The relational nature of leadership identity construction: How and when it influences perceived leadership and decision-making

Lisa A. Marchiondo [a],[*], Christopher G. Myers [b], Shirli Kopelman [c]

[a] Anderson School of Management, University of New Mexico, MSC05 3090, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA
[b] Organizational Behavior Unit, Harvard Business School, Soldiers Field, Boston, MA 02163, USA
[c] Department of Management and Organizations, Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, 701 Tappan Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper empirically tests leadership identity construction theory (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), conceptually framing claiming and granting leadership as a negotiated process that influences leadership perceptions and decision-making in interdependent contexts. In Study 1a, an avatar video-based experimental vignette (replicated in Study 1b with a non-video scenario), we found that when a team member accepted an actor's leadership claim, observers' leadership ratings of the actor increased, whereas when the team member rejected the claim, observers' leadership ratings of the fellow team member increased. However, when an actor granted leadership, the fellow team member's response did not influence leadership ratings. Study 2 extended the conceptual model by identifying *how* claiming and granting influence leadership perceptions – through perceived competence – and *when* claiming and granting exert greatest influence, finding that women observers vary more in their responses to claiming and granting. The negotiated relational leader identity process ultimately influenced observer decision-making.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Despite long-standing recognition of leadership as an interpersonal, relational process (e.g., Hollander, 1958, 1964; Parker, 1984), academics and practitioners often persist in conceptualizing leadership as a formal, top-down construct (Bedeian & Hunt, 2006). However, scholars are increasingly acknowledging leadership as a relational construct (Foldy & Ospina, 2012). This perspective deemphasizes leadership as merely a formal, high-status role conferred by position, instead characterizing leadership as a phenomenon socially constructed between workgroup members (Bass & Bass, 2008; Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2006; Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012). More recently, this relational perspective has been brought to bear in leadership identity construction theory, which conceptualizes a process by which individuals come to be seen (by themselves and by others) as leaders (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Based on this theory, leadership can be defined as a process of mutual influence that unfolds across time and situations as individuals claim and grant leader and follower roles. Leadership in organizations emerges as a result of individuals claiming (for themselves) and granting (to others) leader identities, which we frame as a negotiated process of relational identity construction (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Gelfand, Major, Raver, Nishii, & O'Brien, 2006; Kopelman, 2014; Kopelman, Chen, & Shoshana, 2009). Repeated claiming and granting of these identities establish and reinforce patterns of leadership in the organization, influencing not only perceptions of leadership, but also decision-making.

The present paper contributes to this nascent literature on leadership identity construction, enhancing the field's understanding of leadership emergence by theoretically elaborating and empirically examining psychological factors that influence the relational

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail addresses: marchiondo@unm.edu (L.A. Marchiondo), cmyers@hbs.edu (C.G. Myers), shirli@umich.edu (S. Kopelman).

dynamics of leadership identity construction and their impact on decision-making. DeRue and Ashford's (2010) theory of leadership identity construction provides the theoretical underpinnings for understanding this relational leadership emergence process; however, several aspects of their model merit further development. The present study thus seeks to validate and elaborate aspects of the model of leadership claiming and granting offered, specifically attending to the role of leadership claiming and granting in shaping perceptions of leadership. Specifically, we extend DeRue and Ashford's (2010) model by identifying and testing perceived competence as an underlying psychological mechanism that explains *how* leadership claiming and granting influence others' perceptions of leadership. According to the stereotype content model, competence is a central component of evaluations of individuals (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), posing implications for judgments of leadership and influence (Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011; Ho, Shih, & Walters, 2012). The present study applies this model to leadership identity construction theory in order to test competence as a likely mechanism through which the negotiated process of leadership claiming and granting influences leadership perceptions.

We further elaborate leadership identity construction theory by examining *who* might be most attuned to and influenced by this social process of leadership claiming and granting. Specifically, we propose observer gender as a key moderator of the effects of leadership claiming and granting. The psychological literature has demonstrated gender to be an influential individual difference in shaping perceptions and behavior in relational contexts, with women weighing interpersonal dynamics more heavily than men (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997). However, observer gender has received little attention within the emerging literature on individual differences in leadership perceptions (Antonakis, Day, & Schyns, 2012). Examining observer gender in the present study thus advances research on individual differences in leadership judgments, as well as knowledge of who is most attuned to relational leadership identity construction.

This paper also provides the first empirical investigation of behavioral implications of the leadership construction process, examining whether the dynamics of leadership claiming and granting shape not only perceived competence and leadership, but also influence decision-making.

Relational leadership identity construction

Formal leadership roles contribute to the credibility of an individual as a leader; however, hierarchical status alone is insufficient to explain how and when organizational members perceive others as leaders. Recognizing that leadership reflects more than formal status and role-definitions, theories of leadership have evolved from predominantly top-down, hierarchical perspectives toward relationally-centered models (Day et al., 2006; Denies et al., 2012; Lord & Dinh, 2014; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Indeed, relational leadership theory is an emerging perspective that underscores the socially constructed nature of leadership through interpersonal processes (Uhl-Bien, 2006), seeing leadership as emerging from complex interpersonal dynamics among members of organizations (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012).

Embedded within these broader relational perspectives of leadership, leadership identity construction theory focuses on the dynamics by which leadership emerges, as well as on leadership processes as they unfold among all organizational members, rather than only concerning formal leaders (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Through this lens, *leader* can be conceptualized as a positive identity that is socially constructed through a process of leadership claiming and granting. Individuals claim an identity as a leader (through their words or actions) and these claims are met either by others' corresponding grants of a leader identity to the individual, or by others' counter-claims of a leader identity for themselves. According to this view, leadership is less a matter of formal position, but rather emerges as individuals claim and grant leader identities through a social interaction process that involves individuals' own internalization of an identity, as well as broader recognition and endorsement of that identity from others in the organization (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Thus, a leadership identity is not merely an intra-individual, personal identity, but is recognized by other organizational members as a socially constructed (DeRue et al., 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2003) and negotiated relationship.

Leadership identity construction theory (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) builds on research on leadership emergence by explicating the interactive, social process through which individuals come to be seen as leaders. Whereas leadership emergence research has traditionally focused on traits (e.g., personality, cognitive capacity, emotional intelligence; Foti & Hauenstein, 2007; Taggar, Hackett, & Saha, 1999; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002) and discrete behaviors (e.g., task-focused behaviors; Bales, 1950; Lord, 1977; Taggar et al., 1999) that predict leader emergence, leadership identity construction theory offers propositions about how relational dynamics between group members predict leader emergence. That is, this theory centers not only on the behavior of the individual who eventually emerges as a leader but also on the behavior and reactions of fellow group members.

Claiming and granting leadership

At the heart of DeRue and Ashford's (2010) model of leadership identity construction is the inherently social process of leadership claiming and granting. While a person's identity as a leader may be more likely to emerge in the presence of a formal title or position of authority, leader identities fundamentally emerge from explicit or implicit leadership claiming and granting. Through leadership claiming, a person (whom we term the *actor*) explicitly or implicitly negotiates (Kopelman, 2014) a leadership role for him/herself. The actor may claim a leadership role by explicitly negotiating during a conversation — proclaiming that s/he will take the lead in a meeting or project, for instance. Another actor might instead rely on implicit negotiations, communicating indirectly to accomplish