

Predicting Leadership Style Preferences via Followers' Chronic Motivations

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Abstract

We examined relationships between follower motivation-based individual differences and leadership style preferences. Results revealed that individual identity and prevention focus predicted preferences for task-oriented leadership, relational identity and promotion focus predicted preference for relationship-oriented leadership, and collective identity and promotion focus predicted preference for charismatic leadership.

Scholarship within organizational sciences on leadership has been dominated by a top-down approach to understanding motivation (Kark & van Dijk, 2007). Leadership behaviors resulting from a leader's motivation to act, think and feel explain, at best, only half of the complex dyadic relationship between followers and their leaders. It is also important to realize that followers are motivated to act, think, and feel in ways that influence the leader-follower relationship. Research on personality traits (Moss & Ngu, 2006; Singer & Singer, 1986) and self-concept levels (Kark & Shamir, 2002; Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999) suggest that followers have preferences for different leadership styles (House & Aditya, 1997). The majority of these studies emphasize the leader's motivational style over the followers' and focus nearly exclusively on charismatic, transformational, and transactional leadership or leader-member exchange. We seek to examine leadership style preferences from the perspective of the follower. The current study does so by examining how two follower motivation-based individual differences—self-identity and regulatory focus—impact perceptions and preferences for charismatic, relationship-oriented and task-oriented leadership styles.

Leadership Styles

Of the numerous leadership styles available for study, this study focused on three common ones: charismatic, relationship-oriented, and task-oriented. *Charismatic leadership* is characterized by a leader conveying high performance expectations to his or her followers, providing a shared group focus and vision, and having the potential to create meaningful change for organizations (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Charisma is a key ingredient of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985).

Relationship-oriented leadership (or consideration) is motivated by a leader's desire to maintain and encourage relations between and with his or her followers (Fleishman, Harris, & Burt, 1955). A leader who is relationship-oriented may exemplify this style by showing interest in a subordinate's non-work life and/or family or by acting with compassion towards subordinates in the event of workplace tribulations.

Task-oriented leadership (or initiating structure) is aimed at facilitating and directing task performance (Fleishman, Harris, & Burt, 1955). Monitoring subordinates' behaviors to ensure

completion of their tasks and holding them to performance expectations are examples of task-oriented leadership. It is important to note that though charismatic leaders could also be conceived of as relationship-oriented and/or task-oriented, previous research suggests followers do discriminate between the three styles (Howell & Frost, 1989). To summarize, charismatic leaders embrace change, relationship-oriented leaders are process-driven by personal considerations, while task-oriented leadership is outcome driven.

Follower Self-Identity and Leadership Preferences

People's self-concepts are knowledge structures that comprise all self-relevant information, including values, goals and episodic memory (Oyserman, 2001). Importantly, self-concepts exist at different levels, of which there are at least three: individual, relational and collective (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus & Wurf, 1987). These identity levels have been linked with various leadership styles in a number of studies. For example, charismatic and transformational leaders activate collective identities in their followers (Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004) and followers with collective and relational identities tend to have strong leader-member exchange relationships (Saboe & Johnson, 2008). In light of the aforementioned relationships between self-identity and leadership styles, we believe that followers' self-identity levels affect their preferences for charismatic leadership, relationship-oriented leadership and task-oriented leadership. Below, we define the three identity levels and present hypotheses concerning relationships between them and leadership preferences.

At the *individual level*, people contrast themselves to others by demonstrating their uniqueness and personal accomplishments. At this level, people are motivated by their own self-interest, rely on personal attitudes and values to direct their behavior, and derive self-worth from personal successes (Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998). Because task-oriented leadership clarifies the standards and means for successful performance, and employees with strong individual identities are driven by personal success, we expect that individual identity is positively related to preference for task-oriented leadership. We also expect individual identity is positively related to preference for charismatic leadership because this leadership style engenders a sense of uniqueness through individual empowerment (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001).

At the *relational level*, an individual's identity is intertwined with that of a specific other, such as a spouse, coworker, or boss (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Research on relationship-oriented leadership supports its association with interpersonal, dyadic relationships in the workplace (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). Thus, relationship-oriented leaders, given their interest in maintaining relationships with their followers, could conceivably be preferred by relationally-oriented followers seeking fulfillment of identity-based motivations and needs. Similarly, a charismatic leader works to create a cohesive group of individuals pursuing a shared goal. A group of people cannot form a cohesive unit without a web of dyadic relationships. Thus, a charismatic leadership style is likely to be preferred by people with relational identities because it allots them the opportunity to identify other individuals with whom they may want to form a dyadic relationship with and creates a secure in-group in which they can cultivate relationships with specific others—be it the leader or other group members.

At the *collective level*, people identify according to their social group membership(s). People are motivated to promote their group's welfare and internalize collective goals and norms such that their self-worth hinges on the group's success (Jackson, Colquitt, Wesson, & Zapata-Phelan, 2006). Relationship-oriented leadership and a collective identity level share in their concern for the welfare and success of others (Groves, 2005). Thus, followers with a collective identity will likely want to orient themselves with a relationship-oriented leader who seeks out and encourages

the well-being and success of group members, which cumulatively results in the group's success. Seeking congruency in motives, followers with a collective identity, whose self-worth and self-esteem are derived from their group's success, are likely to favor a charismatic leader who seeks to promote the shared goals and achievement of the group s/he is leading (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

Hypothesis 1: Individual identity level will be positively-related to preferences for (a) task-oriented leadership and (b) charismatic leadership.

Hypothesis 2: Relational identity level will be positively related to preferences for (a) relationship-oriented leadership and (b) charismatic leadership.

Hypothesis 3: Collective identity will be positively related to preferences for (a) relationship-oriented leadership and (b) charismatic leadership.

Follower Regulatory Focus and Leadership Preferences

In addition to self-identity, we propose followers will differentially prefer leadership styles based upon their regulatory focus. Regulatory focus theory proposes that there are two goal-striving strategies: promotion focus and prevention focus (Higgins, 1997, 1998). Individuals with a *prevention focus*—an avoidance-orientated goal striving orientation—act in ways that minimize mistakes and fulfill perceived obligations. With duty, obligation, the presence/absence of punishment, and social pressures and responsibilities motivating them, prevention-focused individuals typically set goals according to feared or ought standards (Johnson & Chang, 2008; Lee & Aaker, 2004; Kark & van Dijk, 2007). The guidance and structure that is provided by task-oriented leadership mirrors many of the motivational needs of prevention focused individuals. For example, prevention-focused subordinates may prefer task-oriented supervisors because they provide highly-structured tasks, leaving little room for mistakes.

People with *promotion focus*—an approach-oriented goal striving orientation—pursue ideal goals. They are motivated by needs of achievement, growth and self-actualization (van Dijk & Kluger, 2004) which are ostensibly characterized, for example, by greater problem-solving creativity and increased risk-taking (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Lee & Aaker, 2004). Promotion focused individuals' motivational style closely parallels characteristics of charismatic leadership. Specifically, charismatic leaders, similar to a promotion focus, emphasize desired and to-be achieved visions and encourage risk-taking and change. Promotion focused individuals may also believe positive regard for and a relationship with their leader is advantageous for their personal growth and achievement. The latter suggests that promotion focused individuals may find utility in forming meaningful relationships. As a result, promotion focus may also predict preference for a relationship-oriented leader.

Hypothesis 4: Prevention focus will be positively related to preference for task-oriented leadership.

Hypothesis 5: Promotion focus will be positively related to preferences for (a) relationship-oriented leadership and (b) charismatic leadership.

The purpose of the current study is to determine if followers with certain self-identity levels and regulatory foci differentially prefer specific leadership styles. We have proposed, mirroring Ehrhart and Klein (2001), that followers prefer leadership styles that fulfill their needs and share consistent behavioral motivations. We tested these hypotheses by measuring people's self-identities

and regulatory foci prior to them indicating their preferences for various leadership styles described via written vignettes.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from 173 participants, who were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses at a Southeastern university in the US. The majority of respondents were female (70%); Caucasian (77%) or African American (15%); and had an average age of 24.1 years ($SD = 5.8$). Participants were administered a questionnaire that contained the following (in the order listed): measures of self-identity and regulatory focus, filler tasks (the purpose of which was to increase separation between predictors and criteria), a work-based scenario, and descriptions for each leadership style. As part of the work-based scenario, participants were told that they were recently hired to work for a coffeehouse chain and would be working under the supervision of one of three possible district managers. For each manager there was a statement about their leadership style followed by items that assessed participants' preference for each (gender and age of managers were not disclosed). The descriptions (included in Table 1) and items were based on ones developed and validated by Ehrhart and Klein (2001). The order of presentation of the leadership styles was randomized across participants. Students received extra credit in exchange for participating.

Measures

Participants responded to all scale items using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree").

Self-identity. Self-identity was assessed using items developed by Selenta and Lord (2005). Five items each were used to measure individual identity ($\alpha = .75$; "I have a strong need to know how I stand in comparison to others"), relational identity ($\alpha = .78$; "If a coworker was having a personal problem, I would help him or her even if it meant sacrificing my time or money"), and collective identity ($\alpha = .77$; "Making a lasting contribution to groups that I belong to, such as my work organization, is very important to me").

Regulatory focus. Work-based self-identity was measured using scales developed and validated by Johnson and Chang (2008). Six items each measure promotion focus ($\alpha = .80$; "I am focused on successful experiences that occur while working") and prevention focus ($\alpha = .74$; "I am fearful about failing to prevent negative outcomes at work").

Leadership style preference. To assess participants' preference for each leadership style, they responded to 5 items developed by Ehrhart and Klein (2001). The items were: "I believe that I would enjoy working with the district manager," "I believe that I would get along with the district manager," "I believe that I would admire the district manager," "I believe that I would find the district manager as similar to my ideal manager," and "I believe that I would work at a high level of performance under this district manager." A composite score was created by averaging participants' responses on all 5 items (α 's = .90 for charismatic, .90 for relationship-oriented, and .92 for task-oriented).

Covariates. We included participant sex and gender as covariates because there is some evidence that these variables impact people's perceptions and preferences concerning leadership (e.g., Boatwright & Forrest, 2000; Vecchio & Boatwright, 2002).

Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among the variables are shown in Table 2. All of the hypotheses were supported at the bivariate level. A preference for relationship-oriented leadership was positively related to relational and collective identity levels and a promotion-focus, whereas a preference for task-oriented leadership was positively related to an individual identity and a prevention-focus. Favoring charismatic leadership was positively related to relational and collective identity levels and a promotion-focus but negatively-related to an individual identity.

Tests of the Hypotheses

To test hypotheses, we were interested in whether focal identity levels or regulatory foci predicted leadership preferences incremental to the other levels or foci. For this reason, we regressed each leadership preference on the sets of identity levels and regulatory foci in separate models after controlling for participant sex and age. The results of these analyses are included in Table 3 and described below.

Self-identity. In every case, the set of self-identity variables accounted for significant variance in preferences for charismatic ($R^2 = .26$), relationship-oriented ($R^2 = .24$), and task-oriented leadership ($R^2 = .14$). As expected, and in support of Hypothesis 1b, an individual identity was a significant predictor of people's preference for task-oriented leadership ($\beta = -.15, p < .05$). Hypothesis 1a predicted people with an individual identity would prefer charismatic leadership; this relationship did not receive support. A relational identity level positively predicted a preference for both charismatic leadership ($\beta = .17, p < .05$) and relationship-oriented leadership ($\beta = .48, p < .01$), in support of Hypothesis 2. Collective identity positively predicted charismatic leadership ($\beta = -.41, p < .01$) but was not a significant predictor for relationship-oriented leadership, as proposed in Hypothesis 3a and 3b. These results suggest identity level is a valuable predictor and differentiates between leadership styles.

Regulatory focus. The two regulatory foci also accounted for significant variance in participants' preferences for charismatic ($R^2 = .26$), relationship-oriented ($R^2 = .14$), and task-oriented leadership ($R^2 = .17$). Hypothesis 5 regarding the positive relationship between prevention focus and a preference for task-oriented leadership was supported, ($\beta = .35, p < .01$). Prevention focus, as theorized in Hypothesis 6, was a significant predictor of people's preference for charismatic leadership ($\beta = .38, p < .01$) and relationship-oriented leadership ($\beta = .23, p < .01$).

Discussion

The intent of this study was to examine whether motivation-based individual differences predict preferences for leadership styles. All hypotheses received support except our predictions of a positive relationship between an individual identity and preference for charismatic leadership and a collective identity and preference for relationship-oriented leadership. The results of this study suggest that followers with an individual identity prefer task-oriented leaders, those with a relational identity prefer relationship-oriented leadership, and those with a collective identity prefer charismatic leadership. Interestingly, while charismatic leadership (and by extension transformational leadership) is thought to be universally preferred, there was variance in preference for this type of leadership. For example, while relational identity, collective identity, and promotion focus predicted preference for charismatic leadership in the regression analyses, individual identity and prevention focus did not. Our results therefore hint at the possibility of exceptions to the universality of attraction to charismatic leaders.

Results fully supported our predictions concerning the relationships between regulatory foci and leadership styles—positive relationships exist between a prevention-focus and preference for task-oriented leadership and between a promotion-focus and favoring charismatic and relationship-oriented leadership. Taken as a whole, the results of this study support Shah and colleagues' (Shah & Higgins, 2001; Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998) findings that people prefer congruency between their regulatory focus leanings and their environment. The latter and the previously mentioned results provide further substantiation for the notion of follower-leader fit. This suggests that congruency between a follower's motives and motivational style and his or her leader's motives and style are important. Extrapolating on the idea of leader-follower fit, future research studies should examine whether performance improvements in congruous conditions are incremental to mismatched leader-follower pairs (e.g. follower with a relational identity and leader who is task-oriented).

We examined people's chronic self-identity and regulatory foci. However, since it is possible for strong situations to prime state-level identities and foci that may override their chronic or dispositional counterparts, it may be possible to prime desired identities and foci while at work so that they are congruent with the leadership styles of employees' supervisors. Doing so may enhance follower-leader relations as well as follower performance. It may also be possible to train supervisors to behave and prioritize relationships and/or tasks in accordance with the different leadership styles depending on the workplace climate (i.e. promotion-focused work environment) and specific motivational differences of subordinates. Thus, subordinates and supervisors may be able to adjust their motives and behavior through priming and training to maximize follower-leader fit. Since organizational leaders largely dictate the policies and climate of an organization, creating "best fit" follower-leader pairs may also enhance the coherency of an organization's climate and culture. This could lead to enhanced person-organization fit, organizational commitment, job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism and turnover.

Limitations and Conclusions

The ability to predict preference for leadership styles using aspects of how followers' are motivated is valuable. However, we must keep in mind certain methodological limitations when doing so. First, our data was collected via self-report. As with all research using this method, caution must be taken regarding participants' ability to provide accurate self-appraisal. This concern may be especially relevant for our study because self-identity levels and regulatory foci are basic motivations that often operate outside people's awareness. Future research might address this issue by collecting co-worker or supervisor perceptions of the participant's regulatory focus. Secondly, the design of this study was cross-sectional. Although we expect that self-identity and regulatory focus affect people's preferences for different leadership styles, we cannot make causal statements about these relationships. It is also possible that prior experience with a certain type of leadership style shapes a follower's future self-identity or regulatory focus. Thus, motivational orientations may be influenced by followers' experiences with leaders and vice versa. Therefore, future studies would be wise to utilize longitudinal designs to follow the developmental trajectory of a follower's leadership style preference.

In sum, our study proposes that a follower's self-identity and regulatory focus predict their preference for leadership style. Followers' preference for one of the three leadership styles (charismatic, relational, or task-oriented) depended on the followers' self-identity and regulatory focus. This suggests that the motivational orientation of followers is important for determining which leadership style will be favored over others.

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Table 1. *Descriptions of the leadership styles.*

Charismatic leadership:

“I have been a successful leader because I am committed to this company’s future and I work hard to communicate my vision for this company to my store managers. I set high standards for my store managers. I expect them to work as hard as they can to reach those standards. However, I don’t push them only for the sake of productivity; rather, I want them to reach their potential and do the best job they can. I want them to realize how good they can be and how much they have to offer. My goal is to do things differently in this organization has done them in the past, and I’m willing to take some chances to show them how things can be improved. I rely on my store managers to be creative in finding new ways to get the job done. I don’t want my store managers to think of this as just another job. Instead, I try hard to make them feel like they’re a part of something special here, something big, something that’s going to make a difference in this organization.”

Relationship-oriented leadership:

“I attribute my success as a leader to my concern for my store managers’ personal well-being. The first thing I try to do in all of my interactions with my store managers is to treat them with kindness and consideration. I am committed to being friendly and respectful, even when stress is high or there is a lot of work to be done. Another thing I emphasize with my store managers is communication. I keep them informed of progress on projects or any other organizational issues that might affect them, and I am always available to listen to my subordinates’ problems, whether their problems are personal or work-related. In addition, I show trust and confidence in my store managers. I want them to feel involved in their work and to know that I think they can do a good job. The final thing I do with my store managers is that I recognize their contributions. If they work hard and do a good job, I go out of my way to make sure that they know that their work is appreciated.”

Task-oriented leadership:

“I’m successful as a leader because I emphasize task accomplishment. I begin by working with my store managers to set goals for their work. I don’t want to overwhelm my store managers with impossible standards, so I make sure their goals are realistic yet still challenging. I am very careful and detailed in laying out what my store managers need to get done. I don’t want there to be any ambiguity; they need to know exactly what to do and when it needs to get done. Once they know what needs to get done, I make sure they have everything they will need to do it. I provide them with the necessary supplies, equipment, and technical assistance to insure that they can be successful at their jobs. Finally, I coordinate the work so that the store managers and their assistant managers know what their job is and there is no overlap between the two. I want everyone to know what their role is so that they can see how they are contributing to the accomplishment of our organization’s goals.”

Note: These descriptions were developed by Ehrhart and Klein (2001).

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among the focal variables.*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>Leadership style preference</i>								
1. Charismatic	(.90)							
2. Relationship-oriented	.35	(.90)						
3. Task-oriented	.09	.25	(.92)					
<i>Follower self-identity</i>								
4. Individual	.19	-.05	-.20	(.75)				
5. Relational	.32	.59	.18	.08	(.78)			
6. Collective	.48	.28	.16	.07	.45	(.77)		
<i>Follower regulatory focus</i>								
7. Promotion	.49	.37	.25	.05	.21	.14	(.80)	
8. Prevention	.02	.04	.48	.24	-.06	.17	-.07	(.74)
Mean	3.78	4.24	3.48	3.27	4.54	4.28	3.94	2.83
SD	.74	.67	.88	.75	.54	.60	.66	.78

Note: $N = 173$. Coefficient alphas are reported along the diagonal.

Correlations with absolute values greater than .15 are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Table 3. Predicting leadership style preference with follower motivation.

Predictors	Leadership style preference		
	Charismatic	Relationship	Task
<i>Step 1</i>			
<i>Covariates</i>			
Sex	.09	.10	.13
Age	-.11	-.12	-.02
R^2	.02	.02	.01
F	2.07	2.64	1.53
<i>Alternative Step 2s</i>			
<i>Step 2a</i>			
<i>Follower identity</i>			
Individual	.12	-.12	-.15*
Relational	.17*	.48**	.05
Collective	.41**	.16	.07
ΔR^2	.26	.24	.14
ΔF	21.95**	20.74**	11.27**
<i>Step 2b</i>			
<i>Follower regulatory focus</i>			
Promotion	.38**	.23**	.03
Prevention	.04	.04	.35**
ΔR^2	.26	.14	.17
ΔF	22.84**	15.01**	17.13**

Note: $N = 173$. Standardized regression coefficients (β s) are reported in the table, the values of which correspond to the step that the variable was entered. Sex is coded male = 1 and female = 2.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.