Capturing hearts and minds: The influence of relational identification with the leader on followers' mobilization and cardiovascular reactivity ☆

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ABSTRACT

The influence of relational identification (RI) on leadership processes and the effects of social identity leadership on followers' responses to stress have received scant theoretical and research attention. The present research advances theoretical understanding by testing the assertion that high RI with the leader drives follower mobilization of effort and psychophysiological responses to stress. Two experimental scenario studies (Study 1 and Study 2) support the hypothesis that being led by an individual with whom followers perceive high RI increases follower intentional mobilization. Study 2 additionally showed that high (vs. low) RI increases follower resource appraisals and cognitive task performance. A laboratory experiment (Study 3) assessing cardiovascular (CV) reactivity showed that, compared to neutral (i.e., non-affiliated) leadership, being led by an individual with whom participants felt low RI elicited a maladaptive (i.e., threat) response to a pressurized task. In addition, relative to the low RI and neutral conditions, high RI with the leader did not engender greater challenge or threat reactivity. In conclusion, advancing social identity leadership and challenge and threat theory, findings suggest that leaders should be mindful of the deleterious effects (i.e., reduced mobilization and greater threat state) of low RI to optimize follower mobilization of effort and psychophysiological responses to stress.

A significant and increasing amount of research has supported the positive effect of social identity leadership on outcomes such as trust (Geissner & van Knippenberg, 2008), influence (Subašić, Reynolds, Turner, Veenstra, & Haslam, 2011), and follower's job performance (Zhu, He, Trevino, Chao, & Wang, 2015). Research additionally reports the mediating effect of followers' social identification. For instance, Zhu et al. (2015) found that ethical leadership (whereby leadership is honest, open, trustworthy, caring, and fair; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005) had an indirect effect on follower job performance through the mechanisms of identification with both the organization and the leader (relational identification [RI]; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Previous literature has focused on the direct and mediating effects of organizational identification (i.e., the extent to which a follower identifies with the organization; see Haslam, 2004) but has somewhat neglected relational elements of identification (i.e., the extent to which a leader—follower relationship has psychological meaning). Formally, Sluss and Ashforth (2007, p. 15) defined RI as "a (partial) definition of oneself in terms of a given role-relationship—what the relationship means to the individual". In the present article, we contribute to theory by testing the assertion that RI with the leader drives follower mobilization of effort and psychophysiological responses to a pressurized task.

Theory and evidence within the social identity paradigm have demonstrated the positive influence of shared group identification for leadership (see, for reviews, Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011; Hogg, 2001) and health (see, for reviews, Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Steffens, Haslam, Schuh, Jetten, & van Dick, 2016). Despite this understanding, theorists and researchers have typically overlooked relational elements of identification (see, for exceptions, Steffens, Haslam, & Reicher, 2014; Zhu et al., 2015), and have only more recently focused on intentional mobilization as a pertinent leadership outcome. Further, the social identity approach to health has outlined the positive stress-buffering effects of social support through shared identity (e.g., Haslam & Reicher, 2006), but has not considered followers' objective (i.e., cardiovascular; CV) stress reactivity as a function of leadership. Accordingly, one of the novel theoretical contributions of the present research is to examine whether leadership, and in particular RI with the leader, is a key determinant of individuals' stress reactivity. In doing so, the present research contributes to both theory (i.e., the social identity approach to leadership and health) and methodology (i.e., by adopting objective CV reactivity measures) through an

exploration of how followers' mobilization and CV reactivity to stress (which has far reaching implications for stress in the general population; e.g., workplace stress, see, for an example, Kivimäki et al., 2012) varies as a function of perceived RI with the leader.

Overall, the present research contributes to existing literature in at least three important ways. First, advancing social identity leadership, we examine whether high (vs. low) RI with the leader mobilizes followers towards the leader's vision. Second, we extend social identity approaches (to leadership and health) by examining the effect of RI with the leader—which has been overlooked compared to group/organizational identification—on resource appraisals and objective CV responses to stress. In doing so, RI with the leader may emerge as a prominent theoretical construct within the social identity approach in reference to individuals' responses to stress. Third, we extend challenge (i.e., adaptive reactivity) and threat (i.e., maladaptive reactivity) theory (Blascovich & Mendes, 2000; Jones, Meijen, McCarthy, & Sheffield, 2009) by examining whether social factors, and in particular RI with the leader, differentiates between individuals' stress reactivity ahead of a pressurized task. In doing so, this research examines the first evidence for the inclusion of leadership factors within challenge and threat theory.

Conceptual background and hypotheses development

The social identity approach to leadership

The social identity approach (encompassing both social identity; Tajfel & Turner, 1979 and self-categorization theories; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) asserts that individuals derive their sense of self from their individuality (i.e., their personal identity) *and* from the groups to which they *psychologically* belong (i.e., their social identities). Evidence points to the importance of understanding and working with individuals' social identities for group functioning (e.g., Haslam, 2004), organizational performance (e.g., Boehm, Dwertmann, Bruch, & Shamir, 2015), and leadership (see, for reviews, Haslam et al., 2011; Hogg, 2001). Speaking to the importance of these social identity processes for leadership, substantial evidence has found that leadership success hinges upon the development, management, and advancement of a group identity that leaders and followers share.

Developing, managing, and advancing a shared sense of group identity has a positive effect on leadership effectiveness. For example, leaders who embody a group's identity are more likely to be supported (van Dijke & De Cremer, 2010), trusted (Geissner & van Knippenberg, 2008), and perceived as effective (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). At the London 2012 Olympic Games successful leaders were more likely to articulate their team's identity, values, and vision in their media communication which may have served to enhance the 'specialness' associated with belonging to the team, and mobilize athletes to performance excellence (Slater, Barker, Coffee, & Jones, 2015). Thus, social identity leadership increases perceived leadership effectiveness, whilst leaders work to proactively advance group identities by articulating shared values.

Despite the significant and growing research attention examining social identity leadership, the relational aspect of identification has been typically overlooked (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Two exceptions to this omission are the programs of research by Steffens et al. (2014) and Zhu et al. (2015). Steffens et al. (2014) examined whether followers' social identification transferred to their identification with the leader in relational terms (i.e., RI). Related to the current research, in experimental and cross-sectional studies, Steffens and colleagues found that compared to low-identified followers, highly identified followers reported increased RI when they shared a group membership with a leader (but not when the leader represented an out-group). High RI was also found to increase charismatic perceptions of the leader. These findings support the "bottom-up" hypotheses that social identification predicts RI with the leader (and not that RI with the leader predicts

social identification), while it is also clear that social identification, leader's group affiliation, and perceptions of RI with the leader interact to implicate followers' perceptions of leaders' charisma.

The examination of RI with leaders is important because within workplace settings individuals interact with their leader (e.g., line manager) frequently and may feel psychologically closer to them compared to the organization overall (Zhu et al., 2015). This same notion is inherent in high performance settings such as elite sport, where athletes typically engage with their leader (i.e., coach) on a daily basis. Further, in a study of Romanian workplace employees, Zhu et al. (2015) reported that RI with the leader positively predicted job performance (as rated by the followers' supervisors). To build on the work of Steffens et al. (2014) and Zhu et al. (2015) and further understand the importance of RI as a theoretical construct in social identity leadership there is a need to examine the effect of different levels of RI with the leader on followers' psychology in performance and health terms. This is because whilst perceptions of leader charisma (Steffens et al., 2014) and supervisor-rated job performance (Zhu et al., 2015) have provided valuable insights into the effects of RI, questions remain pertaining to the effect of RI with the leader on psychological constructs holistically under followers' control (e.g., their mobilization of effort) and important constructs related to follower health and well-being (e.g., CV responses to stress). Accordingly, the present research makes a theoretical contribution to social identity leadership by investigating followers' psychological (i.e., mobilization of effort) and psychophysiological (i.e., self-report and CV reactivity to stress) responses as a function of RI with a leader (e.g., high vs. low).

To date, researchers have typically focused on followers' perceptions to assess effective leadership, yet scholars have proposed that researchers should move beyond this (Subašić et al., 2011). In response, leadership researchers have assessed participants' intentional mobilization through, for example, intentions to engage in collective action (Seyranian, 2014), or the amount of time willing to dedicate to an assigned task (Halevy, Berson, & Galinsky, 2011). To illustrate, Halevy et al. (2011) found that visionary leaders increased followers' mobilized collective action (i.e., intentional time). Moving beyond perceptions of leadership effectiveness and focusing on mobilization may increase our understanding of successful leadership and better reflects leadership as an influential process of motivating followers' energies to a collective target (Northouse, 2015). Aligned with these developments, the current research examines followers' intentional mobilization as a function of the theoretically unexplored principle of RI with the leader.

H1. High (vs. low) RI with the leader will increase follower intentional mobilization.

Theory and research support the notion that social identity leadership has a positive effect beyond followers' endorsement of leadership. In a hypothetical scenario study, compared to leaders who used non-inclusive language, leaders who used inclusive language (e.g., "we" and "us") to promote a sense of shared identity elicited greater positive emotion and confidence regarding social change in followers (Seyranian, 2014). This initial evidence implies that leadership that enhances the group's identity (e.g., through inclusive language) is more likely to elicit positive emotions and confidence towards change.

Despite the limited attention paid to followers' emotional response to leadership from a social identity perspective, a significant body of literature exists surrounding social identities and health (Haslam et al., 2009). In a meta-analysis, Steffens et al. (2016) found that shared social identification in working groups (and at the organizational level) predicted individuals' experience of better health (i.e., presence of well-being and an absence of stress). Moreover, Haslam and Reicher (2006) reported that individuals' sense of shared identity is positively related to social support and coping with situational stressors. Further evidence has suggested that in a stressful situation the presence of others reduces salivary cortisol (a measure of psychological stress) only when a shared sense of social identification has been established with that individual