



Do we want a fighter? The influence of group status and the stability of intergroup relations on leader prototypicality and endorsement☆

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ABSTRACT

Based on the idea that leadership is a group process, we propose that followers' endorsement of a leader depends on particular leadership strategies being perceived to be best suited for maintaining or advancing group identity in the context of prevailing intergroup relations. Three experimental studies with different samples aimed to examine how socio-structural variables that define intergroup relations impact on leader–follower relations and on the support that followers give to leaders who adopt different approaches to manage intergroup relations. We demonstrate that after manipulating the status and the stability of intergroup relations followers endorse leaders who strategically engage in group-oriented behaviour that maps onto optimal identity-management strategies. These patterns mirrored differences across contexts in the perceived prototypicality. We conclude that intergroup relations influence leaders' strategic behaviour and followers' reaction to them. Findings highlight the importance of understanding leadership as both a within- and between-group process.

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Introduction

“I believe that there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those that do the oppressing. I believe that there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation.”— *Malcolm X*

“A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus.”— *Martin Luther King Jr.*

In the above quotations two influential leaders present very different models for advancing intergroup relations in the context of attempts to promote equality in 1960s USA. On the one hand, Malcolm X advocates a conflictual strategy but, on the other, Martin Luther King Jr. argues for conciliation. In their different ways, each leader was also highly successful and admired. The question that this raises relates to the conditions under which these different models of leadership win support. More specifically, when and why do we endorse a leader who champions conflict over one who champions consensus?

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The present article sees leadership and the endorsement of specific leaders as an emergent property of both intra- and intergroup relations and thus moves beyond an individualistic perception of the leader as inherently transformational (e.g., Bass, 1996) or charismatic (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1998). It also challenges the view that some leaders simply have an inherent ability to influence followers and motivate them to participate in social change.

In particular, we argue that leaders need to adjust their strategies towards relevant outgroups as a function of the particular circumstances that they and their ingroup confront. In line with this suggestion, early research by Rabbie & Bekker (1978) found that leaders who felt threatened in their position were more likely to engage in intergroup competition than those who were not threatened since the former strategy helped them secure support from ingroup members. Similarly, research informed by the biosocial contingency model of leadership (van Vugt & Spisak, 2008; Spisak, Nicholson, & van Vugt, 2011) suggests that different leadership prototypes emerge in cooperative as opposed to competitive intergroup situations. Going further, we argue that depending on the nature of intergroup relations, leaders will generally seek to advance competitive (or collaborative) strategies to attain the best possible outcome for their own group and hence for their leadership.

However, the ultimate proof of leadership is the impact that it has on followers (e.g., Bennis, 1999; Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011; Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005). Accordingly, the present article looks at whether the particular strategies that a leader adopts are perceived to be effective by fellow group members. Our core argument, which builds upon previous intergroup leadership research, is that followers' endorsement of a leader who adopts a particular strategy towards an outgroup — specifically a strategy of competition — will vary as a function of the context of intergroup relations. In this way, effective leadership is understood as involving a complex interplay between specific leadership strategies, prevailing intergroup relations, and follower reactions.

The point of departure for our analysis is an understanding that leadership is a group process (Ellemers, DeGilder & Haslam, 2004; Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; Turner & Haslam, 2001; Pittinsky, 2009, 2010; see also Alderfer, 1987) and that it is the shared social identity in groups that makes both leadership and followership possible (Haslam & Platow, 2001; Haslam et al., 2011). Based on assumptions from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987) it is suggested that leaders play a key role in developing this shared and consensual identity (Reicher et al., 2005). However, the social realities in which the leader and followers are embedded are continually renegotiated owing to the fluidity of social relations (Barton & Hamilton, 2005). Thus, social context influences how social identity is perceived and maintained. Consequently, leaders need to consider how to manage social identity when deciding what kind of leadership strategies might be best suited for the group. Followers, by the same token, will be sensitive to these same strategies when deciding whether or not to support a leader in a given intergroup context.

More precisely, we argue that followers' endorsement of a leader is dependent on the extent to which particular leadership strategies are perceived to be best suited for maintaining or advancing group identity in the context of the intergroup relations at hand. In particular, following social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Ellemers, 1993), we expect that socio-structural variables such as group status, together with stability and legitimacy of intergroup relations, will all have a bearing on followers' support for different leadership strategies. More specifically, in the present work we focus on the way in which status, stability, and legitimacy influence followers' endorsement of leaders who pursue intergroup strategies of either competition or cooperation.

The focus on status reflects the fact that within the social identity approach, the relationship between groups is typically discussed in terms of this variable rather than dominance or power. Status is linked to identification processes (Ellemers, 1993) and reflects the social value or worth that others ascribe to a group vis-à-vis another group. Often, status and power (or dominance) are confounded such that groups of higher status tend to be more powerful or dominant. Yet power and status can be distinguished in so far as status is more a property that arises in relation to others (e.g., outgroups) whereas power is a property of the actor that is less reliant on the evaluation of others (Blader & Chen, 2012). In the context of the present work status therefore relates to a comparison between two (or more) groups and status relations are defined by an unequal division of resources — such as political power, prestige or esteem — in this context (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Leadership and managing identities

The study of group dynamics and intergroup relations, including aspects of leadership, has relatively long tradition in organizational research (Alderfer, 1977; Bass, 2008). For example, Alderfer (1987) describes several characteristics of intergroup research that are pertinent to organizational life. He also notes that the behaviour of a group's leader reflects permeability, power differences and the cognitive formation of an ingroup in relation to an outgroup, noting that leadership can be understood as both cause and effect of the total pattern of intergroup relations within a specific situation (Alderfer, 1987; see also Reicher et al., 2005).

Yet despite the fact that (inter-)group processes are clearly important for organizational behaviour, empirical leadership research has tended largely to overlook questions of intergroup relations and group identities (Steffens, et al., 2014; Dinh et al., 2014), a lacuna that this paper aims to fill. As 'entrepreneurs of identity' (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Reicher et al., 2005) much of the leaders' success depends on their ability to define who 'we' are in relation to 'them'. However, social identity is responsive, in both form and content, to the intergroup dimensions of the prevailing comparative context (Doosje, Haslam, Spears, Oakes, & Koomen, 1998; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995; Turner, 1985). Hence, if much of the group's identity depends on the way in which the ingroup ('us') is perceived in relation to other groups ('them'), then much of what constitutes good leadership should also depend on the specifics of the intergroup context that defines both ingroup and outgroup.

In this regard, one of social identity theory's (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) core claims is that when people define themselves in terms of a particular group membership, they are motivated to establish a social identity that is positive and distinct relative to that of other social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). That is, when their behaviour is defined by social identity, people want 'us' to

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