

Research in leadership, self, and identity: A sample of the present and a glimpse of the future

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Abstract

Researchers in leadership effectiveness are paying increasing attention to the role of follower self-concept and identity as a mediator and moderator of the effectiveness of leadership. In this introductory article, we provide a short outline of this rapidly growing field of research, briefly introduce the articles presented in this special issue on leadership, self, and identity, and highlight key themes for future research that we feel emerge from these studies. These themes include greater attention to the dynamic interplay between leaders and followers, the incorporation of theories of fairness, and the role of leader self-concept.

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The essence of leadership is influence, and it is through its influence on followers that leadership may best be observed. This realization has led leadership researchers to focus increasingly on the psychological effects of leadership on followers and on how these effects mediate the influence of leadership on followers' attitudes, behavior and performance. For roughly the last decade, a central theme of this focus on the psychology of followers has been the role of follower self-concept and identity in leadership effectiveness. The growing body of work in this area has inspired books on leadership, self, and identity (Lord & Brown, 2004; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003a), a recent yearly review article in *The Leadership Quarterly* (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004) and this special issue on leadership, self, and identity. The aim of this special issue is to capture a sample of state of the art research on leadership, self, and identity in order to illustrate the variety of issues that may be tackled from a self and identity perspective. We hope that this special issue inspires leadership researchers and practitioners to make issues of self and identity a focal point in their future endeavors.

In this introductory article we first provide a short outline of the self and identity approach to leadership effectiveness and then go on to use the articles in this special issue in order to highlight themes that we consider to be important directions for future research.

1. Leadership, self, and identity

Core to the self and identity approach to leadership effectiveness is an understanding that the way that we perceive ourselves, our self-concept or identity (note that the terms are used interchangeably) strongly informs our feelings, beliefs, attitudes, goals, and behavior (Leary & Tangney, 2003). This has two important implications for leadership effectiveness. First, leadership that is able to influence follower self-conception may influence follower attitudes and behavior (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Hence, follower self-conception may *mediate* the relationship between leadership and follower behavior.

Thus far, empirical research on follower self-concept as a mediator of the relationship between leadership and follower attitudes and behavior has mostly focused on one of three main themes: self-construal, self-evaluation, and self-consistency (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Self-construal refers to the extent to which self-conception includes relationships with significant others (relational self, reflected in personal identification), is defined in terms of group memberships (collective self or social identity, reflected in social identification), or is restricted to the individual as a unique person (personal self; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Leadership has been shown to be more effective if it engenders identification with the leader as well as builds identification with the collective. There is also research showing that leadership that affects follower self-evaluations, as reflected in self-esteem (sense of self-worth) and self-efficacy (beliefs about one's ability to organize and execute courses of action necessary for attainment of a goal), may have a positive effect on outcomes. Finally, there is some, more modest, evidence for the idea that leadership effectiveness may be related to its ability to engender the feeling that the course of action advocated by the leader is consistent with one's self-views (see van Knippenberg et al., 2004, for a detailed overview of the evidence).

Second, self-conception may be regarded an important regulator of social interaction that may inform responses to leadership (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord et al., 1999; van

Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003b). This concerns the *moderator* role of follower self-conception. As the van Knippenberg et al. (2004) review indicates, this moderator role has more or less exclusively been studied for follower social identification (i.e., collective self-construal). For instance, there is consistent evidence that as followers identify more strongly with the collective (i.e., group, organization), the extent to which their leader is perceived to be group prototypical (i.e., to represent the collective identity) becomes more influential in determining leadership effectiveness, whereas the extent to which the leader has typical leader characteristics becomes relatively less influential. Moreover, with increasing identification, group members are more likely to endorse leaders who are perceived to be group-oriented (i.e., to pursue the collective's interest) and who treat followers as more or less interchangeable members of the group rather than as unique individuals.

In sum, there is evidence in support of both the mediator and the moderator role of follower self-conception in leadership effectiveness. The articles in this special issue not only offer insightful illustrations of both roles but they also point to exciting directions for future research.

2. The current studies and some implications for future research

First, as is nicely illustrated by the study by Pierro, Bonaiuto, Cicero, van Knippenberg, and Kruglanski, the social identity analysis may be fruitfully developed and extended. As we touched on above, the social identity analysis points to follower identification as an important moderator of leadership effectiveness and to leader group prototypicality and leader group-orientedness as important determinants of leadership effectiveness (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003b). Pierro et al. suggest that individual differences in follower “need for cognitive closure”, or the desire for a definite answer to a question and the avoidance of ambiguity (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), also moderate the influence of leader group prototypicality on leadership effectiveness, independent of follower identification with the group. This article thus points to a host of potential situational influences on uncertainty and ambiguity that may moderate leadership effectiveness.

The articles by Lipponen, Koivisto, and Olkkonen, and by Tyler and De Cremer also apply the social identity analyses to the study of leadership, but they also highlight another important theme that emerges from the current set of studies: the role of leader fairness. Leaders influence members outcomes in groups and organizations and the fairness of their outcome allocations (i.e., distributive fairness) as well as the fairness of the procedures used to arrive at these outcomes (i.e., procedural fairness) and the interpersonal treatment provided in the course of this process (i.e., interactional fairness) may be important concerns for followers (e.g., De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2003).

Lipponen et al. focus on the interactive effects of the leader's group prototypicality and followers' perceptions of procedural justice on status judgments (pride and respect) made by followers. In a study of employees of banking organizations they showed that relationships between procedural justice (in this case informal justice) and status judgments were stronger the more prototypical the supervisor was assessed to be. Tyler and De Cremer focus on the interplay between procedural justice of the leader and identification of the followers. Their study revealed that the fairness of the procedures leaders used to implement a merger shaped employee's subsequent reactions (i.e., acceptance of the leader's vision that the new merged company is desirable, and employees' motivation to work on behalf of that new company). This was especially the case among employees who identified strongly with the new

company. It is only relatively recently that leader fairness has become a significant focus for leadership research. We feel that both articles clearly highlight the added value of integrating social identity perspectives with theories of leader fairness.

Reicher, Haslam, and Hopkins argue in their article that the impact of leaders on followers must be addressed in the context of leaders' and followers' joint involvement in a social categorical relationship. Reicher et al. argue that leadership depends upon the existence of shared social identity: Where there is a group and there is a shared idea of its collective identity then one voice, a leader's voice, can represent all of its members. Reicher and colleagues further argue for considering both leaders and followers as *entrepreneurs* of identity. Leaders actively intervene in creating and redefining identities and thereby in creating and transforming their followers. However, followers are not merely passive onlookers in this process. They often do not endorse leaders who violate their understandings of either identity or of social reality. The contribution by Reicher and colleagues thus highlights another important issue: the dynamic interplay between leader and follower. Indeed, not enough is known about the processes through which leaders and followers influence each other in the construal of a collective self. More research in this area seems warranted.

Yet another exciting research topic emerges from the Epitropaki and Martin study. They focus on individual difference variables as potential moderators of the relationship between transformational/transactional leadership perceptions and organizational identification. In a survey of public service employees, Epitropaki and Martin identify positive affectivity, negative affectivity, and separateness–connected self-schema as moderators. Their research raises the question of which dispositional characteristics of followers affect how well leaders may be able to engender identification with the organization.

Finally, Lord and Hall's analysis of the role of leader self-concept in leadership development points at two important issues. First, leadership development may be one of the more important, albeit understudied, areas in leadership research (Day, 2000) and Lord and Hall present a persuasive argument that the development of leaders' self-conception as a leader is an essential part of advanced development as a leader.

Second, and perhaps even more important, Lord and Hall's analysis illustrates the important point that the self and identity perspective may also be fruitfully applied to understand leadership effectiveness from the angle of leader (i.e., rather than follower) self-conception. Given that leadership may derive its effectiveness from its effect on follower self-conception, an important question is what are the determinants of leadership that positively affect follower self-conception? What leads leaders to engage in behaviors that affect follower self-construal (e.g., group-oriented behavior)? What leads leaders to act in ways that build follower self-efficacy? An important source of such behaviors may be leader self-conception. Leaders that strongly identify with the collective and its mission may, for instance, be more likely to engage in acts that build follower identification and leaders that strongly believe in the collective's ability to achieve desired ends may be more likely to engender follower efficacy. Exploring the role of leader self-conception in leadership effectiveness would thus seem to be a promising avenue for future research.

In sum, we believe that the emerging literature in this area, including the articles appearing in this special issue, has considerable potential for explaining leader effectiveness. We also believe that the articles in this special issue highlight important new themes for future research that may further help to advance our knowledge of leadership, self, and identity. Our hope is that this special issue may serve as an inspiration for the future undertakings of both researchers and practitioners.

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