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The Social Cognitive Model of Leadership Perceptions: Proposing a Dynamic, Integrated Theory of Leadership Identification and Appraisal

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ABSTRACT. This paper is an exploration of the relationships between the stereotype content model, implicit leadership theory, and leadership behavior theory with a focus on illuminating the elements held in common by these three theories and identifying the positive implications of integrating these theories into an inclusive social cognitive model for future leadership research. After briefly summarizing the three focal theories, we highlight the correspondence between them. We then establish the importance of organizing these theories into a comprehensive model that can be used to understand and explain leadership from a cohesive, multidimensional approach. In proposing such a theoretical model, we take into account the reciprocal relationships between stereotypes of groups and individuals, leadership prototypes held within the mind of those perceiving the leader, and leadership behaviors acted out within organizations. We also discuss the implications of integrating these theories into a dynamic social cognitive model of leadership perceptions. These implications include accurately understanding the gravity of warmth and competency judgments in leadership appraisal and appropriately recognizing the consequences that halo effect and negative correlations between dimensions have on leadership recognition and evaluation in both theory and practice. We propose future research to empirically establish the theoretical foundation of the social cognitive model of leadership perceptions. We also suggest that this model might be used to inform the assessment, selection, training, and development of those who lead in a variety of contexts.

Introduction

We encounter leaders throughout our lives. From primary caregivers to professors to presidents and myriad others in between, someone in charge, outside of ourselves, makes decisions that shape meaningful parts of our everyday worlds. Regardless of organizational setting or formal designation, the primary purpose of leadership remains “influencing and facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (Yukl, 2012, p. 66), and because organizational leadership is both vital and pervasive in many dimensions of the human experience, it is a construct widely studied. A vast amount of the research and subsequent literature on the concepts underpinning perceptions and judgments of organizational leaders, though, has focused on exploring effective leadership through the discrete theories that most interest each particular researcher. Fragmented theorizing, however, does a disservice to the dynamic nature of organizational leadership and the fertile field of research into all its facets. To remedy this, a more integrated, progressive understanding of leadership must be established by synthesizing complementary social and cognitive approaches with established leadership theories. We chose to focus on three relatively distinct approaches to person perception as applied (or not applied) to the area of leadership perceptions: the stereotype content model (SCM), implicit leadership theory (ILT), and leadership behavior theory (LBT). We do so for multiple reasons. First, we chose these approaches because of their respective influences on subsequent theories of interpersonal and intergroup relations as well as theories of leadership

perceptions and behaviors. Second, each of these theories brings a distinct, but in our opinion overlapping, perspective on person perception and/or behavior that deserves to be acknowledged and developed in order to provide a more coherent research approach to studying leadership. Building on a framework that intertwines research into stereotypes with research on prototype-based perceptions of leaders and judgments of absolute leader behaviors, we attempt to provide a more comprehensive model by which to understand and explain leadership perceptions.

Background of Relevant Theories

Extensive research has demonstrated that individuals rely on cognitive categorization to make sense of the world in a mentally efficient way that maximizes the use of prototypes and minimizes the expenditure of energy on specific, detailed evaluations of every stimulus encountered (Mervis & Rosch, 1981; Rosch, 1978). This evolutionary propensity to rely on categorization for simplistic appraisal applies to evaluations of groups of people (Fiske et al., 2002) including those set apart in organizations by their role as leader (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord et al., 1984, 2020; Shondrick et al., 2010). The resultant schemas, often referred to as prototypes, are then utilized in distinguishing and evaluating leadership. These schemas are developed around implicit beliefs about the attributes and actions that constitute an ideal leader for a particular organization (Lord et al., 2020) and identified by behaviors exhibited by those in leadership (Yukl, 2012). However, such conceptions of leadership and evaluations of leader-like behavior are not shaped in a vacuum. Judgments of important leadership features such as warmth and competence have roots in the stereotypes individuals hold about others (Cuddy et al., 2011).

Stereotype Content Model

Despite the highly visible, extensively cited, and voluminous work on SCM, there are few to no mentions of categorization theory found throughout the SCM literature. Yet the stereotype content model presented by Fiske et al. (2002) established that the categorizations of people which we refer to as stereotypes are influenced by where we perceive these individuals fall along the fundamental dimensions of warmth and competence. Warmth refers to what shapes our understanding of someone's intentions towards us—what categorizes another as friend or foe—while competence refers to our appraisal of whether the person or group in question has the ability to act on their intentions towards us for good or ill (Fiske et al., 2006). Liking someone is affected by our perception of their warmth, while respecting someone is affected by our perception of their competence (Fiske et al., 2006). At an organizational level, these judgments of warmth and competence affect who leads, who follows, and the assumptions those in each role make about the people with whom they work (Cuddy et al., 2011).

Implicit Leadership Theories

It is important to understand, though, that personal categorizations of others in general, and leaders in particular, are not based solely on impressions of a target individual in the present. Implicit leadership theory posits that individuals hold within their minds prototypes for leaders based on details held in memory and then use those internalized ideas of leadership to evaluate the extent to which they consider someone to be a leader (Lord et al., 1984; Lord et al., 2020; Shondrick et al., 2010;). Thus, to understand how the actions of a particular leader are assessed

and interpreted, one must not simply look at the leader behaviors alone but also delve into the perceptions of leadership held by those evaluating or following the leader (Shondrick et al., 2010). Formed through previous interactions and experiences with those classified as leaders as well as cultural constructs of leadership, these prototypes influence how followers categorize individuals as (in)effective leaders and how they thus make sense of how these leaders act in a variety of situations (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004).

Leadership Behavior Theory

Evidence that implicit prototypes are partially responsible for personal leadership evaluation, though, does not diminish the importance of leader behaviors on assessments of leadership. In fact, the influential Ohio State leadership studies of the mid-20th century—headed by Ralph Stogdill, Carroll Shartle, and John Hemphill—posited that all leader behaviors could be categorized into the two domains of initiating structure and consideration and that where a leader was situated along these dimensions was indicative of the degree to which they were effective in leadership (see Stogdill, 1950; Judge et al., 2004). Initiating structure refers to how leaders proactively define and organize their role as the leader and how they define expectations for followers (Behrendt et al., 2016; Judge et al., 2004). Initiating structure also heavily emphasizes goal attainment and the creation and use of effective systems for communication and objective achievement (Judge et al., 2004). Consideration, as the name implies, centers on how a leader exhibits concern, shows respect, expresses appreciation, offers support, and cares for the wellbeing of those they are leading (Judge et al., 2004). Though some contemporary theorists of leadership behavior theory have asserted that the two-factor taxonomy of the Ohio State studies is too simplistic and have introduced taxonomies with up to eight factors, the concepts of initiating structure and consideration have been expanded upon in their research—rather than discarded—to include all elements of task-oriented behaviors (e.g., short-term planning, clarifying performance objectives, and monitoring operations) and relations-oriented behaviors (e.g., empowering, developing, and recognizing) (Behrendt et al., 2016; Yukl et al., 2002; Yukl, 2012).

The Social Cognitive Model of Leadership Perceptions

While the theories of SCM, ILT, and LBT are often approached as distinct concepts, there is evidence that these three are inextricably woven together in a way not often explored. Citing the similarities between the findings of the Ohio State studies and the dimensions of SCM, Cuddy et al. (2011) attributes the failure of researchers to recognize consistencies between individual theories to the wide array of labels used to characterize the most essential elements found within these constructs. Shondrick et al. (2010), too, connects theories of beliefs with theories of behaviors through the assertion that leadership evaluation is a process driven by both implicit prototype-based perceptions of the leader in question and analytical assessments of the leader's behavior in the moment. Expanding on the hints of relationship already found within research on these three theories, the establishment of explicit connections between SCM, ILT, and LBT invites the exploration of a more comprehensive model of understanding and evaluating leadership.

One of the primary elements held in common by SCM, ILT, and LBT is their foundation in categorization theory. In SCM, categorization of others by stereotypes is the basis on which perceived intent (warmth) and capability (competence) are evaluated when encountering or interacting with another (Fiske et al., 2002). In ILT, perceivers use internalized prototypes based on abstract ideas of leadership and particular exemplars of leaders to categorize individuals as leaders or nonleaders (Lord et al., 2020). And, regardless how many specific taxonomic factors

are used to model the theory, LBT is concerned with identifying and evaluating the behavior categories held in common among effective leaders (Behrendt et al., 2016; Judge et al., 2004; Yukl, 2002).

Another important element held in common by all three theories is their ability to be situated along the warmth and competence dimensions at the heart of SCM. While, as previously noted, these dimensions are not always precisely referred to *warmth* and *competence* (Cuddy et al., 2011) in other theories, research has shown that no matter what they are called, perceptions of warmth and competence affect impressions of leaders. In fact, there is evidence that these dimensions account for more than 80% of the variance in how individuals perceive ordinary social behaviors (Fiske et al., 2006). In particular, the first-order factors of sensitivity and intelligence (and their second-order factors) in the ILT leader prototypes established by Epitropaki and Martin (2004) correspond directly to the dimensions of warmth and competence respectively (Fiske et al., 2006) as illustrated in Table 1. Additionally, although the LBT two-factor model of initiating structure and consideration established by the Ohio State studies preceded the formation of SCM and ILT, researchers have advocated for its integration with contemporary theories such as these and have suggested that a reciprocal relationship between theories of implicit prototypes and warmth and competence judgments might exist and should be explored for the benefit of leadership research (Judge et al., 2004). Models of leadership behavior that expand on the two-factor model of the Ohio State studies also have at their core differentiations between task-oriented (initiating structure) behaviors and relationship-oriented (consideration) behaviors (Behrendt et al., 2016; Yukl et al., 2002; Yukl, 2012), and the factors that comprise these two categories can also be associated with the dimensions of warmth and competence as seen in Table 1.

Implications of the Social Cognitive Model of Leadership Perceptions

While establishing shared essential elements between SCM, ILT, and LBT is a foundational step in advocating for a more cooperative, multidisciplinary approach to leadership research, it is vital to illustrate how the integrated use of their principles can assist both leaders and those who study leadership. Research has shown that judgments of warmth and competence affect perceptions of leaders (Cuddy et al., 2010; Lord et al., 2020) and that these perceptions both influence and are influenced by implicit leader prototypes (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Shondrick et al., 2010) while also affecting and being affected by the task- and relations-oriented behavior of those in leadership (Behrendt et al., 2016; Yukl et al., 2002). Managing impressions, therefore, is an important element of leadership as leaders are judged by their followers, peers, competitors, and clients (Cuddy et al., 2010) using both prototypes of past leader experiences (Lord et al., 2020; Shondrick et al., 2010) and present engagement with leader behaviors (Behrendt et al., 2016; Judge et al., 2004; Yukl et al., 2012). Considering the evidence that follower perceptions of leader warmth are often primary in importance, most easily lost, and most difficult to regain (Capozza et al., 2017; Fiske et al., 2006), while follower perceptions of leader competence in businesses have been linked to organizational outcomes like lower burnout and weaker intentions to voluntarily leave an organization (Capozza et al., 2017), the importance of understanding where a leader falls along the dimensions of warmth and competence cannot be overstated. Future research centered on specifically establishing where ILT perceptions and LBT behaviors are located on the SCM dimensions would therefore be beneficial to the study of leadership. Such research would contribute to an improved understanding of the general principles of leadership

and could be used in developing strategies for selecting, training, and developing effective leaders in all the contexts where leadership is required.

Integrating the theories of SCM, ILT, and LBT is also useful in understanding the interactions between leader prototypes, leader conduct, and stereotypes of leaders that might determine a leader's effectiveness both in perception and practice. As previously established, one's recognition of a leader is, in part, based on the cognitive match between the target individual's attitudes and actions and the abstract beliefs and behaviors one has learned to associate with leadership from previous experiences with leaders (Lord et al., 2020). The congruence, or lack thereof, between past mental representations of leaders and present leadership behaviors either confirms or challenges the stereotypes we hold of particular kinds of leaders (Cuddy et al., 2011; Lord et al., 2020; Shondrick et al., 2010), and these current experiences with leadership then become part of the memories we will later access to evaluate leadership in the future, creating a braided loop of perceptions, behaviors, and stereotypes that influence the understanding and evaluation of leadership.

These interactions may affect the scientific study and measurement of task-oriented and relations-oriented behavior as well as leadership perception through halo effect—the tendency to use information one knows to make corresponding positive or negative inferences about information one does not know (Capozza et al., 2017; Cuddy et al., 2011). For example, if a person observes a leader effectively completing the task-oriented behavior of problem-solving and they are asked to rate a leader on planning ability, the person may assume that problem-solving performance is indicative of planning competence and rate the leader as high in planning ability even if they have never observed their leader's planning skills (or lack thereof) in action. Additionally, if the person holds memory-based prototypes of leaders who were effective planners and the current leader's behavior is an adequate match against those patterns in many other ways, the person may judge the current leader as competent in the realm of planning even if they have no actual evidence to support this rating. Because stereotypes of entire groups are also reinforced or challenged through interpersonal interactions (Fiske et al., 2002), understanding the extent to which stereotypes influence leader perceptions and leader behavior is necessary to making sense of leadership as well. Therefore, it is important to account for the interactions of these theories when conducting studies intended to help us better understand leadership in all its facets.

Interactions between SCM, ILT, and LBT may also influence the negatively correlated relationship between the dimensions of warmth and competence observed when individuals are being judged against one another (Capozza et al., 2017; Cuddy et al., 2011). While halo effect appears when leaders are being assessed individually, inverse assumptions of warmth and competence are made when a person or group is being evaluated in comparison with another (Cuddy et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2006). There is evidence that evaluators assume less warmth in the presence of high competence and less competence in the presence of high warmth when comparing two or more individuals to each other (Capozza et al., 2017; Cuddy et al., 2011). Understanding how these stereotypes may influence implicit perceptions of leaders can help leaders themselves learn which types of task-oriented or relationship-oriented behaviors to exhibit depending on context of the situation (Behrendt et al., 2016; Yukl, 2012) and the warmth/competence impression-management goals of the leader (Capozza et al., 2017; Cuddy et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2006). Acknowledging the interrelationship between these three theories may also aid researchers as they seek to understand more of the unseen elements at work in leadership evaluation.

Conclusion

Leadership research is a dynamic field populated with an abundance of intelligent and committed scientists seeking to better understand how humans comprehend and assess leadership in organizations of every kind. Appropriate integrations of established empirical theories and collaborations between disciplines allow for a more holistic exploration of the varied elements that make up evaluations of leadership at individual, organizational, and cultural levels. With that in mind, we have illustrated interrelationships between the stereotype content model, implicit leadership theory, and leadership behavior theory with the intention of establishing a theoretical foundation for an integrated social cognitive model of leadership perceptions. Such a model would have implications for both the research and practice of leadership in a variety of contexts through an enhanced understanding of how the interactions between stereotypes, prototypes, and behaviors affect leader recognition and appraisal. A limitation of this proposal is the fact that we did not utilize an exhaustive list of relevant theories to establish our proposed theoretical model, though the focal theories of this article are among the most common in extant literature on individual, group, and leadership appraisals and are conceptually, though not always explicitly, related to each other. Future research into both the strength of the relationships between the three focal theories and their combined impact on leadership assessment, selection, training, and development is necessary to empirically establish support for the proposed social cognitive model of leadership perceptions. For example, research must be conducted to see whether there is empirical correspondence between the competence dimension of the SCM scale, LBT task-related behaviors and initiating structure, and the prototypes of intelligence and sensitivity established by ILT. Such research is beneficial to enhancing our understanding of all the diverse elements that constitute and contribute to effective leadership.

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The Social Cognitive Model of Leadership Perceptions

Table 1

Synthesis of leadership perception approaches

Proposed SCMLP	SCM	ILT	LBT
FACTOR 1	<i>Competence</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competent • Confident • Capable • Efficient • Intelligent • Skillful 	<i>Intelligence</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligent • Knowledgeable • Educated 	<i>Initiating Structure</i> (Task-Oriented Behaviors) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarifying • Planning • Monitoring • Problem solving
FACTOR 2	<i>Warmth</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendly • Well-intentioned • Trustworthy • Warm • Good-natured • Sincere 	<i>Sensitivity</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helpful • Understanding • Sincere 	<i>Consideration</i> (Relations-Oriented Behaviors) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting • Developing • Recognizing • Empowering

Note. Abbreviations: SCMLP=Social Cognitive Model of Leadership Perception, SCM = Stereotype Content Model, ILT = Implicit Leadership Theory, LBT = Leadership behavior theory. SCM adjectives adapted from Fiske et al.'s (2002) SCM scales; ILT factors adapted from Epitropaki and Martin's (2004) second-order factor model of ILT; LBT factors adapted from Yukl's (2012) taxonomy of leadership behaviors.