Dynamic viewpoints on implicit leadership and followership theories: Approaches, findings, and future directions

It has been more than 40 years since Eden and Leviathan (1975) demonstrated how Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) guide raters' sense-making processes when completing leadership questionnaires. In the intervening years, interest in implicit theories has been widespread and considerable research has been generated with significant implications for our understanding of leadership and followership processes in organizational settings (Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013). Organizational members are sense-makers and they use their implicit theories to construct a simplified understanding of events that emphasize human qualities rather than the more complex effects of organization systems (Meindl, 1995). Such research recognizes the active, constructive role of perceivers in the social influence process that is at the heart of leadership. Recent theoretical developments (e.g., Lord, Brown, & Harvey, 2001; Lord & Shondrick, 2011) have highlighted the dynamic nature of leadership and followership schemas but empirical research has lagged behind. Thus, our motivation for this special issue was to showcase new empirical and conceptual work that captures ILTs and IFTs as dynamic, context-sensitive and time-sensitive phenomena.

The early work of Lord, Foti, and De Vader (1984) applied social cognitive theory to understanding implicit theories and developed a theory of leadership that describes how categorization influences perception, memory and interactions with a potential leader. They proposed that ILTs are cognitive categories with a graded structure similar to other types of person (Canter & Mischel, 1977) and object categories (Rosch, 1978). Rather than being defined by concrete, *specific* critical features, that distinguish leaders, such categories develop around an *abstract* set of attributes and behaviors shared by different types of leaders. Thus, categories form around prototypes, the most typical examples or the most ideal types (Gabora, Rosch, & Aerts, 2008). These category structures are thought to be learned through experience, although they may originate early on from experience with caregivers (Keller, 1999, 2003). Individuals rely on these categories to distinguish leaders from non-leaders and the resulting categorization process is based on either recognition or inferential processes. Leadership perceptions based on recognition-based processes are the result of a match between the perceiver's leadership prototype and the perceived characteristics and behavior of potential leaders, whereas inferential-based processes rely on information about past performance to infer leadership.

In understanding leadership as a social influence process, follower categorization is equally as important as leader categorization (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007). A similar social cognitive process has been hypothesized in the case of Implicit Followership Theories (IFTs; Sy, 2010). IFTs are cognitive categories individuals hold regarding the traits and behaviors typically associated with followers (Sy, 2010; van Gils, van Quaquebeke, & van Knippenberg, 2010). Similar to ILTs, categories of IFTs can be based on the most typical instances or the most ideal; however, current research has focused on the former. Perceptions and identification of an individual as a follower can be recognition-based processes following from a match between the perceiver's followership prototype and perceived follower characteristics and behavior, but followership can also be inferred based on performance information (Sy, 2010).

Match with a leader or follower category serves as an antecedent of organizational outcomes, such as leader-member exchange (Coyle & Foti, 2015; Engle & Lord, 1997; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Sy, 2010), as well as bias in behavioral ratings (Hansbrough, Lord, & Schyns, 2015). Thus, work in the area of implicit theories has advanced our understanding of the cognitive processes underlying leaders' and followers' perceptions, interpretations, and sense-making in response to both leadership and followership behaviors (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Shamir, 2007; Shondrick & Lord, 2010), showing perceptions of both leaders and followers are critical to the leadership process.

More recent perspectives (e.g., Hanges, Lord, & Dickson, 2000; Lord & Shondrick, 2011; Lord et al., 2001) have attempted to capture the inherently dynamic and complex nature of leadership and followership perceptions using a connectionist framework. In connectionist models, the process unfolds when top-down constraints such as goals and gender combine with bottom-up inputs such as behaviors of a potential leader or follower to activate multiple nodes in the prototype network. Such perspectives allow for the possibility that ILTs and IFTs are not static and change may take place at the individual, relational, or organizational

level of analysis. The connectionist perspective offers one potential explanation of how perceptions of leadership and followership can be fluid and context sensitive, yet still produce coherence and substantial consistency (Foti, Knee, & Backert, 2008; Sy et al., 2010). Thus, dynamics begin to play a greater role when it is evident that ILTs and IFTs are not fixed in time and place but, instead, are context sensitive.

Overview of the articles

The goal of this special issue was to capture recent theoretical and empirical developments in Implicit Leadership and Followership Theories that address some of the more dynamic aspects of the leadership process. In the five articles that follow, both theoretical and empirical advances are evident, and represent two major themes. The first two articles advance our understanding of the dynamic aspects of implicit theories by focusing on the influence process and investigating relational schemas or implicit theory congruence. The remaining three articles enhance our understanding of the dynamic nature of implicit theories by focusing on either the temporal aspect of implicit theories or the role of emotional expression. Table 1 provides an overview of the focus of each article in terms of characteristics of the implicit theory and method used.

Theme 1 – relational influence processes

Research can capture the dynamic nature of implicit theories by focusing on the leadership relationship, instead of solely on leader OR follower implicit theories. The leadership relationship can be conceptualized in different ways and at different levels of analysis. Relational schemas are cognitive structures that represent regularities in patterns of interpersonal relatedness and consist of expected contingences of how the (significant) other will react in a specific social situation (Baldwin, 1992). Relational schemas include three elements: an interpersonal script, a self-schema and a schema about the other person. Epitropaki et al. (2013) considered relational schemas of leadership a promising line of research that can extend ILT and IFT research to the dyadic level of analysis to help understand the dynamic interplay between ILTs and IFTs.

Tsai, Dionne, Wang, Spain, Yammarino and Cheng (2017) respond to the call for an in-depth understanding of relational leadership schemas. They specifically examined two types of relational schemas, namely expressive relational schemas (ERS) that are associated with social support and instrumental relational schemas (IRS) that emphasize short-term economic exchanges. They further investigated the effects of inter-individual relational schemas' congruence on leader-follower relationships. By using polynomial regression and response surface methodology, they showed that ERS congruence was associated with positive follower-rated LMX. Interestingly, both IRS congruence and incongruence were found to have a negative impact on LMX. Their findings have important implications for ILTs as well as for LMX theory and research. They not only highlight the role of relational schemas for leader-follower interactions but also point to the need for a closer look into the content of these relational schemas. Their results suggest that individuals (leaders or followers) who hold schemas of relationships as mainly short-term economic exchanges (versus a deeper affective connection) will be less likely to invest the time and energy to cultivate high quality interactions. One could even argue that relational schemas may neutralize (in the case of IRS congruence) or accentuate (in the case of ERS congruence) the importance of LMX quality in organizational settings.

The degree of congruence or incongruence in implicit theories held by leaders and followers is at the core of the mutual influence process (Coyle & Foti, 2015; Engle & Lord, 1997). Specifically, interpersonal congruence (the extent to which leaders and followers hold similar implicit theories) are important influences on how individuals perceive relationship quality with their partner (Epitropaki et al., 2013). Lord and Maher (1991) provide a theoretical framework for the interpretation of the effects of both followers' and leaders' implicit theories on their dyadic relationship. They move away from the simplistic conceptualizations that assume leaders' behaviors affect followers' behaviors and vice versa, to propose that these relationships are affected by, and filtered through, the implicit theories of both individuals.

Table 1
Overview of articles.

Authors	ILT/IFT/both	Recognition or inference process	Typical/ideal prototypes	Implied/explicitly measured time	Method
		Theme 1 – relational influence process			
Riggs & Porter (2017)	ILT	Recognition	Typical	Implied	Polynomial regression and response surface
Tsai, Dionne, Wang, Spain, Yammarino, & Cheng (2017)	ERS and IRS (relational schemas)	Recognition	Ideal	Implied	Polynomial regression and response surface
		Theme 2 – dynamic representation of implicit theories			
Alipour, Mohammed, & Martinez (2017)	Temporal ILTs (TILTs) and IFTs (TIFTs)	Recognition	Ideal	Explicitly theorized	Theory paper
Chiu, Balkunid, & Weinberg (2017)	ILT	Inference	Typical	2-Wave study	Social network analysis, HLM
Trichas, Schyns, Lord, & Hall (2017)	ILT	Recognition	Typical	Implied	Experimental study in a banking context ANOVAs, SEM