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The role of distance in shaping relationship quality between leaders and followers

ABSTRACT

Understanding how leaders and followers build good relationships is important because high-quality relationships have been linked to both individual and organizational outcomes, such as job satisfaction and higher performance. However, previous research has insufficiently considered the role the organizational context may play in shaping how these leader-follower relationships develop. In the present qualitative study, nineteen police officers took part in semi-structured interviews to identify how relationship quality is influenced by distance. An inductive analysis identified that four types of distance created by the organizational design of the police force, namely geographical, temporal, task and strategic distance, shaped relationship quality through reducing interaction potential between leaders and their followers. Furthermore, these types of distance appeared to limit the availability of communication channels which further contributed to reduced interaction potential. However, when leaders and followers were familiar with each other, interaction potential appeared to be less affected. The findings advance understanding of the development of leader-follower relationships by highlighting that distance is fundamental to understanding leader-follower relationships but is likely to vary across organizational levels thereby shaping opportunities for interaction differentially.

INTRODUCTION

The particular significance of the workplace relationship between leaders and followers has long been recognized, as exemplified by its implicit inclusion in many leadership theories (Yukl, 2010), such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), as well as explicitly in the leader-member exchange literature (LMX; Graen & Cashman, 1975; Liden & Graen 1980). There have been substantial advancements in the theoretical and empirical exploration of leader-follower relationships in terms of leader and follower characteristics, as well as how these combine to facilitate or inhibit high quality relationship development (e.g. Epitropaki, Martin, & Thomas, 2017; Martin, Epitropaki, Thomas, & Topakas, 2010). Relationships formulate, develop, evolve and devolve in organizational places, spaces, structures and cultures, and are both contingent on, and essential for communication (e.g. Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). However, little is known about the role of contextual factors such as time, space, place and structure in creating the conditions for leader-follower relationships to develop and function as platforms for communication and information exchange. Therefore, the present study will explore the complexity introduced by distance, as a feature of organizational design, to the development of leader-follower relations.

Relationship-based approaches to leadership focus on the quality of the unique dyadic relationship between leaders and followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), and can be examined through a relational perspective (Mary Uhl-Bien, 2006). Uhl-Bien (2006) defined relational leadership as an approach to studying 'close' work relationships that views leadership as a social influencing process involving leaders and followers interacting within the context of a system, creating their shared understanding of leadership. Building on these assumptions and in line with recent calls for a relational perspective to studying leader-follower relationships (e.g., Epitropaki

et al., 2017), it is important to consider how relationship quality and communication are affected by the organizational context in which leadership takes place. Leadership is hence considered to be a dynamic process (Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000), with particular emphasis being put on the role of the context in shaping followers' and leaders' understanding and perceptions of leadership (Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004; Klenke, 2011).

A number of organizational design features have the potential to shape the context in which leadership takes place including leaders' and followers' physical location (Avolio et al., 2004; Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999). Many employees work remotely nowadays which could influence the development and maintenance of relationship quality through the physical distance that is created between leaders and followers. However, the effect of distance on leader-follower relationships has received very little direct attention in the leadership literature despite being implicitly assumed in many leadership theories (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Research into LMX (Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005), the most prominent approach to studying relationship quality (Dinh et al., 2014), has indirectly examined distance through linking communication frequency between leaders and followers (Kacmar, Witt, Zivnuska, & Gully, 2003) and teams (Gajendran & Joshi, 2012). LMX theory suggests that leaders form differential relationships with their followers, with some enjoying high quality relationships, and others low-quality relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Specifically, high-quality relationships are characterized by high levels of affect, loyalty, professional respect and contribution (Liden & Maslyn, 1998), which are not consistently present in low-quality relationships (Uhl-Bien, Graen, & Scandura, 2000). The majority of LMX research, in contrast to the relational perspective, is dominated by the entity perspective where the leader and the follower are considered as individual and separate from each other and their environment, and their relationship is represented as an objective truth (Hosking, 1995; Mary Uhl-Bien, 2006). Research along the

entity perspective can be criticized as failing to capture the reality of leadership (Conger & Toegel, 2002) through its focus on static constructs, such as LMX (Uhl-Bien, 2006), that do not capture the dynamic nature of workplace relationships and insufficiently consider the organizational and occupational contexts. As a result, very little is actually known about the extent to which the organizational context, and especially distance, affects leader-follower relationships and their quality (Napier & Ferris, 1993).

Antonakis and Atwater (2002) provide conceptual and definitional clarity concerning distance as a construct in the context of leadership; they define leader distance as "the configural effect … of leader-follower physical distance, perceived social distance, and perceived interaction frequency" (p. 674). They theorize that leaders appear 'distant' from their followers if all three characteristics of leader distance are present. Physical distance refers to where followers are located in relation to their leader; perceived social distance describes the perceived effects of social structures such as status, rank and authority on the potential for intimacy and social interaction; and perceived interaction frequency is defined as the extent to which followers perceive their task-related interactions with the leader (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Perceived social distance is distinct from physical distance because social distance can occur in relationships which are characterized by proximity (the opposite of physical distance) as well as those where physical distance occurs.

Despite this thorough theoretical consideration of distance (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002), distance has been largely ignored in the empirical investigation of relational approaches. Only Brunelle (2013) has attempted to study the effects of distance on leader-follower relations directly, revealing that distance negatively affects relationship quality. Two hundred and eighty-six respondents from one management and information technology consultancy firm completed a

questionnaire measuring physical distance, defined as "the observable gap separating two people in space", psychological distance defined as "the feeling of separation that an individual has in relation to another person", and relationship quality with their leader. The study by Brunelle (2013) found that both physical and psychological distance affected relationship quality negatively, with psychological distance being more influential than physical distance. Given the quantitative nature of their study, it was not possible for them to offer empirical evidence to explain this result. However, their conceptualized explanations for the outcomes were based on the changes in communication that are caused by distance.

Communication is an important aspect of leadership given that leaders rely heavily on being able to influence followers to share their vision and achieve goals (Bass, 1985) whilst providing support and direction through coaching and mentoring (Luthra & Dahiya, 2015). The importance of communication in leadership theories is evidenced through, for example, its inclusion in leadership scales, such as the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008), and through research linking communication competence to transformational and transactional leadership (Flauto, 1999). Distance has been said to impact communication through removing informal interaction opportunities, such as preventing corridor conversations and social events (Fisher & Fisher, 2001), with studies highlighting that people in close proximity communicate more with each other (Davies, 1953; Kraut, Fish, Root, & Chalfonte, 1990).

A great deal of communication takes place through formal and informal daily interactions. For example, in mundane exchanges of information, chatter, gossip, ad-hoc problem solving and planning exchanges (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). However, formal and informal daily interactions are aspects of leadership practice that have been largely neglected by the traditional leadership literature. Furthermore, interactions may depend on factors such as the combination of

opportunity, initiative and willingness of leaders and followers to engage in communicative exchanges (Bass, 2008). The relationship history, familiarity, perceived intimacy, and perceived level of shared knowledge and understanding, may be some of the factors that facilitate communication.

A communication-focused conceptualization of leadership and leader-follower relationships is in line with the "view of leadership and organization as human social constructions that emanate from the rich connections and interdependencies of organizations and their members" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 655). With this in mind, it seems intuitive that leader-follower relationships should be studied through a communications lens and explore the when, where and how of the exchanges that help co-construct and enact these relationships (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). However, this has not always been a readily adopted approach in leadership theorizing and research.

Regarding leadership, physical proximity can be, on the one hand, considered useful for ensuring that leaders have the ability to communicate with individual followers as opposed to a group, a tactic that can be considered more effective when attempting to inspire and motivate followers (Jacobs, 2004). On the other hand, when leaders and followers are distant from each other, communication becomes more complex and relies on mediated technologies such as email, video-conferencing and telephone (Treviño, Webster, & Stein, 2000). It has been argued that where leaders and their followers are physically distant, there is reduced richness of information transmission (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Richness of information indicates the ability of a communication channel to convey verbal and nonverbal cues, allows leaders and followers to gather and provide immediate feedback and to speak using natural language (Treviño et al., 2000). As a better understanding of the way distance shapes relationship quality through

available communication channels is needed, the present study explores the research question

'how does distance caused by organizational features impact the relationship quality of the

leader-follower relationship?'

METHDOLOGICAL APPROACH

Given the emphasis on the relational view of leadership, an interpretivist perspective for this

research was adopted which focused on defining individual perceptions of distance that shaped

interactions between subordinates and their superior officers. Interpretivism is a term usually

associated with qualitative research (Bosley, 2004) and argues that people's behavior is shaped

by the subjective meaning that they associate with their actions. Therefore, interpretivism usually

represents inductive data analysis meaning that the findings are derived from the data, rather than

from theory (Bryman, 2012). Given the focus on understanding organizational features of the

participating organization, an inductive approach was felt to be the most appropriate.

One form of interpretivism, social constructionism, focuses on the processes of interaction

among individuals in a quest to understand how meaning is derived (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Social

constructionist views of leadership eschew the role of the individual leader as the only influence

on follower's behavior (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Instead, communicative practices "occasioned

by the context" (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; p. 175) are viewed as integral to the way that

leadership is engendered within organizations. As a result, by viewing leadership through a lens

of social constructionism and communicative practices, leadership can be understood as enacted

by individuals who consider each situation according to their own unique perspectives, and can't

be judged objectively by anyone else (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). The context in which relational

leadership takes place should hence be a central consideration in social constructionist leadership

studies (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2014). Through taking a social constructionist view of leadership,

it is possible to consider different ways in which leadership can be understood (Dachler & Hosking, 1995).

The UK Policing Context

There are 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales made up of uniformed officers, detectives and police staff. The present study was carried out in one semi-rural force covering a number of cities and towns, with a geographical area of over 1000 square km and a population of over 800,000. There were approximately 2000 police officers force-wide (detectives and uniform), with approximately 60% of them male. Police staff numbered approximately 50% less than police officers (Home Office, 2015). The police force has a duty to respond to incidents at any given location 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and hence, police officers are located at stations geographically dispersed across their district. Additionally, a shift-working system is core to the delivery model of the police service to ensure that police officers are available when needed and to maintain a constant reassuring presence to the public. Police forces in the UK typically consist of nine hierarchical levels (known as rank structure) and the ranks were divided further into three groups, described as operational, tactical and strategic (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 here

Constables, Sergeants and Inspectors are described as operational roles focusing on local, day-to-day policing matters and their workload is largely driven by customer incidents triggered by 999 emergencies or 101 non-emergency calls. The next three ranks of Chief Inspector, Superintendent and Chief Superintendent are described as tactical roles. These tactical roles focus

on large-scale, force-wide and longer-terms issues such as serious organized crime and child sexual exploitation. The top three ranks of Assistant Chief Constable, Deputy Chief Constable and Chief Constable are referred to as strategic policing roles which focus on ensuring compliance with nation-wide legislation and government demands, benchmarking against different forces and reputation management. The rank of Chief Inspector is synonymous with a middle manager in a non-policing hierarchical organization.

Participants

Officers of ranks ranging from Constables to Chief Inspector from the four divisions of the police force were sent information about the study and invited to participate. Nineteen uniformed officers comprising three Constables (2 females, 1 male), three Sergeants (two males, one female), eight Inspectors (three females, five males) and five Chief Inspectors (one female, four males) volunteered to take part in the study. Length of service ranged from 1 year 4 months to 29 years, 10 months and participants age ranged from 30 to 56 years. Most of the Constables, Sergeants and Inspectors were assigned to either a Safer Neighborhood Team (SNT) or a Neighborhood Patrol Group (NPG). Chief Inspectors were not assigned to either group as their role was to manage both sets of activities as show in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 here

Table 1 shows a breakdown of the units to which participants belonged. One Constable and One Sergeant were working on an internal project on day shifts. One Chief Inspector was assigned permanently to the firearms team and did not manage NPG or SNT officers.

Insert Table 1 here

An important feature of the sample was the prevalence of shift-working patterns which were slightly different for NPG and SNT. NPG Constables, Sergeants and Inspectors worked regular shift patterns which consisted of two day shifts (7 am – 3 pm), two late shifts (3 pm – 11 pm) and two night shifts (11 pm – 7 am). SNT Constables and Sergeants tended to work a two-shift pattern comprising 7 am – 3 pm or 3 pm – 10 pm. Inspectors and Chief Inspectors tended to work a regular day shift of Monday to Friday between 8 am and 4 pm. Compared to the 24x7 NPG shift pattern, the SNT shift pattern reflected the less reactive nature of their work, meaning that 24x7 cover was not required to manage the longer-term community relationships on which SNT focused.

Data Collection and Analysis

The present study comprised an interview-based exploration of the way in which subordinates and their superiors interacted with each other throughout the course of their daily working lives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the lead author between September and December 2014 in a location away from the participants' immediate working environment. All interviews were recorded with an audio recorder and each participant signed a consent form and was assured of anonymity and confidentiality prior to the commencement of the interview. All interviews started with the following question: "Can you describe to me your relationship with your manager and how you would normally communicate with them?" Following this question, the researcher explored relevant areas relating to frequency of communication, method of

communication and reasons for interaction. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents.

The data analysis strategy followed established guidelines laid out for interpretative research (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). In the first instance, the transcribed data were read several times to ensure familiarity before comments were made in the left-hand column to highlight basic ideas. At this stage, the comments were purely descriptive. Once this had been done, the right-hand column was used to group basic ideas together into emerging themes which represented the underlying experiences conveyed by the participant. The emerging themes were the first attempt at interpretation and provided an insight into what subordinates' experiences meant from a psychological perspective (Blaikie, 2007). The final stage was to group emerging themes (known as sub-themes) with similar ideas into overarching themes (known as superordinate themes). Smith, Harre and Van Langenhove (1995) highlighted that emergent themes were called such because the process was an iterative one of interpretation and sustained engagement with the data. The creation of superordinate themes was an attempt to create some order from the complexity of the data. By constantly checking between the data and the themes, it was ensured that interpretations remained faithful to the original data.

FINDINGS

Types of Distance

Four superordinate themes were inductively generated from the interview data. Each theme highlighted a different form of distance. The forms of distance originated from organizational design features which, although not specific to the police force alone, are characteristic of all police forces and also likely to represent common forms of distance in other hierarchical organizations. All forms of distance appeared to contribute to a reduction in interaction

opportunities between subordinates and their superiors, impacting their ability to build high-quality relationships with each other. Table 2 sets out the first order, second order and superordinate themes. Table 3 provides quotations to support the coding process.

Insert Table 2 here

Insert Table 3 here

The themes of geographical and temporal distance highlighted that opportunities for interaction were restricted as a result of working in different locations or on different shifts. The themes of task distance and strategic distance highlighted that opportunities for interaction were restricted because the role design reduced the need for officers and their superiors to interact as they had different daily priorities. The four forms of distance appeared to be most prevalent at the Sergeant-Inspector, and Inspector-Chief Inspector level as shown in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 here

Geographical distance. Being based at different physical locations appeared to lead to reduced interaction between officers and their superiors. For example, Inspectors managed Sergeants based at a number of different stations, making it impossible for them to be together all of the time: "We run five different stations, so I've got three Sergeants and ..., two Sergeants run two stations and

one Sergeant runs one. I work at the main station…I very rarely see them" (Inspector 3). As a result, trying to get to know their subordinates and build close relationships when interactions were limited was difficult for superiors: "Yeah, it's quite difficult when you don't see them on a regular basis, …, it's trying to gauge people through your supervisory meetings and how they respond to, …, seeing how they react to you" (Inspector 3). On the other hand, Constables and Sergeants, and Chief Inspectors and Superintendents interacted more frequently due to the absence of distance: "So we work together as a team, daily, talking daily, meeting daily, discussing and planning at strategic level daily…we all work on the same corridor" (Chief Inspector 4).

The theme of geographical distance highlighted that where officers were not co-located with their superiors, they had reduced opportunities for interaction with each other compared to those that enjoyed working from the same location.

Temporal distance. As described before, NPG Inspectors mostly worked different shift patterns to their Chief Inspectors, and SNT Sergeants worked different shifts to their Inspectors. When this was the case, a reduction of interaction opportunities was the result. Most Inspectors were also located remotely from their Chief Inspectors which meant that they had little face-to-face interaction with them. One Chief Inspector explained:

> I've got, what is it, eight Inspectors, working different shift patterns and this, that and the other. So my actual physically seeing them is quite rare….I only have the potential to see them twice in a month (Chief Inspector 2).

The lack of interaction caused by shift-working was in stark contrast to the high levels of interaction of those working on the same shift:

I speak to her every day that I'm at work, at least a couple of occasions. One advantageous thing is that she's sort of got her office in ours, so it's like a bit open plan. They've got their own private office but she tends to work sort of in an office where we are so it's quite easy to sort of speak to her. It's quite informal… (Constable 3).

Therefore, the theme of temporal distance highlighted that different shift patterns reduced the potential for some officers and superiors to interact with each other.

Task distance. Inspectors and Chief Inspectors appeared to have reduced opportunities for interaction due to the differing nature of their job design. For example, Chief Inspectors managed both NPG and SNT activities, but at the ranks below Chief Inspector, the officers were involved in only NPG or SNT activities. The Chief Inspectors were updated as and when NPG situations arose, keeping them in touch with important developments. On the other hand, owing to the slow-paced nature of SNT, the Chief Inspectors were usually updated about developments only during daily, weekly or monthly scheduled meetings. The scheduled meetings comprised a number of Inspectors from different SNTs, indicating that interaction between superior and subordinate would be limited.

One SNT Inspector highlighted that having a Chief Inspector who came from a NPG background was problematic because the Chief Inspector didn't have an understanding of what the SNT role entailed. Therefore, he tended to not dedicate much time to SNT tasks: "He's come to this environment and is dodging meetings and puts it on a deputy because he doesn't know what we're talking about, I think he finds it a different language" (Inspector 5). The Inspector ascribes the Chief Inspector's non-attendance at meetings to a lack of contextual knowledge and not sharing the same discourse and mental models as the SNT team he supervises. The task and social-context therefore has the capacity to act as a barrier to

communication, such that the leader or follower may avoid or feel excluded from interaction opportunities.

Despite the need for NPG Inspectors to update Chief Inspectors regularly, it was not always the case that NPG Inspectors and their Chief Inspectors had easy access to each other. Chief Inspectors were often assigned to specialist roles known as cadres, which frequently removed them from their substantive policing role. When this was the case, and in order to ensure that there was always a Chief Inspector responsible for formal operational matters, a Critical Incident Manager (CIM) process was in place. Therefore, when an issue was escalated, it may not have been their own Chief Inspector to whom the Inspector was reporting. An experienced NPG Inspector explained that he only spoke to his superior once every ten days, partly because of the CIM and partly because he worked in a different station to his Chief Inspector.

The theme of task distance highlighted that opportunities for interaction between Inspectors and Chief Inspectors were limited by the nature of the work they carried out.

Strategic distance. The focus on tactical policing by Chief Inspectors and the focus on operational policing by Inspectors presented a barrier to interaction. Figure 1 in the method section illustrates the relevant focus of each hierarchical level. Inspectors and Chief Inspectors had reduced opportunities for speaking about operational matters because there was a reduced need for them to interact, resulting in Inspectors describing high levels of autonomy:

> If you ask a frontline Sergeant what the most important thing they have to deal with on a day-to-day basis, it'll be mental health, missing from home and crime list. You ask our senior managers what they should be focusing on every day, it's acquisitive crime, crime prevention, and all stuff like that, and gun crime (Inspector 1).

Similarly,

"So, I would only contact him to be quite honest if I really do need to contact him. Other than that, pretty much run quite autocratically" (Inspector 2).

The theme of strategic distance highlighted that Chief Inspectors were focused on tactical policing issues and Inspectors were focused on operational policing issues which reduced opportunities for interaction between them.

Interaction Potential and Communication Channels. As highlighted above, the presence of distance within the organizational design reduced interaction opportunities for superiors and subordinates. All participants felt that face-to-face contact was preferable because of the ease of communication, the ability to have a two-way conversation and the potential to speak more openly and honestly: "If I can talk to him, it's so much easier to talk to someone face to face and explain something, than to talk to someone over the radio or on email or anything" (Constable 1). Similarly, "The personal [interaction] has more impact, it builds up a relationship far better, and gets, there's clarity in terms of the, what's required or what's being communicated" (Chief Inspector 3).

As seen earlier, the ranks where the most distance was imposed by the organizational structure were between Sergeant and Inspector, and Inspector and Chief Inspector. Predominantly, where geographical and temporal distance existed, superiors highlighted that face-to-face interaction with their subordinates was reduced. Where Inspectors were managing Sergeants who were based remotely, a reduction in face-to-face contact also resulted: "I like to speak to people face-to-face, but it's impossible…You just haven't got that time" (Inspector 3). As a consequence, other communication channels became more appropriate. For example, given the asynchronous working patterns, email was often the most suitable method:

I've got eight inspectors that work at three different sites on seven different shift patterns. So, I don't speak to them, most of the communication I have with them, … is via email (Chief Inspector 2).

Inspectors and Chief Inspectors also described using video conferencing as a way to interact with each other given the geographical and temporal distance to which they were subjected.

I would generally see him on a daily basis in a morning management meeting which is done on remote video link where we review the last 24 hours and where we're going for the next 24 hours (Inspector 2).

As a way to overcome the distance, many Inspectors described the effort they went to in order to visit their Sergeants and create face-to-face opportunities with them, a reflection of the recognition that some communication channels weren't useful for building a relationship.

You're not going to be able to have a face-to-face, it's physically impossible with the geography of [town], which is why I try, well not try, I do move around the sites or start on a day shift at [one station] but I'll make sure that on the afternoon shifts I'm either a [different station]…and then back at [original station] at nights. So … we can sort of have that face to face instead of having to radio and phone (Inspector 4).

Familiarity. It also appeared that familiarity between the superior and subordinate was for some officers helpful in overcoming the effects of distance, meaning that reduced interaction potential was not the result where a high-quality relationship had been established previously.

I can talk with [name of Superintendent] on a very informal basis. I know him of old so I wouldn't have any problem ringing him up and having a chat about anything in relation to that (Chief Inspector 5).

Where superior and subordinate had worked together for a long time, they described knowing each other well, trusting each other, understanding each other's priorities, and as a result, interacting in a more familiar way.

I have an excellent relationship with him. I think that's probably because I was a Sergeant when he was an Inspector, and he pushed me through to get promotion, so I suppose it is more of a buddy relationship but still a working relationship….And we've stayed together, so wherever he's gone I've gone with him, so….Yeah, I suppose it's different to the relationships that you have with other commanders when you're dealing with public order if you don't really know them, it can be difficult to know whether you can trust those sorts of people, so. It's about how you can build up those relationships. But I have no issues with going to him with what he needs to know about, filtering out what he probably doesn't need to know. I ring him at all hours of the day and night because that's what he wants me to do if we're unsure of things, rather than things go wrong (Inspector 3).

Interaction potential therefore appeared to be shaped by distance imposed by the organization design, but did not necessarily lead to reduced interaction where superiors and their subordinates had established familiarity with each other over time. In contrast to earlier examples of reduced interaction caused by distance, the existence of a prior relationship between a superior and their subordinate could indicate that distance may not affect all superior-subordinate relationships in the same way. Therefore, it could be that when superiors and subordinates share

the same perception about common understandings and contextualized knowledge about something, they can identify the information that would be of interest to each other and interact accordingly.

DISCUSSION

The present study identified four inductively-generated themes representing distance created by the organizational design of the police force: geographic, temporal, task and strategic. These types of distance affected leaders and followers differentially according to the level of the organization at which they worked by reducing interaction potential for two reasons. Firstly, the distance prevented them from being in the same place (geographical and temporal) or from working on the same activities (task and strategic), thereby reducing the need for them to interact with each other. Secondly, reduced interaction potential occurred through limited availability of communication channels through which interaction might take place. However, it was also identified that where leaders and followers had become familiar with each other over time, interaction potential was not affected to the same extent. When relating these findings back to the model of leader distance (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002), it appears that all forms of distance can be linked to one theoretical form of distance in particular, namely perceived interaction frequency (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

Theoretical Contributions

The findings demonstrate that the physical design of an organization is important in shaping the amount and type of interaction that leaders and followers enjoy. Consequently, the context must be taken into account when interpreting the literature on relationship quality because different forms of distance can vary amongst different levels of seniority. Furthermore, the variability in distance across an organization may not be limited to different hierarchical levels, but may also

vary in different functional areas, geographic locations or departments. The literature heretofore

has conceptualized distance as a feature of organizational design, which makes assumptions

about organization-wide uniformity and generalizability (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Brunelle,

2013). However, the findings of the present study indicate that there may be large variation in

types and levels of distance within the same organization. Furthermore, the four forms of distance

are caused by organizational design features which are likely to be features of all hierarchical

organizations, suggesting that distance could be a highly prevalent influence in many leader-

follower relationships. Additionally, it is plausible that the same or similar forms of distance are

present, to various degrees, in less hierarchical organizations, since distance is not always caused

by hierarchy but a result of a range of design features, including geographic dispersion, shift

work, and operational and strategic focus (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

As well as the four types of distance, another influence over reduced interaction potential

was identified as availability (or lack) of communication channels. Interaction is synonymous

with communication as it is the act of communication in both verbal and non-verbal ways that

fosters good social relations (Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015). The presence

of physical and temporal distance forced the use of mediated communication channels, such as

scheduled meetings, telephone, radio, video-conference and email as it was impossible to have

face-to-face interactions when not physically or temporally present. Asynchronous channels, such

as email and group meetings using remote technologies, such as video conferencing, do not allow

leaders and their followers to engage openly and honestly (Treviño et al., 2000).

Where organizations provide followers with opportunities for regular interaction with

their leaders, organizations encourage a culture in which informal interaction is allowed to take

place. However, when leaders and followers do not have the potential to interact frequently, the

main forms of interaction are likely to be perceived of as formal (Lievrouw & Finn, 1996). For example, it is likely to be difficult for leaders and followers to get to know each other through email because of the reduced non-verbal cues and aural cues such as hesitation or tone of voice which may have been picked up using face-to-face, telephone or radio (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Non-verbal cues have been found to be important in face-to-face interactions for helping to clarify meaning and understanding between individuals (Kraut et al., 1990). Therefore, it can be argued that where leaders and their followers are physically distant, the richness of information transmission is lacking, meaning that face-to-face interactions are reduced in favor of written methods or computer mediated channels (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Additionally, it could be suggested that beyond the implications of distance for communication across hierarchical levels, the same implications could be applied to horizontal or cross-functional communication within the organization.

With regards to relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006), the findings from the present study demonstrate that interaction potential can shape relationship quality. Therefore, the reduction in interaction potential is likely to be an explanatory factor in previous quantitative studies that have found that distance moderates and mediates some leadership outcomes (Avolio et al., 2004; Howell, Neufeld, & Avolio, 2005). However, familiarity between leader and follower appears to help overcome distance for two reasons. Firstly, leaders and followers who were familiar with each other before the distance featured in their relationship had access to a wider range of communication channels, comprising informal ones, such as corridor or telephone conversations, compared to those leaders and followers who didn't know each other previously. Secondly, the existence of shared mental models (e.g. Cannon-Bowers, Salas, & Converse, 1993) that usually develop through familiarity were more likely to allow leaders and followers to know when interaction was required. LMX theory has shown that where managers develop a high-

quality relationship with their subordinates, leaders and followers are more likely to spend more time together (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Therefore, it would appear that where close relationships existed prior to distance being introduced, continuous communication and proactive pursuit of interactions were more likely, thus mitigating the negative effects of distance. Conversely, where prior relationships were not present, and in the absence of shared task-related knowledge and understanding, leaders and followers had no need to interact. The effect of familiarity can be attributed to the presence or absence of shared cognitions, both on an interpersonal level, and on contextual and task-related matters. Shared cognitions are typically referred to as an interpretive framework for the processes and effectiveness of teams (Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 2001; Cannon-Bowers, Salas, & Converse, 1993; Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994). The findings show that there is scope to extend this framework to account for communication-related behaviors in leader-follower relationships.

Limitations and Future Research

The data were collected in one police force so it is not possible to assume generalizability of these findings to other occupational and organizational contexts. However, the collection of data from one organization can act as a strength by providing clear patterns which originate from individuals with similar influences (Yin, 2009). It is highly possible that data collected from multiple organizations may not have yielded with such clarity, aspects of organizational design which contributed towards distance. Furthermore, there are 42 other police forces in England and Wales that have a similar organization design, suggesting that these findings may be of use to them, even though not generalizable to a sample outside of policing.

Organizational design features influence the degree of distance which, in turn, influences interaction potential and communication channel availability, which shape and are shaped by

leader-follower relationship quality. Future research is needed to explore whether distance is present to such a great degree in other organizations, industries, sectors and countries, and whether it has the same effect on communication and relationships. What is more, the findings indicate that even within the same organization there is a high degree of variation in distance. Future research could extend this finding by investigating the degree to which there is variation in distance between different departments and functions in organizations and the implications of distance for communication. Such studies can investigate the implications for features beyond leader-follower communication and relationships, to factors such as knowledge exchange, culture and climate, strategic alignment, collaboration and conflict.

Furthermore, in order to develop a more generalizable and widely applicable model of the relationship between distance, communication and relationships, a quantitative study would be essential. Distance was present across multiple levels of the organization, so quantitative investigations would need to adopt a multi-level multi-source design in order to capture the cross-level effects and explore implication for organizations, departments, teams, dyads and individuals.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that where distance was greatest, participants appeared to communicate mainly through email, telephone, video conference and scheduled meetings. A previous study has shown that these channels were identified as formal by the majority of participants (Author, 2017). A number of studies have shown that informal channels are preferred and considered more useful for building relationships (Fayard & Weeks, 2007; Kraut et al., 1990), suggesting that further research could be done to understand how formal channels shape interaction potential.

Reflexive account

The role of reflexivity strengthens the quality of research by bringing vulnerability, honesty and transparency to the research process (Tracy, 2010). By doing so, the qualitative researcher, through self-reflexivity, is able to bring to the fore the "shielded or hidden" things that are often overlooked in quantitative research. The inductive analysis was a messy coding process owing to the large amount of data. However, it enabled the researcher to identify factors and concepts which might have otherwise been overlooked, in particular the contextual factors which appear to have contributed towards creating distance. Parker (2004) argued that reflexivity enables the researcher to consider additional influences on the research findings, situating them in a particular cultural or economic context. Without the inductive coding, contextual factors would certainly not have been identified as themes because the participants themselves were not necessarily aware of their influence.

When considering bias introduced by participants, Cassell and Symon (2004) highlighted that when interviewing individuals with a high status within an organization, especially those who command respect from others, it is possible that they may provide only "surface-level answers to questions and therefore the depth of their conversation will remain "shallow"" (p. 19). In order to prevent this from happening, participants were asked to talk about communication with their manager, and not about the distance between them, as this might have encouraged defensiveness. For example, carrying out research in a police environment is known to present additional barriers for a non-police officer. This may have affected the way in which participants viewed the researcher. Brown (1996 as cited in Reiner, 2000; p. 222) would have described the researchers as "outside outsiders", that is someone who was not employed or commissioned by the police to carry out research on their behalf, but wished to do so anyway. It became clear to the

researcher over the course of the data collection that being an "outsider" with an audio recorder, heavily shaped the willingness of some participants to share openly and honestly their experiences of working with, and communicating with their superior.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, where distance is high, leaders and followers may have reduced interaction potential for three reasons. Firstly, because they may be physically or temporally remote from each other. Secondly, because they perceive the world in different ways and therefore don't feel the need to interact with each other. Finally, the limited availability of communication channels where distance exists may lead to reduced desire for interaction. Each of these effects of distance can be linked to one particular form of distance in the leader distance model conceptualized by Antonakis and Atwater (2002), namely perceived interaction frequency. Perceived interaction frequency appeared strongly among this sample but it seemed to be different for leaders and followers at different levels of the organization because certain forms of distance appeared to limit interaction potential by restricting both opportunity for interaction and availability of communication channels. Therefore, although leaders and followers might have the potential to interact, they may choose not to do so because the method of communication is not appropriate or introduces an undesirable level of formality. It can therefore be said that perceived interaction frequency may be reduced not just by organizational design features, but by the method of communication available to leaders and followers.

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FIGURES AND TABLES
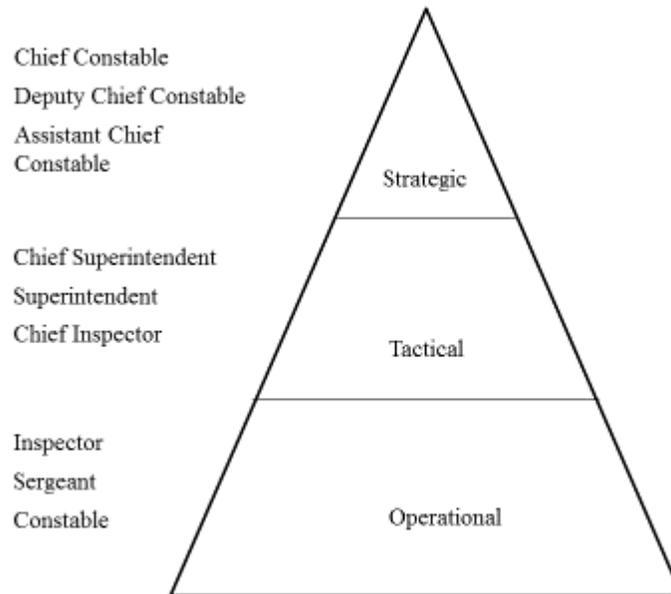
Chief Constable
Deputy Chief Constable
Assistant Chief Constable

Strategic

Chief Superintendent
Superintendent
Chief Inspector

Tactical

Inspector
Sergeant
Constable

Operational

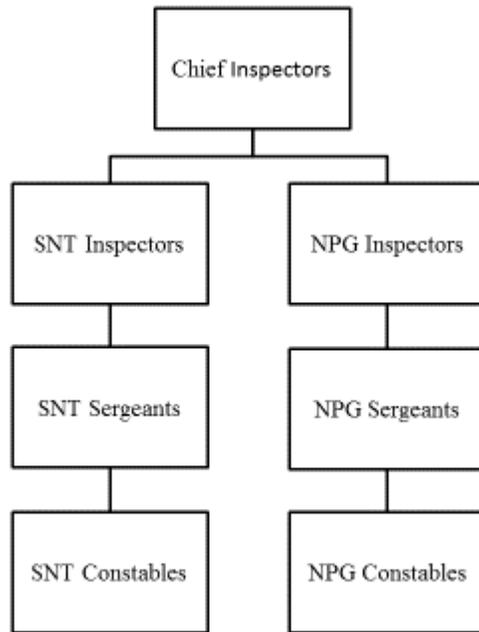**Figure 1.** Hierarchical structuring showing rank structure.

Figure 2. Hierarchical structure showing distribution of NPG and SNT officers

Table 1. Participant's police units

Rank	NPG	SNT	Not NPG/SNT
Constables	2		1
Sergeants	2		1
Inspectors	5	3	
Chief Inspectors			5

Table 2. Superordinate themes and subthemes

Superordinate Theme	Second order code (interpretative code)	First order code (descriptive code)
Geographical	Familiarity	Method of communication
Temporal	Method preference	Frequency of communication
Task	Interaction opportunity	Reason for communication
Strategic		Timing
		Method appropriateness
		Autonomy
		Tenure

Table 3. Quotations to support coding process.

First order code	Second order code	Evidence
Method of communication	Familiarity	Erm…I can talk with [name of Superintendent] on a very informal basis. I know him of old so I wouldn't have any problem ringing him up and having a chat about anything in relation to that (Inspector 5)
Method of communication	Method preference	So the vast majority of communication between me, … and my chief inspector, is done by email. He'll ring me…. But very rarely, usually it's an email…. And my view is that that, email, and that, is actually stifling what we used to call communication (Inspector 5)
Frequency of communication	Interaction Opportunity	…my old role, which is a community safety officer, ….we tend to be slightly detached from the supervisors, so the supervisor of the old office, we'd have our own office, and in the morning we'd come on to

		work we'd have our briefing, sergeants would tell us what we need to know et cetera et cetera, we'd share information, and then the sergeants would go off and do their supervisory stuff and then we'd go off and do our work, and then the next chance we'd probably speak to each other is either at lunchtime when we'd come in for our meal and then after that it's pretty much when it's time to go home, type of thing (Constable 2).
Reason for communication	Method Preference	Again, it depends how urgent the, I suppose, what they want to discuss is. But if it is, I find it a lot easier face to face, as in, we mentioned already how the district [is] split into three sites. It is far easier speaking with the sergeant face to face than when I'm at [a different station], if you like, on a morning to sort out the prisoners, than phoning through and trying to

		explain, because sometimes on a phone or email that message just doesn't come across at all (Inspector 4).
Timing	Interaction opportunity	I could come on in a morning to sort of four missing people, before I get to DMM in a morning which is at quarter to nine, I've got to have my, a good understanding of those four missing people, and potentially you know, if one of those is high-risk I've got to straight away get my head around what's going on with that person and get some work allocated out. So then I can be up to DMM talking about the same thing, then come out of DMM with some more jobs to do, and I can sort of be a third into the day and think gosh, I've not even spoken to that person [her Sergeant] at all (Inspector 7)
Timing	Method Preference	[radio] it's just an instant form of communication, isn't it, where if you

		need to get hold of somebody you can usually (Sergeant 1). It tends to be the time-critical things. You know, like a critical incident or something like staff welfare that needs to be sorted that day, something that would need to be submitted within a very short time period. I'll go up and have that conversation in person (Chief Inspector 2)
Method appropriateness	Method Preference	if it's something which is really important, I always send it in an email, that's the cynic in me, because I always seem to say, it kind of backs me up if anything's to go wrong, you know, everything's traceable and I can check you know. I have sent this message, so if it's something dead, dead important that I think, you know, it needs recording, it'll tend to be an email (Constable 2).

Autonomy	Interaction Opportunity	Again, as what's called a response inspector, I work most of the time without any supervision at all… we have a system of critical incident managers, so if it's on a shift that's not in the daytime and there's no chief inspectors or above working, then I might call on the advice of a critical incident manager, but that would be few and far between…(Inspector 6)
Tenure	Interaction Opportunity	…me, as the youngest I'm the person that communicates with him more than others, because I want clarification on what I'm doing or an answer to a question, whereas everybody else in the group has got quite a lot of service, or most of them. So I think probably the longer you're in service the less you have the need to talk to your manager (Constable 1).

Table 4. Prevalence of distance by rank

Rank	Geographic Distance	Temporal distance	Task Distance	Strategic Distance
Police Constable - Sergeant	N	N	N	N
Sergeant - Inspector	Y	Y	N	N
Inspector - Chief Inspector	Y	Y	Y	Y
Chief Inspector - Superintendent	N	N	N	N