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An exploration of perspective taking as an antecedent of transformational leadership behavior

Transformational
leadership
behavior

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to explore dyad-specific perspective taking as a potential antecedent of transformational leadership behavior.

Design/methodology/approach – The study's hypothesis was explored through a sample of 106 supervisor/subordinate dyads working in a hospital. Supervisors self-reported their dyad-specific perspective taking, while subordinates evaluated the transformational leadership behaviors of their supervisors.

Findings – Results indicate that dyad-specific perspective taking is related to transformational leadership behavior and not related to transactional leadership behavior.

Practical implications – Results suggest that managers wishing to improve their skills as leaders may want to increase the frequency with which they attempt to look at issues from the perspective of their subordinates.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the literature by suggesting that dyad-specific perspective taking is related to transformational leadership behavior.

Keywords Leaders, Leadership, Transformational leadership, Behaviour, Managers, Employees

Paper type Research paper

Leadership literature has primarily concerned itself with the exploration of the outcomes and consequences of different leadership techniques. A considerable amount of empirical evidence has been amassed that points to a number of positive outcomes associated with sophisticated leadership behaviors such as transformational leadership. In fact, Rubin *et al.* (2005) suggested that the relationships between transformational leadership and outcomes at the individual, group, and organizational levels have become self-evident.

Perhaps in response to Bass's (1998) call for research exploring the factors that predict transformational leadership, a small, but growing stream of leadership research (e.g. Rubin *et al.*, 2005; Barbuto and Burbach, 2006) has emerged. This research is aimed at attempting to understand the antecedents of different types of leadership behavior by



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investigating the relationship between the attributes of managers and their management style. The current study contributes to this literature stream by expanding the variables addressed in examinations of leadership style and adding the concept of relationship-specific perspective taking to the list. Specifically, the main aim of this study is to explore whether a relationship exists between a supervisor's tendency to take the perspective of a follower, and that follower's assessment of their supervisor's leadership style. The research question, then, is whether supervisors who see the world "through the eyes" of a given subordinate will be perceived, by that subordinate, as possessing a more highly developed leadership style.

Transformational leadership

The vast majority of leadership research since 1990 has focused on the transformational leadership model (Judge and Piccolo, 2004). Transformational leadership was developed by Bass (1985) as an extension of a previous study's distinction between transactional and transformational forms of leadership. Transactional leaders are said to focus on short-term contingent exchanges whereby extrinsic rewards are given to followers when desired behaviors are performed. Transformational leadership, in contrast, describes the process whereby leaders intrinsically direct followers towards long term objectives. Transformational leaders have been described as those who alter the way that their followers think about themselves such that feelings of commitment and involvement are enhanced (Shamir *et al.*, 1993).

The transformational leadership model provides a multi-dimensional view of leadership behaviors. There has been some debate in the literature about the discriminant validity of several of the transformational leadership dimensions, but a model with eight dimensions is often used (Judge and Piccolo, 2004). Multiple techniques have been used to substantiate the eight-factor approach to transformational leadership, including factor analysis, observation, interviews, and follower descriptions (Bass *et al.*, 2003). The eight dimensions are broken into three categories: transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and *laissez-faire* leadership. The specific dimensions within each of these categories are described below.

Transformational leadership consists of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Idealized influence refers to the degree to which a leader's highly moral behavior elicits admiration from followers which results in the followers identifying with and committing themselves to the leader's cause. Inspirational motivation describes the strength of a leader's vision, the leader's ability to accurately communicate that vision, and the desirability of the vision for the followers. Intellectual stimulation depicts the leadership behaviors associated with providing followers with decision making information, and encouraging followers to question the values and norms of the organization. Individualized consideration refers to the leader's concern with the developmental needs of each follower and the leader's willingness to provide the support needed in order to help the follower advance their career (Bono and Judge, 2004; Judge and Piccolo, 2004).

The three transactional leadership dimensions, which allow the leader to influence follower behaviors through a logical set of exchange propositions, are contingent reward, active management by exception, and passive management by exception.

Contingent reward describes a set of behaviors whereby the leader sets expectations for the followers, communicates those expectations, and provides rewards to those followers who meet expectations. Active management by exception involves actively monitoring follower's progress towards expected performance levels, identifying followers who are falling behind expectations, and initiating corrective actions upon those followers. Passive management by exception refers to leaders who wait for the poor performance of a follower to reach a critical level before initiating any intervention (Bono and Judge, 2004; Judge and Piccolo, 2004).

The final dimension of the transformational leadership model, *laissez-faire*, is often described as non-leadership. *Laissez-faire* leadership refers to the absence of leadership responsibilities altogether, whereby the leader exhibits little or no leadership behaviors when leadership behaviors are needed (Bono and Judge, 2004; Judge and Piccolo, 2004).

Transformational leadership has been shown to be related to several important organizational and individual outcomes. A fairly consistent relationship between transformational leadership and group-level performance in a variety of settings has been established in the literature (e.g. Bass *et al.*, 2003; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2007; Lowe *et al.*, 1996). Group-level outcomes such as team creativity have also been found to be related to transformational leadership (Sosik *et al.*, 1997). Often, the impact of transformational leadership on performance is mediated by group-level constructs such as group potency (Sosik *et al.*, 1997; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2007).

While the empirical evidence supporting the relationship between transformational leadership and positive organizational outcomes seems quite strong, less is known about the potential individual antecedents of transformational leadership behavior. Bass (1998) called for an investigation of the factors that might predict an individual's propensity to exhibit transformational leadership behaviors. This study considers dyad-specific perspective taking as one potential antecedent of transformational leadership behavior.

Perspective taking

Perspective taking can be thought of as the mental act of perceiving a situation from another individual's point-of-view. In other words, perspective taking is what happens when you "put yourself in another person's shoes." Perspective taking has its roots in developmental psychology as an underlying dimension of an individual's mental framework (e.g. Kohlberg, 1969; Kegan, 1982). As a result, one's perspective taking has a general effect on one's social interaction, and thus a potential impact on workplace relationships.

When discussing perspective taking in the context of organizational studies, an important distinction needs to be made regarding its dimensionality. Though the term perspective taking is used in both cases, there are actually two distinct, yet related, conceptualizations referenced in the literature. As noted above, perspective taking's origins are in developmental psychology. In this sense of the term, perspective taking is discussed as a hallmark of various points in the mind's growth. Work by Piaget (1972), Kohlberg (1969), and Kegan (1982) all share a similar conceptualization of perspective taking in that they regard it in a way similar to a general disposition based on a facet of cognitive development. By conceptualizing perspective taking in this way, an individual's tendency to take others' perspectives is applied across all interactions in the same way that a personality construct would be applied across all contexts. In a

recent study, Skinner and Spurgeon (2005) used such a conceptualization of perspective taking in order to explore whether dispositional empathy (a concept closely related to perspective taking) was related to assessments of leadership style. Results of this study suggested that some components of empathy were positively related to transformational leadership behavior.

In contrast to this dispositional understanding of perspective taking, Parker and Axtell (2001) conceptualized perspective taking as a mental behavior that is determined by multiple relationship-specific antecedents. Thus, an individual's perspective taking in their study differs depending on the nature of the relationship that the individual taking a perspective has with the person whose perspective is being taken. In other words, while dispositional perspective taking might be applied across a person's various relationships, this person-specific perspective taking may differ across multiple relationships. Parker and Axtell conceptualized perspective taking in terms of two mental behaviors: empathy and positive attributions. In this context, empathy can be defined as feeling emotional response for another in a way similar to how one feels emotion about themselves. Positive attributions regards the tendency to evaluate other's behavior in a positive, understanding light.

As individuals take the perspectives of others, they understand others' behaviors in a way closer to how they understand their own behaviors. As Davis *et al.* (1996) have pointed out, "self/target overlap" occurs when we take another's perspective, and the perceived other becomes more self-like. This partial merging of self and other is the change in mental representation that lies at the heart of perspective taking. This type of target-specific perspective taking could be said to "short circuit" the fundamental attribution error, which biases our interpretation of other people's actions and the consequences of those actions (Schermerhorn, 2005). Therefore, when we both make positive attributions about another individual and experience empathy for the other individual, we see the other individual's perspective in a manner similar to the way that we see ourselves and our own perspective.

In summary, two distinct, yet related conceptualizations of perspective taking exist in the literature. One sees perspective taking as a disposition applied across all relationships, while the others see perspective taking as a relationship-specific construct which may vary according to the relationship. The current study uses the relationship-specific conceptualization, which we refer to as dyad-specific perspective taking.

Hypothesis development

The basis of the argument for the relationship between perspective taking and transformational leadership is that transformational leadership requires the leader to influence the follower's perceptions of reality (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). The ability to have such an influence seems to be at least in part based on the leader's ability to understand the individual's current paradigm. It would seemingly be difficult to have a transformational effect on the way an individual views the world without first being aware of the way that that individual does, in fact, view the world. Multiple theorists have suggested that transformational leaders exhibit an awareness of followers' perspectives and show empathy for those perspectives (Ashkanasy and Tse, 2000; Barbuto and Burbach, 2006).

A limited amount of empirical evidence supports the proposition that transformational leaders are highly aware of the manner in which their followers think about the world around them. In a study of managerial derailment, Lombardo *et al.* (1987) found that the managers who did not take the perspective of their subordinates were more likely to perform poorly. Additionally, the ability of a leader to recognize the emotional state of followers has been shown to have a significant positive relationship with transformational leadership behavior (Rubin *et al.*, 2005; Barbuto and Burbach, 2006).

Various researchers (Dubinsky *et al.*, 1995; Mederian and Sosisk, 1996; Sosik and Megerian, 1999) have also approached the question in terms of whether elements of emotional intelligence are related to transformational leadership. Empathy, in particular, seems a necessary capacity in transformational leadership behaviors such as individual consideration (Bass, 1998).

Based on these theoretical propositions and empirical results, we offer the following hypothesis:

- H1.* Leader dyad-specific perspective taking is positively associated with subordinate's perceptions of transformational leadership behavior.

Method

Sample and procedure

This sample is composed of 106 supervisor/subordinate dyads from a healthcare organization in the southeastern US. A list of all possible participants was provided to the researchers, which included 28 supervisors and their subordinates. In an attempt to limit the amount of data that a particular supervisor would be asked to provide, five subordinates for each of the 28 supervisors were chosen for participation in this study using a random number generator (if a given supervisor had five or fewer subordinates, all of their subordinates were included).

Participants were contacted through internal mail and asked to participate in a survey assessing various aspects of supervisor/subordinate interactions. Supervisors rated their level of dyad-specific perspective taking with each of the five randomly selected subordinates as well as their age and education level, which were used as controls. Subordinates rated the transformational and transactional leadership of their supervisor. The final sample of 106-paired dyads represents 73 percent of the 146 dyads from whom responses were requested (of the 28 supervisors from whom data was requested, 23 completed and returned the surveys).

Measures

Perspective taking. Dyad-specific perspective taking was assessed using a six-item measure developed by Parker and Axtell (2001). This measure assesses perspective taking in terms of the cognitive outcomes, empathy and positive attribution. Instead of being used to assess coworkers as it was originally designed, here, the word coworker was replaced with the word subordinate, since the present study deals with vertical, rather than horizontal dyads. The Chronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.75. Responses were made using a seven-point response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Example items by which supervisors indicated their dyad-specific perspective taking for each of the subordinates in the study include, "I feel concerned

for this employee if s/he is under pressure.” and “This employee usually does the best s/he can, given the circumstances”.

Transformational and transactional leadership. Transformational and transactional leadership were measured by the multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ Form 5X) (Bass and Avolio, 1995). All 28 items asked followers to rate the degree to which they agree that their supervisor engages in a series of actions. Responses were made on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). This response format differs slightly from the original MLQ format which solicits responses on a five-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (frequently, if not always).

Transformational leadership was calculated as the aggregated score of four sub-dimensions, and transactional leadership was calculated as the aggregated score of three sub-dimensions. The dimensions of transformational leadership included idealized influence (e.g. “talks about their most important values and beliefs”), inspirational motivation (e.g. “talks optimistically about the future”), individualized consideration (e.g. “spends time teaching and coaching”), and intellectual stimulation (e.g. “seeks differing perspectives when solving problems”). The transformational leadership scale had a coefficient alpha of 0.96. Transactional leadership was comprised of contingent rewards (e.g. “provides me with assistance in exchange for my efforts”) active management by exception (e.g. “keeps track of all mistakes”), and passive management by exception (e.g. “fails to interfere until problems become serious”). One item was dropped from the contingent reward portion of this scale (“expresses satisfaction when I meet expectations”) due to low reliability. The resulting coefficient alpha for this scale was 0.70.

Control variables. Two control variables were utilized; the supervisor’s self-reported age (1 = 18-25, 2 = 26-30, 3 = 31-35, 4 = 36-40, 5 = 41-45, 6 = 46-50, 7 = 51-55, 8 = 56-60, 9 = 61-65, 10 = 66-70) and education level (1 = some high school, 2 = high school graduate/GED, 3 = some college, 4 = Associate’s degree, 5 = Bachelor’s degree, 6 = graduate work). These controls were included as a result of previous research that found significant relationships between perspective taking and age (Parker and Axtell, 2001), and between leadership style and education level (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2004).

Analyses

The data in this study take on a unique form; specifically, responses from employees are nested within supervisors, which violates the independence assumption for ordinary least squares regression (Greene, 2003). To test for this nesting effect on the dependent variable, we first calculated the interclass correlation coefficient (ICC) (Bliese, 2000). Using this approach, the variation in the dependent variable, subordinate reported transformational leadership, can be split into two components, that which is due to the nesting within supervisor and the variance due to the individual employee respondent. The variation attributable to the nesting within supervisor, is represented by the ICC, and is estimated to be 0.082 (p -value = < 0.001). This result suggests a moderate amount of nesting (Bliese, 1998) within the data; specifically, a nontrivial amount of variation within the dependent variable is attributable to the supervisor.

Additionally, a Levine test was run to assess the possible homogeneity of variances across different supervisors. If dyad-specific perspective taking is truly a situational construct as opposed to a dispositional construct, then it would be expected that

variances would be heterogeneous across supervisors. An ANOVA was performed with dyad-specific perspective taking as the dependent variable and the supervisor identification number as the factor. Results suggested that different supervisors had different mean levels of dyad-specific perspective taking ($p < 0.001$), but the Levine test results suggested that variances in dyad-specific perspective taking were not consistent across supervisors ($W = 3.698$, $p < 0.001$). If dyad-specific perspective taking was a dispositional variable, then it would be expected that variances within supervisor groupings would be similarly low.

In order to accommodate this unique data structure, the hypothesis presented in this study was tested using a hierarchical linear model (HLM) analyzed in SAS 9.2 for Windows Cary, NC, using the proc mixed procedure.

Results

Correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Table I. Regression results (shown in Table II) suggest that the study's hypothesis was supported. Leader's dyad-specific perspective taking was significantly related to subordinate's perceptions of leader's transformational leadership ($\beta = 0.4897$, $p = 0.0013$). Following the recommendation of Hofmann *et al.* (2003), we performed an OLS regression of the model to estimate the R^2 , a technique that has been shown to provide an unbiased estimate of the R^2 from study variables. Using this approach, we estimate the leader's perspective taking accounted for 5 percent of the variance in transformational leadership above and beyond the variance explained by the control variables alone.

In an attempt to explore the impact of perspective taking on transactional leadership, an additional HLM was performed. This analysis also controlled for supervisor age and education. The results of this analysis suggested that perspective taking is not related to transactional leadership ($\beta = -0.097$, n.s.). Taken together,

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Supervisor age	6.15	1.71					
2. Supervisor education	5.17	0.92	0.18				
3. Transformational leadership	5.65	0.97	0.14	-0.02	(0.96)		
4. Transactional leadership	3.91	0.79	0.07	-0.04	0.07	(0.70)	
5. Perspective taking	5.84	0.81	-0.25*	-0.18	0.14	-0.12	(0.75)

Notes: $n = 106$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; Coefficient alphas are reported on the diagonal

Table I.
Means, standard deviations, coefficient alphas and intercorrelations for all study variables

Predictors	Step 1	Step 2
Intercept	5.18	1.94
Supervisor age	0.01	0.02*
Supervisor education	-0.01	-0.03
Leader's dyad-specific perspective taking		0.49*
ΔR^2		0.05
R^2	0.02	0.07

Notes: $n = 106$; * $p < 0.05$

Table II.
Hierarchical linear model results of study variables on leader's transformational leadership

these analyses suggest that perspective taking has a positive impact on transformational leadership and may not be related to transactional leadership.

Discussion

This study found support for the notion that when leaders take the perspective of their followers, those followers tend to view the leader as exhibiting more transformational leadership behaviors. While the vast majority of the research on transformational leadership has examined the outcomes associated with these leadership behaviors, this study's main contribution stems from the introduction of dyad-specific perspective taking as an antecedent of transformational leadership behaviors.

The positive relationship between a leader's dyad-specific perspective taking and a subordinate's perception of that leader's transformational leadership suggests that understanding the manner in which a subordinate sees the world is one factor that enables a leader to have a transformational effect on a follower. This relationship is consistent with the conceptualization of transformational leaders as those who influence the perspective of their followers (i.e. Shamir *et al.*, 1993), as understanding a follower's perspective should allow the leader an appropriate starting point from which to begin to influence the perspective of that follower. Attempting to influence the perspective of another individual without first understanding that individual's current perspective, on the other hand, seems problematic as it would be difficult to establish preliminary common ground.

The notion that important leadership outcomes result from a range of leadership skills and/or characteristics may provide a complementary conceptualization of the relationship between perspective taking and transformational leadership. For instance, Mumford *et al.* (2000) developed a model focusing on skills which enable managers to understand and solve non-programmed problems. Perspective taking is often defined as both a skill (Parker and Axtell, 2001) and a characteristic (Kuhnert and Lewis, 1987). Thus, perhaps a simpler way to interpret our findings is that perspective taking is a skill that contributes to one's ability to perform transformational leadership behaviors.

The results of this study may also help to further illustrate the importance of relationship-specific perspective taking as a contributor to the quality of important workplace interactions. While Parker and Axtell (2001) found support for regarding perspective taking as a contributory factor for the quality of peer-level dyads (horizontally linked coworkers), this current finding suggests that perspective taking is also part of leadership behavior among vertically linked coworkers.

While we find the results of this study promising, several limitations should be noted. First, since data was collected in a cross-sectional fashion, caution must be taken when interpreting the results. Specifically, the nature of cross-sectional data has made any tests of causality impossible. Therefore, there is a possibility that a pattern of causality different than that described by our theoretical arguments could be responsible for the relationships we identified in our results. Second, this study used a modest sample in a particular setting. Replications of this work via larger samples in more diverse settings are needed in order to confirm this study's results. Finally, this study explores only one antecedent of transformational leadership behavior, and further research is needed to identify additional variables that make one more or less likely to engage in transformational leadership behavior.

Despite these limitations, this study represents a contribution to our understanding of the factors that explain transformational leadership. Though the hypothesis of the current study was exploratory, it was an initial attempt to examine potential relationships between transformational leadership and supervisor dyad-specific perspective taking. Results suggest that a leader's ability to take the perspective of a follower is positively related to the tendency of the follower to view the leader as transformational.

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