When managers become leaders: The role of manager network centralities, social power, and followers' perception of leadership

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**A B S T R A C T**

We explore how formal managers’ centralities in both positive and negative networks predict followers’ perceptions of their leadership. By incorporating social networks and social ledger theory with implicit leadership theories (ILTs), we hypothesize that formally assigned group leaders (managers) who have more positive advice ties and fewer negative avoidance ties are more likely to be recognized as leaders by their followers. Further, we posit that managers’ informal networks bring them greater social power, an important attribute differentiating leaders from non-leaders. We conducted two survey-based studies in student and field teams to test the hypotheses. Based on nested data in both studies, we found support for our hypotheses. These results remain robust across the two studies even though they used different designs (cross-sectional versus longitudinal), different samples (field versus students) across different countries (United States versus India), and a host of control variables at both the leader and follower levels. We find that managers who are central in the advice network are socially powerful and are seen as leaders by individual followers. In contrast, managers who are avoided by followers lack informal social power are not seen as leaders. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our findings and the ways in which our theory and results extend ILTs and social network theory.

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Subordinates’ perceptions of their managers matter. Prior research finds that when followers perceive their manager as a leader, they tend to be more committed to the organization, more willing to comply with their manager’s requests (De Luque, Washburn, Waldman, & House, 2008), and have greater job satisfaction (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004), resulting in better follower performance (Lord & Maher, 1991). However, what is less understood is the social-contextual process through which some managers tend to be acknowledged as leaders by their subordinates whereas other managers are not, even when both types of managers may have the same level of authority to reward and punish their staff.

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Prior studies have drawn on implicit leadership theories (ILTs; Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Lord & Maher, 1991) to explore and understand this phenomenon through the dyadic relationships between managers and subordinates. ILTs suggest that followers’ perceptions of a target individual (e.g., the formally assigned group leader or manager) help them categorize the target as a leader or non-leader (Shondrick, Dinh, & Lord, 2010). When followers perceive that the unique characteristics of their manager fit their own pre-existing schemata for leader prototypes (e.g., being competent and sociable), the manager will more likely be seen as a leader than a non-leader (Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013; Geys, 2014).

Whereas conventional studies assume the stability and generalizability of leadership prototypes across individuals (e.g., Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman, 1999), others posit that these prototypes are not fixed but rather are contextually sensitive (e.g., Phillips, 1984; Phillips & Lord, 1982; Sparrowe, 2014). More so, the exact nature of the context—more specifically, the social context around a manager and its role in leadership prototype activation—is not understood, even though understanding this context may offer critical insights into how the prototypes get activated (c.f., Hanges, Lord, & Dickson, 2000; Lord & Shondrick, 2011; Shondrick et al., 2010). For example, in order to categorize a manager as a leader or not, followers need to have access to information that may determine whether the prototypes become activated or not (Lord & Shondrick, 2011). One key source of information about managers is their social networks with their followers (Pastor, Meindl, & Mayo, 2002). By understanding how managers’ social networks may influence their subordinates’ prototype activation, we are able to address a critical gap in understanding how managers become leaders in the eyes of their followers.

There has been a growing body of literature on social networks that can help us understand how subordinates make attributions about leadership (Sparrowe, 2014). Informal relationships serve as conduits through which information flows from one individual to others (Podolny & Baron, 1997). When individuals interact with others, they reveal information about themselves that can help others evaluate them. Therefore, a manager’s networks are essentially a medium of self-disclosure that can help subordinates activate their leadership prototypes.

Nevertheless, our knowledge of the relationship between managers’ social networks and their followers’ leadership perceptions remains limited for two major reasons. First, current network studies place an exclusive emphasis on positive networks (e.g., friendship or advice networks), ignoring the potential role of negative social relationships (e.g., avoidance or hindrance ties; Kilduff & Brass, 2010). As per social ledger theory (Labianca & Brass, 2006), negative ties may be more potent than positive ties in predicting human behaviors and attitudes in organizations. Very few studies have simultaneously explored positive and negative social networks in general (c.f., Venkataramani, Labianca, & Gresser, 2013), and none has simultaneously examined their joint effects on leadership perception.

Second, the processes by which both positive and negative networks influence perceptions are not well understood. More specifically, a manager’s network position may serve as a heuristic that helps followers make attributions about the manager (Phillips, 1984; Phillips & Lord, 1982). However, the precise network–triggered mechanisms by which leadership prototypes are activated in subordinates are not well understood (c.f., Hanges et al., 2000; Lord & Shondrick, 2011; Shondrick et al., 2010). We posit that social networks provide a signal about managers’ influence and power that helps followers see them as leaders or not. Therefore, we propose and test for the role of networks and the mechanisms through which these networks influence prototype activation.

In summary, we draw on both the social network approach and ILTs to answer how and why some managers are acknowledged as leaders by their subordinates while others are not. We posit that informal network positions in both positive and negative networks serve as heuristics that may trigger the categorization of managers as leaders. A manager’s positive and negative network centralities—the number of incoming positive and negative ties—are expected to predict the extent to which followers classify the manager as a leader (Zaccaro, 2007). Because leadership qualities are strongly embedded in followers’ subjective assessments and are “imagined or constructed by followers” (Meindl, 1995, p. 331), the nature of leader–follower relationships (either positive or negative) could affect how followers judge their manager and thus influence their leadership perceptions. Also, we hypothesize and test a potential mechanism to explain how the central positions of managers could activate the leadership categorization process: A manager’s network centrality is expected to be associated with the level of his or her social power (Brass & Krackhardt, 1999), and we anticipate that social power generates favorable attributions about the manager (Brass & Brash, 1990). Because social power is critical for distinguishing leaders in a group (Ferris et al., 2009), followers may be more likely to categorize a socially powerful manager as a leader (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004).

To test our theory, we conducted two complementary studies to examine relationships among manager centrality in positive and negative networks, social power, and perception of leadership. In Study 1, we use a longitudinal design in a student sample to examine whether a formal leader’s positive and negative network centralities predict subsequent follower perceptions of leadership. We control for followers’ initial perceptions of leadership as well as for several prototypical relevant leadership characteristics (e.g., demographics, personality, and cognitive ability). In Study 2, drawing on a field sample of working teams, we test whether managers’ social power acts as a mediator in the relationship between their network centralities and follower perceptions of leadership. We also rule out several alternative explanations, including a manager’s connections to other managers and to his or her own supervisor.

We make three contributions to current understanding of leadership. First, by integrating the social network perspective with ILTs, we offer both theoretical and empirical support to explain how social network positions of managers serve as heuristics that

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1 We use the term manager to refer to a formally assigned leader who is involved in the day-to-day team tasks and is responsible for team performance (e.g., project manager; Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010). This is to distinguish the leadership attributions followers make about the target (i.e., their manager). Accordingly, in this article we will use terms manager and formal leader interchangeably.