



'It is not fair that you do not know we have problems': Perceptual distance and the consequences of male leaders' conflict avoidance behaviours



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates perceptual distance in terms of managers' conflict avoidance behaviour and its consequences for subordinates. We argue that perceptual distance, or the disagreement between a manager's perception and that of his or her subordinates of his or her conflict avoidance, is a genuine phenomenon. We examine the extent to which the perceptual distance regarding managers' avoidance behaviour influences a team's justice climate as well as the role of gender. The data collected from three multinational companies in China show that the perceptual distance of a male manager's avoidance behaviour exists and that it is associated with a negative justice climate within the team. These findings provide evidence of gender's effect on leadership and highlight the benefits of female leadership.

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1. Introduction

The most common criterion for leadership effectiveness is followers' perceptions of their leaders' effectiveness (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Therefore, it is necessary for leaders to be aware of how they are perceived by their followers and their followers' perceptions. However, the latter can differ from the leader's self-perception. For example, leaders are more likely to have a more positive perception of their own behaviour (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), and the subsequent confidence in their own effectiveness may not reflect reality. Similarly, empirical studies reveal that leaders' and members' perceptions of leader–member exchanges differ (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006); further, leaders' self-reported estimates of their transformational leadership and leadership effectiveness are inflated (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

Accordingly, leadership studies have somewhat addressed this issue (Sturm, Taylor, Atwater, & Braddy, 2014; Taylor & Hood, 2011) in line with the significance of self-awareness (Sturm et al., 2014). The theory of leader self-awareness (Taylor, 2010) claims a leader may lack self-awareness owing to attribution bias or self-bias

(Watson, 1982). However, this theory offers only a limited explanation of the difference in leader–members' perceptions and the incongruence demonstrated in their interactions (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumba, 2005; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Peus, Wesche, Streicher, Braun, & Frey, 2012; Taylor et al., 2008). Specifically, perceptual incongruence or the difference in perceptions between a leader and members may be caused not only by a leader's positive self-bias, but also by differences in how the leader and members perceive situations and the subsequent expectations of the leader's role. Therefore, to address the intriguing issue of a leader's sensitivity, or the lack of sensitivity in a team, a need exists to examine leader–members' perceptual incongruence beyond the leader's self-bias and/or self-awareness. For this investigation, we adapt the notion of perceptual distance to capture the size and amount of the incongruence gap, or the difference between a manager's and his or her subordinates' perceptions of team affairs, including leader behaviours.

Leader behaviours influence followers' perceptions of leadership effectiveness, as followers directly observe and interpret these behaviours (Mayer, Nishii, Schneider, & Goldstein, 2007). Additionally, among leaders' daily behaviours, conflict management is an important team leadership behaviour (Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001). Research thus far argues that a leader's conflict

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avoidance generally has a negative impact on followers' perceptions and leadership effectiveness (Desivilya & Yagil, 2005; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Therefore, we examine leader–members' perceptual distance in terms of leaders' conflict avoidance, given its potentially magnified negative effects. In particular, we examine whether leader–members' perceptual distance exists in terms of leaders' conflict avoidance behaviour and, if so, how this perceptual distance influences followers' attitudes, especially in relation to the prevailing justice climate.

Justice has been an important issue in relation to leadership given its influence on power (Emerson, 1972). Additionally, a team's manager acts as an organisation's gatekeeper (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Mohrman, Cohen, & Mohrman, 1995) and is a direct source and implementer of organisational procedures for team members (Collins, Mossholder, & Taylor, 2012; Zohar & Luria, 2004). Therefore, an investigation of the team's justice climate, in association with the perceptual distance of the leader's avoidance behaviours, is warranted.

A leader's behaviours can be perceived very differently by the leader and his or her followers. Therefore, our exploration offers an important insight into the findings of previous leadership studies (Goleman, 2001; Taylor, Rudolph, & Foldy, 2008). Our study highlights the importance of *sensitivity* and *empathetic leadership* by illustrating leadership failures that may be caused by missing subtle cues, and subsequent role expectations within a team. In doing so, we accept, but also look *beyond*, the significance of a leader's self-awareness and self-knowledge (Gardner et al., 2005; Peus et al., 2012). Similarly, we highlight the positive aspects of *female leadership*, which parallels increasing research on positive female leadership (Elsesser & Lever, 2011; Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012; Rosette & Tost, 2010). Our study thus responds to the call for a more in-depth exploration of issues related to a leader's sensitivity including self-awareness and highlights gender differences in leadership as a possible moderator for further consideration (Sturm et al., 2014; Wang, Chiang, Tsai, Lin, & Cheng, 2013). Our study also contributes to the literature on conflict research by indicating that the *perceptual distance* between a leader and his or her followers, rather than a leader's avoidance behaviours as perceived by followers *per se*, can be detrimental.

In the first part of the paper, we briefly discuss the notion of perceptual distance in terms of leader behaviour. We then justify the suitability of leaders' avoidance behaviour for our model and propose our first hypothesis, which states that perceptual distance is more likely to be present among male managers than female managers. We then explore the association between leader–members' perceptual distance and the team's justice climate in our second hypothesis. We use survey data from a sample of managers and their teams in three Chinese organisations to test these hypotheses. We present the results of *t*-tests and a polynomial regression analysis, and conclude by describing the implications of our study for both research and practice.

2. Theory development

2.1. Leader–members' perceptual distance regarding leader behaviour

The notion of *actorobserver asymmetry* (Jones & Nisbett, 1971) captures the powerful intuition that actors explain their own behaviour differently from how an observer would explain that behaviour (Malle, 2006). Actorobserver asymmetry is primarily caused by an attributing, self-serving bias (Watson, 1982), and could be broadly applied to all kinds of behaviour, whether intentional or unintentional, or positive or negative. Similarly, selfother agreement research (Fleenor, Smither, Atwater, Braddy, & Sturm,

2010) has also examined the relationship between how people rate themselves and how they are rated by others. According to this strand of the research, those who rate their strengths and weaknesses similarly to how others rate them can make more effective career decisions (Atwater & Yammarino, 1997). Alternatively, a lack of agreement regarding leaders' behaviour is related to such low outcomes as followers' low performance (Ostroff, Atwater, & Feinberg, 2004). Discrepancies between self-ratings and those of others thus allow for a rare insight into a leader's interpersonal world.

The theory of leader self-awareness (Taylor, 2010) also considers self-awareness to be an important factor associated with leadership success (Leary & Buttermore, 2003). Self-awareness is claimed to be a cornerstone of leadership including, but not limited to, authentic leadership (e.g. Avolio & Gardner, 2005) and emotional intelligence (e.g. Goleman, 1998, 2001). However, self-perception research has demonstrated that self-knowledge is poor (Dunning, 2005), with positive biases and inaccurate self-assessment. Further, biased self-views may be the most damaging at organisations' higher levels (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004).

Self-awareness consists of two key components: an understanding of oneself and the ability to anticipate how one is perceived by others (Taylor, 2010). Closely related to our study's interest, the second component of self-awareness consists of being in touch with or accurately reading others' emotions, thoughts, and preferences as well as one's influence on them (Taylor, 2010). People anticipate how one is perceived by others by drawing conclusions about themselves from external cues, including the observations of others (Tice & Wallace, 2003).

However, one challenge is that people do not fully know what is unknown about themselves, primarily because of ill-defined problems from 'unknown unknowns' (Caputo & Dunning, 2005). Accordingly, some urge leaders to show humility as well as recognise that people can only access selected parts of their own reality (Diddams & Chang, 2012). Additionally, given the broader contexts or situations in which a leader and leadership are implicated, the leader's scope of awareness should be extended to a team setting, and not only to the leader's self. Similarly, Gibson, Cooper, and Conger (2009) investigate the extent to which leader–members' perceptual distance affects team performance (e.g. goal accomplishment) and present a nonlinear relationship.

By considering the discussion thus far, we expect leader awareness, both the leader's sense of self and the team environment, to offer a more comprehensive view of leadership. As a team leader should not only manage him- or herself, but also manage team affairs, leader awareness and leadership should focus on team environments, including the perceptions of the leader and his or her followers. Accordingly, this study investigates the possible *discrepancies in expectation* beyond the leader's self-awareness of (non)actions due to differences between a leader's awareness of his or her role and his or her expected role as part of a team. We modify Gibson et al.'s (2009) notion of perceptual distance in *leader behaviour*, as the idea of *distance* in terms of perception focuses on not only *the existence* of an asymmetry or gap, but also its *size*. Our investigation of perceptual distance in leader behaviour (e.g. a leader's conflict avoidance) therefore allows us to consider the perception distance caused by different understandings of team environments and situations (e.g. conflict situations). Fig. 1 illustrates the perceptual distance caused by differences in perceptions of work situations between a leader and his or her followers, including the leader's self-awareness.

2.2. Conflict handling as an important leadership behaviour

Two behavioural aspects of leadership, represented by structure

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