



## Leader self-definition and leader self-serving behavior

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### ABSTRACT

The present research investigated the relationship between leader self-definition processes and leader self-serving behaviors. We hypothesized that self-definition as a leader interacts with social reference information (descriptive and injunctive) in predicting leader self-serving actions. Six studies (i.e., two laboratory experiments, two scenario experiments, and two cross-sectional surveys) showed that self-definition as a leader affected the extent to which leader resource self-allocations were informed by descriptive information (i.e., other leaders' self-allocations) and injunctive information (i.e., effective leadership beliefs). Leaders self-defining more strongly as leaders relied more on other leaders' self-allocations and on effective leadership beliefs when allocating resources to the self than those self-defining less strongly as leaders. The data suggest that leaders are more likely to use social reference information when their self-definition is deeply embedded in those references.

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Leaders can wield the discretion afforded to them by virtue of their role (Mumford & Connelly, 1991) to engage in relatively group or self-serving actions. While a lot of leaders<sup>1</sup> use their position admirably and pursue group interests, others do not. Accounts of leader enjoyment of lavish perquisites, such as the personal use of company jets and gargantuan severance and pay packages (e.g., Dash, 2007) have come to permeate the business press. Public reactions have been particularly vehement to reports of leaders pursuing personal gain while their companies were on the brink of collapse (Herszhenhorn, 2008). Thus, the Dutch media scathingly covered the case of a local IT company facing bankruptcy, where the managers had raised their own salaries while the employees had agreed to a 20% salary cut. Next to the popular outcry against leader corruption and the blatant misallocation of resources, it has been argued that leaders who distribute resources to their own advantage harm group interests (Aquino & Reed, 1998). Empirical research has consistently shown a positive relationship between leader group-serving (vs. self-serving) behaviors and leader effectiveness (e.g., Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1999; De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2002, 2004; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005; Yorges, Weiss, & Strickland, 1999). Moreover, excessively high executive compensation has been linked to weakened follower loyalty and increased dysfunctional behaviors (Bok, 1993), whereas increased wage dispersion in organizations has been associated with lowered productivity, decreased cooperation and increased turnover (e.g., Pfeffer & Davis-Blake, 1992; Pfeffer & Langton, 1993). Given that leader self-serving actions carry the specter of negative consequences for the organization, as well as for subordinates' motivation and performance, the question begging for an answer is: What causes leaders to act self-servingly? Surprisingly, the leadership literature remains largely mute on determinants of leader self-serving behaviors. Accordingly, especially given the host of negative consequences associated with leader self-serving acts, there may be value in investigating antecedents of leader self-serving behaviors.

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions of leaders and leadership are almost as numerous as the researchers studying them. In this research, we endorse the following definition of a leader: The leader is an individual holding a structural position of power which provides him/her with control over valuable resources and the ability to administer rewards and punishments (French & Raven, 1959); and who also influences others to act towards the achievement of group goals (Hollander, 1980; Yukl & van Fleet, 1992). Whereas the power associated with the structural position reflects *influence potential*, a leader enacts that potential (Farmer & Aghuinis, 2005).

In this research we investigate determinants of leader self-serving allocations. Leaders do not only expend time and energy towards ensuring their group's success, but also face the more mundane task of allocating scarce resources (e.g., stock-options, bonuses, and office space). However, the more of the shared resource (e.g., bonus budget) the leader claims for the self, the less will be available for subordinates. Leaders making such resource allocations may face an ambiguous situation that requires them to engage in a sense-making process. Equity considerations imply that leaders are entitled to higher outcomes than followers (e.g., De Cremer & van Dijk, 2005; Samuelson & Allison, 1994). But given the ambiguous nature of leader and follower performance how much higher can these outcomes be while still remaining justifiable? In addition to equity concerns, temptations to use the opportunity to ensure good outcomes for the self on one hand, and feelings of responsibility to prioritize the group's interests on the other hand, may further add to leaders' uncertainty about what behavior would be appropriate. Contingent on how leaders make sense of such ambiguous decisions, relatively self or group-serving behaviors ensue (i.e., the more of the resource leaders claim, the more self-servingly they act, because less is left for followers).

In this research we take a self-definition perspective (Johnson, Selenta, & Lord, 2006; Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999) to understand leader self-serving behaviors. Specifically, we consider the interactive effect of self-definition as a leader and social information processing (i.e., the reliance on descriptive and injunctive information) on leader resource allocations. Building on the notion that self-definition as a leader provides a sense-making frame (Kramer, 2003; Lord & Hall, 2005) we predict that the more leaders self-define as leaders, the more likely they are to rely on information about what other leaders do or on beliefs about what an ideal leader should do when making resource self-allocations. Our aim is thus three-fold: (1) to put the study of the determinants of leader self and group-serving behaviors on the research agenda; (2) to introduce self-definition as a leader as a concept to be reckoned with when studying leader behaviors; (3) to show that self-definition as a leader interacts with both descriptive and injunctive information in determining leader self-serving behaviors. In doing so, we provide a conceptual and empirical basis for the study of this important but largely neglected issue in leadership research.

## 1. Self-definition as a leader

The self-concept provides a powerful sense-making frame (Leary & Tangney, 2003), and yet, the leader's self-concept has been largely ignored in the study of leadership processes (for some exceptions see Engle & Lord, 1997; Lord & Hall, 2005). In this research, we argue that self-definition processes uniquely tied to the leadership role are germane in explaining leader behaviors.

The self-concept is a knowledge structure that helps individuals organize and make sense of their memory and behavior (e.g., Lord & Brown, 2004; Markus & Wurf, 1987), and it has been shown to proximally influence behaviors (Leary & Tangney, 2003). It is however also a dynamic, flexible construct consisting of an aggregate of different self-schemas tied to specific social contexts and situations (Lord et al., 1999; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). Once a specific self-schema is activated by the social context, it will directly regulate and guide behavior (Brown & Smart, 1991) by moderating the use of social information (Johnson et al., 2006). Thus, one's self-concept can include various role-related selves such as being a parent or a leader. The 'self as leader' is however more likely to be a relevant behavioral guide in a work-related context than at home, while the 'self as parent' is more likely to inform behavior at home. These various self-conceptions can also differ in terms of their centrality and importance, that is, they can be core or peripheral self-conceptions. Central self-conceptions are more elaborate and predict information processing and behavior more strongly than peripheral self-conceptions (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Thus, 'the self as leader' will be a central, important defining part of their self-concept for some individuals in leadership positions, but not for others. Individuals holding leadership roles will differ in the extent to which they self-define as leaders and incorporate the leader role into their self-concept.

Support for the argument that leaders vary in the degree to which they self-define as leaders comes from two different areas of leadership research: the leader development literature (Lord & Hall, 2005) and a social identity inspired analysis of leadership (Kramer, 2003). Lord and Hall (2005) postulate that across time and with mounting experience leaders incorporate the leader role into their self-identity and develop a self-concept as leaders. Key to developing a leader identity is self-categorizing as a leader and developing a self-view as a leader. Moreover, this categorization as a leader can be independent of how the leader construes the actual role (i.e., the scripts that would directly guide role-behavior). More importantly, Lord and Hall contend that, once activated, this leader self-definition serves as a meta-structure guiding information processing, goal setting, and behavior. Similarly, Kramer (2003) ascertains in a qualitative study that leader identities, i.e., the self-categorizations they use to define who they are as leaders and the way in which they construe their leadership role, are intimately linked to their decisions. Self-definition as a leader is proposed to influence how the decision situation is framed and made sense of by providing a framework against which the consequences of actions are evaluated (Kramer, 2003).

In sum, self-defining as a leader implies self-categorizing as a leader, seeing oneself as similar to the category prototype (Lord et al., 1999), incorporating the leader role into the self-concept and developing a core self-view as a leader. Building on Kramer's (2003) and Lord and Hall's (2005) argument that self-definition as a leader serves as a meta-structure guiding information processing, we argue that self-definition as a leader influences self-serving acts via its impact on the social information used to make sense of ambiguous resource allocations.

## 2. Social information processing

In novel or ambiguous decision making situations that require sense-making, individuals often look at *similar others* or search their beliefs about *ideal others* for information about an appropriate course of action (Parks, Sanna, & Berel, 2001; Wood, 1996).

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