



## Reconsidering the accuracy of follower leadership ratings



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### ABSTRACT

Accurate behavioral measurement is essential to developing a science of leadership, yet accurate measurement has remained elusive. The use of follower reports of leader behavior creates challenges given that a large body of basic and applied research suggests that behavioral ratings reflect not only recall of actual behaviors, but also inferences based on semantic memory, which may vary among individuals. In this paper, we examine several explanations for rater effects that are associated with follower individual differences, contextual factors, and even research methods, such as the type of measure used, that may bias ratings of leader behavior. We also develop a conceptual model to illustrate these processes. Finally, we offer potential solutions to increase accuracy in follower reports of leader behavior.

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The leadership field relies heavily on follower ratings of leader behavior both in research settings to test leadership theories and in applied settings for leadership development purposes (e.g., 360-degree feedback). Given that leadership reflects a dynamic interaction between leaders and followers (Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2006), follower ratings provide an important source of data. Indeed, Shamir (2007) describes followers as “co-producers of leadership.” However, reliance on follower ratings of leader behavior as a key measure of leadership processes, or even as the sole measure, creates significant challenges. In particular, followers become important contributors to the processes they are used to measure, raising both the issue of accuracy of leader ratings and the potential for biases in ratings processes that are associated with individual differences among followers (Bono, Hooper, & Yoon, 2012; Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007).

If leader ratings are to be accurate at the behavioral level, they must accurately report whether specific types of behaviors occurred (e.g., Lord, 1985). In terms of signal detection theory, accurate behavioral measurement requires *memory sensitivity*—that is, the ability to distinguish between those behaviors that occurred and those that did not. A precondition for memory sensitivity is that information must be thoroughly and carefully encoded and retrieved. Yet, both noise and bias may affect follower ratings of leader behavior. *Noise* is a nonsystematic or random error, such as lack of care or fatigue that reduces memory sensitivity for leader behaviors. *Bias* is a non-random or systematic response set that reflects a predisposition to respond in a particular manner by either endorsing or not endorsing items.

Reliance on schemas, scripts, and social categories may introduce bias into behavioral ratings of leadership. Raters are prone to endorse behaviors that seem familiar but did not actually happen (e.g., false alarms; Martell & Guzzo, 1991; Shondrick, Dinh, & Lord,

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2010), and such familiarity may stem from the prototypicality of an item within a relevant category. For example, it has long been known that person categorization processes, based on implicit leadership theories, influence ratings of leader behavior. In particular, the same factor structure emerged in ratings of hypothetical leaders as in ratings of familiar leaders (Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Rush, Thomas, & Lord, 1977; Weiss & Adler, 1981), implying that behavioral ratings of leaders may reflect followers' implicit leadership theories rather than actual leader behavior. Importantly, implicit leadership theories can trigger “false alarms” in person perception, whereby observers incorrectly report behaviors that were not observed yet are consistent with the leader prototype (Phillips, 1984; Phillips & Lord, 1982). In this sense, false alarms affect discrimination as well as bias. Martell and Evans (2005) suggest that reliance on prototypical leader behaviors not only produces false memories, but also fosters heightened feelings of familiarity with prototypical leader behaviors, which in turn causes raters to adopt more liberal decision criteria. Similarly, followers' affective reactions to leaders may systematically influence ratings of leader behavior (Bono & Ilies, 2006; Naidoo, Kohari, Lord, & DuBois, 2010) by impacting both memory sensitivity (Allen, Kaut, & Lord, 2008) and bias, as positive affect engenders more liberal thresholds.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that implicit leadership theories and other aspects of raters such as their affective reactions present a significant challenge to ensuring accuracy in follower ratings of leader behavior. Thus, their effects on the data used for theory testing or leadership development represents a critical issue for the leadership field. Accentuating this concern, measures may have little to do with actual leader behavior and are less accurate than we would like them to be, or assume they are (Hunter et al., 2007; Lord, 1985; Yammarino, Dubinsky, & Spangler, 1998). For example, Scullen, Mount, and Goff (2000) report that 62% of the variance in subordinate ratings of leaders on the human dimension, which includes items that pertain to leadership such as “motivates others,” “builds relationships,” and “listens to others,” is associated with idiosyncratic rater effects (e.g., bias). To that end, a comprehensive examination of individual differences that may impact rating accuracy is sorely needed.

In addition, a focus on follower individual differences that impact ratings of leader behavior may inform the future development of leadership studies and constructs such as transformational leadership and leader–member exchange (LMX) that might potentially suffer from endogeneity effects (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010, 2014) where the effect of  $x$  on  $y$  cannot be interpreted because of omitted causes. Endogeneity can stem from several factors, including omitted variables, simultaneity, and common-method variance. Concerns about endogeneity are important because if the relationship between  $x$  and  $y$  is due in part to other reasons, then the correlation simply has no meaning (Antonakis et al., 2010). Thus, endogeneity is a bias-related issue. Individual differences may provide a solution given that they are mostly exogenous to leadership processes and, therefore, can be useful in process models of leadership (Antonakis et al., 2014). As Antonakis, Day, and Schyns observe (2012, p. 644), one promising area for exploration “is to investigate further how follower individual differences affect perceptions of leaders. This research goes back to the idea that the variance in follower leadership ratings is not only a measurement error but also is a reflection of follower individual differences (e.g., Felfe & Heinitz, 2010; Graen, 1975; Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras, 2003).” Similarly, Scullen et al. (2000) contend that any causal model seeking to explain ratings of supervisory behavior must account for rater effects, as they are the largest source of rating variance. Clearly, further consideration of the nature of individual and perspective-related effects is needed.

Another important issue concerns the means by which follower ratings of leader behavior are actually produced. We propose that gaining a better understanding of the factors that promote the use of automatic and categorization-based processing is an essential first step to increase accuracy in follower ratings. Similarly, understanding the effects of affect on the rating process is necessary because affective reactions are very fast, often setting the stage for subsequent cognitive processing (Srull & Wyer, 1989). The importance of these issues is clear; when raters rely on automatic processes or extant schemas to simplify processing, many factors associated with those schemas become endogenous to the rating process and, therefore, have the potential to bias estimates of leader behavior effects.

Here, we examine the mechanisms through which follower individual differences, contextual factors, and even the type of measure used may bias ratings of leader behavior; develop a conceptual model that illustrates this process; and offer potential solutions to increase accuracy in follower ratings of leader behavior. Accuracy in ratings of leader behavior is a particularly vexing problem because these ratings represent the end of a highly integrative and ongoing sensemaking process that encompasses leaders, perceivers, and context, and all these factors influence both perception and later retrieval of leader behavior. The person perception and memory literature is used below to illustrate the challenges these sensemaking processes create for accuracy in follower reports of leader behavior.

### **Accuracy and bias in person perception and memory**

Dual-processing models of person perception (e.g., Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990) contend that person perception occurs sequentially, with quick, effortless person categorization preceding effortful individuation. As detailed by Fiske, Lin, and Neuberg (1999), research has demonstrated that person schemas are central and available to perceivers within milliseconds of encountering another individual, and automatically guide understanding and encoding of person-related information. Once the target has been categorized, the categorical structure works quickly and efficiently without much effortful thought, eliciting selective perception, interpretation, inference, and memory (Heilman, 1995). Such processing is likely to occur within connectionist systems, and therefore takes place outside of conscious awareness. Perceivers give priority to categorization based on general knowledge structures over individuation or encoding of person-specific information; they will move on to more effortful processing only if targets are judged to be of sufficient motivational relevance and sufficient cognitive resources are available to permit additional processing (Fiske et al., 1999; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988). Thus, the information needed to provide accurate ratings or behavioral descriptions of leaders that is independent of other associated effects is typically not available to followers when they are asked to rate leader behaviors.

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