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Perspective Taking and Transformational Leadership

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Leadership literature has primarily concerned itself with the exploration of the outcomes and consequences of different leadership techniques. Recently, a small, but growing stream of leadership research (e.g., Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005; Barbuto & Burbach, 2006) attempted to understand the antecedents of different types of leadership behavior by investigating the relationship between the attributes of managers and their management style. The current study seeks to expand the variables addressed in examinations of leadership style by adding the concept of relationship-specific perspective taking to the list. Specifically, the main aim of this study is to explore whether a relationship exists between a supervisor's "putting themselves in the shoes" of their follower, and that follower's assessment of their supervisor's leadership style. The basic proposal of this paper is that supervisors who see the world "through the eyes" of a given subordinate will be perceived, by that subordinate, as possessing a more highly developed leadership style.

Transformational Leadership

The vast majority of leadership research since 1990 has focused on the transformational leadership model (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Transformational leadership was developed by Bass (1985) as an extension of Burns' (1978) distinction between transactional and transformational forms of leadership. Transactional leaders are said to focus on short-term contingent exchanges whereby extrinsic rewards are given to followers in exchange for desired behaviors. Transformational leadership describes the process whereby leaders intrinsically direct followers towards long term objectives. Transformational leaders have been described as those who alter the way that their followers think about themselves such that feelings of commitment and involvement are enhanced (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

The transformational leadership model provides a multi-dimensional view of leadership behaviors. There has been some debate in the literature about the discriminant validity of several of the transformational leadership dimensions, but a model with eight dimensions is often used (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Multiple techniques have been used to substantiate the eight factor approach to transformational leadership including factor analysis, observation, interviews, and follower descriptions (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003). The eight dimensions are broken into three categories: transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and non-leadership. The specific dimensions within each of these categories are described below.

Transformational leadership consists of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. *Idealized influence* refers to the degree to which a leader's highly moral behavior elicits admiration from followers which results in the followers identifying with and committing themselves to the leader's cause. *Inspirational motivation* describes the strength of a leader's vision, the leader's ability to accurately communicate that vision, and the desirability of the vision for the followers. *Intellectual stimulation* depicts the leadership behaviors associated with providing followers with decision making information, and encouraging followers to question the values and norms of the organization. *Individualized consideration* refers to the leader's concern with the developmental needs of each follower and the leader's willingness to provide the support needed in order to help the follower advance their career (Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

The three transactional leadership dimensions, which allow the leader to influence follower behaviors through a logical set of exchange propositions, are contingent reward, active management by exception, and passive management by exception. *Contingent reward* describes a set of behaviors whereby the leader sets expectations for the followers, communicates those expectations, and provides rewards to those followers who meet expectations. *Active management by exception* involves actively monitoring follower's progress towards expected performance levels, identifying followers who are falling behind expectations, and initiating corrective actions upon those followers. *Passive management by exception* refers to leaders who wait for the poor performance of a follower to reach a critical level before initiating any intervention (Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

The final dimension of the transformational leadership model, *laissez-faire*, is often described as nonleadership. *Laissez-faire* leadership refers to the absence of leadership responsibilities altogether, whereby the leader exhibits little or no leadership behaviors when leadership behaviors are needed (Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

Transformational leadership has been shown to be significantly related to several important organizational and individual outcomes. A fairly consistent relationship between transformational leadership and group-level performance in a variety of settings has been established in the literature (e.g., Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Group-level outcomes such as team creativity have also been found to be related to transformational leadership (Soski, Avolio, and Kahai, 1997). Often, the impact of transformational leadership on performance is mediated by group-level constructs such as group potency (Soski, Avolio, and Kahai, 1997; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007).

While the empirical evidence supporting the relationship between transformational leadership and positive organizational outcomes seems quite strong, less is known about the potential individual antecedents of transformational leadership behavior. Bass (1998) called for an investigation of the factors that might predict an individual's propensity to exhibit transformational leadership behaviors. This study considers dyad-specific perspective taking as one potential antecedent of transformational leadership behavior.

Perspective Taking

Perspective taking can be thought of as the mental act of perceiving a situation from another individual's point of view. In other words, perspective taking is what happens when you "put yourself in another person's shoes." Perspective taking has its roots in developmental psychology as an underlying dimension of an individual's mental framework (e.g., Kohlberg, 1972; Kegan 1982). As a result, one's perspective taking has a general effect on one's social interaction, and thus a potential impact on workplace relationships.

When discussing perspective taking in the context of organizational studies, an important distinction needs to be made regarding its dimensionality. Though the term *perspective taking* is used in both cases, there are actually two distinct, yet related, conceptualizations referenced in the literature. As noted above, perspective taking's origins are in developmental psychology. In this sense of the term, perspective taking is discussed as a hallmark of various points in the mind's growth. Work by Piaget (1969), Kohlberg (1972), and Kegan (1982) all share a similar conceptualization of perspective taking in that they regard it in a way similar to a general disposition based on a facet of cognitive development. By conceptualizing perspective taking in this way, an individual's tendency to take others' perspectives is applied across all of their interactions, in the same way that a personality construct would be applied across all contexts. In a recent study, Skinner and Spurgeon (2005) used just such a conceptualization of perspective taking in order to explore whether dispositional empathy (a concept closely related to perspective taking) was related to assessments of leadership style.

In contrast, Parker and Axtell (2001) conceptualized perspective taking as a mental behavior that is determined by multiple relationship-specific antecedents. Thus, perspective taking in their study may be higher in one relationship someone has, than in another relationship the same individual has. Parker and Axtell conceptualized perspective taking in terms of two mental behaviors; empathy and positive attributions. In this context, *empathy* can be defined as feeling emotional response for another in a way similar to how one feels emotion about themselves. *Positive attributions* regards the tendency to evaluate other's behavior in a positive, understanding light.

In summary, two distinct, yet related conceptualizations of perspective taking exist in the literature. One sees perspective taking as a disposition applied across all an individual's relationships, while the other sees perspective taking as a relationship-specific construct which may vary according to relationship. The current study uses the second conceptualization, which we refer to as dyad-specific perspective taking.

Hypothesis Development

Kuhnert and Lewis (1987) proposed the idea that transformational leadership behavior is in part determined by an individual's level of cognitive development, of which perspective taking is a significant component. The basis of the argument for the relationship between transformational leadership and perspective taking is that transformational leadership requires the leader to influence the follower's perceptions of reality (Smirich & Morgan, 1982). The ability to have such an influence seems to be at least in part based on the leader's ability to understand the individual's current paradigm. It would seemingly be incredibly difficult to have a transformational effect on the way an individual views the world without first being aware of the way that individual does in fact view the world. Multiple theorists have suggested that transformational leaders exhibit an awareness of followers' perspectives and show empathy for those perspectives (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; Barbuto & Burbach, 2006).

A limited amount of empirical evidence supports the proposition that transformational leaders are highly aware of the manner in which their followers think about the world around them. In a study of managerial derailment, Lombardo, Ruderman, and McCauley (1987) found that the managers who did not take the perspective of their subordinates were more likely to perform poorly. Additionally, the ability of a leader to recognize the emotional state of followers has been shown to have a significant positive relationship with transformational leadership behavior (Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005; Barbuto & Burbach, 2006).

Based on these theoretical propositions and empirical results, we offer the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis: Leader dyad-specific perspective taking is positively associated with subordinate's perceptions of transformational leadership behavior.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Our sample is composed of 91 supervisor/subordinate dyads from a healthcare organization in the southeastern U. S. Participants were contacted through internal mail and asked to participate in a survey assessing various aspects of supervisor/subordinate interactions. The supervisor packets included an information letter requesting their participation, a subordinate identification sheet (listing the subordinates they would answer questions regarding), self-report items, and items regarding several of their subordinates. Subordinate packets included an information letter, a supervisor identification sheet, self-report items, and items regarding their supervisor. The final sample of 91 paired dyads represents 62.33% of the 146 dyads from whom responses were requested.

Measures

Supervisor-specific perspective taking was assessed using a 6-item measure developed by Parker and Axtell (2001). This measure assesses perspective taking in terms of cognitive outcomes such as empathy and positive attribution. Instead of being used to assess coworkers as it was originally used by its creators, here, the word coworker was replaced with the word subordinate, since the present study deals with vertical, rather than horizontal dyads. The Chronbach's alpha for the scale was .75. Responses were made using a 7-point response scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Example items include, "I feel concerned for this employee if s/he is under pressure." and "This employee usually does the best s/he can, given the circumstances".

The eight leadership dimensions that comprise transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership were measured by the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. All 32 items asked followers to rate the degree to which they agree that their supervisor engages in a series of actions. Responses were made on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Dissagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The transformational dimension was measured by idealized influence (e.g., "Acts in a way that builds my respects") with a coefficient alpha of .90, inspirational motivation (e.g., "Talks about their most important values and beliefs") with a coefficient alpha of .86, individualized consideration (e.g., "Talks

optimistically about the future”) with a coefficient alpha of .84, and intellectual stimulation (e.g., “Seeks differing perspectives when solving problems”) with a coefficient alpha of .91.

Transactional leadership was measured by contingent reward (e.g., “Provides me with assistance in exchange for my efforts”), active management by exception (e.g., “Keeps track of all mistakes”), and passive management by exception (e.g., “Fails to interfere until problems become serious”). The laissez-faire leadership dimension was measured by items such as “Avoids getting involved when important issues arise.”

A recent meta-analysis (Judge & Piccolo, 2004) found evidence of the validity of transformational and transactional leadership with somewhat weaker support for laissez-faire leadership. Results showed that the transformational leadership seems to retain relatively high levels of validity across multiple types of circumstances.

Analyses

The hypothesized relationships were tested using a series of linear regressions. Each of the nine subscales of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire served as a dependent variable with perspective taking as the predictor in each case. (Regressions were carried out on all study variables due to the exploratory nature of the current study, though our hypothesis deals with only the Transformational dimensions of the MLQ.)

Results

Correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Regression results (shown in Table 2) suggest that the hypothesis was partially supported. Leader’s dyad-specific perspective taking predicted subordinate’s perceptions of leader’s intellectual stimulation ($p = .041$) and individualized consideration ($p = .008$). Additionally, perspective taking nearly significantly predicted idealized influence ($p = .052$), while it clearly failed to significantly predict inspirational motivation ($p = .164$).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, coefficient alphas and intercorrelations for all study variables

	Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Perspective taking	5.93	.73	.75								
2	Idealized Influence	5.8	1.09	.21	.90							
3	Inspirational Motivation	5.71	1.04	.15	.82**	.86						
4	Charisma	5.68	1.07	.19	.8**	.87**						
5	Intellectual Stimulation	5.6	1.12	.22*	.82**	.75**	.82**	.91				
6	Individual Consideration	5.48	1.12	.28**	.82**	.78**	.78**	.72**	.84			
7	Contingent Rewards	5.48	1.08	.15	.78**	.81**	.77**	.84**	.79**			
8	Active Management by Exception	4.19	1.66	-.00	-.05	-.03	-.01	.09	-.04	.05		
9	Passive Management by Exception	2.53	1.22	-.18	-.58**	-.53**	-.55**	-.6**	-.61**	-.57**	.14	
10	Laissez Faire	1.97	1.12	-.02	-.63**	-.5**	-.51**	-.59**	-.61**	-.58**	-.01	.73**

Notes: $N = 91$. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

Table 2. Regressions results of perspective taking on transformational leadership

	Idealized Influence	Inspirational Motivation	Intellectual Stimulation	Individualized Consideration
Beta	.308	.210	.332	.422
R ²	.043	.022	.047	.076
Adjusted R ²	.032	.011	.036	.066
p-value	.052	.164	.041*	.008**

Notes: $N = 91$. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

Discussion

This study found partial support for the notion that when leaders take the perspective of their followers, those followers tend to view the leader as exhibiting more transformational leadership behaviors. The results suggest that both intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration are associated with perspective taking.

Looking at each of the significant transformational leadership dimensions (intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration) a little more closely may help explain why these two dimensions, in particular, were positively related to perspective taking. For instance, perspective taking concerns the degree to which an individual sees a given situation from another's perspective, in addition to their own. Given this, perhaps we can understand higher levels of perspective taking as facilitating both intellectual stimulation and individualized influence.

For instance, if perspective taking represents a movement towards a more “complicated understanding” (Bartunek, Gordon, & Weathersby, 1983) of various situations, perhaps transformational leadership behaviors included as part of the intellectual stimulation subscale can be understood to flow out of that more complicated understanding. More specifically, Bartunek, Gordon, and Weathersby (1983) point out one elements of cognitive complexity that may provide insight here – complementarity. Basically, complementarity means that multiple theories or perspectives must be applied to understand some complex phenomena. Multifaceted organizational situations might be a good example of an instance in which no one solution or viewpoint may provide comprehensive insight. Such a situation would call for a leader to gather a diverse set of solutions and viewpoints from subordinates in an attempt to address such a problem. Thus, we finally arrive at the doorstep of intellectual stimulation, with a leader whose internal cognitive complexity is externalized on his or her followers in the form of requests for creativity and novelty in approaching a given situation.

Interestingly, Bartunek, Gordon, and Weathersby (1983) provide us further insight into our results in terms of another element of cognitive complexity – differentiation. Differentiation is the ability to perceive an individual stimulus' unique characteristics while that stimulus is part of a wider stimulus set. In other words, it represents the capacity to notice individual differences within the context of a group. Within the context of this study, each leader's ability to make such distinctions among group members (here, followers) can be summed up by our other significant transformational leadership subscale, individualized consideration. Thus, we can see perspective taking contributing to a leader's tendency to take into account the individual needs and concerns of a given follower through the mechanism of cognitive complexity in general and differentiation specifically.

Therefore, while intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration may not at first seem distinct from the other dimensions of transformational leadership as assessed by the MLQ, when we consider these leadership behaviors in terms of whether they necessitate “seeing the world through someone else's eyes”, these two dimensions do seem distinct. This helps explain why they are the only two dimensions of transformational leadership which were significantly related to perspective taking. In summary, viewing our results through the lens of cognitive complexity suggests that perspective taking may lead to some transactional leadership behaviors through the mediating factor of a more complicated understanding of organizational stimuli.

Though these explanations may somewhat blur the dimensional distinction between perspective taking as a trait and perspective taking as a relationship-specific mental activity, it provides a very interesting insight into the role that perspective taking may play in our approach to decision making and problem solving.

These findings may help to further illustrate the importance of relationship-specific perspective taking as a contributor to the quality of important workplace interactions. While Parker and Axtell (2001) found support for regarding perspective taking as a contributory factor for the quality of peer-level dyads (horizontally linked coworkers), this current finding might suggest that perspective taking is also part of leadership behavior among vertically linked coworkers.

Though the hypothesis of the current study was exploratory and only partially supported, it is the first attempt to examine potential relationships among the various dimensions of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire and supervisor dyad-specific perspective taking. Individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation were significantly positively related to supervisor perspective taking. Future directions to consider include mapping a clearer distinction between perspective taking as a trait and perspective taking as a mental outcome, and replicating the current study's findings using a larger sample in diverse organizational contexts.

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