

An investigation of path-goal and transformational leadership theory predictions at the individual level of analysis

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Abstract

This study tested the recent path-goal leadership theory prediction [House, R.J., 1996. Path-goal theory of leadership: Lessons, legacy, and a reformulated theory. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 7, 323–352] that leader contingent reward behavior negatively moderates relationships between transformational leadership and subordinate performance and job satisfaction at the individual level of analysis. Also tested was the prediction that transformational leadership would positively augment the effects of leader contingent reward behavior [Bass, B.M., 1985. *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York: Free Press]. Confirmatory factor analyses, hierarchical linear multiple regression, and within- and between-entity analyses were employed, along with a sample of 169 social services workers in 40 groups. No evidence was found supporting either the path-goal or additive augmentation hypotheses. However, a positive moderator effect was found for some transformational leader behaviors and the leader contingent reward behavior variable, supporting a form of “augmentation effect” that is not incongruent with Bass’s [Bass, B.M., 1985. *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York: Free Press] approach to transformational leadership. Additionally, strong support was obtained for the level of analysis prediction. Future research directions are briefly considered.

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Path-goal leadership theory (Evans, 1970; House, 1971) has existed for over three decades (Evans, 1968), and it is currently one of the major approaches to leadership that is covered by virtually all basic textbooks on management and organizational behavior (Hunt, 1996). Additionally, over 120 scholarly articles and several in-depth reviews have been written exploring the theory’s scientific merits (e.g., Wofford & Liska, 1993; Yukl, 1998). Despite its prominence, however, a number of authors have asserted that “. . .the theory has yet to be adequately

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tested” (Yukl, 1998, p. 269) (see also, Bass, 1990; Evans, 1996; House, 1996; Schriesheim & Neider, 1996; Wofford & Liska, 1993).

Although there are a number of concerns about how the theory has been tested, three appear paramount. One issue is the often poor quality of the measures that have been used in previous path-goal theory tests. This shortcoming is believed to have limited the level of support for the theory (House, 1996) and this concern is more directly addressed in our Method section below.

A second concern is that “. . .most researchers have tested only a few aspects of the theory while ignoring other aspects” (Yukl, 1998, p. 269). It has been suggested that this has occurred because:

. . .scholars generally feel uncomfortable in refining, extending, and testing the path-goal framework, partly because the easiest relationships have already been tested. . . and partly because of the difficulty of developing meaningful extensions of or modifications to the theory (Schriesheim & Neider, 1996, p. 319).

Addressing this second concern, House (1996) developed a substantial revision of the original theory (House, 1971), further explicating its theoretical underpinnings and providing a clearer basis for future tests of the path-goal approach. In particular, House not only clarified and extended the key propositions of earlier versions of the theory (e.g., House & Mitchell, 1974), but he also linked the theory into the rapidly growing stream of theory and research on what he calls “value based leadership” (commonly discussed under the labels “charismatic leadership” or “transformational leadership” by other theorists; e.g., Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Conger & Kanungo, 1987). However, no tests of this extended theory have yet been conducted. This is despite the fact that one of the transformational leadership predictions contained in the revised theory of House (1996) (i.e., Proposition 24) differs from that advanced by another prominent theorist in the transformational leadership area (Bass, 1985, 1990).

A third concern about the path-goal theory is the lack of suitable tests of its level of analysis predictions. To date, all direct tests of path-goal theory hypotheses have employed only raw score or compound analyses (a compound analysis uses a mixture of some raw score variables and some variables that are measured at the within- and/or between-group level of analysis; cf. Katerberg & Hom, 1981). Failing to appropriately test the level of analysis at which relationships occur can result in effects being missed or misidentified.

Furthermore, a (non)significant raw score (or compound) correlation is uninformative and possibly misleading if the existence of within- and between-unit effects have not been tested. For example, a non-significant raw score correlation could actually be masking a significant between-group relationship. However, this might not be discovered if appropriate data-analytic methodologies are not employed (see Markham, 1988, for an excellent illustration of this point).

Without testing for within- and between-unit effects, we cannot determine whether and where the relationships actually occur—at the individual level, at the within-unit level, or at the between-unit level (see Schriesheim, Cogliser, & Neider (1995) for an in-depth explanation and another example of misidentified relationships when inappropriate methodologies are applied). Thus, raw score relationships should not be unambiguously interpreted since they may be due to relationships at different levels of analysis (the same is true for compound analyses such as those of Katerberg & Hom, 1981; cf. Dansereau, Alutto, & Yammarino, 1984). (The Appendix to this paper mathematically demonstrates the ambiguity of raw score analyses and provides technical information on the data analytic approach that we employ to test for levels of analysis; this is discussed in greater detail below.)

In general, the lack of explicit attention to level of analysis issues has been strongly criticized as a very serious deficiency and limitation of previous leadership and management research (cf. House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995; Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994). Perhaps for this reason, House (1996) directly addressed the level of analysis issue in his revised theory by stating that, “Path-goal theory . . .does not address the effect of leaders on groups or work units” (p. 325). However, since none of the approximately 120 studies investigating the theory have directly tested both path-goal hypotheses and their hypothesized level(s) of analysis, suitable research is clearly needed and that is one purpose of this study.

The second purpose is to examine a difference in predictions made by House (1996) and Bass (1985, 1990) with respect to transformational leadership effects; this difference was briefly alluded to above and is further elaborated upon below.

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