



Implicit theories in organizational settings: A systematic review and research agenda of implicit leadership and followership theories^{☆,☆☆}

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ABSTRACT

Implicit theories play important roles in many areas of human life. In this review, we focus on implicit leadership and followership theories, i.e. implicit assumptions of (good) leaders and followers, respectively. We provide a framework for categorizing the existing research in this field. We use this framework to show the current state of research and to illustrate the gaps in the literature. More precisely, we review which types of prototypes of leaders and followers have been studied, the effects of comparisons between the actual leader (respectively follower) with these activated prototypes as well as the contextual factors that influence prototype activation and prototype fit. We conclude by outlining implications for human resource management and for future research, thereby focusing on research questions that can be used to integrate the distinct paths in implicit leadership and followership theories.

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Introduction

In the past, leadership has often been studied from the leader perspective, whereas followers have rarely been considered. Follower-centered leadership research (Shamir, 2007) demonstrated that the follower perspective adds significantly to our understanding of leadership and the formation of leadership. One stream of follower-centered leadership research is the research of implicit leadership theories (ILTs) and implicit followership theories (IFTs). In short, ILTs represent raters' subjective views of leaders (Eden & Leviatan, 1975); IFTs represent the respective views of followers (e.g., Sy, 2010). People compare a potential leader or follower to their implicit benchmarks and act in accordance with the outcome of these comparisons (e.g., Cronshaw & Lord, 1987; Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Shondrick & Lord, 2010).

Research on ILT variation shows that the context significantly shapes impressions of leadership. Similar contexts result in the activation of similar prototypes, whereas raters activate different prototypes in dissimilar contexts (e.g., Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001). These contextual factors have mostly been left out of focus in leader-centered leadership research (see Antonakis et al., 2004) so that this area of research might adapt from our knowledge about variation in ILTs and IFTs.

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Moreover, leadership and followership prototypes influence how we think and act – even though raters are unaware of these processes (Hunt, Boal, & Sorenson, 1990) and cannot control for their influence. Implicit theories bias the rating of actual leader behavior (e.g., Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Weiss & Adler, 1981). Instead of rating observed behavior, raters rely on their impressions of leadership and followership. Individuals benefit if they show substantial overlap with this impression, they suffer if they do not (e.g., Heilman, 1983; Junker, Schyns, van Dick, & Scheurer, 2011). Employee ratings often determine promotion decisions or financial bonuses, but ratings of the same person’s performance and the same relationship often vary substantially between raters (Atkins & Wood, 2006; Schyns & Day, 2010; Scullen, Mount, & Goff, 2000). Scullen et al. (2000), for example, found that up to 62% of the variation in leaders’ appraisals of employee performance is due to implicit person theories. Consequently and all else being equal, inter-rater and intra-rater variability in evaluating individuals or the leader–follower relationship rather reflect differences in the respective implicit theories than differences in actual behavior. We provide suggestions for how to control and reduce the biasing influence of ILTs and IFTs in our discussion.

The effects of prototypes are not limited to leadership and followership ratings. Amongst others, followers state higher levels of job satisfaction if their leader fits their implicit theories of leaders (e.g., Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). Job satisfaction, in turn, is positively related to follower performance (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001). Consequently, these subjective processes need to be considered if organizations aim to maximize their performance. We analyze which training methods might be used to make these implicit processes explicit and how to positively shape leaders’ and followers’ implicit theories.

The overall aim of the present review is to structure the diverse literature on ILTs and IFTs and to shed light on the theoretical and empirical developments in this field of follower-centered leadership research. To do so, we conducted a systematic review (Garg, Hackam, & Tonelli, 2008; Needleman, 2002) of the existing literature on ILTs and IFTs using the databases PsychArticles and BusinessSourcePremier. We used the keywords “implicit leader/leadership theory/theories,” “implicit leadership,” “ILT/ILTs,” “leadership theory/theories,” “leader/leadership prototypes,” “implicit theories of leadership,” “leader categorization,” “implicit follower/followership theory/theories,” “implicit followership,” “IFT/IFTs,” “followership theory/theories,” “follower/followership prototypes,” “implicit theories of followership,” and “follower categorization” to retrieve potential articles. We included any articles found with the above searches if either ILTs, IFTs, leader or follower categorization were explicitly discussed in the full text of the article. We complemented our research by screening relevant papers and books (e.g., Weick, 1995) known to the authors and/or to which the articles from our database search referred. Overall, we considered more than 200 articles and books. Based on these articles, we developed the foci of this review. Our contributions to the literature are threefold (see Fig. 1 for an illustration).

First, we analyze which implicit theories have been researched so far. Prototypes are individually held and can potentially vary between raters. However, researchers (e.g., Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994) found individual prototypes to overlap substantially. We categorize these prototypes on two dimensions: norm of prototype (typical vs. ideal leaders or followers) and valence of prototype (positive vs. negative vs. neutral). When we reviewed the literature, we encountered conceptual differences in the use of the terms prototypicality and antiprototypicality in ILT and IFT research. Researchers have often neglected these differences which resulted in inconsistent findings regarding the importance of implicit theories. We analyze these inconsistencies and provide alternative explanations for the observed results.

Second, we examine the effects of a categorization as leader or follower. We found that the categorization affects leaders, followers, the leader–follower dyad and/or the context. Amongst others, the activated prototypes shape the views of leaders and followers

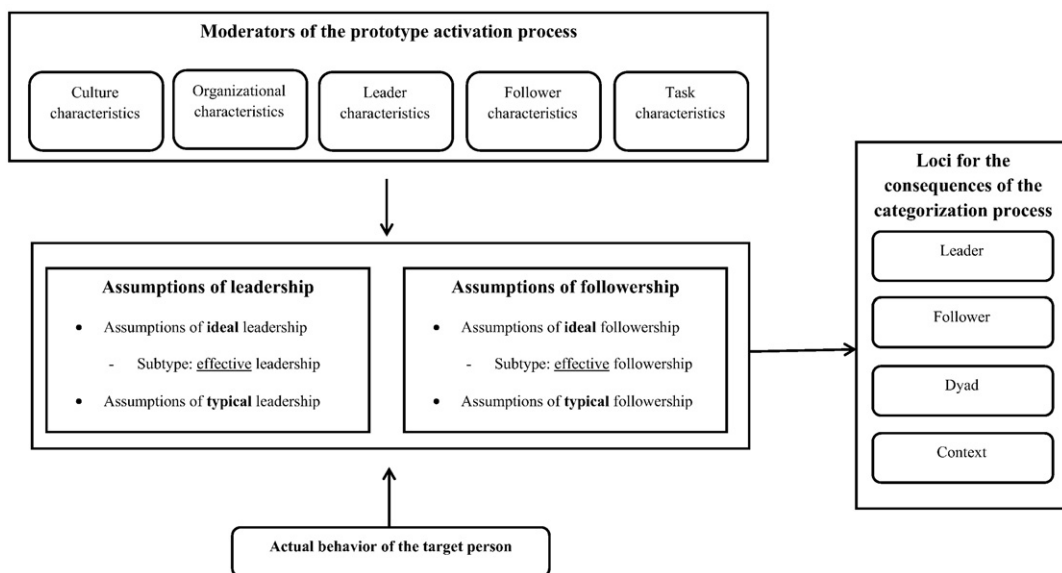


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework for the categorization of research on implicit leadership and implicit followership theories.

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