

Influence of Implicit Followership Theories on Follower Performance

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Abstract

IFTs are defined as individuals' personal conceptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers (Sy, 2010). Consequences of prototypic implicit followership theories (IFTs), an emerging sub-branch of leadership theory and research, were investigated in 120 leader-follower dyads. Leaders' IFTs (LIFTs) positively related to follower relationship quality and performance. As the first to examine the relationship between LIFTs and performance outcomes, this study extends our knowledge of the nomological network of IFTs and determinants of follower outcomes by identifying LIFTs as potential antecedents, thus addressing calls to examine leader cognitions (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009).

Introduction

Implicit followership theories (IFTs) are burgeoning as a sub-branch of leadership research, with conceptual and empirical research investigations (Sy, 2010). IFTs are complementary constructs of implicit leadership theories, which for more than 30 years has demonstrated that individuals have conceptions about the personal attributes of leaders, and that these conceptions have significant implications for leadership processes (Lord & Maher, 1991; Sy et al., 2010). Individuals are just as likely to have conceptions about the personal attributes of followers given the salient role of followers in organizational settings. Indeed, research provides evidence for IFTs, along with their content and factor structure. Sy (2010) conducted five studies involving 1362 participants to identify the content and structure of IFTs and found that IFTs consist of both prototypic and antiprototypic dimensions. For example, IFTs consist of the prototypic dimensions of Good Citizen (i.e., loyal, team player, reliable), Enthusiasm (i.e., excited, outgoing, happy), and Industry (i.e., hardworking, productive, goes above and beyond). These prototypic dimensions were validated with both leader and follower samples, and largely corroborated by independent research (e.g., team player, positive attitude, and taking ownership) (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, & Patera, 2010).

The focus of the current research is on the consequences of IFTs. Researchers have proposed that IFTs have implications for organizational outcomes because IFTs may shape how individuals judge and respond to followers (Lord & Maher, 1993; Sy, 2010). To date, only one study (Sy, 2010) has examined the relationship between IFTs and organizational outcomes. Results demonstrated that IFTs are related to interpersonal outcomes for leaders and followers (e.g., trust, liking, job satisfaction, and relationship quality). As an emerging sub-branch of leadership research, it is important to investigate further the theoretical relevance and utility of IFTs. As such, the goal of the present research was to examine the relationship of leaders' IFTs (LIFTs) with follower performance. Because followers also possess IFTs (Carsten et al., 2010;

Sy, 2010), a second goal of this research is to examine the relationship between followers' IFTs (FIFTs) with follower performance. Follower performance is the focus of the current research because it is centrally important constructs in the leadership literature. Moreover, the focus in the current research is on positive IFTs (i.e., an effective follower prototype comprising of the dimensions of Industry, Enthusiasm, and Good Citizen)(Sy, 2010) so as to generate insights that facilitate the development of positive interventions that enhance organizational functioning, in contrast to the tradition of focusing on the remediation of dysfunctional dynamics (Dutton, Quinn, & Cameron, 2003).

This is the first study to examine the relationship between LIFTs and performance outcomes. In doing so, this study extends our knowledge of the nomological network of IFTs and determinants of follower outcomes by identifying LIFTs as potential antecedents, thus addressing calls to examine leader cognitions (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). That is, this study addresses a major gap in the leadership literature on how leaders and followers "perceive, decide, behave, and take action" (Avolio et al., 2009). Findings from this research generate new insights in our understanding of IFTs, and imply practical advice on how to design effective interventions to improve relationship quality and follower performance.

Overview of IFTs

IFTs are defined as individuals' personal conceptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers (Sy, 2010). IFTs serve the function of "sensemaking" from which individuals interpret, understand, and respond to followers. Individuals form IFTs at an early age via socialization, which are further refined based on individuals ongoing experiences with followers (Lord & Maher, 1993). Over time, individuals may internalize and endorse certain IFTs that may predispose them to judge and respond to followers in a consistent manner (Lord & Maher, 1993; Sy, 2010). Ample research has shown that individuals automatically utilize those cognitive structures that are most easily accessed in the course of perceiving and making judgments of others (e.g., Brewer, 1988; Chen & Bargh, 1997). Thus, in organizational contexts where followers (and leaders) are highly salient cues, IFTs likely operate spontaneously and automatically to shape how individuals judge and respond to followers (van Gils, van Quaquebeke, & van Knippenberg, 2010). Indeed, research suggests that leaders' management style (e.g., Goodwin, Wofford, & Boyd, 2000) may be a function of IFTs (Sy, 2010).

IFTs as Antecedents of Follower Outcomes

Leaders over time may internalize differential IFTs that shape their behaviors and treatment of followers. This association between IFTs and corresponding behaviors can be explained by the perception-behavior linkage (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Chen & Bargh, 1997), that perception or the activation of a perceptual representation (i.e., IFTs) increases the tendency to behave in a manner consistent with that cognition. Thus, leaders who are predisposed to conceive of followers favorably (i.e., prototypic dimensions of IFTs are chronically accessible) are inclined to treat followers favorably.

The notion that perceptions lead to corresponding behaviors is well established (e.g., Bargh et al., 1996; Chartrand, Maddux, & Lakin, 2005). Moreover, considerable evidence has been accumulated to show that perceptions determine, to a great extent, the social interaction between dyadic partners. Research has found a strong link between perceptions and behaviors

because just as cognitive concepts are represented mentally, so are social behavioral responses, and one is likely to activate the other via spread activation (Dijksterhuis & van Knippenberg, 1998). To the extent that perceptions and behaviors are activated frequently and consistently over time, the perception-behavior link develops a strong association, such that the representation of that behavioral response eventually should be automatized (i.e., chronically accessible) and triggered in the mere presence of relevant stimuli (Bargh et al., 1996). On the basis of this logic, individuals' behaviors as a function of their IFTs may be automatically triggered without much conscious thought in the presence of followers or in leader-follower relevant contexts (Bargh et al., 1996).

IFTs as Self-Fulfilling Prophecy for Follower Outcomes

It has been demonstrated that the perception-behavior link leads to self-fulfilling prophecies (Chen & Bargh, 1997). While evidence of Pygmalion effects are well established (McNatt, 2000), researchers have not fully explicated its theoretical underpinnings. Prominent theoretical perspectives (e.g., Eden, 1990; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968) propose that the Pygmalion process begins with perceivers' expectancies for target individuals or groups. As predicted by the perception-behavior link, perceivers then behave toward targets in ways that are consistent with the expectancies. Subsequently, perceivers' expectations and behaviors elicit corresponding behaviors in targets. For example, research has found that perceivers, who expect targets to be hostile, treat them in a hostile manner, and in return, targets respond with hostility to perceivers' hostile behaviors (Chen & Bargh, 1997). The same processes have been demonstrated in the leadership literature. For example, leaders (perceivers) who expect followers (targets) to be high performers treat followers accordingly, and in return, followers' performance is raised (Eden, 1990).

Because classic Pygmalion research begins with experimentally manipulated perceiver expectations (as the independent variable), their antecedents represent a key theoretical gap. LIFTs have been suggested as key antecedents for Pygmalion effects (Eden, 1990; Sy, 2010). Consistent with the perception-behavior model, research has demonstrated that perceptual representations (such as LIFTs) are the source of performance expectancies (for a summary, see Chartrand et al., 2005; Chen & Bargh, 1997) that then influence leaders to treat (behaviors) followers in consistent ways. Thus, because expectancies are derived from IFTs (Whiteley, Sy, Johnson, in press), IFTs afford naturalistic examinations of Pygmalion effects in real world contexts (D. Eden, personal communication, August 8, 2010; R. Rosenthal, personal communication, May 14, 2009).

LIFTs and Follower Outcomes

Pygmalion research has found a reliable impact of leaders' performance expectations on followers' performance (Eden, 1990; McNatt, 2000). Perceptual representations, such as LIFTs, may bias *what* leaders perceive in the environment and *how* they perceive (Sy, 2010). In other words, LIFTs represent (colored) lenses through which followers are perceived, judged, and treated by leaders. As noted above, leaders who possess more prototypic conceptions of followers may be biased toward positive evaluations and expectations for followers because LIFTs bias *what* leaders perceive in the environment (e.g., these leaders are more likely to notice instances when followers perform well and ignore instances when followers perform poorly).

Moreover, leaders who possess more prototypic conceptions of followers may be inclined to make internal attributions for followers' good performance (e.g., followers are productive) and external attributions for followers' poor performance (e.g., situational forces are to blame) because LIFTs bias *how* leaders perceive events. These consistent and positive conceptions of followers are likely to result in leaders having high performance expectations for followers. These high expectations should increase task- and self-efficacy in followers, and efficacious followers will be more engaged, effortful, and persistent in their work, which should lead to higher performance (Eden, 1990). In addition, leaders' high performance expectations should translate into leadership behaviors that facilitate follower performance. Findings (for a review, see Rosenthal, 2002) suggest that these leaders may provide more constructive performance feedback, create a more supportive learning environment, and mentor and coach followers for performance gains. Indeed, these leadership behaviors have been found to facilitate Pygmalion effects (Whiteley et al., 2010). Thus, it was predicted in Hypothesis 1: LIFTs associate positively with follower performance.

FIFTs and Follower Outcomes

The predictions thus far are consistent with the leadership literature that has demonstrated the critical role of leaders in shaping follower outcomes (Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2002). Recently, scholars have called for more follower-centric research (Avolio et al., 2009) because leaders represent only one component of the leadership equation, with followers representing the other equally important component. To address these calls, a secondary goal of the current research was to examine the relationship between prototypic FIFTs and follower outcomes. Indeed, theory and empirical evidence demonstrate that followers possess IFTs, which serve as a basis from which followers generate their own behaviors (Sy, 2010). Thus, as predicted by the perception-behavior link (and the self-fulfilling prophecy literature), followers who conceive of their role in prototypic terms are more likely to behave in ways consistent with that conceptualization. That is, the perception-behavior link predicts that followers who conceive of their role as being productive, good citizens, and enthusiastic (the prototypic dimensions of IFTs) are more likely to engage in correspondingly beneficial organizational actions that result in high performance (Bargh et al., 1996). For example, followers may exert more effort, advocate for and secure resources that enhance performance, and set higher goals. These actions are likely to result in higher performance. Moreover, followers who conceive of themselves as being prototypical followers may develop more self- and task-efficacy that results in more persistence and effort expenditure, which should positively impact performance (Eden, 1990). Accordingly, it was predicted in Hypothesis 2: FIFTs associate positively with follower performance.

Interaction Effect of Prototypic LIFTs and FIFTs on Follower Performance

Beyond the direct relationship between prototypic FIFTs and followers' performance, prototypic FIFTs also may moderate the prototypic LIFTs and follower performance relationship (van Gils et al., 2010). As discussed earlier, prototypic LIFTs should associate positively with followers' performance because leaders may 1) raise followers' self- and task-efficacy, 2) provide more constructive performance feedback, 3) engage in mentoring and coaching behaviors, and 4) engender a supportive environment that is conducive to follower performance (Whiteley et al., 2010). While these behaviors may have a general positive effect on follower

performance, they may be more beneficial to followers who possess less prototypic IFTs. Put differently, followers who conceive of themselves in more prototypic terms may already be higher performers (i.e., ceiling effect) because they are likely to self-generate high performance expectations for themselves (Eden, 1990). Thus, the positive effects of prototypic LIFTs on follower performance may be more beneficial when prototypic FIFTs are low than when prototypic FIFTs are high. Accordingly, it was predicted in Hypothesis 3: FIFTs moderate the relationship between prototypic LIFTs and follower performance, such that prototypic LIFTs associate more positively with follower performance when prototypic FIFTs are low than when prototypic FIFTs are high.

Methods

Data were collected from 120 pairs (240 participants) of workplace leaders and their subordinates from a variety of industries (e.g., professional services, healthcare, food services) in a large metropolitan area in the United States. Ethnicity of the participants was diverse: Asian American (31%), Caucasian American (27%), Latino (19%), African American (6%), other (e.g., multiethnic) (15%), and 2% that did not indicate their ethnicity. Education of the participants was diverse: Bachelor's degree (32%), some college (27%), high school graduates (15%), associate degree (10%), Master's degree (10%), non-high school graduate (2%), Doctorate degree (1%), and 3% who did not indicate their education level. Leaders and followers worked an average of 42 ($SD = 14.91$) and 32 ($SD = 13.49$) hours per week, respectively. Regarding leaders, 62 (52%) were men, and their average age was 36 years ($SD = 12.53$). Regarding followers, 75 (63%) were women, and their average age was 27 years ($SD = 8.83$).

A team of trained research assistants recruited working adults from their existing network of contacts. Participants received approximately 1 hour of training on study protocols, ethical guidelines, and were provided with detailed written protocol instructions, including standard recruitment scripts. Leaders completed the prototypic IFTs scale online. Followers completed an online survey consisting of the prototypic IFTs and the relationship quality scales. To preclude common method variance, two peers provided independent reports of followers' performance.

LIFTs and FIFTs were assessed with the implicit followership theories scale (Sy, 2010). Across five studies involving 1,362 participants, Sy (2010) developed and validated the IFTs scale, providing evidence for content, convergent, discriminant, criterion, and incremental validity. IFTs consist of three prototypic dimensions: Good Citizen (i.e., Loyal, Reliable, and Team Player), Industry (i.e., Hardworking, Productive, and Goes Above and Beyond), and Enthusiasm (i.e., Excited, Outgoing, and Happy). Using a 10-point Likert scale, participants were asked to indicate how characteristic each of the items was for followers (1 = *not at all characteristic*; 10 = *extremely characteristic*). Cronbach's alphas for the three dimensions reported in Table 1 were acceptable.

Two peer members assessed the performance of the target follower using the 3-item performance scale from Wayne, Shore, and Linden (1997). Sample items included: "In my estimation, this employee gets his/her work done very effectively" and "This employee has performed his/her job well." Each peer member independently responded to each item on a 7-point Likert type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). ICC(1) and ICC(2) values of .41 and .81, respectively, indicated peer members' ratings of target followers' performance demonstrated reliability and agreement.

Results

IFTs were analyzed in aggregate form (i.e., all three dimension of leaders' and followers' IFTs were aggregated to form LIFTs and FIFTs, respectively), as well as by individual dimensions. Given that the results were similar across both aggregate and individual dimensions, discussions will focus on results for aggregate IFTs (referenced as LIFTs and FIFTs). For analyses of individual dimensions, the parallel IFTs dimensions were paired for both leaders and followers (e.g., the interaction of leaders' and followers' Industry dimension).

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables. Correlations indicate that prototypic LIFTs were positively associated with and follower performance, thus, providing support for hypotheses 1. Also, correlations indicated that prototypic FIFTs were positively associated with follower performance, thus, providing support for hypotheses 2.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. LIFTs	7.04	1.80						
2. FIFTs	6.90	2.10	.32**					
3. Good Citizen	7.49	1.58	.69***	.77***	(.91)			
4. Industry	6.90	1.79	.75***	.81***	.78***	(.84)		
5. Enthusiasm	6.52	1.72	.74***	.79***	.76***	.82***	(.92)	
6. Follower Performance	5.18	1.05	.29**	.28**	.26**	.36***	.37***	(.73)

Note. LIFTs = Prototypic dimension of Leaders' Implicit Followership Theories – aggregated dimensions. FIFTs = Prototypic dimension of Followers' Implicit Followership Theories – aggregated dimensions. Values in parentheses represent Cronbach's alpha.

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Hypothesis 3 stated that prototypic FIFTs moderate the relationship between prototypic LIFTs and follower performance such that prototypic LIFTs associated more positively with follower performance when prototypic FIFTs were low than when prototypic FIFTs were high. This hypothesis was tested using moderated regression (Aiken & West, 1991). LIFTs (aggregate dimensions) were entered in step 1, followed by FIFTs in step 2, and the interaction term of LIFTs and FIFTs in step 3. These same steps were followed for the three individual IFTs dimensions (i.e., Good Citizen, Industry, and Enthusiasm). The results, presented in Table 2, demonstrated that prototypic FIFTs interacted with prototypic LIFTs in predicting relationship quality and follower performance (see *B* coefficients in Step 3 of analysis for "Combined IFTs"). The results held true for all three individual dimensions of prototypic IFTs (see *B* coefficients in Step 3 for each individual dimension).

Table 2. Interaction of LIFTs and FIFTs on follower performance

Predictor variable	<i>B</i>	ΔR^2
Combined IFTs		
Step 1		.08**
LIFTs	.29**	
Step 2		.04*
FIFTs	.22*	
Step 3		.04*
LIFTs X FIFTs	-.21*	
Overall F for equation		7.88***
Citizenship dimension		
Step 1		.06*
L.GdCit	.23*	
Step 2		.02
F.GdCit	.14	
Step 3		.04*
L.GdCit X F.GdCit	-.19*	
Overall F for equation		4.74**
Industry dimension		
Step 1		.06*
L.Indus	.24*	
Step 2		.07**
F.Indus	.28**	
Step 3		.04*
L.Indus X F.Indus	-.20*	
Overall F for equation		7.73***
Enthusiasm dimension		
Step 1		.10***
L.Enthu	.32***	
Step 2		.03*
F.Enthu	.20*	
Step 3		.04*
L.Enthu X F.Enthu	-.19*	
Overall F for equation		8.09***

Note. LIFTs = Prototypic dimension of Leaders' Implicit Followership Theories – aggregated dimensions. FIFTs = Prototypic dimension of Followers' Implicit Followership Theories – aggregated dimensions. “L” indicates leaders' ratings. “F” indicates followers' ratings. GdCit = Good Citizen. Indus = Industry. Enthu = Enthusiasm

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

The interaction term explained a statistically significant incremental 4% of the variance in performance. To illustrate the nature of the interaction, Aiken and West's (1991) simple slope procedure was employed for the aggregate dimensions. The slopes shown in Figure 2 illustrated the interaction: Prototypic LIFTs associated more positively with follower performance when

prototypic FIFTs were low than when prototypic FIFTs were high. The pattern of results indicated that followers generally performed better when prototypic FIFTs were high than when prototypic FIFTs were low. Moreover, followers performed the worst when both prototypic LIFTs and FIFTs were low. That is, LIFTs had more of a positive effect on follower performance when followers conceived of their roles in less prototypic terms. Hypothesis 3 is fully supported.

Figure 3. Interaction of LIFTs and FIFTs on job performance

Discussion

This research answers the call to address a major gap in the leadership literature on how leaders and followers “perceive, decide, behave, and take action” (Avolio et al., 2009). Results show that prototypic IFTs may influence leaders’ and followers’ cognitions and behaviors that have consequences for follower performance. The current research advances our understanding of Pygmalion effects (Eden, 1990). A key gap in Pygmalion research is the inadequate explanation for leaders’ performance expectations (D. Eden, personal communication, August 8, 2010). The present results support prior theorizing that LIFTs may be antecedents of leaders’ performance expectations (Eden, 1990) that then influence follower outcomes.

A practical implication of the present research is that leaders’ cognitions have consequences for follower outcomes. Because leaders play a large part in shaping the context of work and more specifically, follower outcomes (Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2002), interventions that increase leaders’ positive conceptions of followers should produce corresponding salutary effects on follower outcomes. In a similar vein, because followers use their IFTs as a basis for generating their own behaviors, interventions that increase followers’ positive conceptions of themselves should produce corresponding salutary effects.

Future research will need to investigate the malleability of IFTs. That is, to what degree can intervention programs change IFTs? Research in positive psychology provides some promising possibilities (e.g., Lyubomirsky, 2008). For example, writing appreciation notes for followers from leaders may positively shift prototypic LIFTs from their homeostasis set point.

This intervention could be scheduled regularly (e.g., to coincide with performance evaluation periods) to sustain the positive change. In addition, leaders could “count their blessings” by focusing and identifying positive characteristics and behaviors of their followers to counteract the normative negative ruminations leaders may have for followers. These practices may increase prototypic IFTs that subsequently improve relationship quality, which should boost follower performance.

Study Limitations and Future Research

The current research focused only on the prototypic dimensions of IFTs. It is plausible that the antiprototypic dimensions of IFTs may be (negatively) associated with the follower outcomes in this research. As such, the influence of the antiprototypic dimensions of IFTs on performance may be fruitful areas of research. At the same time, the prototypic and antiprototypic IFTs dimensions are independent and thus, examining these dimensions separately is conceptually appropriate (Sy, 2010). Moreover, consistent with the bandwidth-fidelity notion (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1999), it may be more fruitful to examine the relationship between the antiprototypic dimensions of IFTs with negative valence outcomes (e.g., counterproductive work behaviors, deviance, etc.).

A second limitation of the current research is that the focus was on examining the broader association between IFTs and follower outcomes. Given the dearth of research, it was important to establish first a link between these relationships. Nevertheless, idiosyncratic differences in IFTs may exist across cultures, organizations, groups, and individuals (Carsten et al., 2010; Sy, 2010). Future research could explore how cultural differences factor into these relationships.

A third limitation is the correlational nature of the survey data. Thus, the causal direction among the study variables should be interpreted with caution. For example, it is plausible that performance predicts relationship quality, and relationship quality predicts prototypic IFTs. However, the causal direction of the hypothesized relationships is conceptually consistent with theory, as well as empirical data. That is, stable constructs, such as IFTs, that are developed early in life (Lord & Maher, 1993; Sy, 2010) are more likely to cause more temporal states (i.e., relationship quality and performance). Nevertheless, future research should examine the posited causal effects of IFTs on follower outcomes. One promising prospect is to use experimental designs whereby IFTs may be manipulated via priming (Chen & Bargh, 1997).

Finally, while we addressed some aspects of common method variance by varying the sources of the data (i.e., leaders, followers, and peer evaluators), the method of data collection was the same (i.e., online surveys). Future research should replicate these findings with the use of more objective measures (e.g., performance ratings from company records, sales data, etc.).

Conclusion

This research examined IFTs, a concept that until recently has not received much attention but often has been implicated to be a key underlying mechanism in various theoretical perspectives. Indeed, the present research demonstrated that IFTs may explain in part interactional processes between leaders and followers and subsequently account for follower outcomes. IFTs may be key explanatory mechanisms that underlie extant leadership theories. Because followers are central figures in organizations, IFTs may be a central “hub” construct with connections (like the “spokes” of a wheel) to other organizational constructs. The recent emergence of research on IFTs provides rich possibilities for practical interventions and scholarship. Insights on implicit theories of followership provide insights on leadership.

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