Cross-cultural variations in leadership perceptions and attribution of charisma to the leader

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Abstract

Leadership perception is based on (a) a recognition-based process that involves categorization of leaders' characteristics into relevant stereotypes; and (b) an inference-based process that involves making attributions for leaders' characteristics based on outcomes of salient events (Lord & Maher, 1993). The present study examined the interactive effects of these two alternative processes of leadership perceptions on attributions of charisma cross-culturally. Groups of participants from either a collectivistic culture (Turkey) or an individualistic culture (United States) read a vignette about a prototypical or antiprototypical leader (manipulation of recognition-based process) whose company produced a slight or significant increase in sales (manipulation of inference-based process). The results showed that the co-occurrence of these two processes produced optimal attribution of charisma to the leader. In addition, the leaders' prototypical characteristics were more effective in forming a leadership impression in an individualistic culture, whereas collectivistic people made attributions based on the company performance outcome.
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Introduction

The power of leaders is largely dependent on how they are perceived by others (Hollander & Julian, 1969; Maurer & Lord, 1991; Pfeffer, 1977). The extent to which an individual is perceived as a leader can increase employees' acceptance of organizational decisions and policies, followers' organizational commitment, and positive affect among employees (Pfeffer, 1977). Positive perceptions help leaders accentuate their important characteristics to manage their public impressions (Foti, Fraser, & Lord, 1982). Perceptual processes are also important influences on the measurement of leader behavior (Hogg, 2001; Maurer & Lord, 1991). For instance, to select leaders, or to provide developmental feedback to managers, most assessment centers use behavioral measures that can be distorted by observers' perceptual inaccuracies (Maurer

& Lord, 1991; Murphy & Jones, 1993). Therefore, research on leadership perceptions expands our views of how leaders gain and maintain power, helps leaders to improve their abilities to execute and manage their roles in organizations, and guides applied psychologists and managers in the use of behavioral measurements.

To understand how people perceive leaders, it is essential to understand how they process information and interpret organizational performance in different cultural contexts. The present study investigated leadership perceptions by comparing recognition-based and inference-based information processing, and primarily examined how their co-occurrence increases attributions of charisma to leaders in collectivistic and individualistic cultures. We sought to obtain experimental evidence for the interactive effects of these two alternative forms of information processing on the attributions of charisma to the leader. The other purpose of this study was to investigate both the moderating and mediating processes involved. In particular, we examined culture as the potential moderator, and dispositional attributions as the potential mediator.

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Leadership information processing

A cognitive-attribution approach has been developed to explain the link between leadership perceptual processes and performance (Lord & Maher, 1993). Research suggests that leadership perceptions are based on both the leader's traits (*recognition-based processing*) (Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986), and outcome of events (*inference-based processing*) (Calder, 1977; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). *Recognition-based processing* involves categorization of the leader by making a connection between the leader's characteristics and the prototype of a leader held in memory. A prototype of a leader (i.e., an abstract representation of the most representative features of leaders), such as someone who is goal-oriented and intelligent, is accessed from long-term memory when triggered by a stimulus in the environment (Mischel, 1979). "Once a stimulus person is categorized as the leader, the activated leader prototype causes followers to selectively attend to, encode, and retrieve schema-consistent information, and to provide consistent information where such information does not exist" (Kenney, Blascovich, & Shaver, 1994, p. 411; Phillips & Lord, 1982). When there is a good fit between the leader's characteristics and the abstract ideas of what leaders are, then that leader is categorized into the relevant category (Lord & Maher, 1993), perceived as more powerful and charismatic, and given more credit for work outcomes (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984). Both experimental (e.g., Cronshaw & Lord, 1987; Fraser & Lord, 1988; Lord et al., 1984; Maurer & Lord, 1991) and correlational (e.g., Foti et al., 1982) studies indicated that categorization affects perceptions of leaders and descriptions of their actual behavior.

Inference-based processing involves making attributions for leaders' characteristic based on outcomes of salient events (Lord, 1985; Lord & Maher, 1993; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl et al., 1985; Phillips & Lord, 1981; Rush, Phillips, & Lord, 1981). A group's level of performance is a salient piece of information (Binning, Zaba, & Whattam, 1986). Rush et al. (1981) showed that participants who were told that group performance was good provided higher leadership ratings than those who were told performance was poor. A leader is perceived as charismatic when the business is successful (Shamir, 1992), while business failures are usually attributed to a lack of leadership of the executives, and moreover these failures can detract from the executives' perceived leadership qualities (Lord & Maher, 1993). Repeated organizational successes can enhance the perceptions of CEOs' leadership, increasing their opportunities for further successes, whereas failures severely limit the potential actions of CEOs, diminishing their capacity to improve future organizational performance (Lord & Maher, 1993).

Attribution of charisma to the leader

Charismatic leadership is a popular and much researched approach to understanding effective leadership (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2003). Sociologist Max Weber described charismatic individuals as possessing magical abilities and supernatural power of the mind and speech (Etzioni, 1961). A number of researchers have produced complementary conceptualizations of charismatic leadership (House, 1977; Sashkin, 1988; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993) as well as incorporating charisma as a part of transformational theory of leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

One of the most useful and well-researched models for studying the behaviors of charismatic leaders and how followers attribute charismatic leadership is Conger and Kanungo's (1994) theory that focuses on six behavioral factors exhibited by a leader: strategic vision and communication behavior, sensitivity to the environment, unconventional behavior, personal risk, sensitivity to organizational members' needs, and a deviation from the status quo. Past research that utilized this model used both the composite and separate analyses of these behavioral factors (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). This model is important because it focuses on the behavioral aspects of charismatic leadership (such as demonstrating heightened sensitivity to environmental constraints and followers' needs, formulating and articulating an ideological vision that is discrepant from the status quo) that form the basis for followers' attribution of charisma rather than a set of traits associated with charismatic leadership (Conger & Kanungo, 1987).

The present study

Much of the research on charismatic leadership relies on perceptual ratings, and therefore, it is important to understand what factors are likely to contribute to attributions of charisma. Although a recent study found that the type of attributions played a mediating role between a leader's actual behavior and whether he or she was seen as influential, the study did not look specifically at whether attributions affected ratings of charisma (Yorges, Weiss, & Strickland, 1999). Also, no studies to date have specifically examined which types of information processing play a role in affecting attributions of charisma. Thus, the primary purpose of the present study was to examine the interactive effects of inference-based and recognition-based processing on attributions of charismatic leadership. We hypothesized that the co-occurrence of these two processes does not merely produce an additive combination of their individual benefits, but instead, produces an interaction. Specifically, we expected the combined effects of recognition- and inference-based processing to produce an interaction