Industrial and Organizational Psychology
PERSPECTIVES ON SCIENCE AND PRACTICE

Follower Perceptions Deserve a Closer Look

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We wholeheartedly agree with Lord and Dinh (2014) that the distinction between leadership perceptions and effectiveness warrants a closer look. That said, we would like to additionally redirect attention towards the perceptual biases held by followers as a potentially fruitful topic for future research in the field of leadership. That is, we suggest that part of *how* leaders become effective is driven by how their followers *idiosyncratically perceive* them. As an example, consider a dominant leader (a prototypical leader trait, as noted by Lord & Dinh) interacting with a *suspicious* follower (that is, the follower tends to view others with distrust and to suspect ulterior motives). Although followers may typically respond rather well to dominant leaders, that is, perceive them as leader like, this suspicious follower is likely to find such displays alarming and begin to engage in behaviors to resist or undermine the leader. A better understanding of how the perceptual biases of individual followers can shape their interpretations of the behavioral

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https://doi.org/10.1111/iops.12130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

displays of their leaders can provide a novel avenue for investigating the dynamic processes that underlie leadership phenomena as well as providing practicing managers with a framework for interpreting employee behavior and providing individualized support to their subordinates.

In general, we believe that such person-perception biases represent a unique and important aspect of follower personality and, ultimately, could play a role as a determinant of leader effectiveness. For instance, imagine the dyadic context of leadership. What the leader does is not expressed in a vacuum but must be interpreted through the filter of the followers' pre existing beliefs, values, and motives. In other words, the leader's actions are seasoned by the follower's perceptual biases. Our discussion of follower perceptual biases is firmly embedded in Lord and Dinh's first and second general leadership principles, which focus on the social construction of leadership by leaders, followers, and groups. We aim to expand these principles by focusing on the natural person-perception mechanisms that followers use when encountering and interacting with leaders.

As noted by Lord and Dinh, perceptions of leadership performance are a product of each follower's expectations, idiosyncratic experiences with present and past leaders, social norms, and any number of other factors. Is there any wonder then that leadership researchers frequently find lack of agreement between raters for what leaders and their interactions are actually like (e.g., Gerstner & Day, 1997; Harms & Credé, 2010)? Widespread acknowledgement of this problem is one reason why leadership researchers are encouraged to gather ratings from several followers in order to get some semblance of what leaders are really like.

Some researchers have begun to try to address the problem of idiosyncratic perceptual biases by correlating follower personality and leadership ratings. The basic idea behind these studies is that any significant correlations are more attributable to nonrandom follower perceptual biases than other explanations. For example, ratings of transformational leadership have been linked with follower Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness (Bono, Hooper, & Yoon, 2012) as well as anxious attachment style (Hansbrough, 2012), whereas hostile attribution styles have been linked with ratings of abusive supervision (Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, & Douglas, 2011). However, the majority of studies do not attempt to rule out alternative explanations for these effects, such as followers eliciting styles of leadership. For example, highly neurotic individuals might exasperate their leaders and thereby inadvertently invite abuse (Henle & Gross, 2013). Another potential explanation that cannot be ruled out in studies with single subordinates is that leadership behaviors may be shaping follower personalities. Although many researchers in organizational psychology still consider personality traits to be fixed (e.g., Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010), developmental researchers have clearly demonstrated that traits change in response to workplace experiences (e.g., Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003). Consequently, this possible explanation cannot be ruled out. Perhaps of greater relevance is that although there have been some studies that have employed designs with multiple followers for each leader (e.g., Bono et al., 2012), there are no studies that we are aware of that have been designed to directly assess perceptual biases. Specifically, the typical study employs some other measure as a proxy for perceptual biases (e.g., Big Five personality traits) and no study utilizes a design that would allow researchers to disentangle perceiver and target effects cleanly. This is because having a single target means that even if differences are found between raters, one cannot tell if they are due to that particular dyadic relationship or represent a broader perceptual tendency (see Kenny, 1994). Consequently, there remains a need for research detailing what role perceiver effects play in leadership ratings, specifically, studies that employ designs where multiple followers rate multiple leaders.

https://doi.org/10.1111/iops.12130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Perceiver Effects

Perceiver effects refer to general tendencies to perceive or evaluate others in a particular way (Kenny, 1994) that are largely stable over time (Srivastava, Guglielmo, & Beer, 2010). Typically assessed by aggregating ratings of the personalities of others across several targets, perceiver effects are considered one of the most important psychological determinants of behavior (Wood, Harms, & Vazire, 2010). That is, they cannot be subsumed by phenotypic traits such as the Big Five (Harms, Spain, & Wood, 2014) but are instead crucial antecedents of how individuals process and react to occurrences in their interpersonal lives, with important consequences for how subsequent events may unfold. As an example, a generally positive individual will approach strangers or strange situations with an expectation that something good will happen and that others are worthy of their trust. Although this belief may result in occasions when they are exploited by malevolent others, these individuals will generally elicit more positive reactions from others than would someone who approaches new situations with high levels of cynicism and distrust. Consequently, it is expected that individuals with this positive perceptual bias will experience more positive relationships in the workplace with both coworkers and leaders, as well as the positive outcomes associated with having closer leader–follower relationships such as higher levels of job performance and satisfaction (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012). Consistent with this, prior research has demonstrated that individuals with a generally positive perception of others are better liked by peers, feel more empowered in organizations, and report higher levels of organizational satisfaction (Wood et al., 2010). Positive perceptions of others have also been linked with higher levels of job performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and lower levels of counterproductive work behaviors (Harms & Luthans, 2012).

On the basis of these findings, we believe that there is a real need to take what is known about perceiver effects and investigate what role they play in both leadership ratings and leader–follower dynamics. For example, it has been noted that the majority of research on leader–follower dyads research is not designed in such a way as to allow appropriate tests of the dyadic phenomena or the theories underpinning the research (Krasikova & LeBreton, 2012). Controlling for perceiver effects in situations where individuals have multiple supervisors would allow for a more accurate test of the precise effects of relationship quality. Without doing so, it is impossible to determine whether relationship quality or perceptual biases are driving any positive effects that are found. Moreover, as an antecedent of both behavioral traits and leadership ratings, perceiver effects may represent a potential third variable to explain the previously established relationships between follower personality and leadership performance ratings.

Beyond allowing for cleaner tests of leader–follower dynamics, perceiver effects may also be used as potential antecedents of leadership outcomes. That is, instead of being considered idiosyncratic error to be controlled for, perceiver effects may play a role as a determinant of leadership effectiveness. For example, an individual's tendency to perceive others in a positive manner may determine how responsive they are to specific leadership styles. Ehrhart and Klein (2001) have demonstrated that follower personality impacts preference for specific leadership styles. Perhaps individuals with a tendency to see others in a positive manner will be associated with a preference for, and more positive response to, leaders with a relational style. Individuals with a more cynical outlook may prefer, and respond more positively to, transactional leaders with clear rules and procedures because it better aligns with their worldview.

Conclusion

We do not believe that taking account of perceiver effects represents a radical

https://doi.org/10.1111/iops.12130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

departure for leadership researchers. One of the earliest theories in leadership, McGregor's (1960) conceptualization of Theory X and Theory Y management styles, was fundamentally based on the idea that individuals carried with them perceptual baggage and that this baggage drove behavior and performance. Even Fiedler's (1967) Least-Preferred Coworker (LPC) scale represents a somewhat contaminated (by actual target effects) measurement tool for assessing perceiver effects. A more precise, but still somewhat crude, tool for assessing perceptual biases would have asked how an individual perceives their coworkers in general. Whether this approach is comparable to aggregating across random target ratings remains an unanswered question. Another, more subtle, approach might involve the use of projective tests to dissuade socially desirable responding (see Harms & Luthans, 2012 for an example). Regardless of what method is employed, both leader and follower perceptions warrant a serious second look by leadership researchers if we are to come to a better understanding of what drives leader–follower relationships.

On the whole, we embrace the wisdom of Lord and Dinh's suggestion that leadership researchers need to refocus our attention on the distinction between leadership perception and effectiveness. That said, we hope that the field can move one step further by recognizing the need to treat perceptual biases as more than systematic errors to be controlled for. As encoded in Lord and Dinh's first two principles, followers are active participants in the construction of leadership phenomena, so the perceptual ''baggage'' that they bring into the leader–follower system is an important building block in that construction. We believe that by accounting for perceiver effects in leadership research we can not only help disentangle leadership perception from effectiveness but also open up new opportunities to explore how perceptions may drive effectiveness. In addition, we believe that a better understanding of follower perceptions can facilitate more effective management by allowing practicing managers to make sense of the idiosyncratic reactions followers may display in response to the decisions and behaviors of their leaders.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/iops.12130 Published online by Cambridge University Press