



# Up close and personal: Evidence that shared social identity is a basis for the ‘special’ relationship that binds followers to leaders ☆

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 December 2012

Received in revised form 24 August 2013

Accepted 27 August 2013

Available online 19 September 2013

Editor: Ronald Riggio

### Keywords:

Social identity

Charisma

Leadership

Followership

Prototypicality

## ABSTRACT

The present research extends prior work by proposing that followers' social identification with a group can translate into their relational identification with leaders. Study 1 demonstrates experimentally that compared to low-identified followers, highly identified followers perceive themselves to share relational identity with a leader when that leader is representative of their ingroup (but not if that leader is representative of an outgroup). Followers' relational identification, in turn, influences not only their experience of a personal bond with the leader but also perceptions of leader charisma. Study 2 replicates these findings in the context of Presidential candidates in the 2012 US election and extends them by examining leader prototypicality as a further moderating factor. Findings suggest that followers' experience of a ‘special’ and ‘personal’ bond with leaders arises from their social bond within a group that binds them together and provides a framework for their mutual relationship.

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## 1. Introduction

*After [Franklin D. Roosevelt] died, a reporter asked one of the mourners waiting to see his funeral train at Washington's Union Station, “Why are you here? Did you know Franklin Roosevelt?” The mourner is said to have replied, “No, but he knew me.”*

[Haslam & Reicher, 2012: p. 44]

As the above story illustrates, people's lives are often shaped by a special and enduring sense of personal connection between themselves and their leaders. At the same time, however, their experiences and behaviors are also influenced by a sense of social connection, and feelings of belonging, to a group as a whole. These two forms of identification – with either a relational other (which can be defined as “(partial) definition of oneself in terms of a given role-relationship”; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007: p. 15) or with a social group (which can be defined as part of one's self-concept that derives from internalized group membership; Turner, 1982) – can be seen as distinct and separate concepts (e.g., Zhang, Chen, Chen, Liu, & Johnson, in press; see also Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994). Nevertheless, they are not necessarily independent because when followers join a new group, their relational identification with the leader can generalize to their identification with the group (i.e., as a top-down process; Sluss, Ployhart, Cobb, & Ashforth, 2012). This begs the question of whether this is only a ‘one-way’ process in

☆ We are grateful to Jolanda Jetten and Kelly Fielding for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

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which followers' connection to an individual leader translates into a connection with the group they lead (i.e., as a top-down process), or whether, in established groups, followers' *social* connection to a group as a whole also transfers to a *personal* connection to the leader of that group (i.e., as a bottom-up process). The present paper examines this possibility and suggests that underlying social identification processes can provide a framework within which followers experience powerful personal relationships that bind them to their leaders.

The overarching framework that guides the present examination is summarized schematically in Fig. 1. More specifically, two studies – one experiment and a replication study in the context of the 2012 US Federal election – examine the ways in which followers' relational identification with leaders is influenced by their categorization of themselves and their leaders in terms of a shared group membership. Moreover, we also examine the parallel impact of shared social identity on followers' sense that they have a personal bond with their leaders.<sup>1</sup> In addition, these studies explore whether (and how) the effects of followers' self-categorization of themselves and their leaders also extend to perceptions of leader charisma (after Burns, 1978; see also Bass & Riggio, 2006; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Haslam & Reicher, 2012). In particular, the studies investigate whether the degree to which followers identify with a leader on a relational basis mediates the effects of followers' social identification with a group and a leader's group affiliation on followers' sense that they have a personal relationship with that leader and that he or she is charismatic. At the same time, we also examine the moderating role of leader prototypicality (e.g., Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011; Hogg, 2001, Turner & Haslam, 2001; van Knippenberg, 2011) – investigating whether shared group membership between leaders and followers gives followers a sense of personal connection to a leader when that leader is seen to be particularly representative of the ingroup as a whole. In this way, the paper contributes to our understandings of the leader–follower–relationship by testing the suggestion that the 'special' and 'personal' experience that followers have with leaders is grounded in a sense of shared social identity. Moreover, it contributes to our understanding of 'bottom-up' identity processes by demonstrating that, even in the absence of actual contact with leaders, followers can have the experience of a personal bond with a leader as a consequence of that leader being seen to be representative of a group that the followers hold dear.

In the literature, charismatic leaders are understood to be those who achieve idealized influence by both being (and being seen to be) role models for followers who have a clear mission and sense of purpose. In addition, such leaders are understood to be ethical, consistent, and risk-friendly and to have outstanding capabilities, persistence, and drive, as well as a desire to “do the right thing” (Bass & Riggio, 2006). There are several reasons why the antecedents of this charisma are of theoretical and empirical interest. First, because as a core aspect of charismatic (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Yukl, 1999) and transformational leadership theory (combined in the elements idealized influence and inspirational motivation; Bass & Riggio, 2006) charisma continues to inspire a large amount of contemporary leadership research (e.g., Beck, Carr, & Walmsley, 2012; Bligh & Kohles, 2009; DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011). Second, because leader charisma has at the same time also been a central focus for both public discourse and research in a broad range of disciplines (e.g., history, sociology, religion, and political sciences; Rees, 2012). Third, because by demonstrating that followers' social identification and leaders' prototypicality both shape perceptions of leader charisma through their impact on followers' relational identification with leaders, the present research should also be able to enhance our understanding of the *source* of leader influence (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009).

### 1.1. Followers' social identification with a group

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; together also known as the social identity approach; e.g., Haslam, 2001) assert that people can derive a sense of self not only from thinking, feeling, and acting as individuals (i.e., as “I”, in terms of a personal identity) but also through their sense that they are members of a group (i.e., as “we”, in terms of a social identity). Indeed, it has been argued that it is people's ability to act in terms of social identity that makes group and organizational behavior possible (Turner, 1982, see also Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam, Postmes, & Ellemers, 2003; van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004). Along these lines, when people define themselves in terms of a shared social identity this has been found to have important implications for a range of important organizational behaviors such as (a) effective communication (e.g., Postmes, Tanis, & de Wit, 2001), (b) mutual trust (Platow, McClintock, & Liebrand, 1990), (c) enhanced creativity (Adarves-Yorno, Postmes, & Haslam, 2006, 2007), and (d) successful cooperation (e.g., Tyler & Blader, 2000; for overviews see Haslam, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Riketta, 2005; van Knippenberg, 2000).

Moreover, it has been argued that people's ability to self-categorize in terms of a given group membership also plays a central role in their capability to influence each other, and to exercise both leadership and followership (Ellemers, de Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Turner, 1991; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003; for recent comprehensive and historical overviews see Haslam et al., 2011; Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012; van Knippenberg, 2011). Supporting these basic ideas, studies by Fielding and Hogg (1997) found that as followers came to identify more strongly with a group, leaders' behaviors were evaluated more strongly on the basis of group norms. In particular, under conditions of strong identification, leaders were increasingly evaluated as a function of the degree to which they were seen to be representative of those norms rather than the degree to which they fitted general leader stereotypes (Hogg, Hains, & Mason, 1998).

<sup>1</sup> The experience of having a personal bond with a leader differs from relational identification in that it does not speak to the internalization of the leader into one's self-concept but instead to the experiential aspect of the relationship. This means that we can have a close personal bond with a leader but not define ourselves through this role-relationship as much as we can define ourselves through our role-relationship to a leader but fail to experience a close and emotional bond with him or her. In this sense, the constructs are theoretically independent and not entirely interchangeable.

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