The failure of introverts to emerge as leaders: The role of forecasted affect

Andrew Spark[a,*], Timothy Stansmore[b], Peter O'Connor[a]

[a] School of Management, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, QLD 4000, Australia
[b] School of Psychology and Counselling, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Introverts are less likely to emerge as leaders than extraverts, however the existing literature provides little explanation as to why. To investigate the potential cause of this trait-based difference in emergent leadership, we measured trait extraversion in a sample of 184 business students and studied their leadership-related behavior in an unstructured group task. We drew from a model of forecasted affect to hypothesize that introverts would be less likely to emerge as leaders based on their belief that engaging in the necessary extraverted behavior would be unpleasant/unenjoyable (i.e. they would forecast higher levels of negative affect compared to extraverts). Consistent with this, we found that introverts were less likely to emerge as leaders, and that forecasted negative affect fully accounted for the relationship between extraversion and peer-rated emergent leadership. We therefore argue that introverts fail to emerge as leaders as often as extraverts because they engage in higher levels of forecasted negative affect and that these forecasts impede their emergent leadership potential.

1. Introduction

Emergent leaders are individuals who take on leadership roles in teams with no formal leader (Lok & Crawford, 2004). These individuals not only appear leaderlike (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994) to others, they also provide motivation, direction and support for team members and consequently assist them to achieve their objectives (Bass & Bass, 2008). Due to the positive impact of emergent leadership within organisations, there has been an increase in research seeking to understand the characteristics of emergent leaders (Bass & Bass, 2008; Ensari, Riggio, Christian, & Carslaw, 2011; Kickul & Neuman, 2000). Recent research focussing on personality trait theory has demonstrated that trait extraversion is a consistent predictor of emergent leadership (Ensari et al., 2011; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002; O'Connor & Jackson, 2010). However, to our knowledge, no studies have examined why individuals low in trait extraversion (hereby referred to as introverts[1]) are less likely to emerge as leaders in groups with no formally assigned leader. To address this question, we draw from a novel line of research led by Fleeson (Fleeson, 2001; Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009; Fleeson, Malanos, & Achille, 2002) and Zelenski (Zelenski et al., 2013; Zelenski, Santoro, & Whelan, 2012). This research shows that although introverts can enact extraverted behaviors and appear to enjoy doing so, they are more likely to make 'affective forecasting errors'. In other words, introverts tend to believe (or 'forecast') that acting extraverted will be more unpleasant than what it

actually is (Zelenski et al., 2013). Thus, the purpose of the current study is to investigate emergent leadership from the perspective of forecasted affect and determine whether the tendency of introverts to make negative affective forecasts about group situations inhibits their tendency to emerge as leaders in such situations.

1.1. Extraversion and emergent leadership

The link between extraversion and leadership is one of the most robust findings in the leadership literature. In a meta-analysis conducted by Judge et al. (2002), it was found that extraversion is a predictor of both emergent leadership and leadership effectiveness, however the relationship is stronger for emergent leadership than it is for leadership effectiveness. The relationship even appears to remain stable over time, as extraverted teenagers are more likely to exhibit emergent leadership behaviors later in adulthood (Reichard et al., 2011). Whilst the literature supports the view that extraverts are more likely to emerge as leaders and be more effective once in a leadership role, we argue that the study of emergent leadership in introverts is important. Often, for example, an introverted employee will be the most qualified individual for a particular leadership role and consequently *should* emerge as a leader in such a situation. Additionally, recent research has identified specific situations whereby introversion actually benefits leadership performance. For example, Grant, Gino, and Hofmann (2011) recently found that introverted leaders are more effective than

---

extraverted leaders when leading proactive teams. Similarly, Martin, Liao, and Campbell (2013) found that directive leadership (a typically extraverted leadership style) enhances proactive behaviors for work units that are already highly satisfied with their leaders, however empowering leadership (a typically introverted leadership style) is more effective at improving task proficiency and proactive behaviors in teams that are less satisfied with their leaders. Other studies have demonstrated a negative relationship between extraversion and servant leadership (Hunter et al., 2013) and also show that at least one element of extraversion (i.e. dominance) in leaders can negatively affect team communication and performance (Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2013).

Therefore, despite trait extraversion's association with leadership effectiveness, we argue that the tendency for introverts to *not* emerge as leaders is problematic because there are many situations whereby introverted characteristics are synonymous with good leadership. Unfortunately, in spite of a growing body of research suggesting that introverts are sub-optimally underrepresented as emergent leaders, the literature is lacking an adequate explanation as to why. To address this gap, this study tests whether introverts fail to emerge as leaders as often as extraverts due to their propensity to make higher negative (and lower positive) affective forecasts regarding group situations. This line of argument draws from recent literature on forecasted affect.

1.2. Forecasted affect and hypotheses

A well-established relationship in the personality literature is the positive association between trait extraversion and positive affect (Rusting & Larsen, 1997), which has also been extended to state extraversion. In other words, even when introverts engage in extraverted behaviors, they too experience positive affect (Fleeson et al., 2002). Interestingly, although introverts are able to invoke positive affect via extraverted behaviors, evidence shows that they engage in such behaviors less frequently than extraverts (Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009). Logic would suggest that if positive emotions are sought by an individual, they ought to engage in such behaviors which increase their probability of generating said emotions. In a study by Zelenski et al. (2013), this inconsistency was investigated and it was found that part of the reason introverts do not enact extraverted behaviors as often as extraverts is due to forecasted affect errors. Importantly, this research suggests introverts tend to underestimate the amount of positive affect they will experience as a result of acting extraverted and are consequently less likely to engage in extraverted behavior. Given that emergent leadership is facilitated by trait extraversion (and trait extraversion itself is, unsurprisingly, associated with increased levels of state extraversion behavior in everyday life; Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009), and that introverts tend not to engage in such behavior due to affective forecasting errors, it stands to reason that introverts could tend not to emerge as leaders because they underestimate the associated positive affect conducive to emergent leadership (i.e. extraverted behavior). Our first hypothesis is therefore as follows:

H1. Forecasted positive affect will mediate the relationship between trait extraversion and emergent leadership.

This hypothesis is a direct extension of Zelenski et al.'s (2013) work and consistent with broader research demonstrating a link between extraversion and positive affect (Rusting & Larsen, 1997). However, perhaps the more surprising findings from Zelenski et al.'s study relate to affective forecasting errors with regards to negative affect. Although broader research on personality and affect indicates that trait extraversion and negative affect are only modestly related, if at all[2] (Rusting & Larsen, 1997), when it comes to *forecasted* negative affect the story is quite different. Zelenski et al. (2013) found that introverts

tend to overestimate the amount of *negative* affect they will experience when acting extraverted and further found that this error is more pronounced than it is for forecasted *positive* affect. Applying this to the current study, it follows that introverts will be less likely to emerge as leaders because they overestimate the negative affect related to behavior conducive to emergent leadership. Our second hypothesis is therefore as follows:

H2. Forecasted negative affect will mediate the relationship between trait extraversion and emergent leadership.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

198 first-year university business students participated in the study, however six were excluded as they did not complete the data collection procedure and a further eight were excluded because they were within a group that had less than three participants. Therefore, 184 valid cases were included in the analysis. Participants were aged between 16 and 48 ($M = 19.83$, $SD = 3.65$). 98 were female and 74 were male (12 did not indicate gender). There were no selection criteria beyond being enrolled in the first-year unit.

2.2. Design and analysis

An in-basket exercise was employed based on the typical emergent leadership design (i.e. a leaderless group task with peer-ratings of emergent leadership).[3] H1 and H2 were tested via a simple mediation model using SPSS (v. 23) incorporating the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2013). The independent variable was trait extraversion (self-rated) and the dependent variable was emergent leadership (peer-rated). The mediator variable was either forecasted positive affect (self-rated) or forecasted negative affect (self-rated). Age, gender, trait openness, trait conscientiousness, trait agreeableness and trait neuroticism were included as control variables in all analyses. Ethics approval was granted by the university Human Research Ethics Committee.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Big Five Mini-Markers

The Big Five Mini-Markers is a personality questionnaire consisting of 40 items (Saucier, 1994). The measure was derived from Goldberg's (1992) Big Five markers, which was developed to measure personality traits under time restraints and has been proven to be a reliable measure of personality ($\alpha \geq 0.80$; Thompson, 2008). Each item consists of an adjective relating to a personality trait (e.g. trait extraversion consisted of the following adjectives where the last four were reversed scored: *talkative*; *extraverted*; *energetic*; *bold*; *shy*; *withdrawn*; *bashful*; *quiet*). Participants were required to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with each adjective on a 5-point Likert scale. The reliability for the trait extraversion scale was $\alpha = 0.81$.

2.3.2. Forecasted affect

The forecasted affect questionnaire measured participants' level of forecasted positive affect and forecasted negative affect regarding the upcoming group/leadership exercise. Eight items were included and were scored on a 5-point Likert scale derived from Zelenski et al. (2013), which in turn is based on the Positive and Negative Affect schedule (PANAS; Watson, Lee, & Tellegen, 1988). Zelenski et al. (2013) reported average alphas of 0.82 for forecasted positive affect and 0.92 for forecasted negative affect. In the current study, forecasted

---

[2] Research tends to indicate that trait neuroticism is a better predictor of negative affect.

[3] Such a design has also been associated with leadership effectiveness (Judge et al., 2002).