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Childhood and adolescent antecedents of social skills and leadership potential in adulthood: Temperamental approach/withdrawal and extraversion[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This is the first study examining the developmental roots of leadership potential in a longitudinal framework from age 2 to 29 years. Data are derived from the Fullerton Longitudinal Study. Using structural equation modeling ($N = 106$), the direct and indirect effects of adolescent personality (extraversion) and intelligence (IQ) on adult social skills and leadership potential were investigated. In addition, we examined their joint effect on leadership potential using both a variable and a pattern approach. The relation between adolescent extraversion and adult leadership potential was completely mediated by adult social skills. Adolescent IQ had neither a direct nor an indirect relationship with adult leadership potential, nor did it interact with extraversion in predicting adult leadership potential. Utilizing longitudinal data from early childhood through adulthood, we delineated a specific developmental pathway to adult leadership potential spanning the first three decades of life. A pathway beginning in early childhood with temperamental approach/withdrawal shows stability throughout childhood and leads to extraversion in adolescence, which in turn relates to leadership potential in adulthood via adult social skills.

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To understand the roots of adult leader emergence and effectiveness, scholars have recently proposed developmental models outlining the early building blocks of leadership development. For example, Popper and Mayselless (2007) proposed a conceptual framework delineating three major developmental precursors of leadership, including (1) psychological capacities that promote the potential to lead; (2) motivation to lead; and (3) contextual processes that support or undermine the development of leadership, for example, through provision of experience or observation of a model. Among the psychological capacities

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hypothesized by Popper and Maysless as antecedents of leadership are individual differences such as self-confidence, a prosocial and caring orientation, optimism, and openness/curiosity/flexibility.

Integrating models of adult leadership and research on children and adolescents, Murphy (2011) provided a conceptual model of youth leadership development. She posited that, in its simplest form, leadership is the application of social influence, and as such leadership can be observed beginning in early childhood. Included in her model are *precursors* (individual difference variables such as communication, personality, emotional/social intelligence, and gender); *developmental factors* (parenting styles and learning experiences, etc.); and *self-management* (self-efficacy, coping styles, motivation, etc.). These building blocks, in concert with the child's context of development, are related to *leader behaviors*, which in turn predict *leader outcomes* that vary according to developmental stage. Murphy concludes with a call for more research examining the early antecedents of adult leadership.

1. Approaches to studying of the development of leaders

When studying the early antecedents of adult leadership, there are at least two methodological approaches a researcher may engage, each with strengths and limitations. First, and most commonly employed, is a retrospective methodology whereby the researcher identifies current executives or other organizational leaders and asks them to report on past experiences that they view as developmentally impactful. The strength of this retrospective approach is to gather information on persons with unique characteristics (i.e., a defined target population of organizational leaders) enabling hypothesis generation. However, retrospective reports are contingent upon the imperfect memories of adult leaders regarding their past experiences, producing measures of unknowable reliability and validity. In sum, retrospective studies involve post-diction, not prediction, and may be limited by a restricted range or ascertainment bias due to sample selection.

An alternative, and we argue a more methodologically sound, approach to studying early influences on adult leadership is a prospective investigation spanning a considerable number of years using contemporaneously collected measures. Using this approach, researchers follow a sample from childhood into adulthood, gathering data on a variety of developmental precursors to leadership from a number of sources. Disadvantages of this approach include the significant investment of time and the possibility of attrition bias. Because participants are not selected based on their unique leadership characteristics, which are unknown and yet to emerge at the inception of the investigation, a larger amount of variability in the measures of leadership may emerge, thus allowing for greater predictive power. In addition to studying everyday leaders in a range of situations/contexts, the strengths of such a prospective approach include the examination of cross-time relationships of short and long-term prediction using measures of known reliability and validity. By examining a chain of events, the pathways from childhood to adult leadership can be tested, including hypothesized effects of mediators and moderators involved in the development of leadership. Using a longitudinal, prospective approach allows researchers to truly study *developmental* processes toward leadership potential.

The purpose of the current study was to examine childhood and adolescent precursors of leadership potential in adulthood using a longitudinal study involving contemporaneously collected standardized measures. This study is novel because it is the first investigation of leadership potential spanning childhood through adulthood. The specific antecedents examined included the temperament trait of approach/withdrawal in childhood and extraversion and intelligence in adolescence. Using structural equation modeling, we examined individual differences in child/adolescent temperament/personality and intellectual ability as predictors of leadership potential in adulthood; furthermore, we proposed that social skills mediate the relation between these individual differences in adolescence and leadership potential in adulthood. Finally, possible additive and interactive joint effects of adolescent intelligence and extraversion on adult leadership potential were explored. To our knowledge, this study examining longitudinal data spanning the child/adolescent period through adulthood is unique in the study of leader development and takes the first step to answering scholars' (Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2009; Murphy, 2011; Reichard & Avolio, 2005) calls for longitudinal research on leader development.

2. Intelligence

Among the developmental antecedents of leadership posited by Popper and Maysless (2007) and Murphy (2011), individual differences in cognitive ability as reflected in curiosity, flexibility, or social intelligence are evident. Psychologists have shown that individual differences in intelligence or cognitive ability predict a wide range of important developmental outcomes, including school performance/educational persistence, social status/income, and job performance in most settings (Neisser et al., 1996; see also Ree, Earles, & Teachout, 1994; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998 on predictors of job performance). Longitudinal research has shown a high degree of stability in individual differences in intelligence across adolescence (e.g., Gottfried, Gottfried, & Guerin, 2009) and the adult life span (e.g., Hertzog & Schaie, 1986).

Research on the characteristics of leaders has shown that intelligence is generally positively related to leadership, although findings are quite mixed (Bass & Bass, 2008; Riggio, Murphy, & Pirozzolo, 2002). Stronger verbal, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities associated with higher intelligence may contribute to leader capacity. Additionally, intelligence is a trait associated with people's beliefs about the characteristics of leaders (Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986); individuals higher in intelligence are more likely to be perceived as leaders by followers. However, Fiedler (2002) points out that the context may preclude leaders from making use of their intellectual capacity, which would result in low or zero correlations with leader traits such as cognitive ability. Herein, intelligence at age 17 was examined as an antecedent of leadership potential in all analyses. Over time, adolescents with

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