



A longitudinal analysis of relationships between adolescent personality and intelligence with adult leader emergence and transformational leadership[☆]

Rebecca J. Reichard^{a,*}, Ronald E. Riggio^b, Diana Wright Guerin^c, Pamella H. Oliver^c, Allen W. Gottfried^d, Adele Eskeles Gottfried^e

^a School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences, Claremont Graduate University, CA, USA

^b Kravis Leadership Institute and Department of Psychology, Claremont McKenna College, CA, USA

^c Department of Child and Adolescent Studies, California State University, Fullerton, CA, USA

^d Department of Psychology, California State University, Fullerton, CA, USA

^e Department of Educational Psychology, California State University, Northridge, CA, USA

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ABSTRACT

The long-standing question of the role of traits, particularly personality and intelligence, in predicting leadership qualities was addressed using a longitudinal design in the current study. Based on data from participants in the Fullerton Longitudinal Study, we examined the relationship between adolescent personality and intelligence collected at age 17 and multiple measures of self-reported adult leader emergence and transformational leadership at age 29. Results indicated a significant relationship between adolescent extraversion and adult workplace leader emergence and transformational leadership above and beyond adolescent intelligence, across a 12-year span. Implications for youth leader development are discussed.

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There is a long and complex history of research on the relationship between traits and leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008; Zaccaro, 2007). Following a review of the literature, this empirical study seeks to contribute to that body of research by examining the role that personality and intelligence play in the emergence of leadership from a longitudinal perspective, and in a general sample of individuals not selected on the basis of their leadership roles. The purpose of the current study is to longitudinally examine the relationships between adolescent personality and intelligence with adult leader emergence and transformational leadership. Although prior research has examined these variables in cross-sectional research, the power and uniqueness of this study are reflected in the 12-year span between trait predictors and leadership criteria, hence answering the need for more longitudinal research on leader development as noted by Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, and Chan (2009).

1. A brief history of traits and leadership

The notion that individuals possess certain qualities or traits that led to their emergence in positions of leadership, and to their effectiveness as leaders, dominated the first half of the 20th century. As early as 1927, Bingham defined a leader as a person who possesses the greatest number of desirable traits of personality and character. Bass and Bass's (2008) comprehensive review of this literature suggests that nearly every possible trait or characteristic has been explored in this early research, including physical

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* Corresponding author at: School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA 91711, USA.

E-mail address: Becky.Reichard@cgu.edu (R.J. Reichard).

traits (e.g., age, height, weight, physique, health, athletic prowess), cognitive abilities (e.g., intelligence, scholarship, insight), and particularly personality traits (e.g., extraversion, self-sufficiency, dominance, initiative, ambition). For example, it was reported that between 1904 and 1947 there were 23 studies that examined the relationship between intelligence and leadership; 12 studies looked at Extraversion and leadership; while 17 studies focused on the dominance–leadership relationship.

Such early research on traits and leadership yielded inconsistent results, likely due to the different conceptualizations and measures, resulting in the abandonment by many of this line of leadership research. For example, early trait studies used a wide range of measures for personality constructs due to the lack of a generally accepted and integrated model for personality at the time (Bass & Bass, 2008). For example, studies of “extraversion” and leadership used measures that assessed “sociability,” “interaction oriented,” and being “outgoing,” in addition to measures of extraversion.

As a result of criticisms about the inconsistency of results, the search for leadership traits was nearly abandoned mid-century following Stogdill's (1948) influential review, which argued that individual traits, situational conditions, and the interaction of traits and situations are important to consider when predicting leadership emergence and effectiveness. Consequently, the focus of leadership researchers shifted from leader traits to leader behaviors (e.g., initiating structure/task and consideration/relationship), with traits being regarded as “too abstract” and “distant” predictors of leadership outcomes. Beginning in the 1960s, and continuing over several subsequent decades, leadership researchers focused on interaction models, such as Fiedler's Contingency model (Fiedler, 1964, 1967), Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969), and models of leader decision making (Vroom & Yetton, 1973). Fewer studies during this period focused solely on leadership traits as predictors of leadership, outside of these overall situational approaches.

In recent years, with the increasing popularity of leadership as a topic of investigation in the social sciences, and in psychology in particular, there has been a re-focus on the role that traits play in leadership—particularly the roles of personality and intelligence. Some of the interest in the role of intelligence in leadership is fueled by the popularity of multiple forms of intelligence, particularly emotional intelligence (Caruso, Mayer, & Salovey, 2002; Goleman, 1995), social intelligence (Riggio, Murphy, & Pirozzolo, 2002), and practical intelligence (or tacit knowledge; Hedlund et al., 2003). Regarding personality, the emergence of the Big Five, or Five Factor model of personality (Barrick & Mount, 1991), helped to simplify and organize an otherwise complex mass of traits. As such, the Five Factor model of personality provided leadership researchers with clear direction on the core personality to examine in their investigations, making such data available for meta-analysts to subsequently aggregate and analyze.

In the following sections, the concept of leader emergence is defined and the theoretical rationale and research support for the relationship between leader traits of personality and intelligence with leader emergence are presented. Next, we turn our focus to a discussion of transformational leadership. Following its definition, theory and research to support the linkage between traits and transformational leadership are presented. Based on the evidence, we present and test three hypotheses and one research question.

2. Traits and leadership emergence

There are a variety of theoretical arguments in the leadership literature as to why leader traits are important predictors of leader emergence. Leader emergence is defined herein as both an individual's completion of leader-like work duties and occupying positions of leadership or authority either within or outside of the work domain. Leader emergence, rather than effectiveness, is often a product of others' perceptions of an individual's abilities. If the target individual is perceived to be “leader-like,” then others will be more likely to elect or appoint the target individual into leadership positions (i.e., leader emergence).

This argument is in line with Lord and colleagues' concept of implicit leadership theory (Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984; Phillips & Lord, 1982) and the leader categorization theory (Lord & Maher, 1991). These theories assert that as young children, individuals gradually develop a set of beliefs about the characteristics and behaviors of effective leaders, or their leadership prototype. Leadership prototypes, or mental representations of the characteristics and traits of leaders, in turn influence how the individual evaluates relevant information (Phillips & Lord, 1982). As such, individuals whose characteristics and behaviors match leadership prototypes are perceived more positively (Lord & Maher, 1991; Lord et al., 1984; Smith & Foti, 1998), and we argue are more likely to be elected or appointed into positions of authority (i.e., leader emergence). Although each individual's leadership prototypes vary, there are leadership prototypes that are held consistently across most individuals (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). Two characteristics commonly included in our society's leader prototype are personality and intelligence.

Various authors have argued that the high-energy, assertiveness, and stamina of extraverts equates to most people's implicit leadership theory of how a leader is supposed to behave (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Lord & Maher, 1991; Lord et al., 1984). Fitting the leader prototype, talkative, high-energy, assertive extraverts are more likely to emerge as leaders in contrast to quiet, reserved, shy introverts. A predominant finding from early studies reflected that the person in the group who spent more time talking was often the one to emerge as group leader (Bass & Bass, 2008). Perhaps, it is not surprising that a previous meta-analysis by Judge, Bono, Iles, and Gerhardt (2002) found that Extraversion was, in fact, the personality trait most consistently linked to leader emergence. In fact, based on 37 primary studies, these authors estimated the corrected correlation between Extraversion and leader emergence to be equal to .33.

Taking another line of reasoning, employees who are consistently top performers, such as those high in conscientiousness, are often promoted into leadership positions regardless of whether or not they have the leadership competencies that it takes to be effective in that position. For example, an engineer who is especially technically competent may be appointed (leader emergence) to the head of the unit, yet may lack any of the “soft” skills necessary for effective leadership. Prior research has demonstrated that Conscientiousness is related to overall job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991) as well as leader emergence (Judge et al., 2002).

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