Is leadership a part of me? A leader identity approach to understanding the motivation to lead

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on social comparison and identity literature, we suggest that individuals' comparisons of themselves to their own standards of leadership relate to their leadership motivation. We propose and test a model of motivation to lead (MTL) based on two types of self-to-leader comparisons: self-to-exemplar and self-to-prototype comparisons with respect to affiliation. In our main study, using data from a sample of 180 executives, we apply structural equation models to test our predictions. We find that self-comparisons with concrete, influential leaders of the past or present (self-to-exemplar comparisons) relate positively to MTL. We also find that self-comparisons with more general representations of leaders (self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation) relate to MTL. Whereas the effect of self-to-exemplar comparisons is mediated through individuals' leadership self-efficacy perceptions, the effect of self-to-prototype comparisons is not. We replicate these findings in three follow-up studies using different research designs. We derive implications for theory and practice.

Introduction

Leadership is considered the key to success in today's organizations, and research strengthens this view by extensively documenting its positive consequences (e.g., Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, & Hiller, 2009). Scholars have noted that *knowing how* is not enough to make one effective in managerial roles (Arthur, Claman, DeFillippi, & Adams, 1995); one must also be truly *motivated to lead* to persist in the leadership role despite the challenges leaders face in modern organizations. Therefore, it is not surprising that an increasing number of studies have recently focused on understanding the motivation to lead (e.g., Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007; Kark & van Dijk, 2007; Van Iddekinge, Ferris, & Heffner, 2009).

Motivation to lead (MTL, Chan & Drasgow, 2001) is defined as individuals' willingness to engage in leadership training activities and assume leadership roles. Although Chan and Drasgow (2001) identify three MTL components (affective, social-normative, and non-calculative), following other scholars (Hannah, Avolio, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2012; Van Iddekinge et al., 2009) we choose to focus on the affective MTL component, for theoretical and practical reasons.[1] From a theoretical standpoint, affective MTL has been related to intrinsic motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). In contrast, those who score high on the other two components of MTL would lead for other reasons—either a high sense of duty or responsibility (social-normative MTL) or beliefs about the costs and benefits associated with leading (non-calculative MTL). Moreover, from a practical standpoint, research has consistently

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[1] We use "MTL" and "affective MTL" interchangeably throughout the paper. A more detailed discussion on the dimensionality of leadership motivation is beyond our purpose in this article (see Chan & Drasgow, 2001 for a review on the topic).

shown that, among the MTL components, the affective one is the strongest predictor of leadership outcomes such as ratings of leadership potential made by supervisors (Chan & Drasgow, 2001), leadership emergence (Hong, 2005), and overall team effectiveness (Hendricks & Payne, 2007).

Despite its importance, only a handful of studies have explored the antecedents of affective MTL. These studies show that relatively stable personal characteristics, such as personality and values, shape individuals' MTL. However, MTL is also in part malleable with experience (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007). Identity scholars (Ibarra, Snook, & Guillén Ramo, 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005) suggest that incorporating the leadership role into the sense of self motivates individuals to seek out leadership opportunities. Although previous studies have identified leadership self-efficacy perceptions as key antecedents to MTL (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007), research has not yet identified other cognitive sense-making variables that explain individual differences in MTL.

We propose that cognitive variables underlying social comparisons can be particularly relevant for understanding MTL and its malleability via self-efficacy perceptions. According to Bandura (1982), social comparisons affect self-efficacy, motivation, and ultimately performance. Complementarily, social comparison theory suggests that information about the self is meaningful only in relation to others (Cooley, 1902; Festinger, 1954). However, the role of social comparisons has not received much attention in leadership research (e.g., Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007; Ibarra et al., 2010). This gap is particularly surprising since a growing number of scholars are claiming that individuals' self-motivation can be understood only in relation to others (e.g., Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Gibson, 2003; Ibarra et al., 2010).

In this paper, we propose that *self-to-leader comparisons*, defined as the extent to which individuals' views on attributes that characterize leaders match the attributes they ascribe to themselves, relate positively to leadership self-efficacy perceptions and, ultimately, explain MTL. In particular, we focus on *self-to-prototype* comparisons with respect to a key leadership dimension, *affiliation*, and *self-to-exemplar* comparisons to specific, influential leaders of the individual's past or present. Our underlying assumption is that how people feel toward the leadership role is governed by their own expectations associated with that role (Lord & Maher, 1993) and by their need to align those expectations to their sense of self (Ibarra et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005). When managers are asked to define what being a leader means to them, they may use various attributes, such as smart, funny, creative, visionary, eloquent, unique, self-centered, perfectionist, decisive, sociable, fair, humble, efficient, or supportive, to name just a few.[2] The extent to which people are willing to lead may be influenced by self-comparisons with their *own* view of leadership. If someone, for example, thinks of her/himself as a people person, and considers maintaining interpersonal connections an essential attribute for leadership, s/he will be more motivated to lead than if s/he thinks that the quality of relationships at work is not especially relevant for leaders. Thus, we bridge literature on social comparisons (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Greenberg et al., 2007) and leadership identity (Ibarra et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005) to propose and empirically test a leader identity model of MTL. Importantly, we further predict that leadership self-efficacy perceptions mediate the relationships between self-to-leader comparisons and affective MTL.

This paper makes several contributions to different streams of literature. First, we contribute to the body of research on leadership motivation by identifying a set of identity antecedents that relate to affective MTL. This is important, because despite the positive consequences of MTL, the intrapersonal psychological processes underlying it are still largely unknown. Although MTL has been theorized to be partially determined by cognitive variables, research to date has not really gone beyond identifying leadership self-efficacy as one antecedent to MTL (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007). Second, we contribute to general leadership research by presenting and testing a conceptual framework that explicates how socio-cognitive processes central to the self-concept relate to leadership (see calls for research by Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2007; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Third, we contribute to research on self-efficacy by showing that leadership self-efficacy perceptions mediate the relationship between self-to-leader comparisons and MTL. Since self-efficacy perceptions have been shown to have positive consequences at work (Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008), our finding has both practical and theoretical implications for enhancing leadership motivation. Finally, we explore self-comparisons not with external entities—such as the job, the supervisor, the group, or the organization (e.g., Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005)—but with *internal* expectations associated with the leadership role.

Theoretical framework

Motivation to lead

Affective MTL is an individual difference construct that affects individuals' decisions to assume and persist in leadership tasks because they derive positive affect from the act of leading itself (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). People high in affective MTL enjoy leading, like to think of themselves as natural-born leaders, and are often driven to lead out of a need to satisfy their own leadership standards (Kark & van Dijk, 2007). Affective MTL relates to intrinsically motivated behavior that is undertaken purely for its own sake (Kark & van Dijk, 2007). Enhanced intrinsic motivation is related to greater identification with the leadership role (Walumbwa, Avolio, & Zhu, 2008).

Identity theory suggests that managers work toward the development of a leader identity as a central part of their self-concepts (Ibarra et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005). When enacting leadership roles, individuals want to be perceived as leaders by others and

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[2] These attributes are taken from the qualitative responses of anonymous participants taking part in this research. Participants were required to think about what attributes characterize leaders.