JOURNAL OF APPLIED SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Second-Generation Leader Categorization Research: How Subordinates' Self- and Typical Leader Perceptions Moderate Leader Categorization Effects

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Leader categorization theory proposes that the more leaders match their subordinates' cognitive image (prototype) of an ideal leader the easier it is for subordinates to "categorize" them as leaders and consequently follow their leadership. Based on self-concept research, we extend this perspective and argue that the relationship assumed in leader categorization theory should be stronger when subordinates perceive themselves to represent the ideal leader prototype. Further, this moderating effect should be stronger when subordinates perceive the ideal leader prototype to not only be an abstract ideal category, but one that is generally also met in reality; i.e., when it is met by typical leaders. Findings of a cross-sectional study with employees in Germany ($N = 297$) support both predictions.

In order for leadership to be effective, much depends on how it is received by subordinates. Indeed, compared to followership that is enforced through coercion and force, it is subordinates' voluntary openness toward leadership that allows for lasting effectiveness (Chemers, 2001; Hollander, 1964; Yukl, 2002). To reveal what might evoke such openness toward leadership, a plethora of studies has concentrated on what makes a "good" leader in terms of personality or behaviors. Research on implicit leadership theories (ILTs), however, takes a follower-centric perspective on this issue (Lord & Maher, 1991; Schyns & Meindl, 2005; Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Here, in a process called *leader categorization*, it is argued that subordinates' openness to leadership is largely determined by subordinates' implicit comparison of actual leaders to their cognitive image of an ideal leader. The more a target person represents subordinates' ideal leader prototype, the easier it is for subordinates to recognize and categorize that someone as a

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Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 2012, **42**, 6, pp. 1293–1319.
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doi: 10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.00899.x

leader and, consequently, the more favorable subordinates' responses toward that leader will be (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005).

Yet, as Reis and Stiller (1992) noted, it is the nature of research to move on after the identification of a new phenomenon (which they referred to as *first-generation research*) toward a fuller, more detailed investigation of that phenomenon, such as identifying moderators or boundary conditions (which they referred to as *second-generation research*). In this respect, we would argue that the follower-centric perspective on leadership was such an important first-generation step in research when explaining that subordinates' perceptions of their leaders must be taken into consideration when wanting to understand leadership effectiveness. With the present study, however, we seek to illustrate that perceptions of others do not take place in isolation. They must be understood as contextually constrained.

While it has been noted in theory that subordinates' self-concepts may represent such a constraint to leader categorization processes (Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001), empirical research so far mainly focused on followers' self-concepts in terms of identities within bigger contexts; for instance, how followers' cultural identities determine the attributes that constitute their ideal leader prototypes (Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2007; Gerstner & Day, 1994; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) or how followers' levels of team identification determine the degree to which typical team attributes are sought in a leader (Hogg, Hains, & Mason, 1998; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Extending this reasoning, we argue that the influence of followers' self-concepts on leadership perceptions is not only moderated by specific group memberships, but also by more abstract self-categorization processes; and in the case of the present study, by followers' self-categorization as (potential) leaders.

To do so, we will outline how fundamental research insights on self-categorization processes in general and their consequences for judgment and evaluation processes in particular (Dijksterhuis et al., 1998; Dunning & Hayes, 1996; Markus & Wurf, 1987) can be applied to the leadership setting. Specifically, we will outline why the degree to which subordinates perceive themselves to match their ideal leader prototype should interact with their perceptions of their current leaders along the ideal leader prototype in explaining subordinates' openness to leadership, and why the degree to which subordinates perceive their ideal leader prototype to be realistic (i.e., represented by typical leaders) should additionally qualify the proposed moderation. In doing so, we tie follower-centric leadership research to sociocognitive theories on yet another level, hoping ultimately to present a fuller picture of the complexity that is involved when subordinates perceive and respond to their leaders.

Implicit Leadership Theories

Cognitive-oriented leadership research argues that people develop highly elaborate leadership knowledge structures (ILTs) throughout their lives because they are born into and brought up in groups in which leadership is usually a natural phenomenon (Eden, 1992; Lord, de Vader, & Alliger, 1986; Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). It is through these ILTs that people try to make sense of the leadership they encounter (Weick, 1995; cf. Meindl et al., 1985). Thus, while ILTs are very subjective representations of the leadership world and do not necessarily capture true relationships, they nevertheless guide people in their interpretations of and reactions to leaders and their leadership.

Part of people's ILTs are prototypical images they hold for leaders; that is, mental representations of attributes that people implicitly think characterize leaders, as opposed to nonleaders. Although these leader prototypes vary somewhat, depending on the field of leadership (Lord et al., 2001; Lord, Foti, & de Vader, 1984) and between cultures (Chhokar et al. 2007; Gerstner & Day, 1994; House et al., 2004), the argumentation of leadership researchers working with this notion is generally very similar: People use leader prototypes to implicitly benchmark their actual leaders and eventually determine their responses toward them. It is through this process of comparing leaders to a leader prototype—which is referred to as *leader categorization*—that leaders are actually perceived as leaders, and not by being appointed as such (the leader categorization process is thus also referred to as "information processing based upon recognition," Lord & Maher, 1991, p. 30; cf. Nye & Simonetta, 1996).

Today, the notion of leader categorization, although once dismissed as potential measurement error (e.g., Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Gioia & Sims, 1985; Rush, Thomas, & Lord, 1977), receives more and more attention as a direct determinant of leader–follower interactions. Epitropaki and Martin (2005), for example, showed how established constructs associated with effective leadership—such as leader–member exchange and organizational commitment—are determined by the degree to which actual leaders match their subordinates' leader prototypes. Other researchers have suggested that subordinates use their prototypical images of leaders in organizations when deciding on the appropriateness of a claim for leadership of new leaders (Kenney, Blascovich, & Shaver, 1994) or of women in leadership positions (Eagly, 2005; Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Ridgeway, 2001; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996; Scott & Brown, 2006). While a leader's similarity to a leader prototype leads to greater acceptance of his or her leadership and, consequently, greater leadership effectiveness, the same leader prototype also works against those who do not conform to it.

Self-Concept as a Moderator of Leader Categorization

To date, follower-centered research has mainly focused on followers' perceptions of others, either by investigating specific contents of subordinates' leader prototypes, or examining the consequences the categorization of someone as a leader has for subordinates' responses toward that person. Arguing from a cognitive point of view, we can assume, however, that assessing someone else's qualities automatically renders self-conceptions on the same dimension salient. If, for instance, an individual regards intelligence to be an important attribute of ideal leaders, the individual will not only think of his or her leader as representing the attribute, but simultaneously also will become aware of his or her own intelligence (Dunning & Hayes, 1996; for an in-depth explanation on cognitive spreading of activation, see Bechtel & Abrahamsen, 2002).

Dunning and Hayes (1996) were able to show that the more people's self-concepts in a particular domain were activated, the more people's assessments of other people's behavior in the same domain tended to be processed and evaluated egocentrically (using assessments of athletic practice; cf. Stapel & Tesser, 2001). In this respect, Markus and Wurf (1987) argued that a more or less chronic domain activation takes place when the contents of that domain are strongly tied to people's self-definitions; that is, when they are part of people's working self-concept (cf. Broemer & Diehl, 2004). It is in these domains that people have an easily retrievable, extensive, and well organized information background to which they can match the incoming perceptual information.

Connectionist reasoning suggests for these cases that the underlying cognitive nodes of the respective prototype are manifold, strongly affiliated, and have a comparably low threshold for activation (cf. Bechtel & Abrahamsen, 2002; Lord et al., 2001). Possibly as a consequence, research was able to confirm that people also attach more meaning to domains that are linked to their self-concepts; that is, they give more weight to self-concept-related information when judging and responding to others (Carpenter, 1988; Lewicki, 1983; Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985). Moreover, people with a strong self-concept on a certain issue tend to make more extreme and confident evaluations of others on the same (Dunning & Beauregard, 2000; Fong & Markus, 1982; Lambert & Wedell, 1991). In a way, it seems that for these individuals, judgments become subjectively more reliable, and thus a better ground on which to base one's response.

Adapted to the leadership context, we can assume that incoming information about leaders can be evaluated more quickly, precisely, and extensively by individuals with a strong self-concept as leaders. Also, for these individuals, evaluating someone else along the leader prototype becomes

more reliable, and thus a better ground on which to base one's responses toward leaders. Broadly, we may state that the more central a certain domain is to one's identity, the more central that domain also is for judging and responding to the social world. Specifically, applied to the process of leader categorization, we can thus propose that the established relationship between leader categorization and openness toward a leader's leadership is moderated by the degree to which subordinates perceive attributes of an ideal leader prototype in themselves (cf. Van Quaquebeke, van Knippenberg, & Brodbeck, 2011).

With regard to the outcome in which we are interested—that is, openness to leadership—we will focus on two variables in particular: (a) participants' respect for their leaders; and (b) their personal identification with their leaders. While subordinates' respect for leaders entails a conscious decision to trust and go along with the leadership (cf. Dillon, 2003; Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996; Van Quaquebeke, Henrich, & Eckloff, 2007), their identification with leaders involves a more unconscious openness to leadership because of a sense of unity (Kelman, 1958; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). Both are concrete proxies of the more abstract notion of subordinates' openness to leadership. In summary, we propose the following:

> *Hypothesis 1*. The relationship between the degree to which subordinates perceive their leader to represent the ideal leader prototype and subordinates' openness toward that leader's leadership (as captured in subordinates' respect for and personal identification with that leader) is stronger, the more subordinates will believe that they represent the ideal leader prototype themselves.

As can be gathered from the preceding discussion, capturing the degree to which people perceive the ideal leader prototype as part of their self-concept is central to our investigation. People's indication of how far they are representative of the ideal leader prototype, however, does not tell the whole story of how deeply the category is rooted in their self-concept. More precisely, works in the field of self-categorization have found that people find it easier to integrate more proximal constructs into their self-conception, compared to distal ones (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000), presumably because of the increased salience or "psychological reality" of more concrete and proximal entities.

Dijksterhuis and van Knippenberg (1998), for example, showed that exclusive idealized exemplars (e.g., Albert Einstein) evoke contrasting reac-

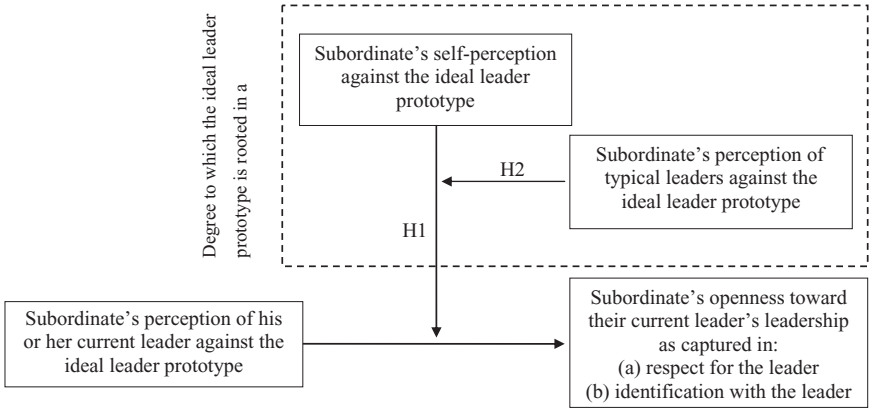


Figure 1. Hypothesized relationships.

tions in participants, but stereotypical idealized groups (e.g., professors) make it easier for participants to assimilate the underlying group characteristics (e.g., intelligence). Adapted to the leadership context, these findings imply that the ideal leader prototype will be more deeply rooted in subordinates' self-concept (and thus function more strongly as a moderator) when subordinates do not only believe that they themselves represent aspects of the ideal leader prototype, but when they also perceive that the ideal leader prototype is not an abstract or exclusive ideal, but an ideal that is found to be a general (stereotypical) reality; that is, when subordinates perceive leaders in general to be representative of the ideal leader category. In other words, we predict subordinates' self-perceptions as (potentially) ideal leaders to have a stronger moderating effect on the leader categorization relationship when subordinates perceive typical leaders to be representative of the ideal leader prototype, as opposed to when subordinates do not perceive typical leaders to represent the ideal leader prototype (a three-way interaction, as depicted in Figure 1). Thus, we propose the following:

> *Hypothesis 2*. The more subordinates believe that the ideal leader prototype is generally resembled by typical leaders, the stronger will be the moderating effect of subordinates' self-perceptions as (potential) leaders on the relationship between the degree to which subordinates' perceive their leader to represent the ideal leader prototype and subordinates' openness toward that leader's leadership (as stated in Hypothesis 1).

Method

Procedure

To obtain a fairly large workforce sample, we set up the study as an online survey. When designing the study, we followed experts' recommendations (Birnbaum, 2004; Kraut et al., 2004). First, by utilizing server-sided survey programming, we avoided common technical selection biases, which tend to exclude people who do not meet special browser requirements (e.g., Java Script). Second, a cookie session ID was assigned to each participant, which made it almost impossible for technically inexperienced users to participate in the survey again. Additionally, we included filter questions; for example, to determine whether or not people currently have a leader. If not, they were asked to apply all subsequent questions either to their last experienced leader or to an analogous leader figure in their lives (e.g., teacher, coach). This strategy was employed to keep people from feeling left out by the questions and re-entering the questionnaire with false self-reports. However, respondents without a current organizational leader were excluded from further analysis.

To increase response rates, lower dropout rates, and prevent a strong self-selection bias, we provided different motivators, such as feedback and a lottery for online bookshop gift vouchers (participants could sign up for both via a different database so that data entries and e-mails could not be matched). Furthermore, the participants were able to decide after completion of the questionnaire whether they wanted to have their data analyzed for scientific purposes or if they would prefer to be deleted from the data pool. Finally, we tested the survey in our labs on different browsers and different screen resolutions to ensure that the survey would look and behave the same way on most computers.

When recruiting participants, we followed a multi-site, multi-entry strategy to prevent strong sampling biases; that is, participants were recruited via various German news websites from diverse backgrounds (e.g., focus.de, hamburg.de, gmx.de), while the entry type was either a banner, a teaser text box, or a short article. With all measures taken to prevent common shortcomings of online research, we are confident that this sample is of a quality that allows us to have faith in the data, at least to an extent to which we would have it for traditional paper-and-pencil studies.

Participants

In total, 297 participants (128 women, 169 men) completed the survey and met the aforementioned requirements. The mean age of the sample was 34.9

years ($SD = 9.4$). The mean length of lifetime employment was 14.2 years ($SD = 9.8$), with an average of 5.6 personally experienced leaders ($SD = 3.1$), of whom 21% were female. Employees with higher education constituted approximately 45% of the sample. A little over one third of all participants had completed vocational training.

Measures

Predictor variables. As leader prototype instruments usually encompass a great deal of leader attributes and, for our case, would have to be surveyed three times (i.e., match of the prototype by participant's current leader, participant himself/herself as leader, and typical leaders), we prefer to employ a shorter instrument that still leaves room for a complex image of the ideal leader prototype. We thus opted for a Venn-diagram measure. Previous studies have shown that this sort of leader categorization measurement (adapted from Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Shamir & Kark, 2004) is convergent-valid with more extensive ones, such as the Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE) ILT scale ($r = .73$, $p < .01$; Van Quaquebeke & Brodbeck, 2008). For our purposes, three separate items asked participants to indicate the degree to which (a) their current leaders; (b) they themselves as potential leaders; and (c) typical leaders in Germany would represent their picture of an ideal leader (see Figure 2). The response scale was constructed as two circles that start apart from each other and then come closer to each other in seven steps, completely overlapping in the final step.

A general advantage of these pictograms is that they manage to assess the basic concept of matching rather intuitively, instead of having to provide long lists of specific leader attributes. In addition, by using pictorial measures as predictors and verbal measures as criteria, we followed a recommendation on how to avoid common item variance in cross-sectional questionnaire studies (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Control variables. To be able to confront potential criticism that an effect of self as leader perceptions might be a result of different levels of self-esteem (Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990; Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993), we assessed self-esteem via the Rosenberg (1989) scale. Moreover, as we also wanted to be able to exclude participants' own current or past experiences as leaders themselves as another alternative explanation, we assessed both by asking if they currently hold or ever held a leadership position.

Dependent variables. We included two dependent variables to represent participants' openness toward their leaders' influence: (a) participants' respect for their leaders; and (b) participants' personal identification with their leaders. The distinctness and psychometric quality of both scales were

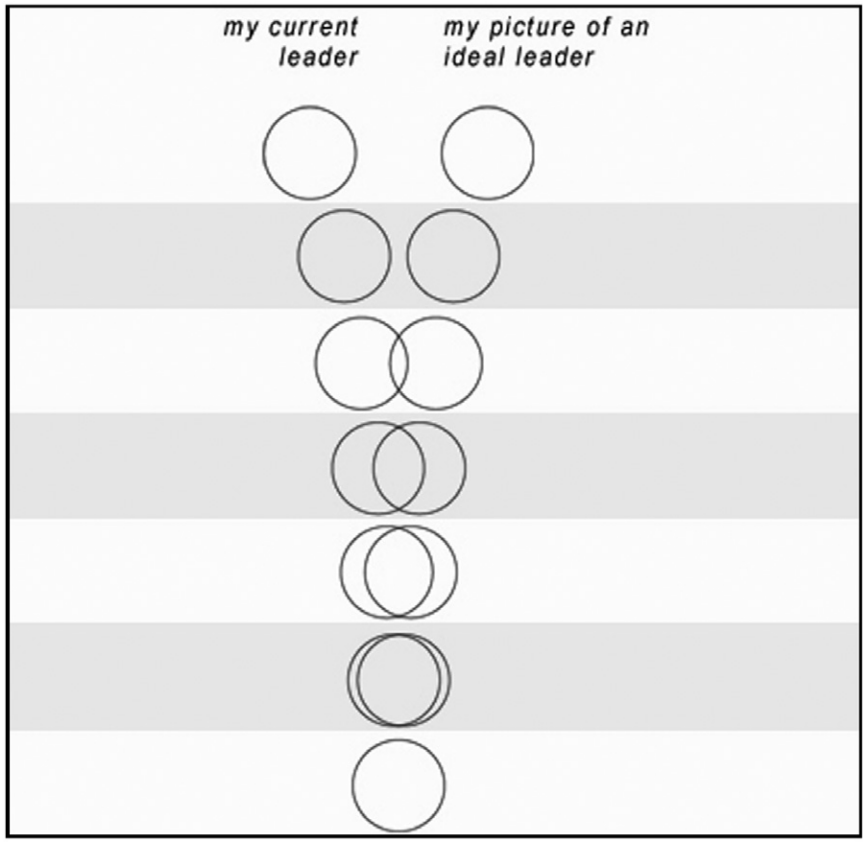


Figure 2. Venn diagram to measure the degree to which a participant's current leader represents the participant's picture of an ideal leader.

examined in a previous study with 103 employees (Graf & Van Quaquebeke, 2007). In that study, both scales proved to be highly reliable and converged in two separate constructs in a principal components analysis with varimax rotation. The scales intercorrelated only moderately ($r = .36$, $p < .001$).

The Respect for Leader Scale initially stemmed from a content analysis of qualitative interviews with employees about their experiences with respected and nonrespected leaders of which the results were later standardized in a questionnaire. Subordinates' respect for their leaders was assessed with six items (see Eckloff & Van Quaquebeke, 2008; Van Quaquebeke & Brodbeck, 2008; Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010) that reflect the extent to which subordinates voluntarily accept and seek their leaders' leadership. Agreement

with each item was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). The items were as follows: "For me, my leader represents a positive role model at the workplace," "I trust the judgment of my leader in work issues," "In a lot of matters concerning work, I gladly seek advice from my leader," "At work, I enjoy being able to learn from my leader," "Due to the influence of my leader, I feel very constricted in my professional development" (reverse-coded), and "I owe respect to the way my leader accomplishes his/her professional functions."

Subordinates' identification with leader was measured with Mael and Ashforth's (1992) six-item Organizational Identification Questionnaire, which was adapted to the current leader as the target focus of identification (cf. van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000). Items were rephrased, such as "When someone criticizes my leader, it feels like a personal insult," or "When I talk about my leader, I usually say 'we' rather than 'he/she'."

Results

Table 1 presents the scale characteristics and intercorrelations of the variables that were used in the present study. In line with previous research, we found a significant positive relationship between the degree to which subordinates perceive their current leaders to match their ideal leader prototype and subordinates' indications of respect for the leader ($r = .69$, $p < .001$) and personal identification with the leader ($r = .37$, $p < .001$).

Moreover, and central for Hypothesis 1, the two-way interaction block in the regression analyses depicted in Table 2 shows that participants' perceptions of own leadership qualities moderated the basic leader categorization relationship on both criteria (predictor variables were *z*-standardized prior to analyses; cf. Aiken & West, 1991). As the simple slopes at ± 1 *SD* of the moderator mean in Table 3 indicate, subordinates believed to resemble the ideal leader prototype themselves showed a stronger relationship between the degree to which they categorized their current leader along the ideal leader prototype, and their openness toward that leader's leadership, as indicated by respect for and identification with their leader, compared to subordinates who did not self-categorize as leaders. Thus, Hypothesis 1, which predicted that the relationship between leader categorization and openness to leadership would be stronger when subordinates self-categorize as leaders, is supported.

In addition, the three-way interaction block in the regression analyses depicted in Table 2 yielded evidence for the moderation predicted in Hypothesis 2. Considering the generally low power for tests of interaction in survey

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Current own leadership experience	1.38	0.49	—							
2. Past own leadership experience	1.49	0.50	.33***	—						
3. Self-esteem	4.09	0.65	−.01	.18**	(.87)					
4. Current leader	3.44	1.69	.03	−.06	.13*	—				
5. Self as leader	3.99	1.23	.06	.12*	.20***	.18**	—			
6. Typical leaders	2.93	1.06	−.03	−.04	.01	.07	.05	—		
7. Respect for leader	3.09	1.09	−.05	−.06	.11	.69***	.04	−.01	(.92)	
8. Identification with leader	2.25	0.83	.09	.01	.13*	.37***	.09	.02	.49***	(.81)

Note. $N = 297$. Cronbach's alphas appear on the diagonal. Items 1 and 2: 1 = *No*; 2 = *Yes*. Items 4, 8, and 9 were rated on 5-point scales ranging from 1 to 5. Items 5, 6, and 7 were measured via Venn diagrams ranging from 1 to 7.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2

Multiple Regression Analysis of Two Dependent Variables Onto Current Leader, Self as Leader, and Typical Leaders

	Respect for leader						Identification with leader					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2		
	b	*SE b*	β	*B*	*SE b*	β	*b*	*SE b*	β	*b*	*SE b*	β
Controls												
Self-esteem				0.21	0.10	.13*				0.18	0.07	.14*
Current own leadership experience				–0.05	0.14	–.02				0.20	0.11	.11†
Past own leadership experience				–0.17	0.14	–.08				–0.10	0.10	–.06
ΔR^2					.02						.03	
F_{change}					1.99						2.87*	
1st block: Main effects												
Current leader	0.77	0.05	.71***	0.77	0.05	.70***	0.30	0.05	.36***	0.29	0.05	.35***
Self as leader	–0.10	0.05	–.09*	–0.10	0.05	–.09*	0.02	0.05	.03	0.01	0.05	.01
Typical leaders	–0.07	0.05	–.06	–0.07	0.05	–.06	–0.01	0.05	–.01	0.00	0.05	.00
ΔR^2		0.48			.47			.13			.12	
F_{change}		90.54***			88.00***			15.14***			13.56***	

2nd block: two-way interactions												
Current Leader × Self as Leader	0.09	0.04	.10*	0.09	0.04	.10*	0.10	0.04	.14**	0.11	0.04	.15**
Current Leader × Typical Leaders	0.10	0.04	.10*	0.09	0.04	.09*	0.02	0.04	.03	0.02	0.04	.02
Self as Leader × Typical Leaders	–0.01	0.04	–.02	–0.01	0.04	–.01	0.04	0.04	.06	0.04	0.04	.06
ΔR^2		.02			.02			.03			.03	
F_{change}		3.66*			3.52*			3.21*			3.32*	
3rd block: three-way interaction												
Current Leader × Self as Leader × Typical Leaders	0.05	0.03	.08†	0.06	0.03	.08†	0.07	0.03	.13*	0.06	0.03	.12*
ΔR^2		.01			.01			.01			.01	
F_{change}		2.99†			3.29†			4.63*			4.36*	
R^2		.51			.51			.18			.18	
Adjusted R^2		.49			.49			.16			.16	

Note. $N = 297$. Predictors were z-standardized prior to analysis.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 3

Simple Slopes for Respect for Leader and Personal Identification With Leader at ±1 Standard Deviation of the Mean

	Respect for leader		Identification with leader	
Simple slopes for	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Hypothesis 1				
Self as $\text{Leader}_{\text{low}}$	0.66***	0.06	0.18**	0.06
Self as $\text{Leader}_{\text{high}}$	0.85***	0.06	0.40***	0.06
Hypothesis 2				
Typical $\text{Leader}_{\text{low}}$, Self as $\text{Leader}_{\text{low}}$	0.63***	0.08	0.23**	0.08
Typical $\text{Leader}_{\text{low}}$, Self as $\text{Leader}_{\text{high}}$	0.69***	0.08	0.30***	0.08
Typical $\text{Leader}_{\text{high}}$, Self as $\text{Leader}_{\text{low}}$	0.71***	0.08	0.14†	0.08
Typical $\text{Leader}_{\text{high}}$, Self as $\text{Leader}_{\text{high}}$	0.98***	0.07	0.47***	0.07

Note. $N = 297$. cf. Aiken and West (1991).
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

research (McClelland & Judd, 1993), the expected low effect size, our two-sided testing, and the significant three-way interaction for identification at the .05 level, the findings at the .10 level for respect for the leader probably point to a weaker effect, rather than the absence of it.

We thus proceeded to probe both three-way interactions using a test to detect slope differences in three-way interactions involving continuous data (Dawson & Richter, 2006). Comparable to ANOVAs with more than two levels of an independent variable where planned contrast analyses are rendered necessary to interpret the results because an omnibus *F* test gives no information as to which means are significantly different from which other means, such probing of three-way interactions of slopes is used to identify whether an interaction, in fact, really shows between the a priori hypothesized combinations of moderators. For that, first all four simple slopes at ±1 *SD* of both moderator means are calculated (see Table 3), which, in the case of the present three-way interaction, are later tested against each other in the hypothesized slope differences conditions (for more information, see Dawson & Richter, 2006).

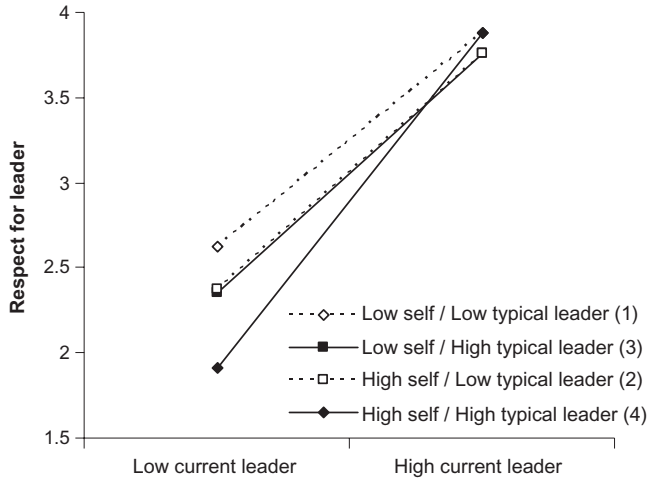


Figure 3. Self as leader as a moderator of the relationship between current leader and respect for leader in the condition of low and high typical leaders.

In the present case, the probing of slope differences confirms that the interaction shows in a difference between the slopes in the condition of high typical leader perceptions (low self vs. high self as leader perceptions: Slope 3 vs. 4)—for respect, $t(289) = 2.86$, $p < 01$; for identification, $t(289) = 3.34$, $p < .001$—but not in the condition of low typical leader perceptions (low self vs. high self as leader perceptions: Slope 1 vs. 2)—for respect, $t(289) = 0.65$, $p = .52$; for identification, $t(289) = 0.66$, $p = .51$. A similar conclusion can be deduced from Figures 3 and 4, in that the two solid slopes expectedly indicate an interaction, while the two dotted slopes are largely parallel or, at least, indicate a weaker interaction (albeit, based on the slope differences test, not statistically significant).[2] Regression analyses, simple slopes analyses, slope differences tests, and the figures thus support the notion of Hypothesis 2 that the two-way interaction between leader categorization and subordinates' self-as-leader categorization as stated in Hypothesis 1 was further qualified by subordinates' perceptions of whether the ideal leader prototype could also be met by typical leaders.

Notably, the second Models in Table 1 also show the same regression analyses when controlling for potential alternative explanations. However,

[2]Note that a similar significant pattern for the two-way interaction (Hypothesis 1) and the three-way interaction (Hypothesis 2) can be found within the same sample when we use affective commitment toward the leader (Meyer & Allen, 1997) as the outcome variable. The results are not reported here because of high conceptual overlap of the affective commitment and the identification construct, but are available from the first author upon request.

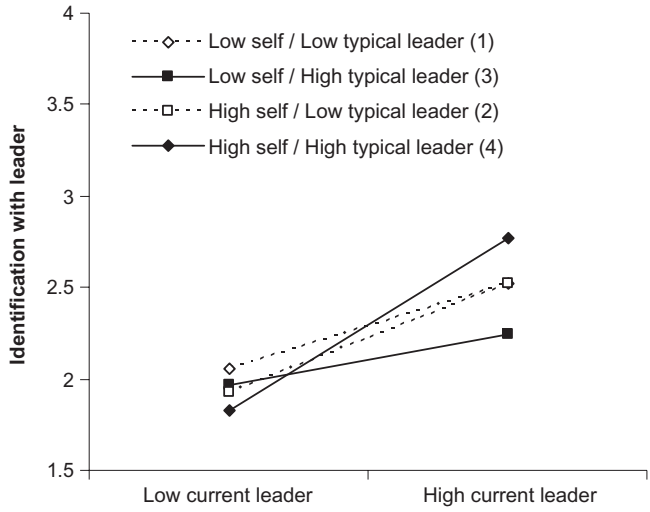


Figure 4. Self as leader as a moderator of the relationship between current leader and identification with leader in the condition of low and high typical leaders.

the significances of the interactions and the pattern of the interaction do not change when these controls are included. Beyond these analyses, we also conducted regression analyses in which we exchanged subordinates' self-perceptions as potential leaders completely (including the moderation term) with these alternative variables and then tested the same regression models. However, again, none of these models was able to reproduce the interactions.[3] We are thus confident that we can rule out subordinates' self-esteem, their past, and their present leadership experience as alternative explanations for our findings.

Discussion

Follower-centered approaches to leadership (Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl, 1995) argue that subordinates' cognitions, particularly leader prototypes, play an important role for subordinates' responses to leaders. Research correspondingly has shown that the degree to which subordinates perceive their leaders to match their ideal leader prototype determines the degree to which they will follow their leadership (e.g., Epitropaki & Martin, 2005).

[3]Because of space concerns, these extended analyses are not reported here, but are available from the first author upon request.

However, with the present study, we sought to illustrate that the relationship between subordinates' evaluations of and their responses to leaders should not be investigated in isolation. Evaluations are cognitions and, as such, always underlie contextual constraints (Bechtel & Abrahamsen, 2002; Lord et al., 2001). Specifically, we pointed out and confirmed that subordinates' self-conceptions as leaders form such a constraint.

Given that we did not hypothesize that taking perceivers' self-concept into account substantially reverses the leader categorization process—but, rather, that it only accentuates it—the obtained ΔR^2s for the interactions are, unsurprisingly, relatively small. In light of such a small effect size, it is noteworthy that we could confirm both interactions in our data, even though cross-sectional field research has comparatively little power to detect interactions (McClelland & Judd, 1993; also see Dawson & Richter, 2006). Moreover, in the present case, we replicated the proposed three-way interaction with the same pattern across two dependent variables. Given that Cohen and colleagues (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) noted that three-way interactions are difficult to replicate, these results are thus encouraging regarding their validity.

Noteworthy in a different respect is that we were able to exclude alternative explanations for the interaction. Neither subordinates' actual nor previous leadership positions, nor their levels of self-esteem had a moderating effect on the basic leader categorization relationship, nor were our results greatly affected when controlling for these constructs. Our findings thus seem to be driven by subordinates' self-concept as leaders, rather than by other constructs that indicate a general heightened feeling of self-worth or actual experience in the leadership domain.

Theoretical Implications and Limitations

While it has been noted that subordinates' self-concept may play a moderating role in leader categorization processes (Lord et al., 2001), empirical research so far has focused mainly on the effects of followers' self-concept in terms of cultural identities (Chhokar et al., 2007; Gerstner & Day, 1994; House et al., 2004) or team identities (Hogg et al., 1998; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). With the present study, we extend this line of research by demonstrating that the influence of people's self-concept on leader categorization processes is also tied to more abstract self-categorization processes, such as seeing oneself as part of the category of *leaders*. In doing so, we parallel a development in social psychology where researchers began to conceptualize people's self-concept as a result of category membership, rather than concrete group membership (cf. self-categorization theory; Turner, 1985).

Specifically, the present empirical evidence not only confirmed that the relationship between leader categorization and openness to leadership was stronger the more subordinates perceived themselves to possess the qualities of an ideal leader, but also that this moderation was stronger when the underlying ideal leader category was seen to be realistic; that is, when typical leaders were seen to match it. By integrating the realness of the ideal leader prototype as an additional determinant in our model (see Figure 1), we thus corroborated further self-categorization reasoning, which says that it is easier for people to include proximate constructs in their self-concept, rather than more distal or abstract ones (cf. Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Dijksterhuis et al., 1998; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000). Based on fundamental self-concept (Markus et al., 1985; Markus & Wurf, 1987) and connectionist research (Bechtel & Abrahamsen, 2002; Lord et al., 2001), and unifying the insights gathered from the present study and those from leader categorization studies in teams and cultures, one could thus state the following: The more central a certain category becomes to people's identity, the more central it also is when people evaluate and respond to the world.

While the aforementioned rationale highlights the accessibility and activation of certain cognitive concepts as the specific mediating process (as extensively laid out in our theoretical introduction), further speculations on the mediation might also stem from a sense-making perspective (Weick, 1995). Indeed, given the complete slope patterns, one can also argue that it is the consistency of categorizations of self and typical leaders along the ideal leader prototype that renders the ideal leader prototype a clear standard to make sense of organizational leadership and on which to base one's openness toward leadership. However, as soon as there are inconsistencies in that either oneself, typical leaders, or both are not perceived to correspond with the ideal leader prototype, the prototype becomes a less clear sense-making structure, and thus also less of a determinant of people's openness toward their leaders' leadership.

Since our results map squarely onto previous research in the leader categorization field and that of related disciplines, we are at this point confident that people's self-concept interacts with the leader categorization process. However, as surveys like ours always force participants to think about issues, even if these might not come up in real life, a logical extension of our research would now lie in exploration of situational determinants that make people aware of their leader prototypes in general and their self-perceptions on these in particular (cf. Lord et al., 2001).

Following the reasoning of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Mussweiler, 2003), we would, for example, assume that the more similar subordinates perceive themselves to typical leaders in general (e.g., in terms of gender, age, background), the more accessible or salient the leader proto-

type should become. The same might also be true on a dyadic level: The more similar subordinates perceive themselves to their actual leaders, the more likely they should be to elaborate their subjectively held leadership concept. Generally, it might also be the case that working in an environment with high power distances or encountering someone with high institutionalized power (e.g., a CEO) increases the likelihood of leader prototype activation, whereas the leader prototype might not be activated as strongly when interacting in a flat hierarchy environment or encountering informal leaders in work group settings. Altogether, the salience of leader prototypes seems to be a valuable extension, if not a whole new field to explore in leadership research.

In a related vein, it also seems interesting to explore the antecedents of why certain individuals—independent of their hierarchical position in an organization—tend to perceive themselves as leaders, while others tend not to do so. In terms of dispositions, it might be that individuals with a strong motivation for power (McClelland, 1975) or a strong motivation to lead others (Chan & Drasgow, 2001) more readily entertain thoughts about themselves as leaders. Likewise, in terms of personal values, it might be that individuals who score highly on the self-enhancement quadrant within Schwartz's (1992) value circumplex model find it easier to picture themselves as leaders because of their values of achievement, power, and hedonism. Finally, and related to the previous discussion, one might also suspect that individuals who perceive their own values to match those of their current leader (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005) or of an ideal leader figure (Van Quaquebeke, Kerschreiter, Buxton, & van Dick, 2010) more readily play with the idea that they, too, could be leaders (cf. Rus, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010).

Yet, despite the many implications and perspectives the current study holds for future follower-centered leadership research, it is also not without its limitations. For example, even though we recruited our participants via a multi-site, multi-entry strategy—thus avoiding potential biases that might arise when only surveying a specific subpopulation—future studies seem well advised to gather URL referrer data in the results data itself; that is, website addresses from where each respondent originated. Unfortunately, in the present case, we were not able to tell where all of our respondents originated, which thus reduced the scope of our interpretation. Indeed, should referrer data be surveyed, studies could potentially strengthen their case by being able to control for different referrer subsamples (much the same as researchers might do in a multi-organization study). Moreover, even if such an approach might not corroborate the stability of the effect across samples, it will reveal what kind of subpopulation might respond differently (e.g., pop-culture-related websites, news, tech, finance), which should allow for more differentiated explorations in the future.

Another issue pertains to the source of the data. While self-reports were reasonable to use in order to measure participants' openness to leadership, it would yield important further evidence for our analyses when our hypotheses could also be confirmed with external criteria, such as observations on how much of a leader's influence is put into practice by subordinates. Such research could also address potential concerns about common source variance (cf. Podsakoff et al., 2003). Although common source variance was not an issue for our proposed moderation hypotheses (indeed, it even works against detecting moderation effects; cf. McClelland & Judd, 1993), it nevertheless appears valuable to survey such measures, as those could substantiate the basic (main effect) leader categorization rationale.

In addition, the relationship of participants' self- and leader perceptions seems to require further elaboration. While our study showed a positive relationship (see Table 1), previous work (Dunning & Hayes, 1996) would suggest a negative relationship; that is, the better subordinates rate themselves, the worse they should rate their leaders. While our study was not designed specifically to test this perceptual relationship (i.e., we do not have a fixed criterion, such as one leader who is evaluated by a number of his or her employees), we think that it would be worthwhile to investigate this issue in future studies, and thus reveal more of the interdependence that already takes place at the perceptual level. Also, future studies may survey the predictors via an extensive list of leader attributes (e.g., House et al., 2004; Lord et al., 1984; Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994) and let participants rate the degree to which they themselves, their current leaders, and typical leaders would match these attributes. As our measure showed convergent validity with more extensive measurements of leader categorization in previous research, we would expect similar overall results. However, such studies might be able to address if there are specific leadership dimensions or factors on which the interaction effect would show more strongly than on others.

Managerial Implications

Building directly on the results of the present study, if leaders do not perform well in their teams, it might be that their subordinates are not open to their leadership. While previous research has repeatedly argued that not matching subordinates' ideal leader prototypes might be one cause (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Lord & Maher, 1991), our findings suggest that an additional cause might lie in the fact that some subordinates simply emphasize the ideal leader prototype more than do others because they

consider themselves to possess ideal leader qualities. In both cases, we would suggest following Lord and Maher's reasoning, which argued that leaders should be (made) aware of the leader prototypes that they will have to live up to in their designated teams because it will be easier for them to actually lead when they match their team members' ideal leader prototype.

In the end, it comes down to the fact that (especially high-potential) subordinates must be able to recognize the features of an ideal leader prototype in their leaders. Leaders—particularly for top-talent teams—should thus either be selected to fit their team members' leader prototype or trained accordingly. This perspective might even be translated to 360° feedback systems that let human resources departments monitor if leaders are perceived to match their subordinates' ideal leader prototype and if they require training in specific aspects (this, however, would require a more detailed list of leader attributes, as opposed to the overall measure we used in the present study). Alternatively, leaders may also focus on their impression-management skills and use their self-monitoring abilities to at least try to convey a desired leader prototype (cf. Foti & Hauenstein, 2007).

However, the present results show that subordinates who do not consider themselves potential leaders do not use the ideal leader prototype as an equally definite benchmark as do top-talent subordinates. Thus, a question remaining to be answered by future studies is whether subordinates without self-perceived leader potential generally care less about benchmarking their leaders' quality or whether they just use a different benchmark that is potentially unrelated to work (e.g., "Is the leader a good father?"; "Is the leader a good athlete?"; "Does the leader have the right social background?").

Important for all managerial implications connected to the follower-centric approach, yet often omitted in the literature, it should be recognized that organizations may and should sometimes intentionally decide to recruit leaders and employees against a prevalent organizational leader prototype; for instance, if a new kind of leadership is desired. In doing so, they will sacrifice short-term leadership effectiveness, but might gain considerably more in the long term by changing the corporate leader prototype, instead of holding on to an established, but potentially destructive leader prototype.

While we have begun to understand that cognitions play a major role in people's responses to their leaders, their full depth is yet to be discovered, in many respects. This study should only be considered the prelude to an even stronger sociocognitive-oriented research agenda on leadership issues: research of the second generation (Reis & Stiller, 1992) that reveals mechanisms, constraints, and boundary conditions in the form of mediator and moderator analyses.

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