

From Perception to Strategy: How Followership Theories Influence Leaders' Behaviors

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Abstract

Contemporary leadership research has focused on leader behaviors, follower perspectives, and the leader-follower relationship. Relatively little investigation has been conducted into how leaders' preconceptions of desirable follower characteristics affect leadership behaviors, strategies, judgments, and effectiveness. Beginning with a review of the concept of leaders' implicit followership theories (IFT), I examined the theoretical processes used by leaders to assess and classify followers. Methods for perceiving and comparing stimuli with implicit theories were explored to gather insight into the underlying process by which leaders' strategies and behaviors are influenced by the perception and IFT framework. The effects of perceptions and interpretation within implicit theories are especially complex within the context of social networks, but my theoretical review was focused solely on the effects of leaders' perceptions and IFTs as they translate into the leaders' actions, styles, and strategies for leading.

Keywords: IFT, implicit followership theories, leadership strategies, followership, perspectivism.

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Contemporary leadership research has focused on leader behaviors, follower perspectives, and the leader-follower relationship, but relatively little research has investigated how leaders' preconceptions of desirable follower characteristics affect leaders' strategies, judgments, and effectiveness (Sy, 2010). There has been a lot of recent research investigating followers' implicit leadership theories (ILT) which have found that implicit frameworks play a meaningful role in defining how followers perceive leaders as leaders (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). The alignment of leader characteristics with the followers' implicit leadership theories has been shown to form meaningful antecedents to leader effectiveness (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). ILTs are derived from cognitive prototypes of leader behavior from prior socialization experiences organized to form a classification system against which actual leader behavior is measured and effectiveness assessed (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). Fewer studies have examined the formation, perceptions, and operationalization of similar cognitive processes used by leaders to assess followers, but available literature has suggested that implicit followership theories (IFTs) are as impactful to the leaders' interpretation of followers as ILTs are to followers' assessment of leaders (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005).

Beginning with a review of the formation and characteristics of leaders' implicit followership theories (IFT), I examined the theoretical processes used by leaders to assess and classify followers. The theoretical perception models that underlie implicit theories were also explored to better understand how the interpretive framework impacts leaders' strategies and behaviors (Whiteley, Sy, & Johnson, 2012). Understanding the influence and methods of perceptions is vital to grasping how IFTs actually influence leadership (Whitely et al., 2012). The comprehensive network of social perceptions and resulting theories that occur across

organizations interact to form complex expectation-based relationships, but this work was limited to exploring the effects of leaders' perceptions and IFTs on the leaders' actions, strategies, and styles.

Leaders Implicit Followership Theories (IFT)

In a quest to simplify complex social interactions, people naturally tend to classify and categorize stimuli including cataloging the actions of other people (Sy, 2010) using "cognitive simplification mechanisms or schemas" (Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013, p. 858). Such categorization facilitates interpreting others within organizational settings. The classification of leader characteristics by followers or implicit leadership theories (ILTs) has been widely researched, but only a modest amount of investigation has been performed on how leaders classify followers (IFTs) (Sy, 2010).

Implicit theories tend to operate at the preconscious level, but are processed both implicitly and explicitly (Epitropaki et al., 2013). Implicit followership theories (IFT) are "... individuals' personal assumptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers." (Sy, 2010, p. 73) Social cognitive processes trigger sense-making mechanisms whereby leaders develop follower classifications, a process that is affected by personal beliefs and the leader's own personality traits, values, and cultural perspectives (Fields, 2007). Kenny (2004) suggested that there are two types of information from which people perceive others; categorical or stereotypical and behavioral, and within those types, Kenny identified six sources of perception variance including physical stereotypes, personal stereotypes, personality, norm, opinion, and error which together formed a classification system Kenny labeled PERSON. In a recent topology, follower perceptions as viewed by leaders were said to be categorized within six dimensions which Whiteley et al. (2012) identified as enthusiasm, good citizen, industry,

conformity, insubordination, and incompetence. Collectively the assessments within those dimensions form an overall positive or negative prototype of the follower (Sy, 2010). That is, in validating the instrument that included the six dimensions, Sy (2010) confirmed that the six dimensions also were part of a second order construct with the first three categories of enthusiasm, good citizen, and industry constructs viewed as positive attributes, with conformity, insubordination, and incompetence constituting a negative group (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Whiteley et al., 2012). As leaders develop and refine their classification schemes, positive and negative experiential outcomes act to further fine tune the leaders' IFTs (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Fields, 2007).

Implicit theories including implicit followership theories (IFTs) likely develop during early age socialization in response to a natural tendency to categorize and simplify the complexity of society, and are then continually shaped and refined by actual experiences with followers (Sy, 2010; Whiteley et al., 2012). Elements that comprise implicit followership theories can be positive or negative, include both traits and behaviors, and will tend to remain fairly stable over time (Whiteley et al., 2012). The implicit theories not only help in understanding the complexity of follower characteristics, but can offer sound assessments of followers as research has suggested that perceptions of others is more accurate than self-perceptions (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992), so the classification structure assists in insightful interpretation of followers and their actions in meaningful, practical ways.

IFTs and their formation are complex (Fields, 2007) reflecting the act of perceiving individual's characteristics, nationality, values, cultural biases, and emotional responses (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Sy, 2010). As IFTs form and are then operationalized, perceived follower stimuli will trigger automatic categorization within the ILT model (Sy, 2010). The ILTs

assist in understanding or interpreting followers by comparing perceptions with desirable and undesirable follower characteristics which are then translated into responsive leader behaviors (Whiteley et al., 2012). The prototyping, benchmarking, and interpretation surrounding IFTs shape how leaders tend to judge and respond to followers, and consequently IFTs have a significant influence on leadership practices and overall strategy (Sy, 2010).

The Influence of IFTs on Leadership Strategies

Awareness of implicit followership theories (IFTs) varies over time with leaders becoming more conscious of their IFTs as they mature (Epitropaki et al., 2013). In particular, leaders become increasingly cognizant of their follower categorizations relative to morality, emotions, and employee voice (Epitropaki et al., 2013, p.860). Lesser experienced supervisors may be less aware of their IFTs, yet ironically tend to rely more heavily on them to frame their interactions with followers (Epitropaki et al., 2013). As leaders increasingly understand their IFTs, the insight does not necessarily translate into an appreciation for how influential average IFTs are in terms of leaders' reactions, behaviors, strategies, and even followers' behaviors (Epitropaki et al., 2013). IFTs are like many leadership variables in that many leaders behave daily with only limited awareness of the effects of such leadership antecedents (Epitropaki et al., 2013, p.876). Advancing leaders' awareness of IFTs and their influence can assist in self-awareness and overall leadership development.

The effects from IFTs are due to follower behavior or trait stimuli activating a category of classification which triggers an associated response (Epitropaki et al., 2013). Repeated experiences of stimuli and behaviors can code the stimuli-to-response process as habitual, especially if the resulting outcomes are desirable (Epitropaki et al., 2013). Drawing on Fields'

(2007) operationalization for implicit leadership theory, a parallel perception model for the operationalization of IFTs would include five steps:

1. Observations of behaviors and interactions
2. Considering consistency of the observations
3. Categorization and interpretation of the behaviors within the IFT follower classification system.
4. Integrating extraneous information about the follower(s)
5. Activate leader behaviors associated with the IFT model.

The IFTs are essentially operationalized through the leaders' perceptions of how followers compare to the IFT categories (Fields, 2007), that is, observations trigger categorization and responses (Epitropaki et al., 2013). The follower observations include not only behaviors, but traits, abilities (Fields, 2007), and even emotions (Epitropaki et al., 2013). Followers' behaviors and leader perceptions are also influenced by culture and the associated bias which can affect the categorization (Sy, 2010). The complex matching process whereby stimuli from followers are compared with the classification system has been theorized to occur through a process called Adaptive Resonance Theory (Epitropaki et al., 2013). Adaptive Resonance Theory describes a system where the stimuli 'resonates' with the matching criteria such that matches and non-matches continuously influence the categorization system, causing the structure or model to adapt to the stimuli (Epitropaki et al., 2013, p.861). The interpretation of followers through the lens of the leaders' IFTs determines how the leader judges and treats the followers, and therefore the IFT operationalization affects both the leaders' behaviors and followers' responses in a cognitive, socio-emotive cycle.

IFTs and the resulting responses tend to “act as antecedents of leaders’ affect, behaviors, and cognitions toward followers” (Sy, 2010, p. 79). Since IFTs are used to categorize followers, effects also impact relationships as revealed in resulting leader-member exchange (LMX) quality, as depicted in McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y, and as observed in the Pygmalion effect (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Sy, 2010; Whiteley et al., 2012). McGregor posited fundamental differences in the IFTs of Theory X and Theory Y leaders over 50 years ago, and recent research of contemporary leadership theories have supported the effect of such implicit theories (Sy, 2010). For example, leaders who tend toward either more transformational or transactional behaviors have the propensity to view followers differently, and those differences are coded within their IFTs (Sy, 2010). Eden’s Pygmalion theory also explains how leader expectations such as those captured within the IFTs affect follower performance, and while much of Pygmalion research involved the artificial experimental manipulation of leader expectations (Sy, 2010), recent non-experimental studies and meta-analyses have found support for IFTs as antecedents of the Pygmalion effect (Whitely et al., 2010). The Pygmalion effect is a particular case of self-fulfilling prophecy (Whiteley et al., 2012) which results in leader expectations being reflected in follower outcomes not unlike the underlying forces within McGregor Theory X and Theory Y concepts. Whether the dynamics are described by McGregor’s Theory X and Y or the Pygmalion Theory, the leaders’ expectations of followers such as those captured within IFTs shape employee performance (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Sy, 2010; Whiteley et al., 2012). Positive IFT characteristics within followers also generate improved dyadic relationships as reflected in higher measures of LMX and greater job satisfaction (Sy, 2010; Whiteley et al., 2012).

The natural classification tendencies that result in IFTs are prototyping and sense-making processes that are used as guides to assess followers (Sy, 2010). Both general and follower

specific perceptions, filtered through the IFTs, have been shown to influence the leaders behaviors and strategies (Whiteley et al., 2012) resulting in leader behaviors that mirror and reveal the underlying IFT (Sy, 2010). Neuroscience literature supports the hard-wired linkage between perceptions and behaviors (Whiteley et al., 2012), explaining the mechanism by which IFTs predispose leadership styles and strategies (Sy, 2010). The continual perception to leadership behavior cycle over time generates a norm, habit, or primarily leadership style (Whiteley et al., 2012). For example, if the IFT is more similar to the Theory X manager concepts where followers are presumed to be primarily uneducated, inexperienced, slow, and underperformers, the leader will tend to micromanage, employ transactional leadership behaviors, and have lower average LMX relationships with followers (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Sy, 2010). The outcomes are reflections of the leader's tendency to evaluate follower behaviors more negatively (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Sy, 2010). If the leader's IFT is more Theory Y like, followers will be expected to be hardworking, good performers, and exhibit greater initiative, so the leader will tend to employ more transformational leadership behaviors and have higher average LMX relationships (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Sy, 2010). Further study is needed to understand which specific IFT dimensions are associated with particular leadership dimensions, but research has suggested that IFTs are significant determinants of leaders' dyadic and average behaviors and in the formation of overall leadership strategies (Epitropaki et al., 2013). Researchers have also found IFTs to be generally stable or static, so the influence of IFTs on behaviors and strategies (Epitropaki et al., 2013) will be relatively constant and difficult to alter. When designing improvement strategies, leadership development efforts must consider the dimensions of IFTs, their static nature, and the tendency of IFTs to restrict leader flexibility.

Recognizing and modifying IFTs, while a difficult long-term undertaking, can be an important element within an effective individual leadership development program.

Concluding Thoughts

IFT are formed from early social interactions, shaped by life experiences, and become more developed but slightly less influential to leadership behaviors as leaders mature (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Sy, 2010; Whiteley et al., 2012). Beginning with McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y, considering Pygmalion Theory, and through recent investigations of IFTs, research has supported the notion that the leaders' classification system, perception, matching process, and resulting leader behaviors and relationship quality have significant effects on leader effectiveness and desirable follower outcomes (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Sy, 2010; Whiteley et al., 2012). Further research to understand the socio-cognitive and emotional processes that influence IFTs, LMX, behaviors, and related follower motivations is needed considering the influence of IFTs and their static, stable nature.

As Harter (2012) observed, "... all knowledge is knowledge from a point of view." (p.158). Contemporary leadership research has been dominated by a focus on subordinate perspectives such as ILTs with leader perspectives and IFTs receiving less attention, but some recent work has suggested that understanding leader implicit followership theories can yield fresh insights into behaviors, styles, effectiveness, and development challenges resulting in improving leadership within the complex leader-follower relationship network.

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