



When opposites do (and do not) attract: Interplay of leader and follower self-identities and its consequences for leader–member exchange

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ABSTRACT

Employees' self-identities, or the ways in which they define themselves relative to others, have implications for the quality of leader and follower relationships at work. Although self-identity has been examined within the context of transformational and charismatic leadership, its relevance for leader–member exchange (LMX) has received little attention. In this study we integrate LMX and self-identity theories. Doing so proved useful because it was found that leader and follower identities predicted LMX quality, as did the fit between leader and follower identities and interactions among fit at different self-identity levels. LMX quality fully mediated relationships of self-identity fit with job performance, regardless of whether LMX was reported by subordinates or their supervisors. Lastly, we also found that self-identity predicted LMX agreement across supervisors and subordinates. Implications of our findings for theory and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Leadership is a social process of exerting influence that involves two or more people (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1990). While initial leadership research emphasized the characteristics and behaviors of leaders, subsequent research has better captured the social nature of leadership by examining leadership from the perspective of followers (e.g., Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001) and the interactions that occur between leaders and followers (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Given the importance of the social context in which leadership emerges, leader and follower self-identity – that is, how they define themselves relative to other people and groups – has emerged as a key variable in the leadership literature (Hogg, 2001; Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord, Brown, & Frieberg, 1999; Uhl-Bien, 2006; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). For example, it has been proposed that charismatic and transformational leadership influences follower behavior via activating different self-identity levels in followers (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), a proposition that has received empirical support (e.g., De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2002; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003; Paul, Costley, Howell, Dorfman, & Trafimow, 2001). Follower self-identity may also moderate the effects of charismatic and transformational leadership, such that followers with strong collective or group-oriented identities respond favorably to charismatic and inspirational leadership and unfavorably to individualized leadership (Hogg & Martin, 2003; Martin & Epitropaki, 2001).

While evidence is mounting that self-identity is a key variable for charismatic and transformational leadership theories (e.g., Johnson, Chang, Jackson, & Saboe, 2009; Lord & Brown, 2004; van Knippenberg et al., 2004), there have been few empirical attempts to assess the role of self-identity in leader–member exchange (LMX) theory. This inattention is unfortunate because LMX theory and its dyadic perspective is a leading paradigm for understanding leadership (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). To address

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this limitation, the current study integrates the literatures pertaining to LMX and self-identity. Self-identity research is relevant for LMX because the quality of leader–follower relations depends on the social evaluations and motivations of both parties (Uhl-Bien, 2006), and the way that people view themselves, their connections to other people, and the value they place on other people's goals and welfare depends in part on self-identity levels (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). We believe, like others (e.g., Chang & Johnson, 2010; Lord et al., 1999; Schyns & Day, 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2006), that the self-identities of leaders and followers relate to the quality of their interactions and, ultimately, to followers' work performance. This study represents an initial empirical test of this idea.

The current study extends existing self-identity-based leadership research in four ways. First, most research has examined self-identity as a mediator of the effects of leader actions and language on follower behavior (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Our approach diverges from this perspective because we examined the direct effects of leader and follower self-identity on relationship quality. Such an approach is needed because scholars have called for more research that examines self-identity as a possible antecedent of LMX and work behavior (e.g., Schyns & Day, 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Our study answers this call. Second, we examined the role of chronic or trait levels of self-identity rather than state self-identity. Research concerning the interplay of leadership with self-identity has typically examined identity as a state phenomenon (e.g., Paul et al., 2001) that shifts in response to situational cues, yet identity also has a stable element that shapes how employees interpret their environment (e.g., Johnson, Selenta, & Lord, 2006), including appraisals of leaders (Lord & Brown, 2004). We believe that trait levels of self-identity are also relevant for leadership-related processes and are capable of shaping LMX, and we test this assumption in the present study. Third, although there is initial evidence that self-identity relates to the quality of leader–follower relationships, thus far the effects of leader self-identity and follower self-identity have been examined separately. For example, it has been found that follower relational identity is positively related to leader-rated LMX (Johnson & Saboe, 2011) and that leader relational identity is positively related to follower-rated LMX (Chang & Johnson, 2010). In the current study we build upon these findings by adopting a person–person fit approach and testing the proposition that follower–leader fit and misfit on identity levels predict relationship quality. This approach represents a key contribution because while it is believed that leader–follower similarity on motivation-based variables like values and goals cultivate LMX (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), almost no published research has examined this issue empirically (see Dose, 1999, for an exception). To date, most empirical research has been limited to leader–follower fit on demographic variables like age and gender. However, self-identity may be more relevant because each level is comprised of unique values and goals that guide people's motivation and behavior in social contexts, which influence leader–follower interactions (Lord & Brown, 2004). Lastly, this study contributes to the existing leadership and self-identity literatures because we examined all three levels of self-identity simultaneously, in contrast to past research that has typically only explored one or at most two levels (e.g., Kark et al., 2003). Examining all three levels addresses the need for more research on the individual and relational identity levels because nearly all leadership research has involved the collective level (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Examining all three identity levels simultaneously also allows for a comparison of their relative importance for LMX and follower job performance.

In the remainder of the paper we describe a study in which we examined relationships of leader and follower self-identity levels and leader–follower similarity on those levels with relationship quality, as captured by LMX. We also tested whether LMX mediates relationships of identity similarity with follower job performance, a higher-order construct comprised of in-role and extra-role work behaviors. We begin with brief overviews of LMX and self-identity, followed by an integration of the two literatures by developing hypotheses concerning how self-identity and the fit between leader and follower identity are expected to relate to LMX quality.

2. Leader–member exchange (LMX)

The fundamental assumption of LMX theory is that leaders form relationships of differing quality with their subordinates (Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982). The theory recognizes the importance of exchange relationships by examining leader–follower dyads as opposed to the characteristics and behaviors of individual leaders or followers. Although LMX operates at multiple levels of analysis (e.g., leaders and followers within a dyad, multiple dyads within work groups and organizations, etc.; see Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005), in this study we examined individual leader–follower dyads. That is, data were collected from pairs of supervisors and subordinates, and these dyads were independent from one another (i.e., participants were not members of multiple dyads). We view a single dyad involving one leader and one follower as the fundamental unit according to LMX theory. If it is found that self-identity influences processes at this fundamental level, then it would be fruitful to explore possible effects of self-identity on LMX at other levels of analyses, which are theoretically plausible.

Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) defined LMX as a social exchange of psychological benefits between leaders and followers, which are characterized as being low or high quality based on the extent of mutual trust, respect, liking, and obligation between the two parties. When leaders and followers contribute economic and socio-emotional resources that are valued by their dyad partner and the exchange is viewed as fair, high quality LMX emerges (Liden, Sparrow, & Wayne, 1997). As it turns out, the quality of these exchanges is quite important because LMX is positively related to various follower outcomes, including job satisfaction, commitment to work supervisors and organizations, task performance, and citizenship performance (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007).

While it is beneficial for followers to have high quality LMX with their leaders, not everyone develops such relationships. A number of variables that potentially contribute to LMX quality have been empirically tested, mostly ones centered around follower characteristics (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Examples of follower characteristics that influence the quality of LMX include follower competence and personality (e.g., Day & Crain, 1992; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993; Nahrgang, Morgeson, & Ilies, 2009; Phillips

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