



Implicit theories of leadership: Stability and change over two decades

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ABSTRACT

Much has changed in the last 20 years, but have people's naïve conceptions of leaders changed as well? Paralleling Offermann et al.'s (1994) study of the content of implicit leadership theories with new samples, the present study investigates ILT stability and change across a 20-year period. Results indicate that, as in 1994, Sensitivity, Dedication, Tyranny, Charisma, Strength, Masculinity, and Intelligence were confirmed as ILT factors. Analyses revealed a new factor, Creativity, and the rearranging of some characteristics across factors. The nine-factor, 46-item scale was confirmed with an independent sample, yielding superior fit indices to the eight-factor solution. This supports the view of ILTs as having both remarkably stable elements despite organizational and societal changes as well as contextually-sensitive elements. Open-ended characteristics had no references to females despite reference to males, as in 1994; thus, “think leader, think male” appears to persist in terms of naïve conceptions of leadership.

Introduction

Interest in how people perceive and respond to leaders continues to remain strong. The implicit and naïve conceptualizations people hold of leaders – their implicit leadership theories (ILTs) - represent the cognitive structures or schemas that specify what people expect from leaders in terms of leader traits or attributes. Perhaps most importantly, ILTs have been shown to relate to perceptions of actual leaders (e.g., Schyns, Felfe, & Blank, 2007; Sy et al., 2010). For example, leaders exhibiting prototypic ILTs have been seen as more transformational in their leadership style (Bass & Avolio, 1989). Yet ILTs can bias leadership ratings (Gioia & Sims, 1985), distorting memory and resulting in perceivers inaccurately reporting category-consistent leader behaviors that did not actually occur (Shondrick & Lord, 2010). Individual judgments of archetypal leadership traits have been shown to influence our standards for leaders, including behavioral expectations (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984). More recently, differences between follower ILTs and the recognition of these attributes in a leader have been associated with poorer quality relations with the leader (Topakas, Martin, & Epitropaki, 2015). In addition, congruence between leader and follower ILTs can influence both parties' assessment of the quality of their relationship (e.g., Riggs & Porter, 2017; Tsai et al., 2017). Thus, people's naïve views of leaders may set the course for their interactions with the leaders with whom they come into contact in daily life.

ILTs stem conceptually from leader categorization theory, which postulates that people form mental schemas of leaders based on perception (Lord et al., 1984; Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982). Individuals use

leader schemas to process information and identify leaders through three hierarchical levels: superordinate, basic, and subordinate (Rosch, 1978). At the highest, most general, *superordinate* level is the simple classification of a stimulus person as either leader or non-leader. The *basic* level is often considered to be most important in that it typically reflects the names most associated with objects (Mervis & Rosch, 1981). In terms of leadership, basic level categories consider the context of leadership; 11 examples such as business leader, political leader, and military leader categories have been identified in previous research (Lord et al., 1984). Traits attributed to leaders typically varied with leadership categorization and context, so that of 59 possible attributes only intelligence was found to be seen as a critical feature across most (10 of 11) basic categorizations (Lord et al., 1984). The lowest level of categorization, *subordinate*, is the most specific, where a military leader might be categorized as an Army major or a Navy admiral.

A distinction exists between recognition-based and inference-based leader processes. Recognition-based processes emphasize leader identification through categorization, as described above. Under inference-based processes, people distinguish leaders from others based on the leader's behavior, rather than perceived traits. Lord and Maher offer their own definition of leadership as “the process of being perceived by others as a leader” (Lord & Maher, 1991, p. 11). According to this definition, the mere perception of leadership, whether based on behaviors or traits, is enough to influence others. Inference-based processes focus on the outcomes of leadership (Lord & Maher, 1991), suggesting that group performance, especially group success, is intertwined with people's inherent definitions of leaders. A 1982 content analysis of news

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sources found evidence of differing perceptions of “leaders” and “effective leaders” (Lord et al., 1982). Positive items were shown to be viewed as more prototypic of “effective political leaders” as opposed to “political leaders” in general (Foti, Fraser, & Lord, 1982). Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz (1994) examined perceptions of leaders, effective leaders, and supervisors, and found that ratings for leaders and effective leaders were typically similar and more positive than ratings of supervisors; however, effective leaders were viewed as less tyrannical than either leaders or supervisors.

Twenty years ago, based on this work on leader categorization, Offermann et al. (1994) investigated the content and structure underlying ILTs through a rigorous, multi-phase process using samples of students and working adults. They identified eight specific ILT factors: Sensitivity, Dedication, Tyranny, Charisma, Attractiveness, Masculinity, Intelligence, and Strength. This frequently cited work resulted in a 41-item ILT scale that has been used as the basis for other subsequent investigations into ILTs (e.g., Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Keller, 2000).

Epitropaki and Martin (2004) noted that mental representations like ILTs may be dynamic and subject to change when the context changes, arguing for the importance of longitudinal assessment. Thus, they investigated the generalizability of Offermann et al.'s work, with the hopes of also reducing the number of scale items. On the basis of their results, they proposed a six-factor structure comprised of Sensitivity, Intelligence, Dedication, Dynamism, Tyranny and Masculinity, dropping the Attractiveness factor as prototypic but not “core,” and collapsing the Strength and Charisma factors into a Dynamism factor. Their work provides good evidence for structural stability of ILTs 10 years after the original Offermann et al. (1994) study, and also provided support for the stability of ILTs over a 12-month period. It also supports the generalizability of ILTs across different groups of workers in terms of age and organizational positions.

More recent theoretical work on ILTs has argued for the more complex and dynamic nature of leadership prototypes, noting that they can be both sensitive to context and yet still produce stability over time (e.g., Lord, Brown, & Harvey, 2001). This suggests that some aspects of ILT content as described by Offermann et al. (1994) and Epitropaki and Martin (2004) may have remained stable over time, while some aspects may have been discarded and new categories added. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the stability and possible changes in ILTs across a 20-year period by following the procedures used in Offermann et al.'s (1994) original study of the content of implicit leadership theories using new samples while allowing for the addition of new attributes and/or the removal or realignment of old ones.

The prospect of both stability and change in ILTs is supported by recent theorizing about ILTs. Advancing a connectionist perspective that proposes a two-way exchange between leaders and followers that can be adjusted to fit changing contexts, and which shows variability within and across individuals, Lord et al. (2001) suggest that this model “can be used to understand both the stability and flexibility that is witnessed in the application of leadership prototypes” (p. 311). Once formed, leadership perceptions are believed to be slow to change, but can be modified through a process of unsuccessful matches of stimulus and prototype that may proceed at different rates for different perceivers. Using adaptive resonance theory (ART, Grossberg, 1999), Shondrick and Lord (2010) argue that there are individual differences in the strictness of individual profile matching, with some perceivers demanding a tighter match and others more willing to accept a looser fit in order for someone to be determined to fit the leader prototype. As new experiences with leaders are encountered, the contextual meaning attached to a particular leader may change without initially changing views of leaders in general, making ILTs less likely to change quickly. However, a number of unsuccessful leader-prototype matches encountered over time may impact views of leaders in general. Thus, ILTs can be both stable and mutable, with new schema being created when matches to existing schema cannot be found while matched schema

continue to persist over time.

This connectionist perspective has also been used to examine implicit theories of followership (IFTs, Braun, Stegmann, Bark, Junker, & van Dick, 2017; Shondrick & Lord, 2010; Sy, 2010), which are the beliefs that people hold about the prototypical characteristics of followers. More recently, Lee, Martin, Thomas, Guillaume, and Maio (2015) suggested viewing leadership perceptions as attitudes towards leaders and that future work is needed to consider implicit attitudes towards leadership and how they impact follower outcomes. As leadership research increasingly views leadership as a socially-constructed reciprocal exchange between leaders and followers, understanding perceptions of both types of actors becomes critically important.

Although leadership perceptions are typically backward-looking, based on past leader behaviors and outcomes, perceivers typically see such perceptions as reflecting stable leader characteristics that are expected to generalize to the future (Lord & Dinh, 2014). Thus, examining the content of ILTs is still important in understanding the frame in which followers begin engaging with leaders and which sets expectations for subsequent interactions where individuals will attempt to match leader stimuli to the expected prototype.

The changing workplace

In keeping with previous theorizing, we argue that major changes in the environmental demands on leaders may change people's perceptions of the characteristics necessary for successful leadership over time, adding new elements and discarding others deemed no longer relevant. In the organizational context, this means that some aspects of ILTs may change along with aspects of a changing workplace while other aspects remain stable. In considering the potential for organizational context to change prototypic expectations, it is clear that the context of the modern workplace has changed markedly in the > 20 years since Offermann et al.'s (1994) original work, and especially in the 13 years since Epitropaki and Martin's (2004) study. Many of these changes have occurred broadly across work sectors and, indeed, across national boundaries, affecting a large majority of working adults. These workplace changes may well have affected the ways in which people view leaders.

One major shift within the U.S. workforce has been the increasing presence of women in organizational management roles. Now that women occupy about half of U.S. management jobs (Catalyst, 2014), it is possible that the traditional “think manager, think male” mantra noted years ago by Virginia Schein (1973; Schein, Müller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996) now often described as “think leader, think male” - may be eroding in naïve conceptions of leadership. A detailed meta-analysis by Koenig et al. in 2011 concluded that although the overall masculinity of leader stereotypes continues, this masculine construal of leadership has decreased over time and is greater for male respondents than for females. As a result, the factor of Masculinity, found by both Offermann et al. (1994) and Epitropaki and Martin (2004) is one where some change in this specific ILT may be likely while other factors remain stable. In the Offermann et al. (1994) study, open-ended leader characteristics generated by participants, over half of whom were women, had no references to the female gender despite references to men and masculinity. Epitropaki and Martin (2004) similarly found masculinity represented in ILTs. However, as more people currently work for and with both women and men in leadership roles, the association of leadership solely with one gender may have decreased.

Numerous authors have suggested that women may, in fact, be better leaders than men (i.e., Helgesen, 1995; Wilson, 2004), rating women significantly higher than men on desirable transformational leadership characteristics such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and contingent reward as well as lower than men on the less desirable management-by-exception and laissez-faire styles (Eagly, Johannsen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). As enthusiasm for the use of teams in organizations continues to rise

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