A comparison of implicit leadership theories of managers and students

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Modern theories of leadership emphasize the cognitive interaction between leaders and followers. Experiences show that proper personality traits, proper behavior or proper situation for leading are not enough, successful performance of leader depends a lot on how he is accepted by his follower. That is why the study of implicit leadership theories that determine these perceptions is important. Implicit leadership theories could be considered as cognitive schemas or prototypes that enables the person to categorize the behavior of a leader. In the present study the implicit theories of managers and students are compared. 256 middle managers from three industries and 150 students from three studies participated in this study. The participants rated the perceived importance of 112 characteristics and behaviors that related to leadership. Previous analyses showed that these items can be reduced to 17 dimensions of implicit leadership theories. Analyses indicate that main differences between implicit theories of managers and students can be summarized on the dimension task vs. relationship orientation. The possible confounding effect of age is considered. The implication of results for the selection and the development of leaders are discussed.

There are few problems of interest to behavioral scientist that has as much apparent relevance to the problems of society as the study of leadership. There is a general agreement that the effective functioning of social systems on all levels depends a lot on the quality of leadership. While one can identify many factors influencing organizational effectiveness, some of which are out of direct control of leaders, the critical importance of leadership functions for survival and effectiveness of organization cannot be denied.

The large amount of research shows that traits, behaviors and situations of leaders have some relationship to leadership effectiveness (Yukl, 1989). In addition, it is clear that even if leaders exhibit the right behavior, possess the requisite traits, and are in situation that make it ease to lead, they still may not influence the followers or achieve their objectives. The follower's interpretation of leader's behavior can enhance or undermine the leader influence. Hollander and Julian (1969) thesis that leaders emerge in group situation by fitting the shared conceptions of followers, emphasizes the role of perceiver construct in leadership processes. This means that the followers tend to allow

others to lead when they matched their ideas of what good leaders should be. Hollander and Julian's view is quite compatible with the social-cognitive approach to leadership developed in the last two decades.

At this point it make sense to draw attention on distinction between the constructs of leadership and management. According to Lord and Maher (1991), the essence of leadership is being seen as leader by others. Management, in contrast, involves discharging a set of task activities associated with a specific organizational position. Managers can generally perform social tasks better if they are seen as leader, and being perceived as leader may be a significant determinant of recognition and promotion for managers. According to Katz and Kahn (1978, p.528), we can consider the essence of leadership to be the influential increment over and above mechanical compliance with routine directives in the organization. Other consensual definition of leadership (House, Hanges, Dickson and Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1996) is that leadership is "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members".

The process by which persons are perceived as leaders follows the same basic social cognitive processes as occur in other context. According to Rosch (1975), people are overflowed by so much information from their environment that they find it impossible to cope with it all. As a result, people develop cognitive structures (schemas, categories, implicit theories) that help them to organize and pro-

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cess the information efficiently. Among the constructs for describing the cognitive structures for perception of persons, the most general is the concept of implicit personality theory. This concept (Rosenberg and Jones, 1972, p.372) is used by psychologists to refer to (a) the categories the person employs to describe the range of abilities, attitudes, interests, physical features, traits and values that he perceives in himself and others and (b) the beliefs that the person holds concerning which of these perceived characteristics tend to go together and which do not. The theory is implicit because the above person's categories and beliefs are inferred from his spontaneous descriptions and expectations about the particular individual and groups rather than being stated by him as a formal theory. Implicit theories have also been dubbed as commonsense, lay or nad've theories to distinguish them from scientific theories. Cognitive schemata and prototypes are specific instances of implicit personality theories.

Implicit leadership theories influence the values individuals place on selected leader behaviors and attributes. They determine how specific configuration of behaviors and characteristics expressed by the leader will be evaluated. The better the fit between the implicit theory and observed behaviors and characteristics, the more leadership ability is attributed to the individual and the more the leader is accepted by the attributer. Implicit leadership theory helps people to efficiently categorize persons into dif-

ferent categories related to leadership. One of the most important categorization is the identification of the leader where the observed person is sorted in the pigeonhole of leader or nonleader. Being categorized and labeled as leader has important consequences. First, this person gains social power and influence (Cronshaw and Lord, 1987). He or she is more likely to be viewed as responsible for causing positive group outcomes. If individuals are labeled as nonleaders, they may have difficulty in influencing the behavior of subordinates and may not receive the credit for positive group outcomes for which they were actually responsible. Second, once a person is labeled as leader, other behaviors and traits are attributed to the person that are consistent with the observers' implicit theory of leadership. For example, a person who is labeled as leader may be seen by followers as intelligent and self-confident, despite the lack of direct evidence to support these perceptions. Rather than paying close attention to what a leader actually does, observers may rely on their preconceptions that are build into their implicit leadership theories. Lord, Binning, Rush and Thomas (1978) estimated that about 40% of the variance in leadership ratings could be attributed to these preconceptions.

Figure 1, adapted from Shaw (1990), shows some other circumstances that beside the structure of the implicit leadership theories (leader schema or prototype) influence the kind of information processing that occurs in categoriza-
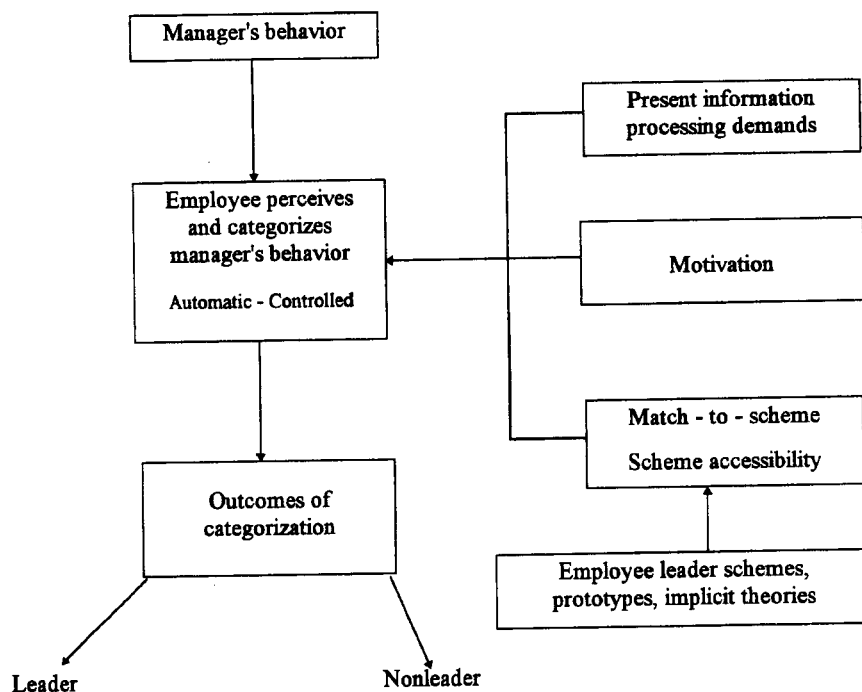
(Adapted from Shaw, 1990)

Figure 1. The nature of the leader categorization process

tion. It is important to realize that the categorization can be automatic or controlled (Cronshaw and Lord, 1987). In controlled categorization person examines the leader behavior and tries to answer such questions as: is the behavior typical of the individual and characteristic of leaders, is the behavior really under the control of the individual, why is the person behaving in this way, and so on. In the automatic information processing an individual is immediately labeled as leader if his behavior matches the essential leadership characteristics represented in the observers' leader schema. Whether categorization occurs as the result of automatic or controlled information processing depends upon situational, contextual and personal factors. One factor is the degree to which the behavior clearly matches pre-existing leader/nonleader categories. If behavior is ambiguous or incongruent with previous categorization, more controlled information search and attributional process may be necessary. Other factor is the schema accessibility. Motivational factors are also important. Individuals that are motivated to maintain their existing schemas are more likely to automatically categorize. Those individuals that are motivated to accurately process information are likely to resort to controlled categorization. Finally, the pressure to process information quickly and in situation where information-processing capabilities are overtaxed can lead to automatic categorization.

Implicit leadership theories develop slowly over the time through repeated experience with objects, persons or situations. It is to be expected that implicit leadership theories reflect various personal and cultural factors. Differences between people in their implicit leadership theories can be of theoretical and practical interest.

The purpose if this study is to describe the cognitive prototypes that are associated with implicit leadership theories of two populations that are expected to have a different perspective on leadership. The hypothesis of the present study is that leadership theories endorsed by managers and students differ. This hypothesis is a collorary of one of the fundamental questions addressed by the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program, House et al., 1996): how attributes of societal and organizational cultures affect the kinds of leader behaviors and organizational practices that are accepted and effective. We propose that students and managers can be considered as members of specific subcultures (Abrahamson and Fobrun, 1994) that share among themselves a lot of significant beliefs about boundaries, reputations and strategic issues. It is noteworthy that both subcultures are distinct but at the same time interdependent. As most managers are recruited from the students' population the study of differences and similarity in their respective implicit leadership theories have important practical implications.

METHOD

Sample

This study was performed on the sample of 256 middle managers from the financial, food and communication industries and the sample of 150 students of economy, electrical engineering and psychology. The mean age of managers is 43 years; the mean age of students is 22 years. Among managers 40 % are females, among students 57 % are females.

Measures

An instrument developed in GLOBE project (House et al. 1996) comprising 112 items about leader's behavior and characteristics was administered. The subjects had to rate the prototypicality of leader behavior characteristics on the following seven-point scale:

1. Greatly inhibits a person from being an outstanding leader

2. Somewhat inhibits a person from being an outstanding leader

3. Slightly inhibits a person from being an outstanding leader

4. Has no impact on whether a person is an outstanding leader

5. Contributes slightly to a person being an outstanding leader

6. Contributes somewhat to a person being an outstanding leader

7. Contributes greatly to a person being an outstanding leader

Preliminary analyses showed that the responses to 112 items can be mapped to 17 dimensions (Hanges, 1997). Table 1 presents the labels of dimensions, the respective numbers of item included in each dimension and the respective reliabilities (Cronbach alpha).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first overview of characteristics of implicit leadership theories endorsed by managers and students is presented in Figure 2.

At first glance two graphs in the Figure 2 show a general similarity of the profiles of prototypicalities of leader

Table 1

Description of leadership scales

Scale label	N of items	Reliability
Visionary	9	.92
Inspirational - charismatic	9	.92
Integrity	4	.86
Bureaucratic	5	.83
Procedural	4	.85
Performance orientation	3	.80
Autocratic	6	.79
Collective	6	.78
Status conscious	2	.76
Face saving	3	.76
Diplomatic	4	.72
Individualistic	4	.69
Decisive	4	.68
Humane orientation	2	.68
Self-centered	4	.67
Equanimity	3	.64
Charismatic – self sacrifice	3	.51

✦ significant at last on .05 level
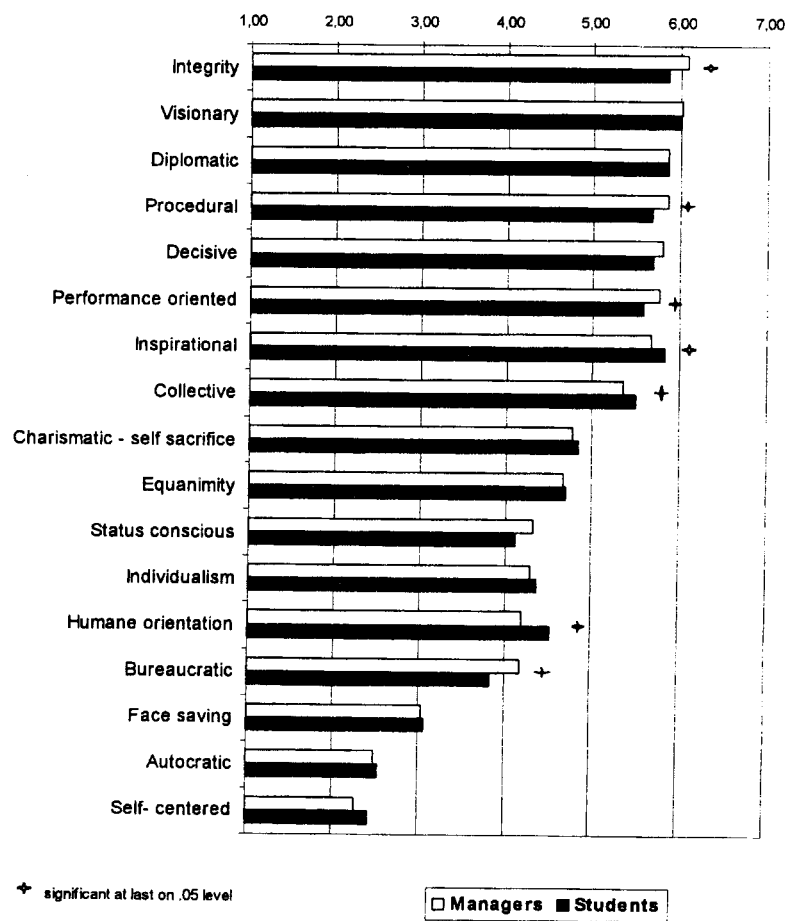
☐ Managers ■ Students

Figure 2. Prototypicality of leader characteristics for managers and students

Table 2

Results of discriminant analysis

Scales	Correlations with discriminant dimensions		
	Function 1	Function 2	Function 3
Performance oriented	.185	.228	.319
Autocratic	.023	.160	-.492
Equanimity	-.031	.500	.141
Charismatic – sacrificing	-.102	.220	.073
Collective	-.267	.291	.654
Decisive	.072	.173	.472
Diplomatic	-.058	.293	.354
Face saving	-.046	.198	-.189
Visionary	-.036	-.074	.372
Humane orientation	-.372	.405	.357
Integrity	.171	.192	.724
Bureaucratic	.461	.407	-.041
Procedural	.247	.379	.200
Self-centered	-.118	.121	-.420
Individualism	-.100	.668	-.095
Status conscious	.191	.187	.073
Inspirational	-.284	.047	.489
Eigenvalue	.250	.186	.085
% of explained variance	41%	31%	14%
Significance	.000	.000	.039

characteristics in both samples. This high correlation can be attributed to the influence of national culture. Some homogeneity is also due to the fact that both samples share a relatively high level of education. Three characteristics that mostly contribute to impression of being an outstanding leader and that are universally endorsed from both managers and students leader are visionary, diplomatic and decisive. Five other characteristics are also generally very important but not equally endorsed by managers and students (integrity, procedural, performance oriented, inspirational, and collective). It is very interesting that being bureaucratic and humane oriented (characteristics that are very popular in everyday discussion about leaders) is perceived to have almost no impact on being outstanding leader although the perceptions of managers and students in these respects differ. Being autocratic and self-centered is perceived as an obstacle for being an outstanding leader in both samples.

Seven leader's characteristics show differences in prototypicalities that reach statistical significance on level 0.05. These characteristics are of course not independent. To get better insight into overall differences a discriminant analysis was performed. Results of this analysis are presented in table 2.

From the Table 2 follows that the differences between implicit theories of managers and students can be summarized in three dimension. The first dimension represents bureaucratic and procedural leader on one end and the collectivistic leader with humane orientation on the other end. This dimension reminds on well-known distinction of task orientation and relationship orientation. The second dimension emphasizes the image of individualistic and equanimous leader, the third dimension emphasizes the image of outstanding leader as having integrity, being collective, inspirational and decisive.

The positions of six groups of subjects that participated in our research are presented in the space of first two discriminant dimensions on the Figure 3.

From the Figure 2 it is evident that the implicit leadership theories of managers and students differ mostly on the first dimension. In the eyes of managers an outstanding leader is more task oriented, students on the other hand, consider the relations oriented leader as more characteristic for outstanding leader. The second discriminant dimension shows differences within managers and students. The same is true also for the third discriminant dimension not presented in the picture.

Comparing the implicit theories of managers and students could be confounded with the influence of age. Man-

Table 3

Centroids of three age groups

Group	N	Function 1	Function 2	Function 3
Managers with age 30 years and bellow	15	.416	.147	.354
Managers with age above 30 years	240	.354	-.026	.033
Students with average age 22	150	-.601	.032	.077

agers are of course much older then students. This influence can not be systematically controlled. To get some additional insight how age can influence the results the managerial group was split in two subgroups. Table 3 shows the respective centroids of three age groups on three discriminant dimensions.

From the Table 3 follows that on the first discriminant dimension the difference between young managers and students is not smaller than between older managers and students as could be expected taking into account age differences. Younger managers are somewhat more task orientated than their older colleagues and much more task oriented then students. One factor that can explain these results is the process of either spontaneous or systematic selection of young managers. Young managers tend to have different implicit leadership theories also in regard to third discriminant dimension. More than students and older

managers they emphasize the integrity, collectivism, inspirations and decisiveness of outstanding leaders.

One of practical implications of implicit leadership theories has to do with the problem of selection of leaders. Hogan, Cuphy and Hogan (1994) observe that many organizations do not use selection procedures that include measures of personality. As a results, first-line supervisors are often chosen on the basis of their technical talents. Middle managers are often chosen on the basis of likeability and perceived ability to work with senior managers. The choices of executive officers are in majority of cases made by committees. We think that in all above cases the implicit leadership theories of those who make selection have a lot of influence on their decision. The problem remains that persons that seem, according to our implicit leadership theories as leaderlike may not have the skills required to build and guide effective teams. The consequences of such
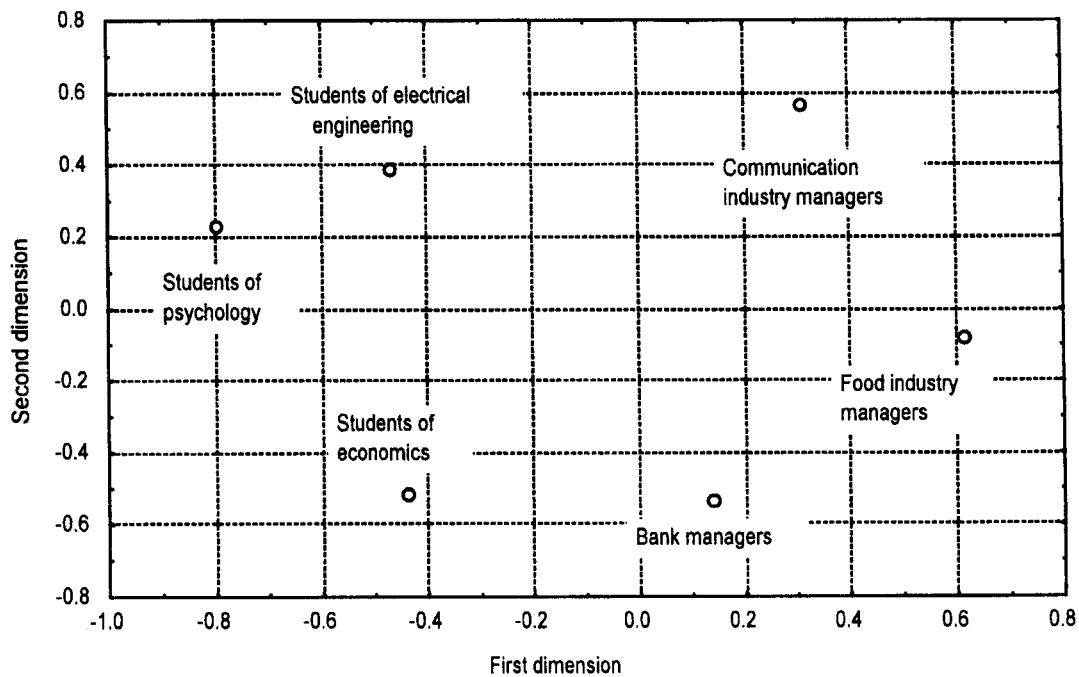

Figure 3. Plot of group centroids on the first and second discriminant dimension

decisions are that the base rate of managerial incompetence in America is estimated between 60% and 75%, partially as a consequence of above described selection decisions, as well.

The second implication of implicit leadership theories has to do with the problem of management development. To be effective, managers need to understand the implicit leadership theories of their followers and adapt their behavior accordingly. That is especially important for expatriate managers that have to work in other cultures (Shaw, 1990). Managers that lead young professionals (students) should probably behave differently than managers that lead unqualified workers. Additional research should be addressed to the issue of conflicts that arise because of differences in implicit leadership theories of subordinates and their leaders.

The results presented support the hypothesis that cultures affect the kind of leader behaviors that are accepted. The extent to which the implicit leadership theories of managers and students are similar reflects the influence of the national culture. The extent to which these theories differ reflects the influence of the specific subcultures. Full insight into the meaning of respective similarities and differences will be possible after reconsidering the results in the context of international comparison.

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