

Demographic category membership and leadership in small groups: A social identity analysis

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Abstract

Developing the social identity theory of leadership (e.g., [Hogg, M. A. (2001). A social identity theory of leadership. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5, 184–200]), an experiment ($N=257$) tested the hypothesis that as group members identify more strongly with their group (salience) their evaluations of leadership effectiveness become more strongly influenced by the extent to which their demographic stereotype-based impressions of their leader match the norm of the group (prototypicality). Participants, with more or less traditional gender attitudes (orientation), were members, under high or low group salience conditions (salience), of non-interactive laboratory groups that had “instrumental” or “expressive” group norms (norm), and a male or female leader (leader gender). As predicted, these four variables interacted significantly to affect perceptions of leadership effectiveness. Reconfiguration of the eight conditions formed by orientation, norm and leader gender produced a single prototypicality variable. Irrespective of participant gender, prototypical leaders were considered more effective in high than low salience groups, and in high salience groups prototypical leaders were more effective than less prototypical leaders. Alternative explanations based on status characteristics and role incongruity theory do not account well for the findings. Implications of these results for the glass ceiling effect and for a wider social identity analysis of the impact of demographic group membership on leadership in small groups are discussed.

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Effective leadership is often the key to successful group functioning. Where people come together in small task-oriented teams, larger social action groups or even larger nations, some form of leadership is almost always necessary to provide focus, vision and organizational coordination. Leadership can be described as a relationship in which some people are able to persuade others to embrace new values, attitudes and goals, and to exert effort on behalf of those values, attitudes and goals. The relationship is usually configured by and played out within the parameters of a group, and the values, attitudes and goals that leaders inspire others to adopt and to follow are ones that define and serve the group. Thus, leaders are able to transform individual action into group action. This characterization of leadership, which is certainly not uncommon (e.g., Chemers, 2001; Hogg, *in press*), places a premium on the role of group

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membership and group life in the analysis of leadership. It is this group-oriented meta-theory of leadership that frames the research reported in this article.

Leadership is about social interaction and group life, and therefore it has long been a focus of research for social psychologists (Chemers, 2001; Hogg, in press; Hollander, 1985). However, since the early 1980s most leadership research has occurred outside the social psychology mainstream, mainly in organizational science. The organizational literature on leadership is enormous (e.g., Bass, 1990a; Yukl, 2002), with a contemporary emphasis on transformational leadership and the role of charisma. Charismatic leaders are able to motivate followers to work for collective goals that transcend self-interest and transform organizations (Bass, 1990b, 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Bryman, 1992; Conger & Kanungo, 1987, 1988). This approach has, however, been criticized (e.g., Mowday & Sutton, 1993).

Particular concern has been expressed that too much emphasis is placed on intrinsic properties of the leader and too little emphasis on the larger social systems within which leadership is embedded (e.g., Hall & Lord, 1995; Lord, Brown, & Harvey, 2001; Pawar & Eastman, 1997; also see Chemers, 2001; Haslam & Platow, 2001). Lord et al. (2001) explain that leadership cannot be properly understood in terms of a leader's actions or in terms of abstract perceptual categories of types of leader. Echoing this concern, Haslam & Platow (2001) warn against any explanation of leadership that rests too heavily, or at all, on invariant properties of individuals and their personalities. There is a general call for a more group membership oriented approach to the analysis of leadership. Although most research now acknowledges that leadership is a relational property within groups (i.e., leaders exist because of followers, and followers exist because of leaders), the idea that leadership may emerge through the operation of ordinary social-cognitive processes associated with psychologically belonging to a group, needs to be more thoroughly elaborated.

1. The social identity theory of leadership

The social identity perspective provides one way to develop this analysis. The social identity perspective integrates a set of compatible analyses, of social categorization, group motivation, collective self-conception, group membership, intergroup relations, and social influence (e.g., Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). It distinguishes group phenomena from personal and interpersonal phenomena, and explicates the former via a process of social categorization of self and others, which becomes the salient basis of perception, cognition and behavior in certain circumstances. Social categorization *depersonalizes* perception and behavior, in that they are no longer based on personalized information about people, but rather on people's representations (i.e., prototypes) of ingroup or outgroup properties. This perspective, which has recently been overviewed in detail (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 2001; Hogg, 2001c, 2003; Turner, 1999; also see Hogg & Terry, 2000) has played a significant role in revitalizing social psychological research on group processes and intergroup relations (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1998; Moreland, Hogg & Hains, 1994). Of specific relevance here is the social identity theory of leadership (e.g., Hogg, 2001a, 2001b; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003; also see van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004).

The key idea is that the cognitive basis of leadership evaluation, support and endorsement, and thus the ability of a leader to be effective, is transformed as a function of how strongly group members identify with the group as an important aspect of their self-concept. Where a group is a relatively loose aggregate of individuals who do not derive a strong sense of social identity from the group, social perception is largely governed by idiosyncratic preferences and by personal relationships. Under these circumstances people use their relatively general or more task-specific schemas of how an effective leader should behave (i.e., their cognitive representations of the attributes of effective leadership in a specific context), to determine their perceptions of leadership effectiveness (e.g., Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984; Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Palich & Hom, 1992; Rush & Russell, 1988). People who match the relevant schema are more likely to be endorsed and to be able to lead effectively.

According to the social identity approach, the basis of perception is quite different in more compact, cohesive groups, which are self-conceptually important. People identify strongly with these groups, and thus the basis of perception of self and others is circumscribed by group prototypicality. Social categorization of self and fellow ingroupers depersonalizes perception, feelings, and behavior in terms of the contextually salient ingroup prototype. Prototypical members embody the essence of the group and are the target of consensual group membership based positive regard or liking (e.g., Hogg, 1993). Under these circumstances people who are perceived to match the relevant ingroup prototype are more likely to be endorsed and to be able to lead effectively.

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