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Individual differences as antecedents of leader behavior: Towards an understanding of multi-level outcomes



Aybars Tuncdogan ^{a,*}, Oguz Ali Acar ^b, Daan Stam ^c

^a Cardiff University, United Kingdom

^b Cass Business School, City, University of London, United Kingdom

^c Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The leadership research on individual differences is going through a period of revival. However, due to the substantial number of variables in this area and the different knowledge bases they are associated with (e.g., psychology, endocrinology, genetics), the literature is also becoming highly fragmented as it grows. This fragmentation is preventing different literature streams from effectively communicating with each other and synthesizing the rapidly expanding body of knowledge. Consequently, the continued growth of the individual differences literature is at risk. Therefore, we believe that classifying the relevant literature streams and reviewing the key variables in those streams will be beneficial. We do so by organizing this review and research agenda of the leadership literature on individual differences around the recent model developed by Antonakis, Day, and Schyns (2012). In doing so, we hope to unify some of the future research efforts around a recent and recognized conceptual model, and in turn facilitate communication between these different streams of literature. Moreover, insights from this literature also allow us to propose additions and refinements to the model of Antonakis, Day, and Schyns (2012) that may help scholars by indicating other fruitful areas for future research on individual differences.

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Introduction

Observations about the link between an individual's stable characteristics and behaviors have been made throughout the history of mankind. Since ancient times, people have been interested in the individual differences that make some leaders more effective than others. Indeed, selecting, supporting and following the right leaders has always been one of the major dilemmas that people have faced, because of the huge impact these influential individuals can have on the lives of their followers as well as on the well-being and survival of their collective entities, such as groups, organizations and societies (i.e. multi-level outcomes). Consider the following time-honored example of individual differences in political leadership:

"We note that [leaders] pursue the ends they have in view...by different ways. One uses caution while another is impetuous, one resorts to violence while another relies on craft, one acts patiently while another does the contrary; and each reaches his goal by a different route".

–Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1513/2003

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: tuncdogana@cardiff.ac.uk (A. Tuncdogan), oguz.acar@city.ac.uk (O.A. Acar), dstam@rsm.nl (D. Stam).

The contemporary academic literature on traits has had significant success in developing the knowledge base required to account for a wide assortment of persistent differences in leadership behaviors. For instance, concerning the quote above, the literature on chronic regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997, 1998; Haws, Dholakia, & Bearden, 2010) can provide elaborate explanations of why some leaders are almost always more cautious or impetuous (e.g., McMullen, Shepherd, & Patzelt, 2009), why some vigilantly show great attention to detail and others advance aggressively towards the goals in the big picture (e.g., Förster & Higgins, 2005), or some are patient while others behave somewhat recklessly (e.g., Hamstra, Van Yperen, Wisse, & Sassenberg, 2011) in pursuing their goals.

While leadership research on traits had slowed down somewhat over the last decade or so, due to the recent efforts of the *Leadership Quarterly* it is once again becoming a vibrant area of inquiry. In line with the journal's goal of reviving leadership research on individual differences (especially since the special issue in 2012), numerous articles on this theme have been published in the last couple of years (e.g., Bendahan, Zehnder, Pralong, & Antonakis, 2015; Cavazotte, Moreno, & Hickmann, 2012; Stulp, Buunk, Verhulst, & Pollet, 2013; Spisak, Grabo, Arvey, & van Vugt, 2014; Tuncdogan, van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2015). However, with this rapid growth comes a high degree of fragmentation, for at least two reasons. First, unlike the institutional theory literature, which has a paradigm with relatively clearly-defined boundaries and key concepts (e.g., legitimization, isomorphism, etc.), the literature on individual differences is multi-paradigmatic and contains a very large number of relevant concepts. Second, this field is not only multi-paradigmatic but also multidisciplinary, with many of its concepts originating from different knowledge bases, including but not limited to psychology (e.g., personality traits, regulatory focus), psychiatry (e.g., dark-triad personalities, general quality of sleep), physiology (e.g., facial morphology, vocal characteristics), endocrinology (e.g., sex hormone levels), and genetics (e.g., DAT1 gene, research on twins).

This fragmentation prevents these different literature streams from communicating effectively with each other and synthesizing the rapidly expanding body of knowledge, and that presents a threat for the continued growth of the individual differences literature. When we examine how this problem has been dealt with recently in other interdisciplinary literatures such as behavioral strategy (e.g., Powell, Lovallo, & Fox, 2011), two complementary solutions stand out: (1) providing regular summaries of research in the field, including the classification of the relevant constructs and their interrelationships, and (2) unifying the research efforts around a relatively small number of conceptual baseline models. The first approach is achieved through literature reviews and also through the use of meta-analyses and bibliometric studies. The second is more complex, as it is generally quite difficult to create consensus in any scientific literature. However, those literatures that can achieve some level of consensus around a relatively small number of baseline models are able to focus their efforts. For example, achieving some level of consensus around the theory of reasoned action/theory of planned behavior (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein, 1980) played a role in the rapid growth of the literature on attitudes. Another example is the particle physics literature, which benefited from the fact that there are only two predominant baseline models (Einstein's deterministic model and quantum mechanics), allowing focused efforts on arriving at a detailed understanding of the theoretical and practical implications of these two models. Efforts that diverge from each other by using too many models prevent the development of in-depth understanding, a problem known as inadequate paradigm development (e.g., Powell et al., 2011).

Following these two complementary solutions found in other literatures, we aim to help sustain and contribute to the rapid growth in the leadership literature on individual differences in two ways. First, we will classify the main streams in the literature and the key constructs within them, and build a research agenda based on this. In recent years, there have been articles initiating research on almost all the relevant differences between individuals. For instance, at least one article was published on genetic factors (e.g., Li et al., 2015), one on hormonal factors (e.g., Bendahan et al., 2015), facial morphology (Haselhuhn, Wong, Ormiston, Inesi, & Galinsky, 2014), voice characteristics (DeGroot, Aime, Johnson, & Kluemper, 2011), psychological traits and trait-like features (e.g., O'Reilly, Doerr, Caldwell, & Chatman, 2014), and so on. In other words, the building blocks are already in place, and future research will rest upon the current foundations. Thus, at this point, we believe that it will be helpful to provide researchers with a classification of these different research streams. More specifically, doing so will help us to establish the current situation, which is necessary in order to determine how to proceed. Second, we will build this literature review around a simple but powerful model that has recently been developed which links leaders' individual differences to multi-level outcomes (i.e. Antonakis et al., 2012). It is worth noting that the review section of this paper will focus mainly on the literature addressing the relationship between leaders' traits and different leadership outcomes, as providing a satisfactory summary of research on all components of this model is likely to be beyond the scope of a single paper. The model will, however, serve as the main organizing framework for the future research agenda we propose following our review. By doing so, we aim to help reduce fragmentation and facilitate communication between different streams of literature by unifying at least some of the future research efforts around a recent and recognized conceptual model.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss the model which underlies this review and its components, and focus in depth on the role of leaders' individual differences. After that, we provide a classification of different streams within the leadership literature on leaders' individual differences, with examples of their effects on leadership outcomes. We end this review by proposing a research agenda, around the leadership process model, that will enable a better understanding of the effects of leaders' traits and behaviors on multi-level outcomes.

The model underlying this review

The leadership process model by Antonakis et al. (2012) consists of three main groups: distal predictors, proximal predictors, and the multi-level outcomes of these predictors. The distal predictors part of the model focuses on the individual differences

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