



# Transformational leadership and follower creativity: The mediating role of follower relational identification and the moderating role of leader creativity expectations <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

We examined follower relational identification with the leader as a mediator and follower perceptions of leader creativity expectations as a moderator in the relationship between transformational leadership and follower creativity. Using a sample of 420 leader–follower dyads from an energy company in mainland China, we found that follower relational identification with the leader mediates the transformational leadership–follower creativity relationship, and this mediating relationship is conditional on the moderator variable of follower perceptions of leader creativity expectations for the path from follower relational identification to follower creativity. These results contribute to the literature by clarifying why (through relational identification) and when (high creativity expectations set by the leader) transformational leadership is positively related to follower creativity.

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## Introduction

Recent research has connected transformational leadership with the emergence of follower creativity in organizations (e.g., Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009; Shin & Zhou, 2003; Wang & Rode, 2010; Zhou & Shalley, 2008). Transformational leadership refers to charismatic, visionary, and inspirational actions that influence followers to broaden their goals and perform beyond the expectations specified in their formal work roles and job descriptions (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985; Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002; Howell & Avolio, 1993). Followers perform creatively when they generate new and potentially useful ideas for products, services, procedures, or processes (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004). Such ideas provide the raw material for further development and implementation through which individual employees, work groups, or the whole organization can adapt to problems, opportunities, and unusual situations (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993).

Although transformational leadership is supposed to be positively related to follower creativity, the prior studies have yielded inconsistent results and meta-analytic findings showed a high variation in the relationship between transformational leadership and creativity (Hammond, Neff, Farr, Schwall, & Zhao, 2011; Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011; Vessey, Barrett, Mumford, Johnson, & Litwiller, 2014). Given these inconclusive findings, creativity researchers question the simplistic

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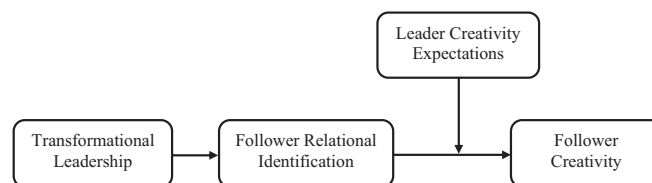
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transformational leadership–follower creativity relationship in order to consider through what explanatory mechanisms (via what mediators) and under what boundary conditions (in the presence of what moderators) transformational leaders might promote followers to engage in creative courses of action (Gong et al., 2009; Rosing et al., 2011; Shin & Zhou, 2003). The goal of the present study was to contribute to addressing this important yet relatively unclear issue.

Recent research has largely used an intrinsic motivational perspective to clarify why transformational leadership brings forth follower creativity. That is, while Shin and Zhou (2003) proposed and found intrinsic task motivation as a mediator in the transformational leadership–follower creativity relationship, Gong et al. (2009) identified creative self-efficacy as the explanatory intervening mechanism. As stated by Gong et al. (2009), efficacy beliefs enhance perceptions of self-competence (Ng & Feldman, 2013) that intrinsically motivate employees to engage in creative courses of action. This recent research has capitalized on an intrinsic motivational perspective to clarify the underlying influence process through which transformational leadership promotes follower creativity, and thus overlooked process mechanisms that are inherently embedded in the role relationship between the leader and follower. Transformational leadership tends to exert influence on followers by the creation of relational identification with the leader (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003). Though such relational identification is no new concept, it is only recently that research has begun to examine how followers' identification with the leader impacts on their performance (e.g., Miao, Newman, & Lamb, 2012; Walumbwa & Hartnell, 2011; Wang & Howell, 2012). To advance understanding of this mediational process, in the present research we examined follower relational identification with the leader as a psychological mechanism through which transformational leadership may exercise its influence on follower creativity. Sluss and Ashforth (2007) developed a theoretical framework that takes a relational perspective on role relationships in organizations and delineate how relational identification flowing from role relationships may shape how individuals think, feel, and act in the workplace. We used this theory on relational identification to argue that transformational leadership may encourage followers to internalize the role relationship with their leader as part of their self-concept (i.e., relational identification).

However, the extent to which relational identification with the leader fosters follower creativity may depend on creativity expectations that the leader sets for the individual follower. As creativity may not be the typical job for all followers (Ford, 1996), leaders are likely to set creativity expectations that vary for followers. Consequently, the extent to which transformational leadership enhances follower engagement in creativity may be contingent upon the role expectations for creativity that leaders set for individual followers. Based on core features from role expectation theory (e.g., Dierdorff & Morgeson, 2007; Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991), we proposed that the extent to which relational identification with the leader fosters follower creativity may depend on creativity expectations that the leader sets for the individual follower. Followers' identification with the leader is likely to encourage their creativity the more they perceive that leader creativity expectations form a core feature of the role relationship they have with the leader. Thus, the goal of the current study was to advance understanding of the relationship between transformational leadership and follower creativity by integrating insights from relational identification theory (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) with theoretical notions on transformational leadership, role expectations (e.g., Dierdorff & Morgeson, 2007; Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991), and employee creativity (e.g., Ford, 1996; Madjar, Greenberg, & Chen, 2011). For this purpose, we examined a moderated mediation model proposing that follower relational identification with the leader operates as a mediator in the relationship between transformational leadership and follower creativity, while follower perceptions of leader creativity expectations were proposed to moderate the second path from follower relational identification to follower creativity. Fig. 1 presents this model.

We aimed to make several contributions through our study. First, identifying follower relational identification as a mediating process may advance scientific understanding of the influence of transformational leadership on follower creativity, and help practitioners to develop and use effective leadership interventions. Empirical research on the role of identity and identification in organizations has primarily been focused on examining how individuals identify with collective entities, such as groups, departments, or organizations, while largely ignoring the emergence and effects of the relational level of self (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Second, we proposed that transformational leaders may differ in their creativity expectations to followers, and tested whether follower perceptions of leader creativity expectations operate as a boundary condition for the indirect relationship between transformational leadership and follower creativity through follower relational identification with the leader. Researchers have only very recently begun to investigate how relational identification processes may link leadership to follower performance, and have reported inconclusive findings. Some researchers found follower identification with the leader to operate as a mediator in the relationship between transformational leadership and follower job performance (Walumbwa & Hartnell, 2011; Wang & Howell, 2012), whereas others found no evidence for such a mediational effect (Miao et al., 2012). In the current study, we extend this recent empirical work by focusing on creativity as a particular type of follower performance, and by identifying follower perceptions of role expectations for creativity set by the leader as a boundary condition that moderates the mediated relationship between transformational leadership, follower relational identification, and follower creativity.



**Fig. 1.** Research model in which follower relational identification mediates and follower perceptions of leader creativity expectations moderate the relationship between transformational leadership and follower creativity.

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