What goes around comes around: How meso-level negative emotional contagion can ultimately determine organizational attitudes toward leaders

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ABSTRACT

We present a follower-centric model of leadership that integrates multiple levels of analysis, and includes emotional contagion as a key meso-level process. In our model, leadership at the individual level is manifested in terms of the leader's favoritism toward members and affective displays. Drawing upon affective events theory, we argue that member perceptions of a leader's behaviors and member attributions of insincerity result in negative emotions. Through a process of emotional contagion, the negative emotions then spread to other individuals in the group. These are in turn reflected in the group's affective climate and trust climate, and also in the quality of leader-member and team-member relationships. In the end, this results in organizational-level disapproval of the leader and cynicism towards the leader. Included as moderators in the model are task interdependence, the temporal context, reward systems, emotional labor requirements, organizational culture, and power distance. We conclude with a discussion of boundary conditions, and implications of our model for research, theory, and practice.

Leadership research is still largely fractured; riddled with contradictory findings and assertions that lack connected interpretability (Chemers, 2000). One reason for this state of affairs stems from an omission of theory that integrates both micro-level and macro-level leadership influences. As Yammarino and Dubinsky (1992) suggest, more attention should be paid to multi-level issues that have the ability to influence, and in turn to be influenced by, leadership performance. This argument is reiterated by Tse, Dasborough, and Ashkanasy (2008), who posited that the adoption of multi-level perspectives in scholarly leadership inquiry is crucial if a more comprehensive and accurate portrayal of organizational leadership is to emerge.

Recent publications in this field show promise, however, and scholars are beginning to apply multi-level perspectives to the study of leadership (see Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, & Rosen, 2007; Tangirala, Green, & Ramanujam, 2007; Tse et al., 2008). Further, leadership scholars have called for attention to meso-level issues, examining phenomena across levels by incorporating contextual factors into consideration (Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002). We build on these multi-level frameworks by adopting a meso-level approach, highlighting emotional contagion as a vehicle for meso effects across levels.

Emotional contagion is defined as the tendency automatically to mimic and to synchronize verbal and non-verbal cues with those of another person and, subsequently, to converge emotionally with the conveyor those emotions (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). The process of emotional contagion has been researched extensively for the past decade, and empirical evidence has supported its existence in social settings. Most of the research on emotional contagion has been in the psychology literature and in the marketing literature (see Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006 for example). The strongest empirical support for the existence of

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emotional contagion as a real phenomenon comes from the field of neuro-cognitive psychology, where researchers make use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) methods. Recently, for instance, Nummenmaa, Hirvonen, Parkkola, and Hietanen (2008) used fMRI to show that emotional contagion physically occurs as a special type of empathy. The evidence they found for emotional contagion can be seen in limbic areas involved in emotion processing (thalamus), cortical areas involved in face (fusiform gyrus) and body perception, as well as in brain networks associated with mirroring of others' actions (inferior parietal lobule).

Nonetheless, there have also been developments in exploration of emotional contagion processes within the organizational literature. Studies of emotional contagion processes in groups and teams (Barsade, 2002; Totterdell, 2000; Totterdell, Kellet, Teuchmann, & Briner, 1998) and in leadership interactions (Bono & Illies, 2006; Sy, Côté & Saavedra, 2005) are testament of the emerging interest on emotional contagion processes in organizational behavior research. This is in part attributable to the increasing acknowledgement of the prevalence and impact of emotions in organizational life (Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Daus, 2002). Recent research also suggests that emotional contagion processes may be an important but overlooked mechanism by which leaders and followers themselves influence leadership processes (e.g., see Sy et al., 2005; Tee & Ashkanasy, 2008). We build upon these recent findings to posit that emotional contagion is a central, direct means by which followers themselves ultimately influence perceptions of leadership effectiveness in organizations.

In this article, we focus exclusively on contagion of negative emotions. We justify this approach based on Dasborough's (2006) research, where she found that, compared to positive emotion, negative emotion was a stronger determinant of member perceptions of leaders. We do however still acknowledge that members also experience positive affect, which also can spread through contagion processes. In this instance, it is important to note that we do not discount the value of positive emotions, especially since scholars have consistently highlighted the value of positive emotions for cognitive performance and general wellbeing (Forgas & George, 2001; Frederickson, 2003). Nonetheless, we concur with Game (2008), who highlights that our understanding of why and how leaders arouse negative follower emotions is lacking in leadership research. We therefore argue that, by focusing primarily on negative follower affect, we can provide new and convincing evidence that leadership phenomena are not shaped solely by leaders, but also by the emotions of followers (see also Meindl, 1995).

1. Contextual influences on leadership

Individual characteristics, team behaviors, and organizational factors affect the process of leadership and its effectiveness in organizations (Shamir & Howell, 1999). Hence, leadership is embedded within a broader social context, evident in work groups, units, and organizations (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). Consequently, contextual factors can produce cross-level effects where variables at one level influence variables at another (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Rousseau, 1985). As Antonakis and colleagues (2004) explain, however, the context in which leadership is manifested and embedded has received relatively little research attention to date. New leadership theories regularly neglect contextual influences and regard leadership as isolated from the larger social context (Johns, 2006).

Given that leadership is context-dependent and multi-level in nature, scholars have called for more research synthesizing macro- and micro-level perspectives to study leadership in the hope of providing new insights into individual, group, and organizational effectiveness (see Osborn et al., 2002). In this regard, House, Rousseau, and Thomas-Hunt (1995) were among first to develop a comprehensive framework proposing the "Meso-Paradigm" that integrates micro- and macro-perspectives to advance research in the field of organizational behavior. Their framework emphasizes that macro- and micro-level conceptualizations and cross-level linkages should be considered and specified for theoretical development, research design, data analysis, and results interpretation. Adding to this early work on the meso-paradigm, scholars such as Johns (2006), and Rousseau and Fried (2001), have directed attention to variables at different levels of analysis within their contextual milieu.

Consequently, developing meso-models of leadership is theoretically and practically important because it provides a more comprehensive picture of how leadership should be studied. By integrating micro- and macro-level perspectives, we can examine processes and variables across levels simultaneously. Our proposed model contributes to the existing leadership literature because it involves representing the context in which leadership is conceptualized, and the levels at which leadership is enacted (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). Specifically, our model consists of micro- and macro-level variables, including individual-level (perception of unwarranted favoritism and attribution of insincerity), dyadic-level (LMX quality), group-level (TMX quality, affective climate and trust climate), and organizational-level variables (organizational endorsement and cynicism towards leaders). To elaborate the micro-macro nexus further, we also include six organizational-level contextual variables: task interdependence, temporal context, organizational reward system, emotional labor requirements, power distance, and organizational culture.

2. A meso-model of negative member affect towards leaders

In the meso-model we propose, relationships between variables proceed from the micro-level, though to dyads and groups, and end up at the macro-organizational level. Our meso-model of leadership is based on a follower-centric approach and encapsulates the underlying principles of the meso-paradigm. While leadership research has traditionally focused on the leader (Hollander, 1992), our focus is on the role of the follower in the leadership process (Meindl, 1995), and how followers impact leadership through the dyadic, group, and organizational levels of analysis.

Thus, beginning at the micro-level, we consider two leader behaviors that influence followers' perceptions of the leader: leader favoritism towards group members and leader affective displays. We argue that followers' perceptions of these aspects of their leader's behavior form the basis for their consequent experience of negative emotions, resulting in their portrayal of negative