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Individual differences in the leader categorization to openness to influence relationship: The role of followers' self-perception and social comparison orientation

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Abstract

Contemporary so called follower-centric leadership theories often argue that "good leadership is in the eye of the beholder". Leader categorization theory, for instance, suggests that subordinates use their cognitive representation of an ideal leader (ideal leader prototype) as an implicit "benchmark" to determine their openness towards the target's leadership, i.e., influence. With the present study, we extend this rationale by hypothesizing that such benchmarking processes are subject to follower individual differences. In particular, we argue that the process of leader categorization plays a bigger role for subordinates who perceive themselves as ideal (potential) leaders. Moreover, this two-way moderation is proposed to be further qualified by subordinates' disposition to engage in social comparison orientation. Results of two field samples with employees ($N = 140$; $N = 287$) confirm our hypotheses. In integrating the leader categorization perspective with an individual difference perspective, we not only expand the scope of follower-centric theorizing on social influence, but also support its validity.

Keywords

Implicit Leadership Theories, ILT, leader prototypes, leader schema, leadership categorization, information processing, self-concept, leader identity

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> […] peel away the surface of social judgment a bit and one finds underneath an act of social comparison. (David Dunning, 2000, p. 354)

The follower-centric perspective on leadership effectiveness provides a persuasive case for the idea that followers' openness to their leaders' influence is critically contingent on followers' perceptions that their leaders have the characteristics of a good leader (e.g., Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Schyns & Meindl, 2005; Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2006).

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In a nutshell, this perspective argues that people have implicit theories of what characterizes a (good) leader as opposed to a non-leader, i.e., "good leadership is in the eye of the beholder". While people may willingly follow someone they can categorize as a good leader, i.e., someone who in their eyes represents their ideal leader prototype, they will be reluctant to do so otherwise.

Using insights from research on self-concept and social comparison, we argue that the follower-centric story should not end here. In particular, we propose that followers' perceptions of their own leadership qualities in combination with their social comparison orientation should moderate the extent to which followers rely on leader prototypes in their responses to their leaders. As the response criterion, we focus on followers' attitude to be open for a leader's influence because such openness can arguably be considered an important precondition for leadership effectiveness (Hollander, 1964; Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996; Yukl, 2005). By linking socio-cognitive and follower-centric leadership research on yet other levels, the present study primarily broadens the scope of follower-centric leadership theorizing (cf. Lord, Brown, & Harvey, 2003) but also potentially helps to fine-tune staffing processes in practice.

Leader categorization theory

The perspective of cognitive psychology, that humans should (also) be understood as information processing systems and their behavior as a consequence of such processing (Abelson, Black, & Galambos, 1986; Bourne, Dominowski, & Loftus, 1979), substantially changed how leadership and its effects were understood (Lord, 1985; Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl et al., 1985). Specifically, it was noticed that growing up in groups where leadership is a natural phenomenon leads people to develop Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs). These ILTs are schematic expectations of what happens as a result of leadership, what can be defined as "good" leadership, and who can be defined as a "good" leader. ILTs provide perceptional sense-making frameworks (cf. Weick, 1995) which consequently channel people's perceptions and indicate "adequate" responses towards encountered leaders and their leadership (Harris, 1994; Markus & Zajonc, 1985; Poole, Gioia, & Gray, 1989). As this kind of "guidance" spares people's cognitive resources, information on leaders and their leadership can be reacted upon rather fast and frugal - which is especially crucial when cognitive demands in situations are high (Maurer & Lord, 1991).

The notion of leader categorization theory rests upon this cognitive perspective. More specifically, it proposes that people use a previously developed mental image of an ideal leader, i.e., a so called leader prototype, as a means to implicitly judge the quality and leadership legitimacy of their actual leaders. And although the underlying prototypes differ in some part from person to person (Keller, 1999), from context to context (i.e., leadership in business, politics, or sports, Lord, Foti, & de Vader, 1984, and, although there is no research on it, probably also to a certain extent between organizations within the same context and even between departments within the same organization), and from culture to culture (Brodbeck et al., 2000; Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2007; Gerstner & Day, 1994; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), the process a leader prototype is associated with is essentially the same—it is a benchmark. The better the match between a target and subordinates' leader prototype, the more a target is perceived as a leader and consequently the more open people are towards the target's leadership. The leader categorization rationale thus partly explains why some people are more likely to emerge as leaders or get promoted to (higher) leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Engle & Lord, 1997; Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Ridgeway, 2001; cf. Conger & Kanungo, 1987). In addition, it explains why some leaders manage to have better leader-follower relationships that evoke higher levels

of job satisfaction and organizational commitment in their subordinates (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). Similarly, such prototype matching processes are also used to explain why women find it more difficult to obtain leadership positions than men and harder to establish authority in these positions (Eagly, 2005; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, Block, & Stathatos, 1997; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996; Scott & Brown, 2006).

In summary, the evidence suggests that followers heavily rely upon implicit leader prototypes to determine if they are open towards a leader's leadership. The more they perceive prototypical leader features in their actual leaders, the more open towards their leader's leadership, i.e., towards their social influence, they will be.

The interdependence of perceptions of others and self-perceptions

How subordinates perceive their leaders is the centerpiece of leader categorization theory. Socio-cognitive research of the last decades, however, would suggest that perceptions do not take place in isolation (Alicke, Dunning, & Krueger, 2005; Kahneman & Miller, 1986). Indeed, a prominent constraint to consider is 'the perceivers' themselves, especially (a) how they perceive themselves and (b) how strongly they engage in self-other comparisons.

First, let us outline how the perception of others is fundamentally interwoven with one's self-perception. Research on self-concept suggests that the perception of others also activates self-perceptions to a certain degree. In other words, evaluating someone else along a certain dimension will often automatically instigate people to also think about themselves in that domain (Dunning & Cohen, 1992; Dunning & Hayes, 1996). Thus, if leader categorization theory proposes that leaders are evaluated against a leader prototype, it is very likely that subordinates will also become aware of their own leadership potential along the leader prototype.

Additionally, self-concept research suggests that people with strong leader-self-concept (i.e., with a working self as a leader) will have a lot more aspects to "think" about than someone who does not consider her/himself to be a leader (Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Specifically, it is suggested that the centrality of a certain concept in someone's self-concept determines the concept's degree of elaboration in people's cognitive structures (Markus & Wurf, 1987). This is little surprising considering that it can be assumed that concepts that are central to the self are also more often prompted and explored as part of every day life than concepts which have little to do with the self. Connectionist reasoning affirms the same by arguing that the underlying cognitive nodes are more manifold, more strongly affiliated, and have a lower threshold for activation in these cases (Bechtel & Abrahamsen, 2002).

Research has shown that a possible consequence of these elaborate self-concepts is that people also attach more meaning to domains that are linked to their self-concepts, i.e., they give more weight to self-concept related information when judging and responding to others (Carpenter, 1988; Dunning, Perie, & Story, 1991; Keller, 1999; Lewicki, 1983; Markus et al., 1985). Moreover, people with a strong self-concept in a certain domain tend to make more extreme and confident evaluations of others in the same domain, presumably due to their own familiarity with the domain (Dunning & Beauregard, 2000; Fong & Markus, 1982; Lambert & Wedell, 1991).

Translating these insight to the world of leadership and social influence, it thus stands to reason that those subordinates who consider themselves to be (potential) leaders, i.e., those who see the leader prototype as part of their self-concepts, should also rely more on the leader prototype as a means of benchmarking their leaders and, consequently, also as a means to determine their openness toward these leaders' leadership compared to those subordinates who do no consider themselves potential leaders.

The interdependence of perceptions of others, self-perceptions, and social comparison orientation

Social comparison research suggests that the egocentricity of social judgments extends even further than outlined above. Specifically, people differ in the degree to which egocentricity permeates their social judgments. Since Festinger's (1954) early accounts of social comparison, it is known that people tend to set themselves into perspective to others. In his theory, he proposed that "There exists, in the human organism, a drive to evaluate his opinions and abilities" (p. 117). Since then, however, the theory has considerably evolved. While it is still acknowledged that social comparison is a universal phenomenon, it was also found that people differ in the degree to which they engage in social comparison. Reconsidering findings that some personality traits tend to involve acts of social comparison (Wheeler, 2000), Gibbons and Buunk (1999) pointed out and confirmed that the degree to which people engage in social comparison should in itself be conceptualized as a disposition, a disposition to compare one's opinions and abilities to other's, regardless of the direction of comparison that is sought (i.e., upward or downward).

Moreover, it has recently been argued that social comparison works both ways (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001; Dunning, 2000; Krueger, 2000). While traditional social comparison theory focuses on how people gather information on others in order to reevaluate their self-views, the same is nowadays proposed to work vice versa, i.e., people also take their self-concepts as a benchmark for their assessments of others. Indeed, it has been marked a curiosity that research on social comparison and on social judgment have started from different premises and have developed different research avenues, yet, as social comparison implicitly underlies social judgment processes, essentially address the same phenomena (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001; Dunning, 2000). Empirical research (Dunning & Hayes, 1996) supports this argumentation showing that when participants were split into participants who indicated that they took their self as a standard for judgments and those who did not, the self-concept of the former had a bigger effect on the judgments of others than it did for the latter.

Taken together, we can conclude that people differ in the degree to which they engage in social comparison and thus in the degree to which their social comparison permeates their perceptions of others. As people's disposition to engage in social comparison is related to the frequency and extent to which self-concepts are accessed (Dunning, 2000; Dunning & Hayes, 1996), people high in social comparison can be assumed to show a heightened degree of self-awareness when perceiving others and subsequently expressing an attitude towards these in a domain in which they have a strong self-concept which can fuel their confidence in their judgments (as outlined in the section before), whereas they can be assumed to be somewhat "lost" and less confident in their attitude when they do not have a strong self-concept in that domain. In other words, when the tendency to engage in social comparison is high, individuals are also likely to be more in "need" of strong-self concept to fuel their confidence in their judgments. Conversely, this effect should be less pronounced when people's social comparison orientation is low.

The hypothesis

To sum it up: The first section on leader categorization theory concluded that subordinates base their responses to their leaders, i.e., their openness towards their social influence, on their perceptions of these leaders vis-à-vis an ideal leader prototype). The second section on the egocentricity of social judgments concluded that the stronger subordinates' self-perceptions vis-à-vis the ideal leader prototype, the more confident subordinates are going to be in basing their responses towards their leaders on their perceptions of these. The third section on individual differences in social comparison concluded that

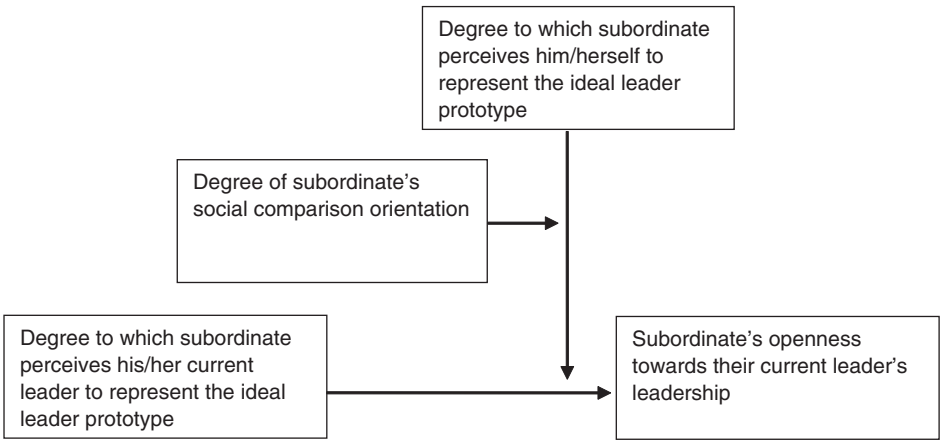


Figure 1. Hypothesized relationships.

subordinates vary in the degree to which they "need" a strong self-concept as a cognitive background to evaluate other people. That is, when responding towards leaders, subordinates high in social comparison orientation are more in "need" of a self-concept as a (potential) leader compared to those subordinates low in social comparison. Hence, when high social comparison subordinates do not have a strong self-concept as a (potential) leader accessible, they should feel less confident to base their responses to leaders on their perceptions of these, i.e., a smaller correlation between perception and response, compared to subordinates who have a strong self-concept as a (potential) leader accessible (Figure 1 presents a schematic depiction of the respective three-way moderation hypothesis).

Hypothesis: The positive relationship between subordinates' perceptions of their actual leader's match to the ideal leader prototype and subordinates' openness towards the leader's leadership is stronger the more subordinates perceive themselves to represent their ideal leader prototype. This two-way moderation effect is further qualified in a three-way interaction, in that it is stronger under the condition of high subordinate social comparison orientation and weaker under the condition of low subordinate social comparison orientation.

Study 1

Method

Sample In order to have sufficient power to detect the proposed interaction in the field and furthermore to prevent strong sampling biases, we set up the study as a multi-site-multi-entry survey. This means that participants were recruited in cooperation with major German websites from diverse backgrounds (e.g., Stern.de, Focus.de, GMX Mailservice) and that the entry-type was either a banner, a teaser text box, or a short article on the rough objective of the survey.

To increase and diversify the motivation to participate, we provided an option for results feedback and included a gift voucher lottery at the end of the survey. Altogether 140 people participated. The sample's mean age was 37 years (SD = 13.79). Women represented 55% of the sample. The mean employment time was 16 years (SD = 13.50) with an average of 6 personally experienced leaders (SD = 4.89), of whom averagely 23% were female. Employees with higher education made up around 52% of the sample. Nearly two-thirds of all participants had completed a vocational training. Participants were employed in more than 15 different industries and more than 20 different departments (approx. 90% white-collar work).

Measures

Predictor variables To assess *subordinates' perceptions of their current leaders* and *of themselves along the ideal leader prototype*, we used a reduced version of the widely applied Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) leadership scales which are usually used to assess prototypes people have for outstanding leaders in different cultures (Hanges & Dickson, 2006; House et al., 2004). This instrument (van Quaquebeke & Brodbeck, 2008) consists of only those attributes that at least 95% of the original German GLOBE sample (N = 471, as reported in Brodbeck & Frese, 2007; House et al., 2004) considered as greatly contributing to or extremely hindering outstanding leadership in Germany (following the method of Dorfman, Hanges, & Brodbeck, 2004). Attributes regarded as prototypical in Germany are: Inspirational, Future-oriented, Foresight, Positive, Motive arouser, Confidence builder, Dynamic, Encouraging, Motivational, Morale booster, Trustworthy, Decisive, Logical, Improvement-oriented, Excellence-oriented, Integrator, Informed, Team builder, Dependable, Intelligent, Effective bargainer. Attributes regarded as antiprototypical in Germany are: Dictatorial, Non-delegater, Vindictive, Irritable, Non-cooperative, Cynical, Dishonest, Hostile, Non-participative. The instrument also encompasses another leadership attribute item ("professional expertise") which was not included in the original GLOBE questionnaire due to its intercultural constraints[1] but which van Quaquebeke and Brodbeck (2008) regard highly relevant for the perception of leadership qualities in Germany (cf. Brodbeck & Frese, 2007). For the present study, participants were first asked to indicate the degree to which they saw themselves (as potential leaders) and then to which degree they saw their current leaders representing all of the 31 leadership attributes. Answers were to be made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Scores for leaders and participants were calculated as means (antiprototypical items were reverse coded). These sum scores consequently indicate the degree to which participants and their leaders represent the ideal leader prototype.

Participants' *social comparison orientation* was assessed via the six item 'comparison of abilities' (COA) subscale out of the "Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure" (INCOM, Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Sample item: "I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things."

Dependent variables We chose two criterions which broadly capture the notion of subordinates' openness to a leader's leadership: subordinates' *vertical respect for their leaders* and their *identification with their leaders*. The first construct was chosen because it entails a conscious decision to trust and go along with the leadership (cf. Dillon, 2003; Kenney et al., 1996; van Quaquebeke, Henrich, & Eckloff, 2007). The second construct was chosen because it reflects a shared sense of unity which also produces an accordance with the encountered leadership (cf. Kelman, 1958; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004).

The respect for leader scale initially stemmed from a content analysis of qualitative interviews in which employees described their relationships with respected versus non-respected leaders. The results were later standardized in a questionnaire. The construct was assessed with six items (as used in, for example, van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). Agreement with each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). The items were (1) "For me, my leader represents a positive role model at the workplace.", (2) "I trust the judgment of my leader in work issues.", (3) "In a lot of matters concerning work I gladly seek advice from my leader.", (4) "At work I enjoy being able to learn from my leader.", (5, reverse) "Due to the influence of my leader I feel very constricted in my professional development.", (6) "I owe respect to the way my leader accomplishes his/her professional functions.".

Subordinates' identification with the leader was measured by Mael and Ashforth's 6-item organizational identification questionnaire (1992) which was adapted to the current leader as the target focus of identification (cf. van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004; van Knippenberg

Table 1. Descriptives, correlations, and reliabilities in Study 1

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Current Leader	3.61	.82	(.97)				
2. Self as Leader	3.93	.47	.25**	(.92)			
3. Comparison of Abilities (COA)	3.02	.85	–.03	–.19*	(.84)		
4. Respect for Leader	3.03	1.18	.84***	.28***	.00	(.92)	
5. Identification with Leader	2.31	.84	.48***	.32***	.10	.62***	(.80)

Note. $N = 140$; Cronbach's α is indicated in brackets; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Results of multiple regression analysis of two dependent variables onto Current Leader, Self as Leader, and Social Comparison of Abilities Orientation (COA) in Study 1

	Respect for Leader			Identification with Leader		
	B	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β
Main effects						
Current Leader	.96	.06	.82***	.35	.06	.42***
Self as Leader	.10	.06	.08†	.20	.06	.24**
COA	.05	.06	.04	.13	.06	.16*
Δ R^2		.71			.29	
Δ F		109.97***			18.87***	
2-way interactions						
Current Leader × Self as Leader	.10	.05	.10†	.00	.06	.00
Current Leader × COA	.12	.06	.10*	.05	.07	.06
Self as Leader × COA	.08	.05	.08	–.03	.06	–.05
Δ R^2		.02			.00	
Δ F		3.25*			.29	
3-way interaction						
Current Leader × Self as Leader × COA	.13	.05	.13*	.08	.06	.12
Δ R^2		.01			.01	
Δ F		5.60*			1.75	
R^2		.74			.31	
Adjusted R^2		.73			.27	

Note. $N = 140$; † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

& van Schie, 2000). Items were rephrased, such as "When I talk about my leader, I usually say 'we' rather than 'he/she'." It thus involves a more unconscious openness to leadership due to a sense of unity.

The interplay of both measures was tested prior to the present study with 103 employees. In that study, both scales exhibited strong reliabilities (Cronbach's α = .90 for respect and Cronbach's α = .80 for identification), loaded on two separate components in a principal component analysis with VARIMAX rotation, and moderately correlated ($r = .36$, $p < .001$) - in our view, reflecting the shared overarching concept of openness towards leaders' influence.

Results

Table 1 shows the scale characteristics and intercorrelations of the variables used in our study. Similar to the pre-study, we find a positive relationship between the dependent variables.

Central to our hypothesis, the hierarchical linear regression analyses in Table 2 (predictor variables were z-standardized prior to analyses, cf. Dawson & Richter, 2006) shows a significant three-way

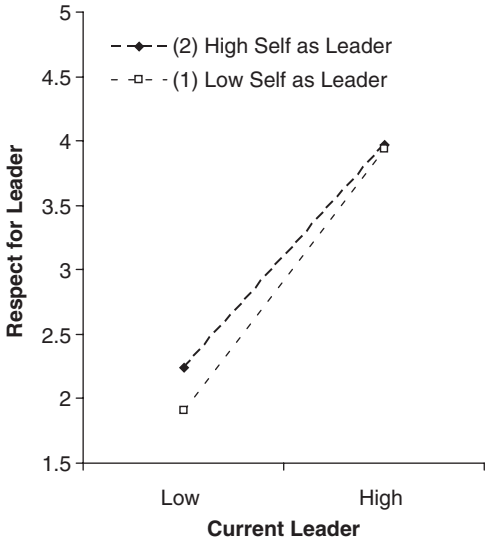


Figure 2a. Self as leader as a moderator of the relationship between Current Leader and Respect for Leader in the condition of *low COA* in Study 1.

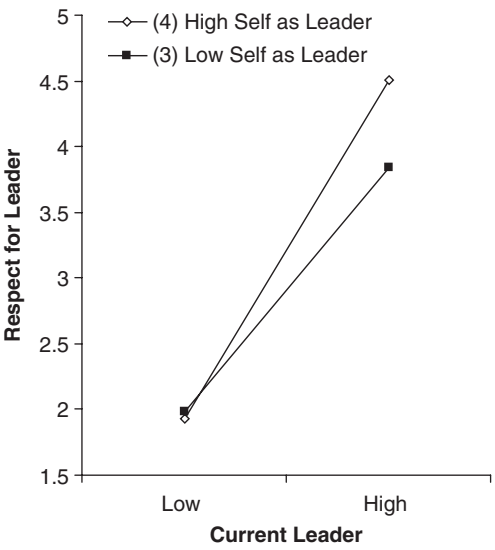


Figure 2b. Self as Leader as a moderator of the relationship between Current Leader and Respect for Leader in the condition of *high COA* in Study 1.

Table 3. Simple slopes for "Respect for Leader" at +1 and –1 SD of the mean (cf Dawson & Richter, 2006) in Study 1

Simple slopes for	Respect for Leader		
	B	*SE*	*p*
(1) $COA_{low,}$ Self as Leader $_{low}$	1.01	0.15	<.001
(2) $COA_{low,}$ Self as Leader $_{high}$	0.87	0.09	<.001
(3) $COA_{high,}$ Self as Leader $_{low}$	0.93	0.09	<.001
(4) $COA_{high,}$ Self as Leader $_{high}$	1.29	0.11	<.001

Note. $N = 140$; slope numbers indicated under H2 are the same as in Tab Figures 2a & 2b.

interaction on the criterion 'respect for leaders'. The *p*-value for the criterion 'identification with leaders' is .19 and thus not significant. When plotting the significant three-way interaction for respect, we find the pattern predicted in our hypothesis (Figures 3a–3b). Proceeding to simple slopes analyses and using a post-hoc test for slope-differences in three-way interactions involving continuous data (Table 3, cf. Dawson & Richter, 2006),[2] we find that the interaction, as predicted, shows in differences between the slopes in the condition of *high* social comparison orientation (low self vs. high self as leader perceptions: $t(132) = 2.97$, $p < .01$; Slope 3 vs. 4 in Figure 3b), but not in the *low* social comparison orientation condition (low self vs. high self as leader perceptions: $t(132) = 0.84$, $p = .40$; Slope 1 vs. 2 in Figure 3a).[3]

Study 2

Study 1 provides important first evidence for our hypothesis. However, we only obtained significant results for one of our two dependent variables. Given the general difficulty for finding three-way interactions confirmed in the field, the small effect size, and common source variance—all of which work against finding the proposed interaction effect (Aguinis, 1995; Evans, 1985; McClelland & Judd, 1993), we thus opted for a replication study. The first pre-condition for the second study was to increase the sample size to increase the power to detect small effects. Secondly, to bolster confidence in conclusions and show that effects of the first study are not measurement-specific, we decided to use another operationalization of the key predictor

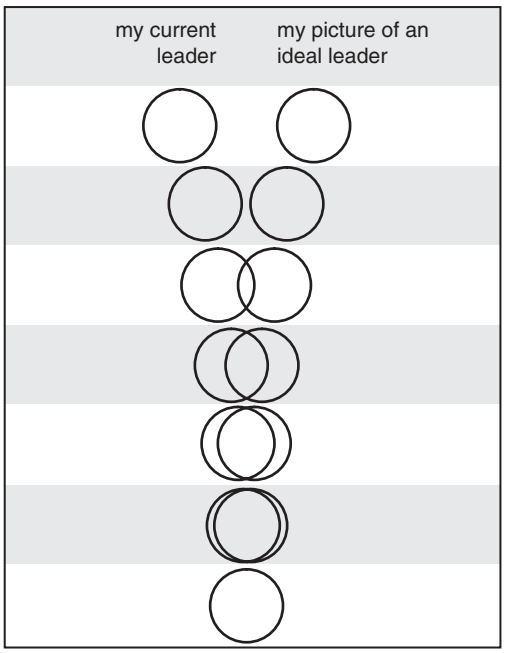


Figure 3. Venn-diagram to measure the degree to which a participant's current leader represents the participant's picture of an ideal leader

variables. In the second study, we opted for a leader categorization measurement via pictorial Venn-diagrams. It is by means of the pictograms that we were able to avoid listing all kinds of leadership attributes that people potentially consider ideal for leaders and instead left it to the participants to project those attributes they associate with an ideal leader into the Venn-diagram. This renders the measurement not only idiographic and easy to use, but also largely free of contextual or cultural biases.

Method

Sample Similar to Study 1, we wanted to ensure that our hypothesis does not apply in specific organizational contexts only. We thus recruited a diverse workforce sample via a professional survey panel in Germany (Sozioland). Again, to increase and diversify the motivation to participate, we provided an option for results feedback and included a gift voucher lottery at the end of the survey. Altogether 287 people participated. The sample's mean age was 37 years (SD = 10.4). Women represented 58% of the sample. The mean employment time was 15 years (SD = 10.4) with an average of 5.9 personally experienced leaders (SD = 3.7), of whom averagely 26% were female. Employees with higher education made up around 42% of the sample. Nearly two thirds of all participants had completed a vocational training. In terms of their vocational background, participants were again very diverse, in that they were employed in more than 20 different industries and more than 30 different departments (approx. 90% white-collar work).

Measures

Predictor variables We opted for a Venn-diagram to measure leader categorization along an ideal leader prototype (cf. van Quaquebeke, Kerschreiter, Buxton, & van Dick, 2010). Previous studies had confirmed its convergent validity with the more extensive leader-categorization measurements we used in Study 1 (r = .73, p < .01; van Quaquebeke & Brodbeck, 2008). For our purposes, the first item asked participants to indicate to what degree they themselves as a potential leader would represent their picture of an ideal leader; while another second similar item asked them to what degree their current leaders represent their picture of an ideal leader (e.g., Figure 2). The advantage of these pictograms is that they manage to assess the basic concept of leader prototype matching rather intuitive instead of having to provide long lists of specific leader attributes.

Participants' social comparison orientation was again assessed via the six item comparison of abilities (COA) subscale out of the "Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure" (INCOM, Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

Dependent variables We assessed the same dependent variables as in Study 1: subordinates' vertical respect for their leaders (van Quaquebeke & Brodbeck, 2008; van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010) and subordinates' identification with their leaders (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Table 4. Descriptives, correlations, and reliabilities in Study 2

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Current Leader	3.68	1.77	—[a]				
2. Self as Leader	4.74	1.15	.15*	—			
3. Comparison of Abilities (COA)	3.00	0.89	–.08	–.08	(.85)		
4. Respect for Leader	2.98	1.12	.64***	.05	–.03	(.91)	
5. Identification with Leader	2.18	0.79	.23***	.03	.10	.47***	(.78)

Note. $N = 287$; Cronbach's α is indicated in brackets where applicable; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.[a] With the results provided in van Quaquebeke and Brodbeck (2008) and via rearranging the correction for attenuation formula, it is possible to estimate the reliability of the one-item Venn Diagram at a minimum of .69.

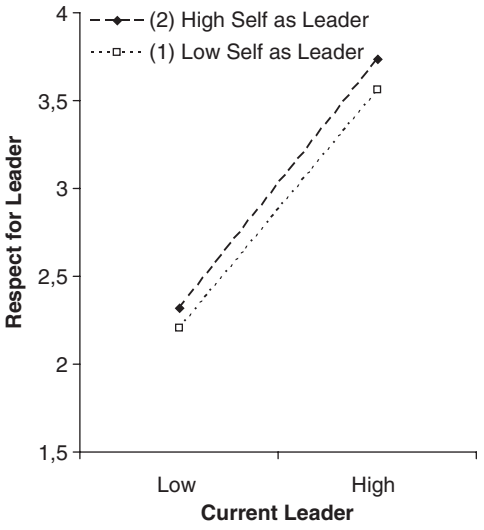


Figure 4a. Self as Leader as a moderator of the relationship between Current Leader and Respect for Leader in the condition of *low COA* in Study 2.

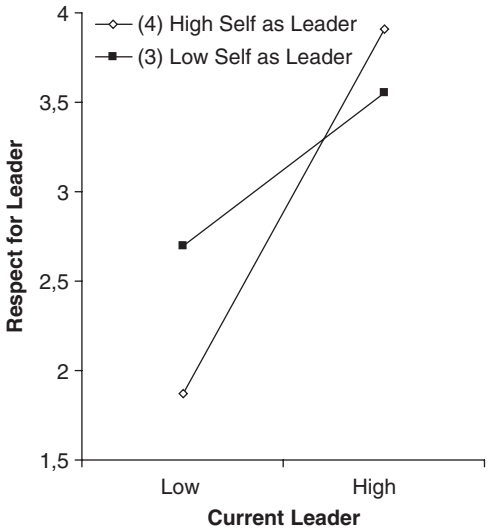


Figure 4b. Self as leader as a moderator of the relationship between current Leader and Respect for Leader in the condition of *high COA* in Study 2.

Results

Table 4 shows the scale characteristics and intercorrelations of the variables used in our study. Expectedly, we again find a positive relationship between the dependent variables.

Central to our hypothesis, the hierarchical linear regression analyses in Table 5 show that both three-way interactions exhibit the predicted pattern (Figures 4a–5b). When proceeding to simple slopes analyses using the post-hoc test for slope-differences in three-way interactions involving continuous data (Table 6, cf. Dawson & Richter, 2006),[4] we find that the interaction shows as expected in differences between the slopes in the condition of *high* social comparison orientation (low self vs. high self as leader perceptions: for respect $t(279) = 4.28$, $p < .001$, for identification $t(279) = 1.91$, $p = .057$; Slope 3 vs. 4 in Figures 4b and 5b), but not in the *low* social comparison orientation condition (low self vs. high self as leader perceptions: for respect $t(279) = 0.23$, $p = .82$, for identification $t(279) = 0.92$, $p = .36$; Slope 1 vs. 2 in Figures 4a and 5a).[5] Considering the significant differences between slope 3 and 4 for subordinates' respect for their leader at the $\alpha = .05$ level and our two-sided testing, the differences between slope 3 and 4 for identification

Table 5. Results of multiple regression analysis of two dependent variables onto Current Leader, Self as Leader, and Social Comparison of Abilities Orientation (COA) in Study 2

	Respect for Leader			Identification with Leader		
	B	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β
Main effects						
Current Leader	0.72	0.05	.64***	0.19	0.05	.23***
Self as Leader	–0.05	0.05	–.04	0.01	0.05	.01
COA	0.02	0.05	.02	0.10	0.05	.12*
Δ R^2		.41			.07	
Δ F		64.63***			6.60***	
2-way interactions						
Current Leader × Self as Leader	0.14	0.04	.14**	0.02	0.04	.03
Current Leader × COA	0.02	0.05	.02	0.06	0.04	.08
Self as Leader × COA	–0.08	0.05	–.07	–0.09	0.05	–.11
Δ R^2		.03			.02	
Δ F		4.22**			1.86†	
3-way interaction						
Current Leader × Self as Leader × COA	0.14	0.05	.13**	0.08	0.04	.11*
Δ R^2		.02			.01	
Δ F		8.80**			3.90*	
R^2		.45			.10	
Adjusted R^2		.44			.07	

Note. $N = 287$; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

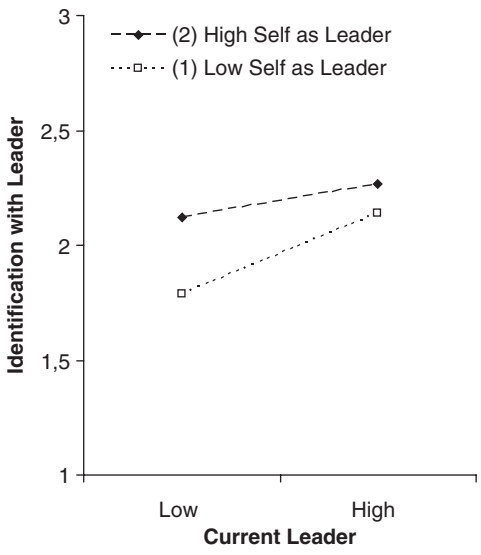


Figure 5a. Self as Leader as a moderator of the relationship between Current Leader and Identification with Leader in the condition of *low COA* in Study 2.

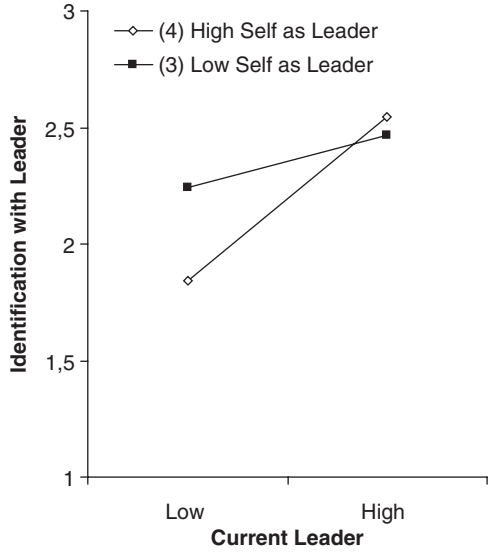


Figure 5b. Self as Leader as a moderator of the relationship between Current Leader and Identification with Leader in the condition of *high COA* in Study 2.

Table 6. Simple slopes for "Respect for Leader" and "Personal Identification with Leader" at +1 and –1 SD of the mean (cf. Dawson & Richter, 2006) in Study 2

Simple slopes for	Respect for Leader			Identification with Leader		
	B	*SE*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*p*
(1) COA $_{low,}$ Self as Leader $_{low}$	0.68	0.09	<.001	0.17	0.08	.036
(2) COA $_{low,}$ Self as Leader $_{high}$	0.71	0.09	<.001	0.07	0.08	.381
(3) COA $_{high,}$ Self as Leader $_{low}$	0.43	0.10	<.001	0.11	0.09	.213
(4) COA $_{high,}$ Self as Leader $_{high}$	1.02	0.10	<.001	0.35	0.09	<.001

Note. $N = 287$; slope numbers indicated under H2 are the same as in Figures 4a–5b.

with the leader at the $\alpha = .10$ level likely point to a weaker effect rather than the absence of it.

Discussion

'Follower-centred' leadership research (Lord & Maher, 1991; Meindl, 1995) was able to show that subordinates' cognitions, in particular leader prototypes, play an important role for subordinates' responses to leadership. The more subordinates perceive their leaders to match their leader prototypes, the more subordinates "recognize" them as leaders, and the better subordinates respond to them (e.g., Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). The key contribution of the present study is to show that the story does not end here but can be extended into other socio-cognitive research domains (cf. Lord et al., 2003). We argued and provided first evidence that subordinates' self-concepts as (potential) leaders and their social comparison orientation play a role in leader categorization processes.

Specifically, we argued that subordinates high in social comparison orientation are in need of a strong self-concept as a (potential) leader in order to have confidence in basing their responses towards their actual leaders upon their perceptions of these. Else, we proposed, they lack the cognitive background which they are used to draw on when responding to people. This effect was argued to be diminished or non-existent for subordinates low in social comparison orientation.

The data of both studies support our hypothesis, albeit the effect shows to be stronger in subordinates' conscious decision to trust and go along with the leadership, i.e., in their respect for the leader, than in their more affective sense of unity with the leader, i.e., in their personal identification with the leader. As a side note, it is important to understand that while our post-hoc simple slopes difference tests indicate that the two-way interaction between leader categorization and self as leader categorization is not significant under the condition of high comparison of abilities, this finding does not refute our hypothesis in which we argued for a weaker interaction at conditions of low COA compared to high COA. Indeed, as Aiken and West (1991; also see Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) point out, the test of continuous data interactions resides in the test of the product term in the regression analyses, whereas the decomposition into simple slopes (at arbitrary albeit agreed upon values of +/–1 SD of the mean) and simple interactions merely serve to understand the underlying pattern.

Our confidence in the results is further bolstered by the studies' field design. As survey research, especially when involving common source data, usually underestimates interaction effects (Aguinis, 1995; McClelland & Judd, 1993), the consistency of the present findings with regard to the interactions can be taken as robust evidence that the theoretical framework of leader categorization, which was to this point only connected to issues of social influence, is also connected to other socio-cognitive issues on many more levels. In starting to integrate these two streams of research, we not only expand the scope of the follower-centric approach to understand social influence in leadership but also seek to support its validity.

Theoretical implications and limitations

While researchers working within the cognitive oriented paradigm of follower-centric leadership research have only recently suggested that subordinates' self-concepts may be an important constraint to consider when examining the equation of leader categorization theory (Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001), many more fundamentally oriented research traditions have already included people's self-image as a central constraint in their models.

In the introduction of the present paper, we drew upon the rich bodies of self-concept, connectionist, social judgement, and social comparison research to demonstrate how subordinates' self-image can be conceptualized to impact on their evaluations of their leaders and thus also on their responses towards their influence. In doing so, we specifically pointed at a possibility that is habitually ignored in leadership research, i.e., that subordinates might envision themselves as something else than followers, that is as (potential) leaders.

Building on the insights of socio-cognitive research, the results of our study can be unified under the theme: The more central a certain category becomes to people's self-concept, the more central it also is when people evaluate and respond to the world. Our study further complements this logic of egocentricity by combining people's self-perceptions with people's disposition to rely on self-perceptions in their assessments of others, i.e., with their social comparison orientation. In a way, finding that the two-way interaction only holds under the condition of high social comparison can be taken as further evidence for our rationale.

Moreover, alternative explanations for the obtained two-way interaction, such as leader-follower similarity (cf. Keller, 1999) and the resulting attraction effect, can also be ruled out for a number of reasons: a) The obtained interaction patterns for the DVs in the present study are not consistently crossed. If similarity were to exhibit a main effect on our results, such crossing should, however, be observable within the range of our variables. Instead the slopes, for instance in the first study, seem to converge at the low current leader end (or in the second study, the slopes converge at the high end for identification with the leader); b) We find in the present paper that the (unqualified) two-way interaction only showed in one out of four instances (i.e., only for respect as a DV in Study 1). Here too, if similarity were the driving force, all two-way interactions would have to show consistently in all analyses of the unqualified two-way interactions; c) We find the two-way interaction to consistently show when participants are high in social comparison, and we are not aware of any research that would suggest that attraction due to similarity only holds when people's tendency to engage in comparison of abilities is high.

The question thus is where to proceed from here. In the present study, we intentionally decided to stay within the inner boundaries of the leader categorization framework (Lord & Maher, 1991) by focusing on subordinates' perceptions of their leaders and their openness to their influence (here, assessed via subordinates' respect for and identification with their leaders). While this is an appropriate model and it helped to establish the basic rationale, the ultimate aim is the prediction of actual behavior. And thus, although common source variance does not interfere with our hypothesis (indeed, it even works against detecting moderation effects, cf. McClelland & Judd, 1993), it appears valuable to survey external criteria of subordinates' openness to leadership (such as observations on how much of a leader's influence is put into practice by subordinates). A future inclusion of such data would allow to test a more complex leader categorization model in which subordinates' openness to leadership influence could be conceptualized as a mediator between leader categorization and behavioral indicators of leadership effectiveness while subordinates' self-perception as (potential) leaders could be conceptualized as a moderator to the mediator.

A logical extension of our research also seems to lie in the exploration of situational determinants that make people naturally aware of their leader prototypes in general and their self-perceptions on these in particular (cf. Lord et al., 2001). Further social comparison reasoning (Festinger, 1954; Mussweiler, 2003) would, for instance, suggest that perceiver-target similarity in a certain domain should evoke the perceiver's self-perceptions in the same domain. Thus, it can be assumed that subordinates' self-perceived similarity to leaders in general (in terms of gender, age, background, etc.) renders leader prototypes and subordinates' self-assessments along these more salient. The same might also be true on a dyadic level: The more similar subordinates perceive themselves to their actual leaders, the more likely they should be to assess their own leadership qualities. In other words, while leader-follower similarity is unlikely to be at the root of the two-way interaction between leader categorization and self as leader categorization (as discussed before), it might qualify the two-way interaction much in the same way as we have presently shown it for social comparison orientation. In our opinion, salience of leader prototypes and triggers of social comparison in leadership are thus a valuable extension if not a whole new field to explore in leadership research.

Along similar lines, one might also argue that self-concept centrality might also be fuelled by other aspects, not just perceiving leader attributes in oneself. In particular, it stands to reason that some people might not (yet) perceive leader attributes in themselves, yet they feel a certain desire or obligation to become a leader, in other words, a motive to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Hence, their leader prototype might not be prompted as a benchmark due to the weight the actual self lends it (as we have investigated in the present paper) but by individuals' ideal self (for individuals who are high in an affective-identity motive to lead) or their ought self (for individuals who are high in a social-normative motive to lead).

In addition, the relationship of participants' self and leader perceptions requires further elaboration. While our study showed a positive relationship (Table 1 and 4), previous work (Dunning & Hayes, 1996) would suggest a negative relationship, i.e., the better subordinates rate themselves, the worse they should rate their leaders. While our study was not designed to specifically test this perceptual relationship (i.e., we do not have a fixed criterion, such as one leader who is evaluated by a number of his/her employees), it would be worthwhile to investigate this issue in future studies and reveal more of the interdependence that already takes place at the perceptual level.

Managerial implications and limitations

As stated in the introduction, the present paper's objective primarily lies with the broadening of the theoretical scope of follower-centric leadership research (cf. Lord et al., 2003) but it can also potentially help to fine-tune staffing processes in practice. Indeed, based on our results and following Lord and Maher's (1991) reasoning, we agree that leaders should be chosen according to their match with an organization's leader prototypes or in any case be trained accordingly—at least, when true followership is pivotal, such as in times of crisis

Additionally, the present findings suggest that the story does not end here. Our analyses show that, under condition of high social comparison, the higher the (self-assessed) leadership potential of employees is, the more their openness to a leader's influence is contingent on their leader's representation of the ideal leader prototype. While under the same condition, subordinates with a lower self-image as a (potential) leader tend to be more lenient if their leaders do not closely represent their ideal leader prototype. Thus, in a corporate culture in which social comparison is for instance frequently induced as part of development programs, high-potential candidates can be assumed to be led most effectively if organizations assign their best leaders to them, i.e., leaders who can live up to the ideal leader prototype. This is not to say that high-potentials will not always be led best by those types of

leaders, but under the condition of high social comparison, high potentials might not be as lenient towards mediocre leaders as in a low social comparison environment.

Conclusion

The socio-cognitive process of leadership categorization provides a basis for social influence. As the present study illustrates, in many ways we may have only just begun to explore the self-conception and social comparison dynamics underlying these processes, and the present study can also be seen as a "call to arms" to research to more fully explore these issues. As a final remark, it is interesting to note that the present study is among the first to empirically acknowledge that subordinates might also envision themselves as leaders, and that such self-perceptions might have a profound impact on how they interact with their actual leaders. The resulting dynamics paint a picture that seems exciting to explore.

Notes

1. Reported results in the present study were not different when this item was left out.
2. The same significant pattern can be replicated when regressing on 'satisfaction with leader' using a smiley-item (Kunin, 1955), likewise when regressing on a six-item 'affective commitment towards leader' measurement (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Due to space concerns, results are not reported here, but are available from the first author upon request.
3. To be able to proactively confront potential criticism that an effect of self-perception as a leader might be due to respondents' own leadership experience, we repeated the previous analysis with leadership experience (dummy-coded for experience vs. no experience) instead of subordinates' self-perceived leadership attributes as the second predictor and multiplicative factor for the moderator term in the same hierarchical regression model. This analysis showed that leadership experience does not interact with subordinates' perceptions of their leaders as the second predictor and multiplicative factor for the moderator term (neither in a two-way nor in a three-way interaction with social comparison). Analyses are available from the first author upon request.
4. The same significant pattern can be replicated when regressing on a Venn-diagram measurement of identification with leader (cf. Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Shamir & Kark, 2004), likewise when regressing on 'satisfaction with leader' using a smiley-item (Kunin, 1955). Due to space concerns, results are not reported here, but are available from the first author upon request.
5. Similar to Study 1, using leadership experience as a predictor variable and multiplicative factor for the moderator term (instead of participants' self-assessed leadership qualities) showed that leadership experience could not account for the observed interactions. As in Study 1, leadership experience can thus again be ruled out as an alternative explanation.

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