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Embodying who we are: Leader group prototypicality and leadership effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is a process enacted in the context of a shared group membership, and leadership effectiveness is contingent on followers' perceptions of the leader as a group member. Addressing this role of group membership, the social identity theory of leadership puts leader group prototypicality, the extent to which the leader is perceived to embody group identity, center-stage in leadership effectiveness. I review empirical research in leader group prototypicality, concluding there is a robust empirical basis for the key propositions of the social identity theory of leadership. I also identify newer developments that extend and enrich the social identity analysis of leadership, including attention to the roles of uncertainty, leader fairness, leader–follower relationship, leader self-perceived prototypicality, and leadership of creativity and innovation.

1. Introduction

Leadership is on the agenda of behavioral research for more than a hundred years. This is not surprising if we consider that leadership is such a natural and basic element of social groups. Indeed, it is hard to think of human groups without some form of leadership structure, even if only informally (cf. Halevy, Chou, & Galinsky, 2011). Moreover, typically no member of a social group – be it a work team, organization, nation, or other social grouping – is better positioned to impact the functioning of the group than a leader. Not surprisingly then, the question of what makes leaders effective in mobilizing and motivating followers lies at the core to leadership research. To address this question leadership research has covered a wide range of influences on leadership effectiveness including leader personality (e.g., Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002), leader behavioral styles (e.g., Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004), and social exchange relationships between leaders and followers (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hollander, 1958).

In view of the fact that leadership is so inextricably embedded in groups, it is perhaps somewhat ironic that none of these perspectives on leadership really engages with the implications of the fact that leaders are also members of the groups they lead. Leadership is a process that is enacted in the context of a group membership shared by leader and followers — the President of the United States is an American citizen, the CEO is a member of the organization, the team leader is a member of the team (or at least of the same organization), and so forth. Accordingly, responses to leadership may be informed by characteristics of the leader as group member (e.g., who is the President as an American?) and an understanding of the psychology of group membership may be important to our understanding of leadership effectiveness. This is the issue that assumes center-stage in the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003).

In this review, I outline the social identity theory of leadership from its first conceptual articulation in Hogg (2001), via the integration of two independent streams of research by Hogg and colleagues (Fielding & Hogg, 1997; Hains, Hogg, & Duck, 1997; Hogg, Hains, & Mason, 1998) and van Knippenberg and colleagues (Platow & van Knippenberg, 2001; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005a; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, & van Dijk, 2000) in the most full-blown articulation of the social identity theory of leadership (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), to more recent developments and extensions that took place after the publication of the 2003

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formulation of the theory. I only present a concise review of the earlier work in the social identity analysis of leadership, because such reviews can also be found elsewhere (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), and the current review prioritizes more recent empirical developments that took place after, or had a smaller presence in, the 2003 articulation of the theory.

Core to the social identity theory of leadership is the proposition that leaders are more effective in mobilizing and influencing followers the more they are seen as group prototypical — to embody what is defining of the group identity (Hogg, 2001). *Leader group prototypicality* therefore is the unifying theme in this review, and the aim of this review is to take stock of the state of the science in empirical research in leader group prototypicality. This is not to say that the social identity theory is limited to the role of leader group prototypicality. It is not, and also highlights such influences as leader group-oriented behavior (e.g., leader self-sacrifice; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005a; cf. Platow, Haslam, Foddy, & Grace, 2003; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005). Such influences are not unique to the social identity analysis of leadership, though (cf. Lord & Brown, 2004; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004), and will be covered here mainly, or only, in relationship to leader group prototypicality to highlight the unique contribution of the social identity theory of leadership to our understanding of leadership effectiveness.

This review is structured as follows. First, I briefly outline the basic propositions of the social identity theory of leadership. I follow this up with an updated review of the evidence for these basic propositions that also highlights areas where evidence may be sparser than ideally it would be. Subsequently, I review a series of more recent developments in the social identity analysis of leadership. In conclusion, I take stock of where this combined evidence leaves us in terms of the current state of our understanding of the role of leader group prototypicality in leadership effectiveness as well as in terms of an agenda for future research to develop this core aspect of the social identity theory of leadership.

2. Social identity and leader group prototypicality

To understand how the group membership shared by leader and followers informs followers' responses to leadership (i.e., and thus leadership effectiveness) it is important to realize that group memberships have identity implications. Group memberships reflect on how we see ourselves and others. Social identity captures this group membership-based aspect of identity or self-conception (identity and self can be used interchangeably here). It refers to that part of an individual's sense of self that is rooted in the individual's group membership — the part that gives people a sense of "we" and includes other members of the group in one's sense of self (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). This is not to say that all group memberships are equally self-defining for all people. The concept of social identification (i.e., including organizational identification, team identification, etc.; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000) captures the extent to which an individual defines the self in terms of a particular group membership. The higher the identification with a particular group, the more the individual sees the self in terms of the membership in that group, the more the individual has a sense of "we" connected to that group (i.e., rather than of "I" as a unique individual). The higher identification, the more the individual perceives the self in terms of characteristics that are typical of the group, and the more perceptions, attitudes, and behavior are governed by the group membership (Hogg, 2003; Turner et al., 1987).

Two influences associated with social identification in particular are relevant to an understanding of leadership effectiveness. First, social identification leads one to experience the group identity as not only self-describing but also as self-guiding. Group identity includes a shared sense of social reality that reflects what the group believes, values, and sees as appropriate and important: it has a normative element to it, and this group-normative influence is internalized through a process of social identification. Put differently, through social identification group identity becomes a source of social influence — a source of information about social reality and about what is appropriate and desirable (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Turner et al., 1987; van Knippenberg, 2000a). Second, because it implies seeing the self through the lens of group membership, social identification entails taking the group's best interest to heart — indeed, experiencing the group interest as the self interest (i.e., the interest of an inclusive "we", of the collective self; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Turner et al., 1987; van Knippenberg, 2000b). These two influences provide an important link with responses to leadership as they are informed by social identification.

Building on research in cognitive psychology (Rosch, 1978), the social identity approach outlines how social groups are mentally represented as group prototypes, fuzzy sets of characteristics that capture the characteristics that define the group (Hogg, 2001; Turner et al., 1987). Group prototypes capture what is group-defining and in that sense represent the ideal-type of the group more than the group average. Translated to a hypothetical group member, the group prototypical group member would not be Joe Sixpack, but rather embody what is perceived to be the ideal-type of "who we are". In this respect, it may also be important to note that prototypes are not restricted to – indeed do not even need to include – demographic attributes. Group prototypes capture the socially shared reality of the group, and thus include what the group values, believes, and considers important, and what are seen as appropriate and desirable behaviors and courses of action. In effect, group prototypes capture what is group-normative. The notion of group identity as a source of social influence can thus be rephrased as the group prototype as a source of social influence for those who identify with the group.

2.1. Leader group prototypicality

Core to the social identity theory of leadership is the notion that group leaders, like all group members, differ in the extent to which they are perceived to represent or embody the group prototype — are *group prototypical* (i.e., social identity is individual self-definition, and the perception of group prototypicality thus at its root is individual cognition even when such perceptions often are socially shared). To the extent that a leader is perceived to be group prototypical – that is, to embody the group