



# Transformational leadership and job performance: A social identity perspective<sup>☆</sup>

Herman H.M. Tse<sup>a,\*</sup>, Warren C.K. Chiu<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Griffith University, Australia

<sup>b</sup> The Center for Leadership and Innovation, Department of Management and Marketing, Faculty of Business, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on social identity theory, this study provides a model explaining the underlying process through which transformational leadership influences creative behavior and organizational citizenship behaviors. Individual differentiation and group identification are proposed as social identity mechanisms reflecting the characteristics of personal and collective identity orientations that underpin the differential effects of transformational leadership behaviors on performance outcomes. The model is tested with data from a sample of 250 front-line employees and their immediate managers working in five banks in the People's Republic of China. Results of hierarchical linear modeling provide support for the model whereby group-focused and individual-focused transformational leadership behaviors exert differential impacts on individual differentiation and group identification. Furthermore, individual differentiation mediates the relationship between individual-focused transformational leadership and creative behavior, whereas group identification mediates the relationships between group-focused transformational leadership and OCBs toward individuals and groups. Implications for theory and practice are discussed and future research directions are outlined.

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## 1. Introduction

Transformational leadership is one of the most prevalent approaches to understanding individual, group and organizational effectiveness (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders display certain types of behaviors that include raising followers to a higher level of achievement, enabling them to transcend their personal interests for collective welfare, focusing on their abilities to facilitate personal growth, and developing their intellectual ability to approach problems in new ways (Bass, 1985). These behaviors imply that the motivational basis of transformational leadership is a process of changing the way followers envision themselves (see Lord & Brown, 2004; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

According to social identity theory (SIT), individuals have a range of identities open to them including personal and social identities. Each identity reflects an individual's self-worth and self-esteem that, in turn, serve as foundations for cognitive, emotional and motivational processes

(Tajfel, 1978, 1982). Hence, it is important to motivate individuals to enhance their self-worth and self-esteem by orientating themselves either as a unique person with idiosyncratic needs or as an enthusiastic member of a social group whose obligations align with the obligations of the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This theory suggests that the identity orientations of followers may play a vital role in the motivational process of transformational leadership, influencing how followers define themselves: as unique individuals (personal identity orientation) or as members of a workgroup (collective identity orientation). Unfortunately, few empirical studies adopt the social identity perspective to explore the role of followers' identity orientations in the transformation process in organizations (e.g., Hogg & Terry, 2000; Kark & Shamir, 2002; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005). The current study develops and tests a model (Fig. 1) to explore group-focused and individual-focused transformational leadership behaviors and their underlying processes from the social identity perspective.

The present study aims to advance the research on transformational leadership processes by achieving three objectives. First, the study responds to repeated calls to understand the unique implications of individual components of transformational leadership on different outcomes, such as personal and collective identity orientations (Yammarino, 1990; Yammarino & Bass, 1990). In line with Wu, Tsui, and Kinicki (2010), the study conceptualizes transformational leadership components (e.g., individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation) as individual-focused leadership which aims to influence individual followers within a workgroup. The study also conceptualizes the other two leadership components (e.g., identifying and articulating a vision and fostering the

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\* Corresponding author at: Department of Employment Relations and Human Resources, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland, 4111, Australia. Tel./fax: +61 7 3735 7305/7177.

E-mail addresses: h.tse@griffith.edu.au (H.H.M. Tse), mschiuw@polyu.edu.hk (W.C.K. Chiu).

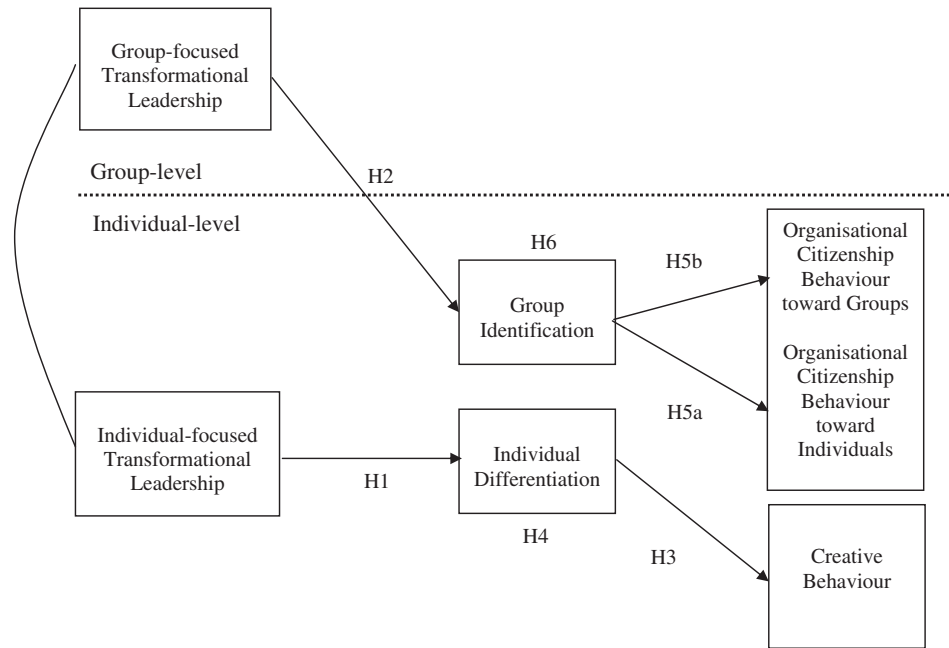


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model of the processes linking transformational leadership and work behaviors.

acceptance of group goals) as group-focused leadership which aims to influence the group as a whole. This conceptualization of transformational leadership behaviors provides new theoretical insights because existing research regards transformational leadership as an overarching construct based on the assumption that all components of transformational leadership exert similar effects on followers' work attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006; Shin & Zhou, 2007).

Second, individual components of transformational leadership have important implications for followers' social identity orientations. This study seeks to explain how SIT underpins the motivational impact of leadership by proposing and examining the mediating roles of individual differentiation and group identification which epitomize key identity orientations of SIT during the transforming process. Individual differentiation reflects the characteristics of personal identity, focusing on personal traits and self interests instrumental to the enhancement of an individual's self-esteem, whereas group differentiation indicates the characteristics of social identity, emphasizing the group processes and shared values as a means to increase an individual's self-esteem (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Understanding the relationship between transformational leadership and different identity orientations is important because prior research focuses primarily on examining the psychological processes of transformational leadership from the perspectives of intrinsic motivation and job characteristics (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006; Shin & Zhou, 2003). This new conceptualization of transformational leadership behaviors thus increases our understanding of how individual differentiation and group identification explain the implications of transformational leadership for important work outcomes (Kark & Shamir, 2002; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003; Lord & Brown, 2004).

Finally, this study extends Kark et al.'s (2003) work on followers' self-reported work attitudes of dependence and empowerment by incorporating supervisor-reported behavioral repertoires of followers' performance outcomes such as creative behavior, organizational citizenship behavior toward individuals (OCBI) and organizational citizenship behavior toward groups (OCBG). This further underscores the implications of how personal and social identity orientations exert differential impacts on the relationships between transformational leadership behaviors and behavioral outcomes beyond followers' self-reported work attitudes.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. Transformational leadership, social identity theory and work outcomes

Social identity theory (SIT) postulates that individuals seek to see themselves positively, and extend this motivation to include the individual's group memberships or social identities (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). A person's self-concept comprises a personal identity (i.e., idiosyncratic characteristics such as individual attributes, abilities and past experience), and a social identity (i.e., salient group classifications and characteristics such as group attributes, processes and composition; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Research suggests that both personal and social identities are important as they influence the self-esteem and self-worth of individuals. Empirical research examines how group identification and other related constructs such as group cohesiveness and group potency mediate the effect of charismatic leadership or transformational leadership on work outcomes (e.g., Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Cicero & Piero, 2007), yet few studies pay attention to the effect of personal and social identities with respect to specific work outcomes, and to understanding what factors contribute to these two identities (e.g., Doosje & Ellemers, 1997; Janssen & Huang, 2008; Lord & Brown, 2004). In addition, Kark and Shamir (2002) and Yammarino and Bass (1990) call for research to investigate how individual components of transformational leadership relate to work outcomes because examining specific components provides insights on how transformational leadership affects individual and group effectiveness.

To demonstrate the differential effects of transformational leadership behaviors and their theoretical relevance for this study, this study adopts Wu et al.'s (2010) behavioral foci of transformational leadership, that is, individual-focused leadership (e.g., individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation) and group-focused leadership (e.g., idealized influence and inspirational motivation). Individual-focused leadership aims at affecting individual employees by considering the uniqueness of each follower, whereas group-focused leadership deals with influencing the group as a whole by creating shared values and seeking a common ground. These two behavioral foci of transformational leadership are indeed more relevant than the overall transformational leadership construct in theorizing foci specific effects on different work outcomes

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