

Leader influence beyond the individual leader: Group-level and member-level factors that affect leader influence

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Leadership is inextricably intertwined with the notion of influence. When examining the most prominent contemporary approaches to leadership, notably neo-charismatic leadership theories, trait-based approaches to leadership and leader-member exchange theories, the factors that determine leaders' influence are sought in the individual leader. This article uses social identity approaches to leadership as a basis for constructing a conceptual argument for investigating factors beyond the individual leader that impact on leaders' influence. We focus on group-level factors that impact on leader influence. Using a minimal definition of social groups as point of orientation and framed by the philosophy of social constructionism, we show that two factors beyond the individual leader can be identified: group entitativity, or 'groupiness', is identified as a group-level factor, and group identification is identified as a member-level factor. This research contributes to a wider understanding of leader effectiveness by devoting closer attention to the effect of group dynamics on leader influence.

Keywords: transformational leadership; non-heroic leadership; leader influence

1. Introduction

The strong yet complex influencing process that is central to the majority of approaches to leadership has been investigated from a myriad of perspectives and in a range of contexts (cf. e.g. Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2002; Brodbeck, Frese, Akerblom, Audia, Bakacsi, Bendova, Bodega, Bodur, Booth, Brenk, & Castel, 2000; Dorfman & House, 2004; Jung & Avolio, 1999; Kakabadse et al., 1996). Research on leadership shows that a leader's influence can produce positive and negative outcomes on a variety of organisational matters, ranging from followers' commitment (Gebert et al., 2016; Wofford et al., 2001), stakeholder outcomes (Neubert et al., 2016) to work output and performance (Higgins et al., 2003; Clark et al., 2014) and effectiveness (Yukl 2008).

Few leadership scholars will disagree with Day and Antonakis that 'leadership' should at least be defined in terms of 'an influencing process that occurs between a leader and followers' and 'how this influencing process is explained' (2012, p. 5). Yet much of the research on leaders' ability to influence followers focuses on factors related to the leaders themselves. In this article we seek to address the paucity of research on factors beyond the individual leader that affect leader influence. By using relational leadership theories as conceptual points of reference, we argue that it is possible to critically assess the current leadership literature, highlighting its limitations and suggesting an alternative approach not frequently presented in the discourse. We do this by adding group-level and member-level factors to our theorising on the production and use of leader influence.

The leader-level bias of research on leader influence becomes evident when one examines the peer-reviewed literature on leader influence and related topics published since 2000 in highly rated management journals. One group of researchers, such as Griffith, Connelly, Thiel and Johnson (2015), emphasise the importance of the individual leader's employment of affect in influencing followers. This is confirmed by studies on the effect of a leader's mood (Tee,

Ashkanasy, & Paulsen, 2013; Joseph, Dhanani, Shen, McHugh, & McCord, 2015; Jin, Seo, & Shapiro, 2015). Another group of researchers emphasises the importance of the leader's personality for influencing followers (Deinert, Homan, Boer, Voelpel, & Gutermann, 2015). This includes personality types that are amenable to taking on 'leader role identities' (Kwok et al., 2018) or that are prone to being more 'agreeable' (Hunter, Neubert, Perry, Witt, Penney, & Weinberger, 2013). These factors highlight the impact of individual characteristics and moods of the leader on their ability to influence, helping to explain why leadership should be defined on the basis of influence and the associated factors.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) scholars also emphasise the importance of factors related to the individual leader. In their study, Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer and Ferris (2012) show that the variables of interpersonal relationship characteristics, contextual work settings, and participant location have a significant impact on LMX quality. Other studies similarly found that congruence of leaders' competence and personality (Goodwin, Bowler, & Whittington, 2009) or 'expressive relational schemas' (Tsai, Dionne, Wang, Spain, Yammarino, & Cheng, 2017) raise LMX quality. Other studies point towards performance and political skill as antecedents of leadership (Treadway et al., 2013; on political skill see Buch et al., 2016), whereas expert and legitimate power do not necessarily correlate with influence (Yukl et al., 1996).

Those researchers who also expand their analysis beyond the leader-follower dyad to the group emphasise the factors that have an effect on leader influence linked directly with the individual leader. In their study on team reflexivity Schippers, Den Hartog, Koopman and Van Knippenberg (2008) show that traits and behaviours associated with transformational leadership improve team reflexivity. Watson, Chemers and Preiser (2001) emphasise the importance of 'effective leadership' for strengthening collective efficacy.

The exceptions in the literature to the studies that focus on leader-level factors which affect leader influence are few and not worked out in detail. Andra Serban and Ashley Roberts (2016), for example, focus on group leadership. Marjo-Riitta Parzefall and Volker Kuppelwieser (2012) show the positive impact of perceptions of higher social capital. Other theorists, notably González-Romá, Perió and Tordera (2002) and Joshi, Pandey and Han (2013), look at the enabling factors in the environment within which leader-follower exchanges are embedded. Clark, Murphy and Singer (2014) look at the impact that ownership and governance structures have on performance influence. Investigating the effect a CEO has on financial performance, they find ownership and governance structures are an indirect contingency for a CEO's discretion as a result of the normative expectations which can mitigate leader effects. Avey, Palanski and Walumbwa (2011) investigate follower self-esteem as a moderating factor on ethical leadership, arguing the case for the need to take into account followers' characteristics as moderators. Gebet, Heinitz and Buengeler (2016) examine follower cynicism and societal value erosion, while Villa, Howell, Dorfman and Daniel (2003) note that an organisation's culture and values can contribute to whether there is a need for leadership and thus the group's receptiveness to influence. They note that the absence of a consideration of situational variables in the literature, as these are described in their study, is a consequence of the 'questionable methodological practices' used as a basis for such conclusions (2003, 14).

The contribution of this article lies in the way it seeks to expand the research on factors beyond the individual leader that play a role in the production and enactment of leader influence. We do so by using social identify approaches to address what we regard as a lack of conceptual clarity on factors that affect leaders' influence in relational leadership theories.

We start by, firstly, discussing the bias towards leader-level considerations in research on the factors that impact on leader influence. We then show why it could be argued that relational leadership theories in general have failed to provide clarity not only on the connection between

leaders and influence in general, but also on the factors that impact on leader influence. In the third section we argue that social identity theory provides a useful basis from which to build theory on group-level factors that affect leader influence. This is, in part, because this theory allows for the retention of the idea that a leader is in some way a person with influence, without succumbing to the view that makes the leader's influence dependent on factors related to the leader personally.

2. Literature

For the purposes of this paper, we found the suggestion put forward by Dinh, Lord, Gardner, Meuser, Liden and Hu (2014) that the most important contemporary leadership theories can be grouped into trait theories and neo-charismatic theories of leadership helpful to structure the discussion on the leader-level factors in conventional approaches to understanding leader influence.

2.1 The leader-bias in trait-based and neo-charismatic theories of leadership

Recent trait-based theories of leadership present a more complex view than initial studies on typical leadership traits (Zaccaro, 2007). These theorists argue, firstly, that traits should not be approached in isolation, but as 'integrated constellations of attributes that influence leadership performance' (Zaccaro, 2007, p. 8). Traits, secondly, should not refer only to attributes related to the personality of the leader, but also include 'motives, values, cognitive abilities, social and problem-solving skills, and expertise'. Such approaches, thirdly, argue for the existence of 'cross-situational traits', whilst acknowledging that certain leadership traits will only be effective in particular situations (Zaccaro, 2007, p. 9).

Trait-based theories of leadership assume the closest of links between individual leaders and their influence on their followers. The factors identified are understood to be directly related to the person of the leader. Furthermore, these individual leaders are in some ways extraordinary and are able to influence others because of their extraordinary collection of attributes. This is confirmed by studies and reviews on the links between leaders' attributes and their impact on followers (see Cavazotte, Moreno, & Hickmann, 2012; Yukl, 2012). In their study on the relation between leaders' personality traits and a neo-charismatic theory of leadership, Timothy Judge and Joyce Bono (2000) find that extraversion and agreeableness are particularly strong predictors of the influence a leader may exert.

Neo-charismatic theories of leadership are particularly clear on the relation between leadership and influence. Transformational leaders, according to Bernard Bass, enable followers 'to transcend [their] own self-interest for the sake of the team, organisation, or larger polity' (Bass, 1985, p. 20). Transformational leaders influence followers by means of their 'socialised charisma' and 'charismatic actions' (or 'idealised influence') as well as by means of the motivation, intellectual stimulation and personal consideration they provide to followers, thus 'allowing them to develop and self-actualise' (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003, pp. 264–265). The process of influencing followers is closely linked to the traits and actions of an individual with extraordinary abilities.

Dennis Tourish and Ashly Pinnington (2002) argue that there is a lack of critical analysis of transformational leadership, which they find promotes corporate cohesion at the expense of internal dissent and. This is because the defining characteristics of transformational leaderships potentially pushes such organisations 'further along the cult continuum' (2002, p. 157). Tourish further argues that an unintended consequence of transformational leadership is the unchecked power of leaders, with their power promoted while the powers of follower are diminished

(2013, p. 20). Taking into account factors that affect leaders' influence can help address this shortcoming.

The clarity with which both trait-based and neo-charismatic leadership theories conceptualise the connection between the individual leaders and their influence on followers is at least partly a function of these heroic bias of these theories. In their discussion of the heroic bias of transformational leadership, Willem Fourie and Florian Höhne (2018) argue that transformational leadership theory seems to overstate the influence of leaders, seemingly making it 'the indispensable *explanans* for processes of change of followers' personal goals and their alignment with the more comprehensive and transformational vision of the leader'. Influence is understood as 'unidirectional' (Yukl, 1999, p. 292). Transformational leaders also seem to be presented as incapable of failure, as evidenced by Bass and Paul Steidlmeier's distinction between authentic and pseudo-transformational leaders – with pseudo-transformational leaders denoted as failed transformational leaders (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

2.2 Relational leadership theories as point of reference

We use relational leadership theories, in particular entity approaches, as the conceptual point of reference for correcting the leader-level bias in trait-based and neo-charismatic theories of leadership, as well as for proposing factors beyond the individual leader that affect leader influence.

A review of scholarship in this field by Mary Uhl-Bien (2006) identifies the entity perspective as one of two dominant perspectives in relational leadership theory. According to Uhl-Bien, the entity perspective '[assumes] individual agency', according to which individuals are thought of as entities with 'clear separation between their internal selves and external environments' (2006, p. 656). She views LMX theory as an entity perspective, as it bases its

analysis on a conventional view of individuals and their relationships: connections between people who are in some way related or who have to work together.

Building on the research on vertical dyad linkage (Dansereau, & Haga, 1975) LMX theory focuses on the leader-follower dyad. In their contribution Chester Schriesheim, Stephanie Castro and Claudia Cogliser (1999) trace different focal points and definitions of LMX. The emphasis was initially placed on the ‘quality of the exchange between leader and subordinate’ (Schriesheim et al., 1999, p. 76). However, despite a proliferation of subcomponents of LMX, no generally agreed-upon definition was developed. As the LMX body of research expanded, definitions started to stabilise around the notion that the theory focuses on the ‘quality of the exchange relationship between leader and subordinate’ (Schriesheim et al., 1999, p. 77).

In their research, George Graen and Mary Uhl-Bien (1995, p. 227) emphasised three factors that determine the quality of the exchange relationship, namely respect, trust and obligation. These factors have been studied in more depth by numerous scholars. In the early 2000s, for example, Holly Brower, David Schoorman and Hwee Tan (2000) published their integration of LMX and trust theory, arguing that leader-follower dyads are built by the mutual evaluation of ability, benevolence and integrity (Brower et al., 2000, p. 238).

In our view, as will be argued below, Michael Hogg’s social identity theory of leadership (e.g. Hogg, 2001), also regarded by Uhl-Bien as an entity perspective, provides a particularly productive theoretical foundation for investigating factors beyond the individual leader that impact on leaders’ influence. According to Hogg, leadership is a ‘relational property’ of social groups (Hogg, 2001, p. 185).

3. Group-level and member-level factors that affect leader influence

The previous sections showed that much of the literature on leader influence – broadly understood as an influencing process that leads to a change in behaviour, thought or belief amongst followers – focuses on factors related to individual leaders. This section draws together impulses from relational leadership theories, in particular what Uhl-Bien refers to as ‘entity perspectives’, to identify and discuss group-level factors that affect leader influence. In a first step we use existing theory to show that influence is produced in groups, and that this process determines the potential influence available to leaders in the respective groups. The second step will show that the production of social influence depends on two group-level factors.

3.1 The social production of influence

A basic understanding of how social groups are created is necessary for understanding how influence could be conceived as being created in social groups.

From the perspective of social identity theory, a social group, in the most fundamental sense, can be viewed as any collection of individuals ‘who share a common social identification of themselves’ or, put differently, ‘who perceive themselves to be part of the same social category’ (Turner, 1982, p. 15). Individuals, according to this model, ‘structure their perception of themselves and others by means of abstract social categories’. They then integrate these categories as ‘aspects of their self-concepts’, which in turn forms the basis for group behaviour (Turner, 1982, p. 16). This approach to social groups builds on Solomon Asch’s attempt at reconciling individualist theories that regard groups as mere abstractions with theories that view individuals as mere products of groups (Asch, 1952, pp. 241–242). Asch managed to develop and establish the plausibility of a theory of social groups according to which social

groups are both ‘the product and condition of actions of individuals’ (Asch, 1952, p. 251). An element of Asch’s theory relevant for our argument, and also latently present in Turner’s theory, is the notion that individuals are at times members of social groups without being aware of their membership (1952, p. 265). The determining factor of social group formation is the shared perception of a shared attribute – by those who share the attribute (insiders), by those who do not share the attribute (outsiders), or (more frequently) by a combination of insiders and outsiders.

A social group, therefore, is not in the first instance brought into existence by face-to-face contact (Bales, 1950) or social relationships between group members (Cartwright & Zander, 1968, p. 46). Neither is a social group defined by members’ ‘common fate’ (Rabbie & Horwitz, 1988), shared tasks (Keyton, 2002, p. 5), joint satisfaction of needs (Cattell, 1951, p. 165) or a sense of unity (Smith, 1945, p. 227). It is possible – experimentally and conceptually – to define a social group simply as a collection of individuals who are viewed as sharing some socially constructed attribute.

Social groups can plausibly be understood as the most fundamental building blocks of social reality. The construction of social groups even precedes the formation of individuals’ identity. Individual identity represents individuals’ attempts at making sense of their membership of multiple social groups.

For our purposes, a further implication of understanding social groups as the fundamental building blocks of social reality should be highlighted: the creation of social groups also precedes the production of influence. Yet the cognitive processes that lead to the emergence of social groups explain the production of influence in social groups. When using the social identity theory-based approaches to leadership pioneered by Michael Hogg and colleagues, it is possible to view a leader as the symbol of socially-constructed influence in a group.

The very existence of leaders in groups, and therefore of group members' ability to be influenced to change their behaviour, thoughts or beliefs, is made possible by their ability to think of themselves as members of a group (Hogg, 2001, p. 186). This makes it possible for them to think of themselves and of others in terms of the social group's constituting attributes. Looking at others through the lens of these attributes segments the world into 'ingroups and outgroups' (Hogg, 2001, p. 187). Amongst members of a social group and between members of different social groups, predictable and often even standardised patterns of relationships develop.

The ability of group members to think of themselves in terms of the constituting attributes of a social group leads to the emergence of the idea of the prototypical group member. According to Hogg and colleagues, the leader is the prototypical group member (Hogg, 2001, p. 189). The leader could also be understood as the primary symbol of social influence in the group. Why? The member self-categorisation that lies at the core of the emergence of the social group depersonalises members' perceptions of themselves and of other group members. By doing so, they become 'embodiments of the contextually salient perceived group prototype' (Hogg and Hains, 1996, p. 295). In cohesive social groups this, in turn, leads to a 'positive intermember attitude', or social attraction, which leads to members being liked not as individuals but as 'embodiments of the group'. Higher levels of social attraction are directed at members who are perceived to have higher levels of prototypicality. The leaders of groups can be assumed to be objects of the highest levels of social attractiveness, with the concomitant ability to influence other members to emulate them.

Recent research has shown that 'prototypicality' is a more dynamic concept than is often assumed. If 'prototypicality' was only to be equated with notions such as 'averageness' or 'similarity', as highlighted by Niklas Steffens and colleagues (2014, p. 1003), the resultant social influence would have been relatively weak and inflexible. However, as proved in their

research, 'prototypicality', as used in social identity approaches to leadership, means that the leader embodies the 'core attributes', or 'unique qualities' that define the group. Moreover, the leader is also expected to 'advance and promote' the group's core interests and deliver what Steffens and colleagues call 'concrete outcomes' to 'give weight to the group's existence' (2014, p. 1003). Put differently: social attraction in social groups is not determined by the 'most average' group member, but by the group member who embodies and promotes what distinguishes the social group from other groups in the most exemplary fashion. By doing so, it could be argued, the leader in a social group is given the mandate, if not the responsibility, to actively craft the boundaries of the social group's identity and the content of their identity (Steffens et al., 2014, p. 1004).

From the perspective of individual group members it should be kept in mind that all individuals simultaneously belong to numerous social groups. Their social world is therefore not segmented merely into one ingroup and one outgroup, but into a multitude of interrelated ingroups and outgroups. At any given time, an individual is compelled to negotiate the social influencing processes of numerous groups. It is therefore highly unlikely that any of these groups and their leaders will be able to exert an absolute influence, i.e. an influence that trumps all other leaders' influence, on any individual. This state of affairs is expressed in terms of group members' 'self-certainty' (Grant & Hogg, 2012; Hogg et al., 2007; Leach et al., 2008), which impacts on the ability to influence a group as well as on the receptiveness of the group (Leach et al., 2008). For example, the potential of one group to influence a particular individual with multiple and competing group memberships reduces the influence of a particular group on the individual (Margolis 2018).

When using a social identity-based approach to leadership as the theoretical framework, it can be posited that in attempting to understand leaders' influence, we should first understand the most fundamental building blocks of social reality, namely social groups. As argued above,

this leads us to understand that influence is produced in social groups. The Leader symbolises the enactment of a group's founding attributes, and in this way influences other group members to emulate the leader's behaviour, thoughts or beliefs. Yet, the influence of a leader is moderated by each individual's multiple group memberships.

From the discussion above it might already be clear that when reflecting on factors of socially-produced leader influence, two sites should be investigated further: the social group itself and individual group members. The following section argues that the social group, and more specifically its entitativity, creates a group-level factor that impacts on individual leaders' influence. Individual group members, and more specifically their identification with the group, creates a member-level factor.

3.2 Group entitativity

Different levels of social groups' 'groupiness', or the extent to which they can be regarded as an entity, is the conceptual starting point for the group-level factor. This is typically referred to as the entitativity of a group. Put differently: groups differ in the degree to which they are perceived to have 'the nature of an entity' (Campbell, 1958, p. 17). One would expect a group of shoppers waiting to be served by a cashier, for example, to have a much lower level of entitativity – even though they could be seen to constitute a social group – than a large group of people protesting against a perceived injustice. Even though both groups could be diverse and without a formal structure, their levels of entitativity differ dramatically. The higher a group's entitativity, the higher the potential influence a leader can exert over group members. Whereas the shoppers will barely have enough cohesion for a leader to be able to emerge, the group of protesters will likely have a number of leaders who embody what they are perceived themselves to stand for.

Amongst social identity theorists, group entitativity is linked to five factors: how clear a group's boundaries are, the homogeneity of its members, levels of interaction amongst members, the clarity of its structure, and levels of group consensus on its goals and members' common 'fate' (Hogg, 2004). Without a clear ingroup-outgroup boundary, group members will find it difficult to associate with the group (and non-members will find it difficult to identify the group). This will make it close to impossible to create a shared sense of the most prototypical group member, or will at the very least decrease the available social influence relative to the influence available in more clearly defined groups. Similar arguments can be presented for the other factors.

For the purposes of this paper, the impact of group structure, one of the elements of group entitativity, on the potential influence available to a leader is of particular relevance. Why? It provides us with a better understanding of how a leader becomes the symbol of influence within a particular group, and it helps us to understand the nature of this influence. Influence does not simply refer to the ability to change what group members do, think or believe. Should this have been the case, then coercion and manipulation would also have counted as influence. The social production of influence, and therefore leader influence, makes it possible to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate leader influence in a group. Group structure as a component of group entitativity is the key factor in this regard.

As indicated above, the shared perception of a shared attribute amongst a collection of individuals creates distinctive ingroups and outgroups, which leads to distinctive patterns of relationships amongst group members, and between members and non-members. Put differently: the patterns of the relationships between people in a group always tend to become, in some way, standardised. This allows members of the group to harbour specific expectations of their fellow group members in their typical ingroup interactions. Whereas a group of shoppers will typically not have a formal structure, one would expect a group of shop attendants

in a store or a political party to have clear structures on who reports to whom, which decision-making competences are vested in whom, how influence is distributed in the group and so forth.

Based on theorisation by David Beetham, it can be posited that the development of rules in a group serves to create a certain measure of predictability in the ingroup relationships and in this way also creates legitimate and illegitimate forms of influence (Beetham, 2013, p. 16).

Shop attendants would not expect of their manager to influence their religious convictions, and neither would members of a political party expect of their party leaders to have a say in what they choose as their hobbies. But shop attendants would expect of their managers to determine how they engage with customers, and members of a political party would expect of their leaders to prescribe the core principles of party membership. This predictability, or the standardisation of patterns of ingroup relationships, is expressed as rules. Rules typically create a certain measure of social stability in a group.

However, one should avoid the temptation to equate the rules that develop in groups with codified legal systems. Legal systems are certainly included, but the category of rules is significantly broader. Rules also include unwritten practices and customs, or informal rules. Shop attendants would typically know whether to address their managers on their first names, last names or titles, even though this communication pattern would in all probability not have been codified. Members of a political party would similarly vote for their party leaders during elections, even though this custom would, in most cases, not have been made into a general rule. The pressure to formalise rules typically arises 'from the need to resolve disputes about power', and thus the need for rules that are 'both precise and strictly enforceable' (Beetham, 2013, p. 16).

The influence of a leader, or the influence of a person ascribed with the status to influence others in a particular group, is legitimate if the leader has acquired the status and exercises the power attached to that status in accordance with the 'prevailing rules' of the particular group

(Beetham, 2013, p. 16). Store managers, for example, are appointed based on standardised appointment criteria, whereas political leaders are elected according to codified party-specific processes. The influence of a leader is illegitimate if the rules – formal or informal – are breached. Illegitimacy is the flipside of this dimension of legitimacy. But legitimate influence depends on more than simply the existence of formal and informal rules. It also has to do with whether or not these rules – or simply, these standardised patterns of behaviour – are viewed by group members as justifiable (Beetham, 2013, p. 70). An important subset of a group's rules has to do with how leaders become symbols of legitimate influence, and whether or not leaders actually exert their influence in ways that are understood as being to the benefit of the social group itself.

Group entitativity, in summary, is a group-level factor, as it, amongst other things, defines and safeguards a social group's definition of legitimate influence by standardizing relationships between group members and creating group-level justifications of these standardized relationships.

3.3 Group identification

All individuals are simultaneously members of multiple social groups. This means that they are constantly participating in numerous – at times reinforcing and at times contradictory – influencing processes. The influence of a leader in a particular group is higher, relative to the influence of leaders in other groups, when an individual group member has a stronger sense of group identification.

In order to make sense of the way in which group identification is a factor that impacts on the influence produced in groups and symbolised by leaders, it is helpful to refer to the modes of group identification developed by Sonia Roccas and colleagues (2008, p. 283–284). Individuals

are prone to higher levels of group identification when they perceive the group as important to their own identity ('importance'), when they want to benefit from the group ('commitment'), and when they, possibly as a result of these factors, view a particular group as superior to other social groups in the environment ('superiority') and are willing to submit to the group's norms ('deference'). In a slightly more philosophical fashion, the social philosopher Raimo Tuomela (2007, p. 46) uses the distinction between individuals' 'we-mode' and 'I-mode' to describe this state of affairs. Whereas the 'we-mode' refers to individuals' conception of themselves as members of groups, the 'I-mode' represents a subjective space in which a person navigates between different group memberships and ultimately, albeit dynamically, integrates them.

Individuals with high self-uncertainty are more likely to identify with a highly entitative group (Hogg et al., 2007; Grant & Hogg, 2012), or groups similar to their self-perception (Lau, 1989). The group itself 'can influence members' degree of self-definition by the group and self-investment in the group' (Jans et al., 2015 p. 206), yet the success of the group is not required for individuals to self-identify (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). What is likely required for group identification is 'enactment and social validation ... to firmly embed the identity in one's self-definition and to establish one's legitimacy as a prototypical holder of the identity' (Ashford et al., 2008, p. 360). Yet, for individuals with multiple identities, the group influence is reduced, creating opportunities for conflicting views and acts to be adopted despite shared social characteristics amongst group members (Margolis, 2018).

Therefore, features of the social group lead individuals to develop a stronger or a weaker sense of group identification. Individuals in all likelihood evaluate these features relative to the features of other groups in the social environment. The relative importance of a particular social group then determines the extent to which an individual is willing to be influenced by the processes of social influence produced in the group. The influence of the leader, as symbol of

legitimate influence in the group, is therefore constrained by factors far beyond his or her control, which social identity theory helps to identify.

Does this mean that the leader has very little agency apart from the influence potential determined by the group in its social environment? This is not necessarily the case. As shown by Steffens and colleagues (2014, p. 1004), leaders are, to some extent, given the responsibility by group members to ‘create a sense of us’. As discussed above, leaders have leeway to update the boundaries between the ingroup and outgroup as well as the group’s core values, norms and ideals.

Based on the literature on group commitment – one element of group identification – it can also be argued that the type of social group provides guidance on the areas where leaders can be seen to have individual agency. At this point the argument becomes more intricate. In the discussion below it will become clear that even the components of group identification – in this case group commitment – have their own subcomponents. We will focus the discussion only on one component and its subcomponents.

Based on Meyer and Allen’s early work on group commitment, it can be argued that the type of social group – and thus the nature of the perceived attribute that leads to the emergence of a social group – determines which component of commitment is more important relative to the other components or their variables. Meyer and Allen (1991, p. 69), for example, identify personal characteristics as one of the variables of affective commitment. Social groups that are constituted based on personal attributes could depend more on affective commitment than social groups constituted, say, by more formal arrangements, such as employment or membership. In such cases continuance commitment might be understood as the particular group’s most important component of commitment. The difficult question is, of course, how group members negotiate between different levels of group commitment, if different components determine their level of commitment to the particular group. Leaders in social

groups constituted by personal attributes, for example, could draw on group members' openness to affective commitment. Leaders in formal organisations would typically have greater agency in matters related to continuance commitment.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In this article we used perspectives from social identity theories of leadership as the basis for developing an extended conceptual argument to identify group-level and member-level factors that impact on leader influence. We sought to retain the linkage between the individual leader, influence and the notion leadership, whilst showing that it is possible to argue that group-level dynamics impact on the degree of influence available to a leader. We locate the production of leader influence, using social identity theory, in group dynamics. The article contributes to theories that, according to the categorisation by Uhl-Bien, use 'entity perspectives' on relational leadership.

The key movements of the argument are the following: socially constructed categories, or attributes, allow individuals to conceive of themselves as one of a collection of people who share one or more of these attributes. This is how social groups are constructed. Social groups are sites where social influence is created. An important element in the creation of influence in groups has to do with members' self-certainty in the face of multiple group memberships. Individuals with multiple and conflicting group identities have been shown to be less prone to be influenced in their respective groups than those with fewer group memberships.

We argue that two factors determine the potential social influence available in a group. Group entitativity, or 'groupiness', is a group-level factor that could be seen to determine potential social influence. Groups with lower levels of 'groupiness', thus with a lower potential for being identified as entities, would have lower levels of potential social influence available. Group

entitativity is linked to five factors, namely group boundaries, member homogeneity, member interaction, group structure, and clarity and consensus on group goals. Without a clear ingroup-outgroup boundary, a high level of group entitativity becomes less likely.

The member-level factor that determines potential social influence is members' identification with the group. Groups with lower levels of group identification have lower levels of social influence available to leaders. Groups with that are perceived to be important to members' identity, groups that are perceived to provide members with some sort of social benefit, and groups that are perceived to be superior to other groups in a particular social environment are likely to be able to create higher levels of group identification.

Despite what we view as the logical coherence of the argument we presented above, our study does have a number of limitations. Firstly, despite our best intentions, we might underestimate the complexity of the relationships between the different elements presented in the argument. We expect that when testing our conclusions in the field, the extent of the complexity will be revealed. A case in point is the relationship between social groups and social influence. We propose viewing the creation of social groups as something that happens prior to the creation of social influence. But in some cases the inverse seems to be true, as social influence can influence the creation of social groups.

A second and related limitation is the absence of competing hypotheses. Because of the conceptual nature of the paper, competing hypotheses could have been presented at numerous junctures of the argument. Could higher levels of group cohesion and group identification, for example, not actually weaken the influence of a leader, as this could mean that group members have additional resources (independent from the leader) to draw on to achieve the group's objectives? It could also be posited that low levels of entitativity actually increase the need for leadership, as group members have few other resources to draw on in order to reach their group's objectives. Empirical research on the impact of changes in the external environment

on the production of influence and receptivity to different leadership styles could nuance our argument further. In our view competing hypotheses would be particularly helpful, should we seek to explain the results of testing our hypotheses in the field.

Our argument is aimed at highlighting the complexity of group members' social environment, as well as of the complexity of the production and practising of social influence. Apart from testing the proposed hypotheses in the field, we are of the view that further research can be done on understanding and classifying the group-level and member-level factors that impact on leader influence. Greater clarity is also required on the nature and directionality of the interactions between leader-level, group-level and member-level factors that affect leader influence.

In our view, this paper could have an impact not only on research on leader influence, but could also inform the ways in which leadership development programmes are designed. Rather than focusing on leader-level competencies, and assigning blame for failed organisations to leaders, the perspective should also be reversed. In many instances leaders' capacity to drive organisational change is severely constrained by the organisation – a combination of social groups – itself. Without a strong sense of group entitativity and group member identification, even the most inspirational and competent leader will find it difficult to initiate and successfully drive change.

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