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Transformational leadership and performance outcomes: Analyses of multiple mediation pathways

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ABSTRACT

Transformational leadership (TFL) has been shown to affect employees' job performance, and the literature offers a large variety of explanatory processes. Integrating the diverse literature related to the mechanisms that mediate the TFL-performance relationship, the current study identified five core mechanisms— affective, motivational, identification, social exchange, and justice enhancement—that are consistent with established social and psychological theories. Meta-analysis involving >600 samples was conducted to test these mechanisms. General support was found for each of the five mechanisms. The findings showed that TFL was related to variables that represented these mechanisms, which in turn were associated with non-self-report measures of employees' task performance, citizenship behavior, and innovative behavior. An integrative model was further proposed and tested to show the central role of leader-member exchange in the relationships between TFL, other mediating variables, and performance outcomes. This study contributes to the literature by strengthening researchers' theoretical understanding of the major social and psychological processes by which transformational leaders promote followers' job performance.

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Transformational leadership (TFL) is one of the most extensively researched topics of the past few decades, evidenced by the more frequent citation of studies of TFL than other leadership topics (Antonakis, Bastardoz, Liu, & Schriesheim, 2014). Transformational leadership attracts such attention because of its relevance and importance to organizational productivity. Robust evidence has shown that followers of transformational leaders are more productive, regardless of whether performance is measured at the individual, team, unit, or firm level (Barrick, Thurgood, Smith, & Courtright, 2015; Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003a, 2003b) and whether the performance outcomes are in-role tasks, extra-role activities, or innovations (Chen, Farh, Campbell-Bush, Wu, & Wu, 2013; Choi, 2009; Keller, 1992).

Many explanatory mechanisms have been proposed to explain the positive effects of TFL on job performance. Consequently, multiple pathways have been identified as relevant, but no efforts have been made to integrate the plethora of different mechanisms. An attempt at integration is important because identifying the most relevant mechanisms helps both researchers and practitioners understand not only that TFL enhances the job performance of followers, but also why and how it does so. Although different perspectives are often encouraged in leadership research (DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011), too many different explanatory mechanisms with no integration may actually hinder development in the field, as TFL researchers have reached little consensus about which mechanisms are the most useful and powerful. Other leadership researchers have echoed this call to examine the detailed social and psychological mechanisms by which TFL affects job performance (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009).

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The goal of the current investigation is to identify and test the mediating mechanisms through which TFL affects followers' job performance. Five theory-driven mediating mechanisms are addressed, including *affective*, *motivational*, *identification*, *social exchange*, and *justice enhancement* mechanisms. These five mechanisms were chosen for two reasons. First, each is supported by an established social or psychological theory, thereby enriching the theoretical foundation of the TFL research. As Van Knippenberg and Sitkin's (2013) recent review of the TFL literature states, "the mediators studied are rather diverse, probably because there is no theory to guide the investigation of mediation." (p. 16). Second, the five mechanisms together comprehensively show how TFL affects followers internally and externally, including their affect intensity (the affective mechanism), motivation level (the motivational mechanism), and value system (the identification mechanism), and their external environment, including the relationships with leaders and employers (the social exchange mechanism) and the broader workplace (the justice enhancement mechanism). Taken together, these five mechanisms broadly illustrate the different types of changes in followers elicited by TFL.

Meta-analytical data collected from >600 empirical studies are used to test these mechanisms, with a special focus on non-self-report measures of performance, including task performance, citizenship behavior, and innovative behavior, to lower the threat posed by common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). These three performance outcomes were chosen because they capture three major roles an effective worker should play in an organization (Welbourne, Johnson, & Erez, 1998). An employee is effective when he or she is a significant contributor to the organization's technical core, a team player who goes beyond his or her prescribed role, and an innovator who helps the organization innovate. These three roles are also highly relevant to TFL research. Transformational leaders can not only convince followers of the importance of an organization's goal and therefore persuade them to contribute their efforts to help achieve that goal (through the display of higher task performance and citizenship behavior), but also motivate followers to challenge the current ways of doing things to seek improvement (innovative behavior). In brief, through examining five theory-based mechanisms by which TFL affects job performance, this study enriches the theoretical foundation of this field and integrates the diverse ways in which transformational leaders promote followers' job performance. The five core models are depicted in Fig. 1.

Theoretical background

The nature of TFL

TFL entails inspiring followers to believe in or identify with the leader's vision beyond their own self-interest (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). It consists of four core components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1993). *Idealized influence* involves exhibiting confidence and charisma that arouse strong emotions and loyalty from followers. *Inspirational motivation* involves articulating organizational goals,

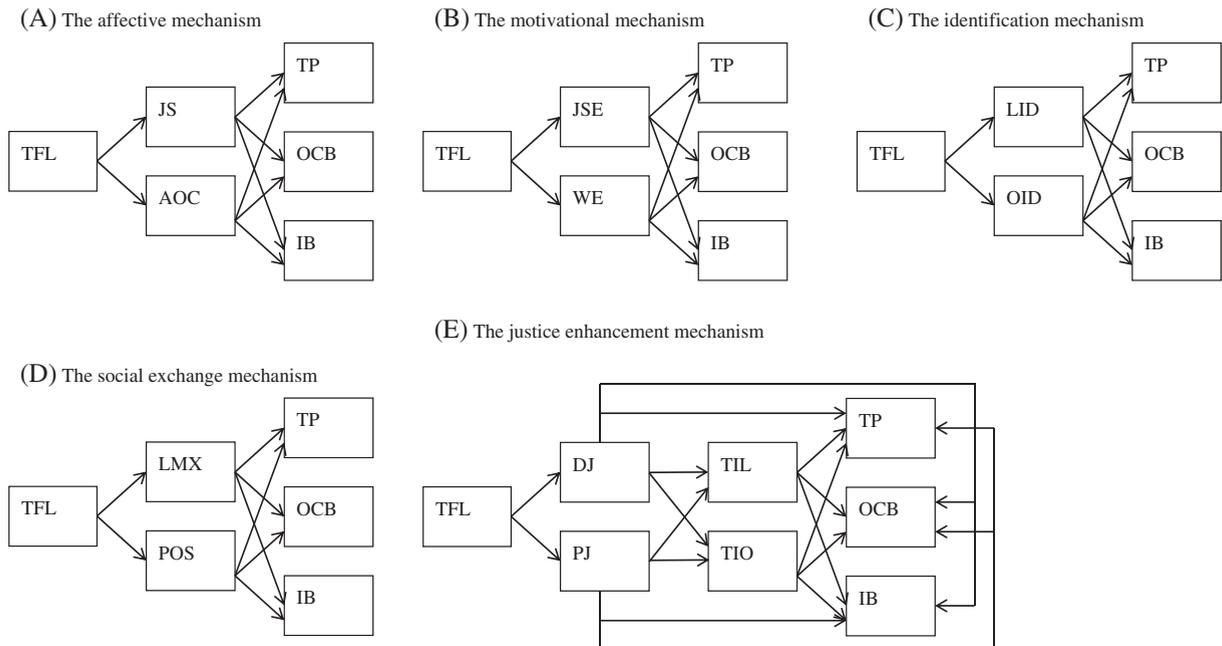


Fig. 1. The five mediating mechanisms. Note. AOC = affective organizational commitment; DJ = distributive justice; IB = innovative behavior; JS = job satisfaction; JSE = job self-efficacy; LID = leader identification; LMX = leader-member exchange; OCB = organizational citizenship behavior; OID = organizational identification; PJ = procedural justice; POS = perceived organizational support; TIL = trust in the leader; TIO = trust in the organization; TFL = transformational leadership; TP = task performance; WE = work engagement.

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