicated respect for their leader's abilities, experienced a developing feeling of trust, and reported feelings of solid commitment to the leader (MSG, 2017). Scores fell into five categories: very high (30–35), high (25–29), moderate (20–24); low (15–19), and very low (7–14). Scores in the upper ranges demonstrated more grounded and stronger, high-quality relationships (i.e., in-group); scores in the lower ranges showed lower-quality relationships (i.e., out-group) (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1998). It is worth noting that many of the participants ($n = 199$; 65%) indicated a more grounded and stronger, high-quality relationship with their leader. As noted above, 82% ($n = 248$) of

participants were employed in Deaf-centric organizations and agencies. Of the 18% ($n = 54$) of participants employed in hearing-centric organizations, 59% ($n = 32$) rated their leader-follower relationship as *very low* or *low*.

Deaf Identity and the Leader-Follower Relationship

The central premise of this study is that participants who have a stronger Deaf identity will also report a stronger relationship with a workplace leader. The results of a Pearson r correlation analysis supported a significant positive correlation between the DASd score and the LMX-7 score, $r(300) = .29, p < .001$. A linear regression analysis was conducted with the LMX-7 score (leader-follower relationship) as the criterion variable and the DAS score (Deaf identity) as the predictor. Deaf identity was a significant predictor of the leader-follower relationship, $\beta = .29, t(300) = 5.24, p < .001$, and accounted for 8%, $r^2 = .08$ of the variance in the leader-follower relationship. These findings indicate that Deaf identity is a significant predictor of the leader-follower relationship, as hypothesized.

Table 1. Multiple Regression Results

Predictor Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Cultural Identification	4.23	.47	-.060	-.810	.418
Cultural Involvement	4.45	.64	.240	3.75	< .001
Preferences	3.80	.84	-.380	-5.49	< .001
Cultural Knowledge	3.42	1.13	.167	2.20	< .001
Language Competence	4.50	.73	.422	6.15	< .001

A multiple regression was conducted predicting the leader-follower relationship (LMX-7 score, criterion variable) from the DASd subscales (predictor variables): Cultural Identification, Cultural Involvement, Cultural Preferences, Cultural Knowledge, and

Language Competency. As Table 1 indicates, the regression model was significant, $F(5, 296) = 24.123, p < .001$, with an $R^2 = .29$.

Of the predictors investigated, Cultural Involvement ($\beta = .22, t(296) = 3.70, p < .001$), Cultural Preferences ($\beta = -.40, t(296) = 6.16, p < .001$), Cultural Knowledge ($\beta = .17, t(296) = 2.24, p < .001$), and Language Competence ($\beta = .40, t(296) = 6.28, p < .001$) were significant. Cultural Identification was not a significant predictor of LMX, ($\beta = .02, t(296) = -.373, p > .05$). Language Competence was the most significant predictor of scores on the LMX-7; Cultural Involvement and (to a lesser extent) Cultural Knowledge are also statistically significant predictors of LMX.

A correlation analysis between the participant scores on the LMX-7 and scores on the subscales of the DASd showed a positive relationship between LMX and Cultural Identification, Cultural Involvement, Cultural Knowledge, and Language Competence, meaning that as the level of these variables increased, the participants' ratings of their employers increased (see Table 2). These findings also support the idea that a strong Deaf identity is associated with greater satisfaction with the leader-follower dynamic.

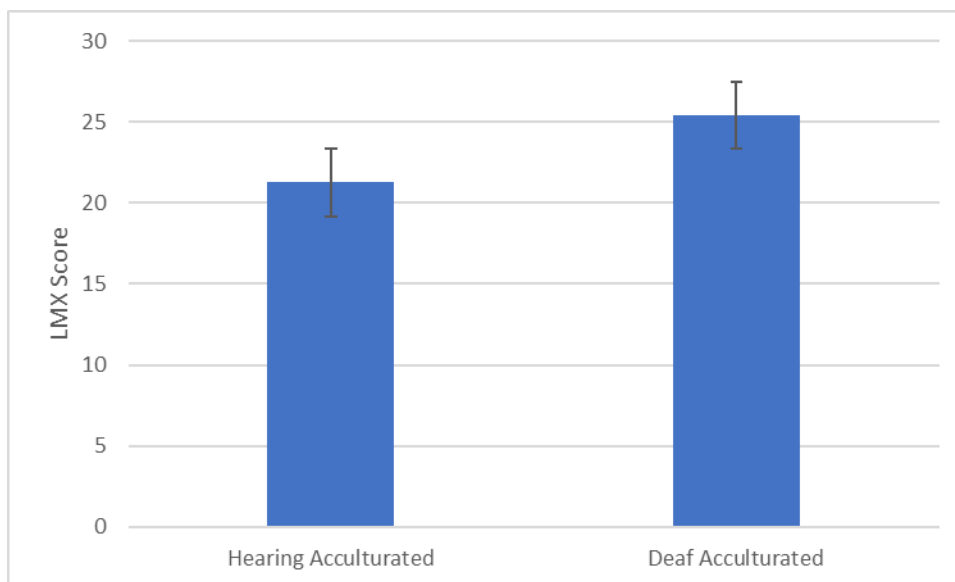
Table 2. Correlation Between DASd Subscales and the LMX-7

DASd subscales	<i>r</i>	<i>P</i>
Cultural Identification	.205	< .001
Cultural Involvement	.326	< .001
Preferences	-.002	.972
Cultural Knowledge	.282	< .001
Language Competence	.416	< .001

Finally, to explore the differences in deaf employees' relationships with their leaders, the participants were divided into two groups, deaf acculturated ($n = 135$) and hearing

acculturated ($n = 24$). Participants scoring as bicultural on the DAS were excluded because these people often had equally high levels of Deaf and hearing acculturation. A Welch's t-test was used because this statistical analysis is robust when there are unequal sample sizes and/or unequal variances. The results showed that deaf acculturated participants ($M = 25.41$, $SD = 5.33$) reported having a better relationship with their leader than hearing acculturated participants ($M = 21.25$, $SD = 5.37$; see Figure 1), $t = -3.49$, $p < .001$, *Cohen's d* = 5.34).

Figure 1. LMX-7 Score by Acculturation Status



These findings support the importance of Deaf identity in positive leader-follower relationships. Deaf acculturated participants reported having a better relationship with their employers than did hearing acculturated participants.

General Discussion

Identity is a multifaceted, intricate, and complex issue that involves culture, language, and a sense of belonging—personally and in the workplace. The current study addressed three questions: To what extent did participants endorse hearing acculturation items as compared to deaf acculturation items? To what extent does overall Deaf identity predict the

workplace leader-follower relationship? To what extent does each of the subscale scores on the DAS predict the workplace leader-follower relationship?

The study's findings support the hypothesis that Deaf identity is a predictor of the leader-follower relationship. This conclusion is important because self-identity, within the context of an organization, is central to attaining a positive leader-follower relationship, employee satisfaction, and organizational success (MacKinnon & Heise, 2010). The deaf follower's self-identity informs their work identity and belief in their capabilities. Therefore, a strong self-identity is central to developing a strong work identity. In turn, a strong identity yields a more productive and loyal employee.

The findings of this study indicate that deaf individuals with a strong Deaf identity rated their relationship with their leader as *high* and *very high*. LMX theory states that these followers, by their ratings of their relationship, do more for the leader and the leader does more for them. When it comes to the personalities of the followers and leaders within the context of the in-group, they seem to connect with one another, leading them to work diligently toward a common goal of satisfying each other (Northouse, 2015). Furthermore, these findings are consistent with Perkins-Dock, et al. (2015) who found that communication difficulties and conflicts related to Deaf culture were the top two barriers for employment.

Cultural Involvement

The final research question dealt with the predictability of each DAS subscales on the leader-follower relationship, beginning with Cultural Involvement. Cultural Involvement was a significant predictor of the leader-follower relationship, $\beta = .24$, $t(296) = 3.75$, $p < .000$. This supports the idea that the development of a strong Deaf identity involves the follower modeling specific behaviors that are associated with Deaf culture. The leader demonstrates support and encouragement by being informed about Deaf culture and identity and by modeling the same behaviors.

Cultural Preferences

The Cultural Preferences subscale was a significant predictor of the leader-follower relationship, $\beta = -.38$, $t(296) = -5.49$, $p < .000$; however, results indicate that as participants scored higher on this subscale, their LMX-7 score decreased. These findings are consistent with Schein (1989); like the individuals from numerous ethnic groups, culturally deaf individuals like to associate with and to wed individuals from their deaf social group. Understandably, the leaders may not be deaf and as such are not socially preferred over deaf members of the group, possibly indicating that cultural preferences do not contribute to the leader-follower relationship in the same way as other subscales.

Cultural Knowledge

Cultural Knowledge was also a significant predictor of the leader-follower relationship, $\beta = .17$, $t(296) = 2.20$, $p < .001$. This finding suggests the leader was familiar with information related to the Deaf World, which includes knowing the leaders within the Deaf community, important events (e.g., *Deaf President Now* Campaign), national Deaf heroes, and famous Deaf actors. The follower would also have knowledge of the unique traditions and customs of the Deaf community. These include a strong devotion to community clubs, events, alumni events, religious activities, and sporting events (MDHS, 2013). According to MDHS (2013), “events are frequently filled with entertainment such as Deaf folklore, arts, history, ASL poetry, songs, and joke-telling” (p. 1). Again, the large number of participants working within a Deaf-centric organization could explain the leader’s knowledge and support of various aspects of Deaf culture. This *interest* by the leader could endear the Deaf follower to the leader.

Language Competency

Language competency deals with ASL and the follower’s receptive and expressive communication skills. The language competency subscale was the largest predictor of the

leader-follower relationship, $\beta = .42$, $t(296) = 6.15$, $p < .001$. Communication with Deaf followers is of utmost concern for leaders with deaf employees (Hicks & Gilmore, 2012). Likewise, being able to understand the directives and the ability to communicate effectively and directly with the leader is of great importance to the Deaf follower (Watson, 2015). Communication struggles with supervisors, coworkers, and customers are a major hindrance to job preservation and promotion and can affect employees in social interactions within the work setting. This can, in turn, hinder their sense of fitting in or being one of the team (Lillestø & Sandvin, 2014).

Although deaf employees have a variety of communication preferences, those with a strong Deaf identity and a feeling of group identity within the Deaf community prefer ASL as their language of choice because it is a visual and gestural language (Gertz, 2003). This finding is supported by Watson's (2016) study, which found that Deaf followers reported a Deaf-centric work environment provided direct communication with supervisors in ASL, accessibility of communication, and readily available accommodations.

Applications of the Research

It is difficult to read any literature today about business without seeing leadership and the leader-follower relationship discussed in detail. The leader-follower relationship is a crucial component of a leaders' ability to inspire and lead an organization to produce better services, products, and benefits for its stakeholders. This examination of the effects of internalized discrimination provides a foundation for leaders and a better understanding of relationship failures and how to prevent them.

Deaf identity is strongly related to both language (i.e., ASL) and the norms of the Deaf community. Frequently, these norms and expectations are substantially different from those of the hearing community. Often, Deaf employees prefer ASL interpreters and assistive technology such as Video Relay Service over verbal or written communications

(Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing , 2022). A leader who allows deaf employees to choose their preferred method of communication signals to those employees that they are welcome and valued. Too often the communication preferences and abilities are not considered by employers, leading to Deaf employees being underutilized or overlooked for advancement. Understanding and valuing an employee begins with understanding and valuing the employee's culture and identity. Like the hearing world, such understanding begins with basic communication.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Although the current study is among the initial quantitative examinations of the predictability Deaf identity plays in the leader-follower relationship, certain limitations were noteworthy. First, in this study, the sample had a higher percentage of college degrees than the national average for the overall Deaf populace. As indicated by Marschark et al. (2002), approximately 30% of hard-of-hearing and deaf students who attend postsecondary 4-year schools will graduate. This is a significant contrast with the sample, as 72% of the participants held an advanced degree. It is possible that holding an advanced degree also influences employee-employer relationships. Therefore, replication of the current study with a sample that more accurately reflects the national statistics is needed

Second, although it was not our intent, most participants were employed by Deaf-centric organizations. These organizations would be much more familiar with the unique culture and language of Deaf followers. They would also be more aware of typical accommodation needed by Deaf followers. Future research should include a cross-section of deaf followers from both hearing-centric and Deaf-centric organizations.

Finally, the focus of this study was Deaf identity and the relationship between employer and employee. Although we chose to focus on the hearing and acculturation status of the employee, research into how those factors affect the leader is needed.

Conclusion

The central premise of this study is that a deaf follower with a strong Deaf identity reports a strong positive relationship with a hearing workplace leader. The implication is that leaders who support a strong Deaf identity provide work environments that allow deaf employees to thrive. Abundant resources are accessible to businesses to provide education and training in working with Deaf or hard-of-hearing followers. In return, there are tremendous benefits for the company when they include people who are Deaf in their diverse workforce. “Leaders who include deaf employees within their recruiting initiatives ultimately strengthen the overall diversity among the workforce” (Hicks & Gilmore, 2012, p. 1).

Given the increasing focus on and demand for equity and parity in the workplace, it is important that employers and leaders understand how to promote and support Deaf identity. Deaf employees offer a unique perspective for innovation in the workplace, but they must feel comfortable with sharing their experiences. Those who have a strong Deaf identity are more likely to engage with leaders, be creative in overcoming accessibility challenges, and advocate for themselves and others who have disabilities (Huyck et al., 2021).

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