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More than meets the eye: The role of subordinates' self-perceptions in leader categorization processes ☆

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ABSTRACT

Leader categorization theory suggests that subordinates implicitly compare their leaders with a cognitively represented ideal image of a leader, i.e., an ideal leader prototype. The better the match, the more favorable subordinates' attitudes toward their leaders will be. We suggest, however, that subordinates not only perceive their leaders against the backdrop of a leader prototype but also themselves. Based on socio-cognitive research, we hypothesize that these self-perceptions in turn should lend more weight to the leader prototype as a benchmark. Three field studies with employees ($N = 87$; $N = 265$; $N = 385$) were undertaken to test our hypothesis. Results confirm that subordinates' perceptions of their leaders against an ideal leader prototype are related to subordinates' respect for their leaders and leadership effectiveness perceptions, and that these relationships are moderated by subordinates' self-perceptions against the ideal leader prototype. This study therefore extends current follower-centric perspectives on leadership and strengthens its ties with fundamental socio-cognitive research.

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Cognitively oriented perspectives on leadership effectiveness argue that 'good leadership' is in part in the eye of the beholder. The more a leader displays what followers believe to be the characteristics of a good leader (i.e., of the ideal leader prototype), the more favorably followers respond to the leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996; Lord & Hall, 2003; Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Nye & Forsyth, 1991). This so-called 'follower-centric' perspective on leadership is supported by a substantial body of evidence (see overviews in Schyns & Meindl, 2005; Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2007). Somewhat ironically, however, research in the follower-centric perspective has overlooked a potentially important moderator in the equation: followers' self-perceptions against the leader prototype.

The present study outlines why and how subordinates' self-perceptions against the leader prototype need to be considered as a contextual constraint to the equation of leader categorization (cf. Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001). Particularly, by drawing on socio-cognitive research on perception and judgment processes (Dunning, 2005; Leary & Tangney, 2005b; Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985), we show that people's responses to the social world are very much in reference to their self-conceptions and that perceptions in the leadership domain are no exception. More specifically, we argue that subordinates' perceptions of their own leadership qualities (along an ideal leader prototype) moderate the relationship between subordinates' perceptions of their leaders (along the ideal leader prototype) and their respect for and perceived effectiveness of these leaders. In doing so, we not only illustrate how subordinates' self-perceptions permeate their reactions toward leaders, but we also extend and strengthen the ties between the leader categorization perspective and fundamental socio-cognitive research.

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1. Leadership is in the eye of the beholder

Leadership is a general characteristic of most groups. Because it is such a natural social phenomenon, people develop a subjective understanding of what good leadership entails. Research refers to these knowledge structures as Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) (Eden, 1992; Lord, de Vader, & Alliger, 1986; Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl et al., 1985). Such ILTs can be broadly differentiated into (a) subjective theories that enable people to make sense of the leadership processes, such as when people hold leaders most responsible for a group's success or failure (inference-based information processing), and (b) subjective theories that represent people's mental image of a leader (i.e., leader prototype) and thus enable the categorization of targets as leaders vs. non-leaders or good vs. bad leaders (recognition-based information processing). For the present paper, we focus on the latter aspect, i.e., the importance of leader prototypes to subordinates' leadership perceptions.

Leader prototypes differ to some extent from person to person (Dunning, Perie, & Story, 1991; Keller, 1999), from context to context (i.e., leadership in business, politics, or sports, Lord, Foti, & de Vader, 1984), and from culture to culture (Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2007; Gerstner & Day, 1994; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). They can also differ contingent on the type of prototype that is activated. For instance, different attributes spring to mind when people are asked about the attributes which characterize typical leaders (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994) as opposed to attributes of outstanding leaders (House et al., 2004). The process, prototypes are associated with, is essentially the same though — they become benchmarks.

It is by more or less implicit comparisons to such benchmarks that people evaluate the quality of someone's leadership (or leadership potential). The more a target represents the attributes of an individual's ideal leader prototype, the more likely the individual will recognize the target as a leader (also referred to as “leader categorization”), and the more positively the individual will respond to the target's leadership attempts. Moreover, because leader prototypes are usually found to overlap considerably across individuals within certain cultures as part of a socially shared leader prototype, the leader categorization rationale partly explains why some people are more likely to emerge as leaders, rise to higher leadership positions, and build better relationships with their followers, than others whose attributes align less closely with leader prototypes (Eagly and Karau 2002; Engle & Lord, 1997; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Ridgeway, 2001; Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008; Scott & Brown, 2006; cf. also Conger & Kanungo, 1987).

Over 30 years of research support the basic tenets of the follower-centric leader categorization approach (for recent reviews see Schyns & Meindl, 2005; Shamir et al., 2007). Yet, somewhat surprisingly, research within this tradition has largely overlooked followers' self-perceptions as (potential) leaders in this process. In the following section we outline why these perceptions are important and how they fit into the socio-cognitively driven leader categorization framework.

2. The role of subordinates' leadership self-perceptions for their perceptions of leaders

The leadership literature regards followers' self-conceptions predominantly as a consequence of the leadership process (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004) and less so as a constraint for leadership behavior and perception (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999; Lord et al., 2001). Other research domains, however, yield consistent evidence that individuals' self-conceptions (i.e., their mental representation of their understanding and evaluation of themselves) guide their attitudes and behavior as well as their attention to and processing of social information (for comprehensive reviews see Baumeister, 1998; Leary & Tangney, 2005a; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Fong and Markus (1982), for instance, found that individuals tend to seek information about others that is related to their self-schemas (in their study, they focused on extraverted vs. introverted people). Likewise, Dunning and Hayes (1996) showed that the more activated individuals' self-concept in a particular domain is, the more egocentrically these individuals tend to assess others' behavior (e.g., people take their own athletic activities as a standard when evaluating to what extent someone else's 2.5 h of basketball is athletic). While such domain activation is partly dependent on situational cues, Markus and Wurf (1987) argue that chronic domain activation occurs when the domain is central to one's self-definition, i.e., when it is part of one's working self-concept (cf. Broemer & Diehl, 2004).

In a review, Dunning (2005) describes how such self-concepts relate to social judgment. Among others, he concludes that people's self-perceptions drive contrast effects in their responses to others. Dunning and Cohen (1992), for instance, show that individuals with favorable self-perceptions regarding their performance in a certain domain (e.g., high math Scholastic Achievement Test scores) extensively use similar performance information on targets (e.g., the target's math SAT scores) to differentiate their judgments of targets in the domain (e.g., the target's mathematical ability). Conversely, individuals with less favorable self-perceptions regarding their performance in a certain domain make less use of the respective performance information about targets when judging them in the domain. Other works support these findings in that they too find that individuals' self-perceptions in certain domains influence how often and confidently the domain criteria are used by these individuals to base their judgment of others upon (cf. Fong & Markus, 1982; Kuiper & Rogers, 1979; Markus et al., 1985). Within such processes, the domain criteria are generic in that they depend on what is most important, i.e., prototypical, in a certain domain. In basketball, it might be the number of shots, assists, and steals, in academia it might be the number of publications, grant money, prizes, and teaching evaluations.

Given the extant evidence that people perceive and respond to the social world egocentrically (i.e., in reference to the self, cf. Leary & Tangney, 2005a), it is surprising how little this notion has been empirically explored in the domain of leadership. The lack of such work is especially surprising in follower-centric leadership research, which asserts that subordinates' perceptions of their leaders are a central determinant of subordinates' reactions to those leaders. The present study seeks to fill that void. For that

purpose, we designed a set of studies to illustrate that egocentricity in social judgments also extends to leader categorization processes in that people's self-conception in the domain of leadership moderate the leader categorization processes. Specifically, we propose that the more subordinates believe that they themselves are representative of an ideal leader prototype, the more they rely on the ideal leader prototype as a benchmark when judging and responding to others' leadership.

Core to leader categorization theory is that the categorization process is assumed to directly feed into a perception of the target's suitability for the leadership role (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lord & Maher, 1991; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Such suitability perception is reciprocated by followers with an openness towards the enacted leadership (cf. 'worthiness of influence' in Kenney et al., 1996; or 'respect for the leader' in van Quaquebeke & Brodbeck, 2008) and a perception of the leader's effectiveness in his/her role (cf. Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008). Both, subordinates' respect for their leaders and subordinates' perceptions of leadership effectiveness, are important as criteria in leadership scholarship, in that leaders cannot be effective without subordinates who are open to their influence (Hollander, 2006; Yukl, 2005) and in that favorable perceptions of leadership can set the stage for leadership effectiveness as evidenced in follower behavior or performance (Lord & Maher, 1991; van Knippenberg, in press). Accordingly and in line with the main thrust of leader categorization theory, we put such outcomes in the present study center-stage. In summary, we thus advance the following moderation hypothesis (see also Fig. 1):

Hypothesis. The more subordinates perceive themselves to represent their ideal leader prototype, the stronger the relationships between their perceptions of their current leader against the ideal leader prototype and (a) their respect for the leader, and (b) their perceptions of leadership effectiveness respectively.

3. Overview of studies

We tested our hypothesis in three field studies. We thereby obtain an overall picture that we seek to parsimoniously interpret across samples and measures in the light of our hypothesis. In Study 1, we investigate our hypothesis within a single organization and use an intuitive graphical response format to assess perceived self and actual leader match with an ideal leader prototype. Study 2 is a larger scale field study which employs a more detailed measure of leader prototype match. It was additionally designed to rule out alternative explanations for the proposed moderated relationship. Study 3, finally, uses once again the predictor measures of Study 1 to replicate the effect while simultaneously ruling out even more alternative explanations than Study 2.

Together the outcome measures respect for the leader and leadership effectiveness perceptions were not only chosen because they are core to leader categorization theorizing, but also because they capture subjective responses to and perceptions of leadership which may set the stage for behavioral expressions of leadership effectiveness (cf., van Knippenberg, in press; Yukl, 2005). In the first two studies we focus on subordinates' respect for their leader as conceptualized by van Quaquebeke, Henrich, and Eckloff (2007) to capture subordinates' openness to the leader's influence — the essence of leadership effectiveness (Yukl, 2005). Because this measure arguably is slightly more distal to effective leadership than more traditional direct measures of perceived leadership effectiveness, we focused on such a more direct measure in our third study.

4. Study 1

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Procedure

The survey was conducted in a mid-sized metal processing company in Germany. Participants were approached via a direct mailing that contained a link to enter an anonymous online survey programmed according to the recommendations given in the field (Birnbaum, 2004; Kraut et al., 2004). We additionally assured on the welcome page that the research would be conducted anonymously. At the end of the questionnaire, we provided participants who were interested in the results with an opportunity to sign up in a different database so that names and emails could not be linked to any data entries in the survey.

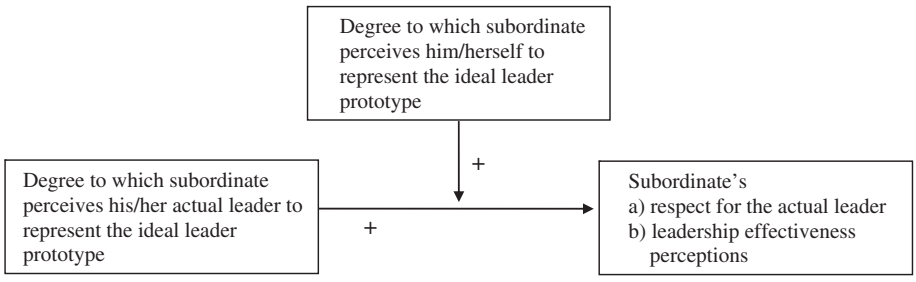


Fig. 1. Hypothesized relationships.

4.1.2. Participants

Eighty-seven participants who indicated that they worked for a direct supervisor completed the survey. The sample's mean age was 40 years ($SD = 9.6$). Women made up 45% of the sample. Lifetime employment experience averaged around 20 years ($SD = 11.0$) with an average of 6.3 supervisors experienced throughout each worker's career ($SD = 3.6$). On average, 12% of those supervisors were female. Employees with higher education made up around 40% of the sample. 80% of all participants had completed vocational training.

4.1.3. Measures

The predictor variables, i.e., the degree to which participants perceive themselves and their current leaders to represent their ideal leader prototype, were constructed as 7-point Likert-type scales. As response options we used pictorial Venn-diagrams instead of verbal indicators (Fig. 2). A general advantage of this approach is that it manages to assess the basic concept of matching rather intuitive instead of having to provide long lists of specific leader attributes via verbal response options with subsequent indications of ideal-, self- and leader-ratings. We thus avoid a difference score logic which would render the testing via polynomial regression necessary (cf. Edwards, 2001). In addition, by using pictorial measures as predictors and verbal measures as criterions, we followed a recommendation on how to avoid common item variance in cross-sectional questionnaire studies (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Also, they function as cognitive "speed-bumps" in an otherwise all verbal survey. Due to these advantages, such kinds of assessments are increasingly popular as a substitute for more extensive assessments, for instance, inclusion of others in self (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), organizational identification (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Shamir & Kark, 2004), or general self-categorization (Schubert & Otten, 2002) — all of which yield congruent validity with more extensive verbal counterpart scales. For the present study, on two consecutive pages, we asked participants to indicate via the overlapping Venn-diagrams to what degree a) their current leaders and b) they themselves represented their image of an ideal leader. The brevity of the measurement was moreover helpful because the participating organization was concerned about the time it would take to fill in the survey. The chosen graphical response format is, however, not only time efficient, but also captures by and large the same variance as more extensive leader categorization measures ($r = .73$, $p < .01$, with the Global Leadership and Behavior Effectiveness Program (GLOBE) scale as reported in van Quaquebeke & Brodbeck, 2008; also adapting the correction for attenuation formula and using available information on correlations and reliability of the Venn in the same publication, the single item reliability of the Venn measure can be estimated to be at least .69).

As the outcome variable, participants' *respect for their leaders* was assessed via six items. The scale initially stemmed from a content analysis of qualitative interviews with employees about their experiences with leaders and captures the extent to which subordinates respect their leader and voluntarily accept and seek his/her leadership (van Quaquebeke & Brodbeck, 2008; van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). Participants ranked their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). The items were (1) "For me, my leader represents a positive role model at the workplace.", (2) "I trust the judgment of my leader in work issues.", (3) "In a lot of matters concerning work I gladly seek advice from my leader.", (4) "At work I enjoy being able to learn from my leader.", (5) "Due to the influence of my leader I feel very constricted in my professional development." [*reverse coded*], and (6) "I owe respect to the way my leader accomplishes his/her professional functions.".

To control for potential alternative explanations, we not only surveyed demographic controls such as gender, but also asked for the number of worked years and number of ever experienced leaders at work. Moreover, we also asked for participants' de facto

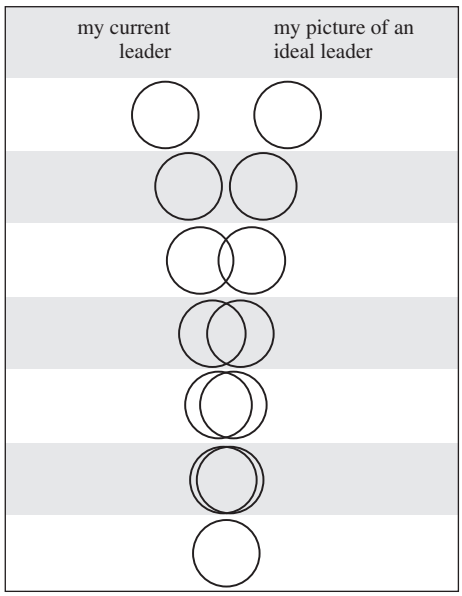


Fig. 2. Venn diagram response format item to measure the degree to which a participant's current leader represents participant's picture of an ideal leader.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations, Study 1.

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Follower's gender	1.45	.50	–								
2. Leader's gender	1.13	.33	.21*	–							
3. Follower's years of work experience	20.07	11.01	−.22*	−.18†	–						
4. Follower's number of experienced leaders	6.25	3.64	−.22*	−.03	.37***	–					
5. Follower's past leadership experience	1.44	.50	.23*	.08	−.45***	−.23*	–				
6. Follower's present leadership experience	1.59	.50	.15	−.03	−.33**	−.12	.32**	–			
7. Leader's match with leader prototype	3.14	1.77	−.08	−.01	.07	−.11	−.00	.01	–		
8. Follower's match with leader prototype	3.95	1.25	−.08	−.18†	−.00	−.12	−.06	−.11	.20	–	
9. Respect for the leader	2.71	1.12	−.03	−.00	−.03	−.13	.17	.08	.72***	.10†	(.91)

Note. $N = 87$; Cronbach's α are indicated in parentheses where applicable; Gender was coded as 1 = male and 2 = female; Past and Present Leadership Experience was dummy-coded 0 (no experience) vs. 1 (experience); Respect for the Leader was measured by a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5; constructs 7 and 8 by Likert scales with Venn response format ranging from 1 to 7.

† $p<.10$.
* $p<.05$.
** $p<.01$.
*** $p<.001$.

leadership experience by asking them if they had ever held a position at work in which they supervised other people or if they do so now.

4.2. Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all variables. The results of the hierarchical regression analyses used to test our hypothesis are summarized in Table 2. Note that Aiken and West (1991) propose centralization or standardization of the predictors in interaction analyses. We decided for the latter. Also, we followed the recommendations of Edwards (2008) and Ganzach (1997) who argue that interaction analyses should always include the quadratic terms of the predictors to among other reasons check whether curvilinear relationships are not falsely identified as interactions.

As suggested by the general leader categorization approach, the extent to which participants perceived their leader to represent their prototype of an ideal leader correlated positively with participants' respect for their leaders. Central for our hypothesis, we also find the predicted interaction in the hierarchical regression model confirmed. Both quadratic terms were not significant. The observed interaction is thus unlikely to be a statistical artifact. As can be gathered from the second model in Table 2, the proposed interaction also holds when variables such as participants' gender, work experience, number of experienced leaders, current or past experience as leaders, as well as their leader's gender were controlled for. Simple slopes analysis (cf. Aiken & West, 1991) moreover confirms the predicted pattern in that the slopes predicting participants' respect for their leaders were expectedly steeper for participants who perceived greater overlap between themselves and an ideal leader prototype ($b = 1.05$, $p<.001$) than for those who perceived lesser overlap ($b = .56$, $p<.05$) (cf. Fig. 3).[1]

5. Study 2

Altogether, Study 1 provides important evidence for our proposed hypothesis. To further bolster confidence in our conclusion, some issues, however, needed to be addressed. First, Study 1 was unspecific concerning the concrete attributes an ideal leader prototype encompasses. With our second study we thus wanted to show that the same effects also hold when participants assess their leaders and themselves against a list of concrete prototypically ideal leadership attributes. Second, the previous study left room for alternative explanations regarding the interaction effects. Specifically, skeptics might argue that the interaction effect we find is due to participants' self-esteem, not only because seeing oneself as a (potential) leader might be a proxy for heightened self-esteem, but also because prior research found that individuals with high self-esteem made more use of prototype matching in forming preferences compared to low self-esteem individuals (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). Likewise, some might argue that perceived leader-follower similarity can account for our findings in the first study based on a similarity-attraction hypothesis (i.e., seeing oneself as more similar to the leader prototype could be a proxy for seeing oneself as more similar to one's leader). In the second study, we thus sought to empirically rule out such alternative explanations.

[1] Note that the same interaction pattern was obtained for leadership effectiveness perceptions assessed with the 1-item Yukl and Falbe (Yukl & Falbe, 1991) measure with or without reported controls. Because the current multi-item respect scale and the leadership effectiveness measure are highly correlated (as they should be, given that they should be indicative of highly related concepts), we only report the more reliable multi-item measure here. As a more distal proxy of leadership effectiveness, we also assessed identification with the leader (cf. van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Identification was (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; adapted to the leader as the target of identification, van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004). It showed the same significant pattern of results as the respect and effectiveness perceptions. We chose not to report identification results here because they do not add a great deal to the overall picture. These additional analyses are, however, available from the first author upon request.

Table 2
Multiple regression analysis of respect for the leader on current leader and self as leader, Study 1.

	Respect for the leader					
	b	*SE b*	β	*b*	*SE b*	β
Controls						
Follower's gender				−.07	.18	−.03
Leader's gender				.01	.27	.00
Follower's years of work experience				.00	.01	−.02
Follower's number of experienced leaders				−.01	.03	−.02
Follower's own past leadership experience				.35	.19	.16†
Follower's own present leadership experience				.10	.19	.04
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$				.05/.72		
Main effects						
Leader's match with leader prototype (L)	.80	.09	.72***	.80	.09	.71***
Follower's match with leader prototype (F)	−.07	.09	−.07	−.07	.09	−.06
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$	.52/45.46***			.50/43.12***		
Quadratic effects						
L^2	−.12	.09	−.11	−.13	.10	−.12
F^2	−.05	.07	−.06	−.06	.08	−.07
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$	.01/.44			.01/.51		
Interaction effects						
L×F	.25	.09	.23**	.27	.09	.25**
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$	.04/7.6**			.05/8.52**		

Note. $N = 87$.
*$p<.05$.
† $p<.10$.
** $p<.01$.
*** $p<.001$.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Procedure

In order to have sufficient power to detect the proposed interaction in the field and furthermore to prevent strong sampling biases, we set up the study as a multi-site-multi-entry survey. This means that participants were recruited in cooperation with major German websites from diverse backgrounds (e.g., Stern.de, Focus.de, T-Online Business, GMX Mailservice) and that the entry-type was either a banner, a teaser text box, or a short article on the rough objective of the survey.

To increase the response rate, we offered different motivators, such as result feedback and a lottery for online bookshop gift vouchers. Because this was an openly accessible survey, we furthermore assigned a cookie session ID to each participant which made it virtually impossible for inexperienced users to participate in the survey from the same computer again. Additionally, we employed filter questions, for example to determine whether people currently had a leader or not. If not, they were asked to answer the survey questions with regard to either their last leader or an analogous leader figure in their lives (e.g., teacher, coach, etc.). We employed this strategy to keep people from feeling left out and re-entering the questionnaire with false self-reports. Note though, that respondents without a current leader were excluded from the analysis here. Similar to the previous study, we assured at the beginning that the research would be conducted anonymously, provided the option for feedback, and extensively pretested the survey on different browsers and screen resolutions.

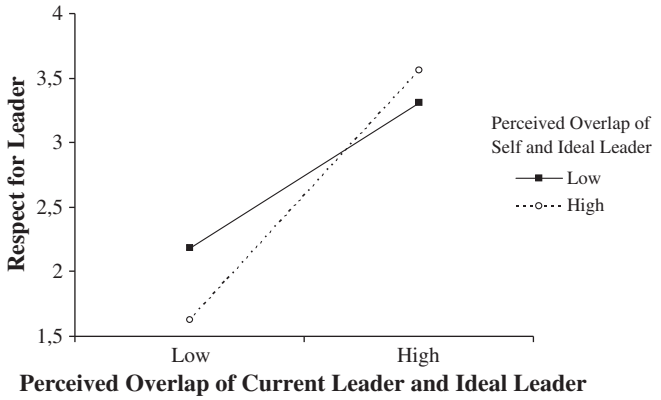


Fig. 3. Perceived overlap of self and ideal leader prototype as a moderator of the relationship between the perceived overlap of current leader with an ideal leader prototype and respect for current leader, Study 1.

5.1.2. Participants

Two-hundred-sixty-five participants completed the survey and met the requirement of currently working under a direct leader. The sample's mean age was 37 years ($SD = 9.2$). Women made up 53% of the sample. Average employment experience was about 15 years ($SD = 9.3$), and participants had experience with an average of 5.6 ($SD = 3.8$) supervisors, of whom on average 23% were females. Employees with higher education made up roughly half of the sample. 62% of all participants had completed vocational training. Participants were employed in more than 20 different industries and more than 30 different departments (approx. 90% white-collar work).

5.1.3. Measures

To assess subordinates' perceptions of their current leaders and of themselves along the ideal leader prototype, we used the widely applied Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) leadership scales which are usually employed to assess the leader prototypes of people in different cultures (Hanges & Dickson, 2006; House et al., 2004). Specifically, we used a reduced version of the instrument developed as part of a reanalysis of the original GLOBE data by van Quaquebeke and Brodbeck (2008). This version consists of only those attributes that at least 95% of the German GLOBE sample ($N = 471$ as reported in Brodbeck & Frese, 2007; House et al., 2004) considered as greatly contributing to or hindering outstanding leadership in Germany (following the method of Dorfman, Hanges, & Brodbeck, 2004). Attributes regarded as prototypical in Germany are: Inspirational, Future-oriented, Foresight, Positive, Motive arouser, Confidence builder, Dynamic, Encouraging, Motivational, Morale booster, Trustworthy, Decisive, Logical, Improvement-oriented, Excellence-oriented, Integrator, Informed, Team builder, Dependable, Intelligent, Effective bargainer. Attributes regarded as antiprototypical in Germany are: Dictatorial, Non-delegater, Vindictive, Irritable, Non-cooperative, Cynical, Dishonest, Hostile, and Non-participative. The instrument also encompasses another leadership attribute ("professional expertise") that was not included in the original GLOBE questionnaire due to its intercultural constraints[2] but which van Quaquebeke and Brodbeck (2008) regard as highly relevant for the perception of leadership qualities in Germany (cf. Brodbeck & Frese, 2007). For the present study, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they saw their current leaders and themselves (as potential leaders) representing each of the 31 leadership attributes. Participants ranked each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much"). We calculated scores for both leaders and participants as means (antiprototypical items were reverse coded). These mean scores indicate the degree to which participants view their leaders and themselves as representative of the ideal leader prototype. Similar to Study 1, because the attributes were previously identified as the most representative for the leader prototype in Germany (van Quaquebeke & Brodbeck, 2008), we again avoid a difference score logic which would render a testing via polynomial regression necessary (Edwards, 2001).

We used the same dependent measure as in Study 1 to assess participants' respect for their leaders. The same is true for the control measures. To additionally rule out any effect of perceived follower-leader similarity in leadership, we also asked participants to rate how they would judge their own leadership quality in comparison to their leader's. Participants ranked this measure of similarity on a scale from −2 ("a lot worse") to 0 ("about similar") to +2 ("a lot better"; cf. Strauss, Barrick, & Connerley, 2001). In analogy to Strauss et al. (2001), we computed the similarity score as the absolute distance of the response to 0 and then added 3, which resulted in a similarity score from 1 ("not similar") to 3 ("similar"). Also, we now complemented participants' work experience by also asking for their tenure with their current leaders. Last, we included the Rosenberg measure of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1989) to be used as another control variable for reasons discussed above in the introduction to this study.

5.2. Results

All scales showed satisfactory reliabilities (see Table 3). The table further indicates that self and current leader perceptions were positively related, possibly indicating a certain degree of common method variance due to the same verbal measurement method. The hierarchical regression analyses that we conducted to test our hypothesis are displayed in Table 4.

Not surprisingly and in support of leader categorization theory, we found that the more participants perceived their leader to represent prototypical ideal leadership attributes, the higher participants' respect is for the leader. Of greater importance and in support of our hypothesis, we found that this direct relationship is moderated by participants' self-perceptions along the ideal leader prototype. Moreover, while this time the quadratic effect for participants' categorization of their leaders became significant in a convex shape (U shape), it does not render the interaction insignificant. The same is true for the only marginally significant and concave shaped effect of participants' self-perceptions as leaders. Again, as in Study 1, the interaction can thus be considered not to be a statistical artifact. Moreover, as the two models in Table 4 show, we obtained significant results with or without controlling for demographic variables as well as participants' leadership experience, participants' self-esteem, and participants' perceptions of leadership similarity to their leaders. Following Aiken and West (1991), we proceeded to simple slopes analyses for ratings of subordinates' own leadership qualities one standard deviation above and below the mean, and graphically displayed these interactions (Fig. 4). The interaction pattern was as predicted. The relationship between participants' perception of ideal leader attributes in their leaders and participants' respect for these leaders was stronger for participants who rated themselves

[2] Results were not different when this item was left out.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics and correlations, Study 2.

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Follower's gender	1.53	.50	–											
2. Leader's Gender	1.28	.45	.31***	–										
3. Follower's years of work experience	14.58	9.29	−.15*	−.13*	–									
4. Follower's number of experienced leaders	5.60	3.77	−.11	.00	.44***	–								
5. Follower's tenure with leader	3.89	4.47	−.04	−.06	.39***	−.11†	–							
6. Follower's own past leadership experience	1.54	.50	.20***	.08	−.32***	−.26***	−.05	–						
7. Follower's own present leadership experience	1.66	.47	.05	.03	−.10	−.07	−.04	.36**	–					
8. Follower's self-esteem	4.18	.64	.02	.07	.11†	.00	.03	−.14*	−.11†	(.88)				
9. Follower perceived similarity to leader	2.11	.68	.02	.00	−.07	−.08	.05	−.04	.15*	−.02	–			
10. Leader's match with leader prototype	3.55	.83	.10†	.07	−.22***	−.14*	−.10	.20***	.20**	.11	.26**	(.96)		
11. Follower's match with leader prototype	3.94	.51	−.01	−.02	.03	−.01	.00	−.09	−.07	.25***	.06	.32***	(.93)	
12. Respect for the leader	3.05	1.15	.11†	.06	−.27***	−.14*	−.13*	.23***	.19**	.03	.33***	.80***	.07	(.92)

Note. Cronbach's α are indicated in parentheses where applicable; Gender was coded as 1 = male and 2 = female; Past and Present Leadership Experience was dummy-coded 0 (no experience) vs. 1 (experience); perceived similarity was coded from 1 (not at all similar) to 3 (similar); all other psychological constructs were measured by Likert scales ranging from 1 to 5.

† $p<.10$.
* $p<.05$.
** $p<.01$.
*** $p<.001$.

Table 4
Multiple regression analysis of respect for the leader on current leader and self as leader as well as controls, Study 2.

	Respect for the Leader					
	b	*SE b*	β	*b*	*SE b*	β
Controls						
Follower's gender				.04	.09	.02
Leader's gender				−.13	.10	−.05
Follower's years of work experience				−.01	.01	−.11*
Follower's number of experienced leaders				.01	.01	.03
Follower's tenure with the leader				.00	.01	−.02
Follower's own past leadership experience				.00	.10	.00
Follower's own present leadership experience				.01	.09	.00
Follower's self-esteem				−.01	.07	.00
Follower's perceived similarity to leader				.21	.06	.12**
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$				.21/6.75***		
Main effects						
Leader's match with leader prototype (L)	1.02	.04	.89***	.99	.05	.87***
Follower's match with leader prototype (F)	−.24	.05	−.21***	−.21	.06	−.19***
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$	.69/289.35***			.51/200.94***		
Quadratic effects						
L^2	.07	.04	.08*	.10	.04	.12**
F^2	−.05	.03	−.13†	−.03	.03	−.09
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$	.01/3.81*			.02/6.67**		
Interaction effects						
L × F	.12	.04	.17**	.09	.04	.13*
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$	.01/8.19**			.01/4.21*		

Note. $N = 265$ (without controls), $N = 235$ (with controls, due to missing data).

† $p<.10$.
* $p<.05$.
** $p<.01$.
*** $p<.001$.

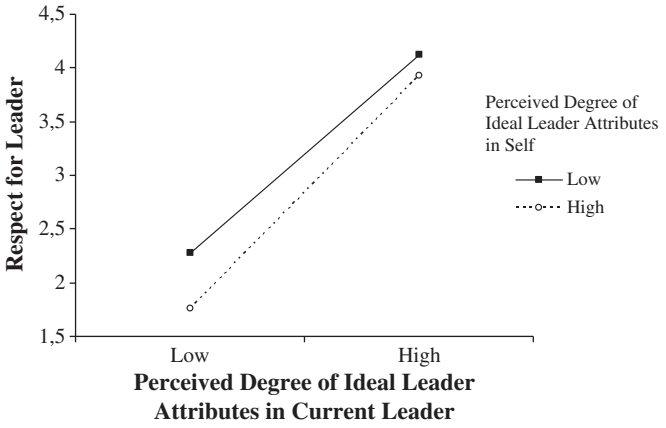


Fig. 4. Perceived ideal leader attributes in self as a moderator of the relationship between the perceived ideal leader attributes in current leader and respect for current leader, Study 2.

high on the leadership attributes ($b = 1.14$, $p < .001$) than for those participants who rated themselves low on the leadership attributes ($b = .91$, $p < .001$).[3]

6. Study 3

Whereas both previous studies provide substantial evidence for the proposed interaction between regular leader categorization and self as leader categorization, there are some issues that we sought to address with the third and final study. First, and most importantly, in both previous studies we surveyed respect for the leader and leadership effectiveness as outcomes. However, while respect for leader was measured with a six items scale, leadership effectiveness was only measured with a one item measure taken from Yukl and Falbe (1991). In both studies, we found the measures to be empirically highly overlapping, as we would indeed expect on the basis of the proposition that respect is indicative of perceptions of leadership effectiveness (i.e., the constructs are also conceptually highly dependent). Thus, while the interaction pattern equally held for both dependent measures in Study 1 and Study 2, we decided to only report the results for the more extensive respect for leader scale and referred the leadership effectiveness results to a footnote. To more fully address perceptions of leadership effectiveness in the third study, we now surveyed leadership effectiveness with a more extensive scale taken from B. van Knippenberg and van Knippenberg (2005) (in contrast to the previous studies, we now, conversely, report the results for respect for the leader only in a footnote, because they do not add much value when leadership effectiveness results are reported). Secondly, we sought to improve the controls used in Study 2. Specifically, we surveyed performance self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) as a variant of general self-esteem that is not only closer to the work-domain but also captures more of the state aspect of self-esteem which might influence participants' response behavior. Also, we now distinguish our previous relatively rudimentary similarity measure into two kinds of similarity, surface and deep level similarity, both to be used as controls. Thirdly, to round off the design, we chose to employ the measurement method used in Study 1 for the predictors in order to check whether the interaction effect holds with the Study 1 measurement even when all controls that were introduced in Study 2 are included.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Procedure

We recruited participants via a professionally managed survey panel in Germany (Respondi). We invited only participants with at least one year of work experience who currently work under a direct leader. By clicking on a link in an email invitation, participants anonymously entered the survey. To lower drop-out rates and diversify self-selection biases, Respondi offered all completing participants credits within their bonus system. Additionally, we offered them the opportunity to sign up in a separate database to be informed about the results.

6.1.2. Participants

Altogether, 385 participants completed the survey. The sample's mean age was 34 years ($SD = 8.7$). Women made up 38% of the sample. Lifetime employment experience averaged 14 years ($SD = 9.6$) with an average of 5.2 supervisors experienced

[3] Note that, similar to Study 1, the same interaction pattern was obtained with or without reported controls for leadership effectiveness perceptions (Yukl & Falbe, 1991) as the outcome measure, but as for Study 1 we do not report these results here because of the high, and to be expected, intercorrelations of effectiveness and respect. Again, results also hold for identification with the leader (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; van Dick et al., 2004). Moreover, subordinates' self-esteem did not significantly interact with subordinates' perceptions of their leaders against the ideal leader prototype. Thus ruling it completely out as an alternative explanation. These additional analyses are available from the first author upon request.

throughout each worker's career ($SD = 2.7$). Of these supervisors, 27% on average were females. Employees with higher education made up around 38% of the sample. 82% of all participants had completed vocational training. Participants were employed in almost 30 different industries and more than 40 different departments (approx. 90% white-collar work).

6.1.3. Measures

To measure the categorization of the leader along the ideal leader prototype and participants' self-categorization along the same, we used the same items we employed in Study 1, i.e., we asked participants to indicate the match of themselves and their actual leaders with their image of an ideal leader. The response scale was again depicted as a seven step Venn-diagram (see Fig. 2).

As a dependent variable we included a more extensive measure of participants' perception of leadership effectiveness (10 items). The measure was chosen (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005) because it was previously shown to yield the same results as behavioral indicators of leadership effectiveness such as follower performance. The scale encompasses items such as "My leader performs his/her tasks well." "My leader motivates me to exert myself on behalf of the team." or "My leader is very effective as a leader.". Answers were to be made on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much").

Table 5
Descriptive statistics and correlations, Study 3.

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Follower's Gender	1.38	.49	–													
2. Leader's Gender	1.28	.45	.28***	–												
3. Follower's Years of Work Experience	14.00	9.64	−.04	−.01	–											
4. Follower's Number of Experienced Leaders	5.16	2.66	−.12*	−.04	.43***	–										
5. Follower's Tenure with Leader	2.28	1.94	.04	−.08	.21***	−.04	–									
6. Follower's Own Past Leadership Experience	1.59	.49	.14**	−.06	−.28***	−.32***	.07	–								
7. Follower's Own Present Leadership Experience	.32	.47	−.02	.02	.07	.02	.07	−.23***	–							
8. Follower's Performance Self-Esteem	4.17	.61	.01	.03	.08	.03	.09†	−.11*	.08	(.82)						
9. Follower Surface Similarity to Leader	1.61	.74	.03	−.02	−.02	−.07	−.05	.04	−.04	−.30***	(.64)					
10. Follower Deep Similarity to Leader	2.37	.90	.03	.01	.06	−.12*	.02	.05	.13*	−.04	.31***	(.83)				
11. Follower's Liking of Leader	2.98	.94	−.02	.01	.08	−.03	−.02	.02	.08	.07	.13*	.62***	(.82)			
11. Leader's Match With Leader Prototype	3.72	1.55	.00	−.01	.03	−.05	.02	.04	.09†	.06	.06	.40***	.41***	(.95)		
12. Follower's Match with Leader Prototype	3.88	1.17	−.09†	−.01	.03	.01	.02	−.11*	.22***	.22***	.00	.12*	.07	.17**	(.90)	
13. Leadership Effectiveness	3.24	1.08	.01	.04	.06	−.08†	.00	.06	.01	.06	.05	.57***	.59***	.62***	.01	(.97)

Note. $N = 385$; Cronbach's α are indicated in parentheses where applicable; Gender was coded as 1 = male and 2 = female; Past and Present Leadership Experience was dummy-coded 0 (no experience) vs. 1 (experience); all other psychological constructs were measured by Likert scales ranging from 1 to 5.

† $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

While we generally surveyed the same controls as in Study 2, we now measured a variant of general self-esteem, i.e., performance self-esteem, with a seven item scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). Sample items are "I feel confident about my abilities." and "I feel as smart as others." Also, we measured two types of perceived similarity with the leader. Surface similarity was captured by the following three items: "My leader and I look alike.", "In appearance, my leader and I are very different." (reverse coded), and "From a distance, one could mistake my leader for me and vice-versa.". Deep-level similarity was captured by the following three items: "I often notice that my leader and I behave similarly.", "Usually, my leader and I have the same opinion.", and "My leader and I are in a lot of aspects very similar.". Answers to all of these had to be made on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much"). Finally, liking was measured with the five item social attraction subscale from the interpersonal attraction measure (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). Sample items include "I think my leader could be a friend of mine." and "My leader and I could never establish a personal friendship with each other." (reverse coded). Answers again had to be made on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much").

6.2. Results

As can be gathered from Table 5, all scales show good or at least satisfactory internal consistencies. Similar to Study 2, but to a lesser extent, we find a positive correlation between participants' self-perceptions as potential leaders and their perceptions of their leaders ($r = .17$, $p < .01$). The hierarchical regression analyses that we conducted to test our hypothesis are displayed in Table 6.

In support of the basic notion of leadership categorization theory, the more participants perceived their leader to represent the ideal leader prototype, the higher their perceptions of leadership effectiveness for the leader. Mapping squarely onto both previous studies and in support of our hypothesis, we also find the interaction for our more extensive leadership effectiveness measure confirmed. More specifically, the relationship between participants' perceptions of their current leaders against the ideal leader prototype and participants' leadership effectiveness perceptions was moderated by participants' self-perceptions against the ideal leader prototype. While the quadratic effect of participants' categorization of their leaders turned significant, it showed the reverse pattern compared to the quadratic effect in Study 2, i.e., a concave (inverse U) shape. Moreover, the quadratic term for participants' self-perceptions as leaders also turned significant in a concave shape. Despite controlling for these quadratic effects, the interaction remained significant, indicating that it is not a statistical artifact explainable by unaccounted quadratic effects. Moreover, as can be noted from Table 6, we again obtained these results with or without demographic controls, participants' performance self-esteem, participants' liking of their leaders, as well as participants' perceptions of surface and deep-level

Table 6
Multiple regression analysis of respect for the leader on current leader and self as leader as well as controls, Study 3.

	Leadership Effectiveness					
	b	*SE b*	β	*b*	*SE b*	β
Controls						
Follower's gender				−.04	.08	−.02
Leader's gender				.13	.08	.05
Follower's years of work experience				.01	.00	.05
Follower's number of experienced leaders				−.01	.02	−.04
Follower's tenure with the leader				.00	.02	.00
Follower's own past leadership experience				.06	.08	.03
Follower's own present leadership experience				−.17	.08	−.07*
Follower's performance self-esteem				.06	.06	.03
Follower's surface similarity to leader				−.12	.05	−.08*
Follower's deep similarity to leader				.33	.06	.27***
Follower's liking of leader				.27	.05	.24***
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$				.44/26.18***		
Main Effects						
Leader's match with leader prototype (l)	.67	.04	.62***	.46	.04	.43***
Follower's match with leader prototype (F)	−.11	.04	−.10*	−.11	.04	−.10**
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$	.38/124.44***			.14/63.62***		
Quadratic effects						
L^2	−.08	.03	−.12**	−.05	.02	−.08*
F^2	−.10	.04	−.10*	−.07	.03	−.07*
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$	.02/6.39**			.01/3.35*		
Interaction effects						
L × F	.13	.04	.14***	.10	.03	.10**
$\Delta R^2/\Delta F$	.02/12.40***			.01/8.70**		

Note. $N = 385$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

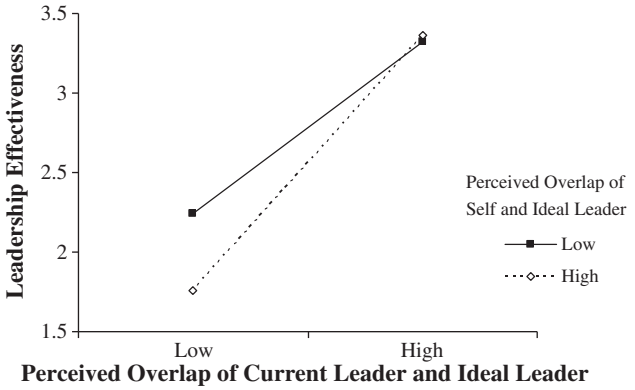


Fig. 5. Perceived overlap of self and ideal leader prototype as a moderator of the relationship between the perceived overlap of current leader with an ideal leader prototype and leadership effectiveness, Study 3.

similarity with their leaders. As can be gathered from Fig. 5, the pattern for leadership effectiveness perception as an outcome was as predicted. The relationship between participants' perception of ideal leader attributes in their leaders and participants' leadership effectiveness perceptions was stronger for participants who rated themselves high along their ideal leader prototype ($b = .81$, $p < .001$) than for those participants who rated themselves low on their ideal leader prototype ($b = .54$, $p < .001$).[4]

7. Discussion

Research on the cognitive underpinnings of leadership perceptions and the social construction of leadership has firmly established that leadership is to a certain extent in the eyes of the beholder. The more we see the attributes of our ideal leader prototype represented in an actual leader, the more we tend to believe in the leader's suitability for the leadership role (Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl et al., 1985; Schyns & Meindl, 2005; Shamir et al., 2007). The current study further develops and extends this follower-centric perspective on leadership by showing that subordinates' self-perceptions play a moderating role in such leader categorization process. The relationship between subordinates' perceptions of their leaders against the ideal leader prototype and their favorability towards their leaders' leadership (i.e., respect for the leader and perceived leadership effectiveness) was stronger when subordinates perceived themselves to possess prototypical leadership qualities. This moderating relationship held consistently across the present samples, operationalizations of leadership categorization, and operationalizations of outcomes. Indeed, despite a variation of the slope steepness, presumably due to the different measures and sample variation, the picture is overall consistent in that the slope of high self as leader individuals is always steeper than the one for low self as leader individuals. Noteworthy is that the interactions could not be reduced to quadratic effects. Moreover, it also held when many controls were included: subordinates' actual or previous leadership positions, subordinates' and their leaders' gender, subordinates' years of work experience and number of experienced leaders, their levels of self-esteem, their tenure with their leader, their liking of their leader, and their perception of similarity to the leader. Our findings thus indeed seem to be driven by subordinates' self-conceptions in terms of ideal leader attributes rather than by other constructs or methodological artifacts.

7.1. Theoretical implications

Follower-centric perspectives on leadership have made major contributions to the field by showing how people's cognitive representations of leadership affect their responses to actual leaders (Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl et al., 1985). Yet at the same time, and somewhat ironically in view of the fact that the leader categorization perspective has been labeled a “follower-centric” perspective (Meindl, 1995; Shamir et al., 2007), previous research has neglected to investigate the impact of followers' self-conceptions in terms of these cognitive representations of leadership on their evaluations of and responses to their leaders. This is all the more surprising given the abundant attention to follower self-conception in leadership research (Lord et al., 2001).

Put in a nutshell, the current findings suggest that people's self-conceptions in reference to an ideal leader prototype affect the

[4] As would be expected, the same interaction pattern again was also obtained for respect for leader (van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010), but, as would also be expected, respect and effectiveness were again so highly correlated that it did not make sense to report both findings in detail. Moreover, in addition to again replicating the pattern of results with identification with the leader (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; van Dick et al., 2004), we also obtained it for satisfaction with leader (Kunin, 1955), trust in leader (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008), and Leader–Member-Exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) as well as for intention to leave (Camman, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979), although of course in the latter the pattern reflects a negative relationship. Moreover, subordinates' performance self-esteem did not significantly interact with subordinates' perceptions of their leaders against the ideal leader prototype. Thus ruling it completely out as an alternative explanation. These additional analyses are available from the first author upon request.

degree to which they use the leader prototype to judge actual leaders (cf. Lord et al., 2001). Based upon previous socio-cognitive reasoning (Broemer & Diehl, 2004; Hogg, 2001; Markus et al., 1985; Markus & Wurf, 1987; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), we contend that this effect is driven by the centrality of the leader prototype in subordinates' self-concept. Put abstractly, the more representative individuals feel of a certain category, the more important the underlying criteria of that category become to them as a standard for structuring and responding to the social world. Framed from a self-verification perspective (Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2005), one could argue that the nature of the interaction between self- and leader perceptions indicates that individuals are reluctant to hold leaders to standards that they themselves do not meet. Conversely, to the extent that subordinates perceive that they meet the standards, they have some justification for evaluating and thus differentiating leaders by those standards.

While the present set of studies can confirm such a moderated relationship, it needs to be noted that they were not designed to test the specific cognitive mediating process. A possible angle on this is discussed by Medvedeff and Lord (2007). They apply Grossberg's (1976, 1999) Adaptive Resonance Theory (ART) to Implicit Leadership Theories and argue that, as individuals observe leader behavior, they implicitly match their perceptions against a mental leader prototype. When a match occurs, a resonant state occurs which sustains the representation in memory and allows to classify the target as a leader and to access the appropriate behavioral response script (this is the basis of leader categorization). Furthermore, within ART, it is proposed that a vigilance parameter monitors and regulates the stringency of the matching process. The observed moderation effect across all three present studies may thus be understood within the realm of Adaptive Resonance Theory in that subordinates' self-perceptions might alter the vigilance parameter (Lord, personal communication, Dec. 3rd, 2008).

While the investigation of the specific mediation effect is in itself an exciting avenue for future research, the present set of studies also provides a basis for further moderation-based theorizing. Indeed, it seems the obvious next question to ask is when and which kinds of followers are more likely to categorize themselves as (potential) leaders. That is, building on the current analysis, we may identify moderators of leadership categorization processes by identifying variables that are predictive of self-conception in terms of leadership attributes. Chan and Drasgow (2001), for instance, identified motivation to lead as a variable that would be predictive of individuals' self-assessment of their leadership abilities. Accordingly, we may propose that motivation to lead would also moderate leadership categorization processes along the lines discussed here.

Taken from a different angle, it would also be interesting to explore when one's self-categorization as a leader most affects one's responses towards others. In this respect, future research might be able to resolve whether subordinates' self-concepts moderate leader categorization processes more strongly when the categorization of the target leader is less bound by factual evidence about the leader's quality as Catrambone and Markus (1987) would suggest it, or whether we find the interactive effect even if factual evidence is available as in Dunning and colleagues' work (Dunning & Cohen, 1992; Dunning & Hayes, 1996). In leadership research, this might be tested in different organizational contexts where performance evaluations for employees including their leaders are (vs. are not) openly available or where it is (not) apparent which leaders have successfully led projects in the past.

On a final note, while the present research was developed within the boundaries of the perception-based leader categorization paradigm, the same rationale could conceivably extend to leadership constructs such as transformational, ethical, or participative leadership. In other words, subordinates' self-conceptions (e.g., as transformational, ethical, or participative) could moderate the relationship between subordinates' perceptions of their leaders (as transformational, ethical, or participative) and their openness to such leadership. Linking such self-perceptions to leader perceptions might thus be informative as to when and why followers endorse a certain standard for leaders and stringently hold them accountable to it (beyond a main effect as outlined, for instance, in research that links personality to transformational leadership perceptions, cf. Felfe & Schyns, 2006; Schyns & Sanders, 2007).

7.2. Managerial implications

On the management side, the present findings support appeals to be conscious of the expectations subordinates hold for leaders and to select or train leaders accordingly (Engle & Lord, 1997; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Lord & Maher, 1991; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Indeed, the general leader categorization perspective can help to explain some of the difficulties both management trainees and more experienced leaders face when they enter new leadership settings, such as a new company, a new industry, or a new culture. New settings comprise new subordinates who often subscribe to somewhat different leader prototypes than what leaders were accustomed to in previous contexts. If an incoming leader has not adapted to the prototypes of the new subordinates (cf. Kenney, Blascovich, & Shaver, 1994) or the subordinates have not adapted their prototypes to the qualities of their new leader, leadership will be difficult for the new leader. Knowing about such processes, assessments of leader prototypes and leaders' representation of the same could, for instance, be surveyed as part of a 360° feedback process in organizations. In that way, organizations could not only learn more about the prevalent leader prototype in their organization as a whole, in subsidiaries in different countries, or in specific departments, but they would also have a more detailed picture when leadership conflicts arise and, as a consequence, where some leaders or subordinates might be better placed.

The present findings also suggest that the higher the (self-perceived) leadership potential of a group of employees (or a single employee), the more their openness to a leader's influence and ultimately leadership effectiveness depends on their leader's representation of the ideal leader prototype. Carefully selected high-potential candidates in an organization can thus be led most effectively if leaders are assigned to them who, in their eyes, can live up to the ideal leader prototype. While the same is principally also true for 'low (self-perceived) leadership potential' employees, our results indicate that such employees are likely to be somewhat more accepting of leaders who do not closely represent their ideal leader prototype. Framing the same issue from a development perspective, we can assume that if leaders foster their subordinates' leadership potential and awareness thereof, they should not be surprised to find that those subordinates become more sensitive to the quality of leadership they encounter (cf. Lord et al., 1999).

7.3. Limitations and outlook

Using multiple studies, we obtained a consistent picture that we were able to interpret parsimoniously across samples and methodologies in terms of our hypothesis. Although the consistent replication of the predicted moderation across three studies provides a strong basis for our conclusions, certain aspects of our findings nevertheless require further exploration in future research. We, for instance, did not focus on the relationship between participants' self and leader perceptions, neither in our theorizing nor in our study designs. Moreover, because results concerning this aspect vary across studies, we are at this point not comfortable interpreting this relationship. The same is true for the main effect of self as leader perceptions on our outcomes, which is mostly negative, albeit not significant in Study 1. While this effect seems consistent enough to explore, the pattern of the self as leader main effect is more varied in the outcomes only referred to in the footnotes. Here too, we thus felt uncomfortable interpreting the results. A final issue pertains to the quadratic effects. While Studies 2 and 3 produced some significant quadratic effects, the effects are inconsistent for the quadratic leader categorization term, and only reach significance for the self as leader term in Study 3. We think that all three aspects, the interplay of self and leader categorization at the perceptual level, the main effect of self as leader perception on outcomes, and the quadratic effects, are exciting to explore in the future. In our opinion, prospective studies could address all three issues best by holding the criterion constant (e.g., one leader who is evaluated by a number of subordinates). In that way, more variance could be explained by way of nested models and thus unpeel more layers of the interdependence that characterizes the perception and responses to leadership. Likewise, such research could survey more outcomes via which one might be able to differentiate whether the quadratic and the self as leader main effects are different with regard to more cognitive, more affective, or more behavioral responses towards leaders and their leadership.

Related to the above, we intentionally decided to stay within the inner boundaries of the leader categorization framework (Lord & Maher, 1991) by focusing on subordinates' perceptions of leadership effectiveness and their respect for their leader. While this is an appropriate model in that leadership categorization predictions first and foremost revolve around leadership perceptions and attitudes towards it, the ultimate aim in leadership research arguably lies in the prediction of actual behavior at the workplace (e.g., follower performance). By incorporating behavioral data, future research could test a more complex leader categorization model in which leadership perceptions could be conceptualized as a mediator between leader categorization and behavioral indicators of leadership effectiveness, while subordinates' self-perception as (potential) leaders could be conceptualized as a moderator in this relationship.

As a final note, we may observe that the effect size for the interactions that are central to our analysis were small. An important point to realize here is that it is a well-established problem that interaction effects are underestimated in survey research (Aguinis, 1995; McClelland & Judd, 1993). Indeed, Evans (1985) even argues that in view of the persuasive evidence for the underestimation of interaction effects, interactions with as little as 1% variance accounted for should be taken seriously. Also, we should be open to the possibility that research populations may differ in terms of where on the range of leadership self-perceptions people are (e.g., blue collar workers vs. management trainees) or how big a range they cover, and that the moderating relationship may be stronger for specific populations. One other reading of the apparently small effect sizes is that the present results speak louder to a theoretical audience than to the practical one. Indeed, while the present findings may translate into implications for practice as discussed above, in the populations studied the leadership effectiveness improvement due to adjustments according to the interaction effect above and beyond improvements that occur due to an adjustment according to the main effect is possibly only marginal. One take on the translation of the current analysis into practice thus could be to first identify populations in which effect sizes are likely to be substantially larger before investing in the application of the current insights in practice. In that sense, then, the primary contribution of the current study is to fundamental theory in leadership while its applied potential should either be considered a “fine-tuning” of organizational leadership processes or should await further developments linking it more clearly to value-added interventions.

7.4. In conclusion

Follower-centric leadership research of the first generation has shown that follower perceptions present constraints for leaders and their leadership. In order to progress down that path and further our understanding as to what kinds of follower-leader dyads promise to be effective and which ones not, the time seems ripe to explore followers' egocentricity in this process (cf. Leary & Tangney, 2005a; Lord et al., 2001; Medvedeff & Lord, 2007; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). The present work took a step into that direction.

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