



Leaders' relational self-concept and followers' task performance: Implications for mentoring provided to followers

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ABSTRACT

Using a sample of 137 leader–follower dyads, this study investigated how leaders' relational self-concept relates to the mentoring (career support and psychosocial support) they provide to their followers, and whether followers' task performance moderates this relationship. As expected, leaders with a stronger relational self-concept provided more career support to followers who displayed higher (vs. lower) task performance. However, leaders' relational self-concept was unrelated to their provision of psychosocial support, irrespective of followers' task performance.

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1. Introduction

The receipt of mentorship is associated with various favorable behavioral, attitudinal, health-related, relational, motivational, and career outcomes (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). Organizational leaders (managers) are often in an excellent position to provide valuable mentorship to immediate followers (direct reports) because they have personal, first-hand knowledge of their followers' needs and immediate work environments, and are typically required by the organization to be attentive to their performance (Burke, McKeen, & McKenna, 1993; Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). In fact, effective leadership has been closely associated with a leader's provision of mentorship to his or her followers (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000; Thibodeaux & Lowe, 1996). To the extent that organizations wish to better understand and manage the degree to which their leaders mentor their followers, it is important for scholars to elucidate why leaders decide to engage in such behavior. This was the general impetus for our study.

One factor that is likely to explain a leader's propensity to mentor is the leader's self-concept. Our self-concept or self-identity reflects how we define ourselves, and has profound effects on the way we feel, think, and behave (Leary & Tangle, 2003). Different levels of self-conception have been distinguished. These levels differ in the degree of inclusiveness at which individuals define themselves. The personal or independent self is defined in terms of unique characteristics that distinguish the individual from others. The collective self represents an extension of the self to include others, and denotes the degree to which one defines oneself in collective terms, sees the self as similar to other members of the collective, ascribes group-defining characteristics to the self, and takes the collective's interests to heart (Hogg, 2003). The relational self also includes others. However, instead of being defined in terms of one's belonging to a group or collective, it is based on an individual's close dyadic relationships (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). Individuals with a strongly relational identity are motivated to act in terms of a specific other's benefit, and derive a sense of self-worth from engaging in appropriate role behavior with relational partners (Brewer &

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Gardner, 1996). Compared to other levels of self-conception, the relational identity, with its focus on developing and maintaining close dyadic relationships, is most salient to the dyadic process of mentoring (Lord & Brown, 2004). In this study, we tested whether the degree to which leaders define themselves at the relational level (i.e., the strength of their relational self-concept) explains variation in the mentoring they provide to followers. If it does, organizations could consider the strength of individuals' relational self-concept when trying to predict their propensity to mentor direct reports, and potentially use this information for making leadership selection or promotion decisions.

Mentoring research has used social exchange theory to explain why individuals would be motivated to provide mentorship (Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 2000; Lapierre, Bonaccio, & Allen, 2009; Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993). The basic premise of social exchange theory is that when an individual perceives that a relationship will provide greater rewards than costs, he or she will be more inclined to develop the relationship (Blau, 1964). Following this premise, a leader would be more willing to offer mentorship to a follower if doing so is deemed more beneficial than costly to the leader. One factor that should convince a leader that providing mentorship to a follower would be more beneficial than costly is whether that follower has shown strong job performance (Olian et al., 1993). Supporting this argument, recent research has shown that leaders are more willing to mentor a follower who has displayed stronger rather than weaker task performance (Lapierre et al., 2009). Task performance specifically refers to employee activities that are formally recognized as part of their job and thus expected of them (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). As we explain in more detail later in our article, leaders with a more relational self-concept have much to gain and relatively little to lose by mentoring followers who have displayed stronger rather than weaker task performance. Thus, while leaders with a more relational identity may generally be more disposed to mentoring a follower in an effort to develop a closer relationship, this inclination may be particularly strong when the follower has displayed stronger task performance. To examine this possibility, we tested whether the strength of leaders' relational self-concept is more strongly related to their provision of mentorship when followers have displayed stronger task performance. Our results may imply that organizations can increase leader-provided mentoring by ensuring that leaders with strongly relational self-concepts are paired with more highly performing followers.

1.1. Leadership research involving the self-concept

Leadership scholars have paid significant attention to the self-concept in an effort to better understand leadership phenomena. Most of this research has focused on followers' self-concept. In a review of this literature, Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer, and Hogg (2004) concluded that followers' self-conception can mediate (explain) and moderate leadership effectiveness. They note that most empirical evidence comes from studies focusing on followers' independent and collective identities. Relatively little evidence stems from research on the relational self-concept, which Lord and colleagues (Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999) argue would be theoretically salient to our understanding of leadership effectiveness in dyadic (leader–follower) relational contexts.

The idea that the relational self-concept could play a distinct role in explaining leadership phenomena is reinforced by evidence showing that it is empirically distinct from the independent and collective self-concepts. Cross and colleagues (2000) showed that their measure of the relational self-concept was very weakly related to a measure of the independent self-concept, and only moderately related to a measure of individuals' collective identity. Moreover, they showed that the relational self-concept measure explained unique variation in one's general attitudes toward relationships over and above the collective identity measure. Also, Selenta and Lord (2005) reported that measures of the independent, relational, and collective self-concepts were factorially distinct from one another. Such findings imply that an examination of the relational self-concept could elucidate leadership phenomena that research focusing on the independent or collective self-concept would not have.

Although most leadership research addressing the self-concept has focused on followers' self-concept, some leadership scholars have considered leaders' self-conception. For example, Sosik, Avolio, and Jung (2002) examined leaders' desired charismatic identity (which they explain would stem from their self-concept) as antecedent to their display of charismatic leadership, managerial performance, and unit performance. Sosik and Dworakivsky (1998) studied other constructs associated with leaders' self-concept, including their self-awareness, purpose in life, and self-control of expressive behavior as antecedents to their charismatic attributes and behaviors. Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005) argued that leaders' self-awareness (self-clarity and self-certainty) would influence their display of authentic leadership. More recently, Rus, van Knippenberg, and Wisse (2010) tested whether leaders' self-definition as a leader (which would be part of their self-concept) is linked to their self-serving behavior. Finally, Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009), in a review of leadership theory and research, called for research examining how leaders' self-concept is formed, changed, and influences the manner in which they behave. Although none of this work has explicitly addressed the different levels at which leaders may construe their identity (i.e., independent, relational, or collective), it reveals that some have considered leaders' self-conception as salient to our understanding of leadership.

Our research objective was to contribute to the burgeoning leadership literature examining leaders' self-concept. As noted earlier, given our interest in explaining leaders' provision of mentorship to followers, we focused on leaders' relational self-concept due to the central importance it gives to close dyadic relationships, which mentoring exemplifies.

1.2. Leaders' relational self-concept and mentoring behavior

The relational self-concept is often considered as a chronically accessible or trait-like individual difference characteristic (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Cross et al., 2000; Kashima & Hardie, 2000). Lord and Brown (2004) view the individual difference component of the self (i.e., the chronic self) as the identity that typically guides the working self-concept. The working self-

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