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Human Relations 2009; 62; 1697 originally published online Sep 23, 2009;
DOI: 10.1177/0018726709346377

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://hum.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/62/11/1697

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:

The Tavistock Institute

Human Relations
DOI: 10.1177/0018726709346377
Volume 62(11): 1697–1733

The Tavistock Institute ®
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ABSTRACT

Following recent interest in contextual factors and how they might influence the effects of transformational leadership, we consider the social distance between leaders and followers as a cross-level moderator of the relationships between senior level managers' transformational leadership and individual-level outcomes. Our sample comprised 268 individuals in 50 leader-follower groups. Results revealed that high social distance reduced or neutralized transformational leadership's association with followers' emulation of leader behavior. In contrast, high levels of social distance between leaders and followers enhanced the effects of transformational leadership on individuals' perceptions of their units' positive emotional climate and individuals' sense of collective efficacy. Results not only highlight the importance of social distance as a contextual variable affecting leader-follower relations but also suggest that the same contextual variable may have differential effects, enhancing some relationships and neutralizing others.

KEYWORDS

affect ▪ context ▪ efficacy ▪ leadership development ▪ multilevel

> Leadership in organizations does not take place in a vacuum. It takes place in organizational contexts. The key issue, therefore, is whether, and to what extent, the organizational context has been front and center. That is, does a relative void still exist in the research literature on the impact of the organizational context on leadership? If it does, the situation would seem to be like the weather: many talking about it, but very few doing much about it insofar as empirical research is concerned.
>
> (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006: 559)

Since its introduction, transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978) has not only become the most studied leadership theory, but also has garnered substantive support (Conger, 1999; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe et al., 1996). Hunter et al. (2007) recently suggested, however, that scholars need to focus their attention to the context within which individuals enact such leadership. Notably, contextual issues are not new to those interested in transformational leadership (Antonakis et al., 2003; Lowe & Gardner, 2000; Pawar & Eastman, 1997; Shamir & Howell, 1999; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Yet, Porter and McLaughlin (2006), having conducted a comprehensive review of the leadership literature, lamented that despite increased recognition of contextual variables and their moderating influence on the effects of transformational leadership, empirical research has not (appropriately) followed suit.

One contextual variable of potential importance, and which the literature has underexplored, is leader-follower distance (Collinson, 2005). Along similar lines, earlier work by Waldman and Yammarino (1999) bemoaned the fact that scholars know very little regarding how followers (at multiple, lower level echelons) respond to leadership initiated at top echelons. In their attempt to highlight the distance construct, Antonakis and Atwater (2002) contended that, although overlooked within leadership research, distance is a key contextual factor and, thus, a defining element of the leadership influence process. Further, Antonakis and Atwater defined leader-follower distance in terms of three independent dimensions: physical distance, social distance, and the amount of interaction between leader and follower. The problem with these analytical distinctions is that in reality various dimensions of distance tend to co-vary.[1] Thus, scholars have often associated social distance with physical distance and the quantity and quality of interactions between leaders and followers. Indeed, while Shamir (1995) and Yagil (1998) concentrated on social distance, many of their arguments implied that it is less possible for distant leaders to observe followers and for followers to observe distant leaders owing to greater physical distance and

less frequent or less intimate interactions between leaders and followers. This research further illustrates that the terms *distance* and *proximity* are rather 'slippery concepts, difficult to pin down' (Collinson, 2005: 244).

In order to reduce confusion, we focus on social distance. We therefore adopted, with a slight modification, Antonakis and Atwater's definition of social distance as 'differences in status, rank, authority, social standing and power, which affect the degree of social intimacy and social contact that develops between followers and their leaders' (2002: 682). In this study, however, we take a somewhat narrower perspective and focus on the hierarchical distance between the senior level managers and the rank-and-file memberships of an organization (see Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Indeed, the notion that organizations are structured hierarchically (i.e. levels of management) is one of the most fundamental of contextual factors (Bass et al., 1987; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999; Yammarino, 1994). Upper level leaders tend to come from the highest echelons of management, a factor that can significantly influence the interaction dynamics and perceived distance between leaders and those in subordinate positions (Collinson, 2005). Further, Collinson observed that companies commonly locate leaders' and senior level managers' offices on the very top floors, in the least accessible and most extravagantly furnished areas of their buildings. And those in senior level positions use gatekeepers to help control who has access to them and they usually enjoy generous compensation packages and have greater access to company sponsored travel and off-the-job training – all of which can further distance the leaders from the led. Thus, it should not be surprising that within organizations, social distance as described by Antonakis and Atwater (2002) is most clearly manifested in hierarchical level differences between senior level leaders and subordinates. Consequently, the present study operationalized social distance as the hierarchical distance between senior level leaders and followers, which carries with it implications regarding differences in status, rank, expertise, authority, nature of leader-follower interactions, and so on (see Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

The purpose of the present study was to address mounting calls for identifying the conditions under which transformational leadership is more or less effective (Hunter et al., 2007; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). In doing so, we sought to obtain empirical evidence that social distance (viz., hierarchical distance) influences the direction and strength of the relationship between senior level managers' transformational leadership and follower (i.e. subordinate) outcomes. Interestingly, in spite of suggestions from the theoretical literature that social distance might moderate the impact of leader behaviors on follower outcomes, we are unaware of any research that confirms this proposition. The closest empirical work is that reported by

Shamir (1995) and Yagil (1998). In both studies, the researchers focused on how followers attributed leadership characteristics to socially close and distant leaders. Although these two studies provided interesting findings, neither study attempted to directly test social distance's role as a potential contextual (moderator) variable. To address this lack of empirical research, we investigated how leader-follower social distance affects the relationships between strategic, business unit managers' transformational leadership behavior and three follower outcomes.

Transformational leadership, follower development, positive emotional climate, and collective efficacy beliefs

According to Bass (1985), among others, transformational leaders develop and empower followers in two ways: first, by fostering personal growth, namely the development of each follower as an individual; second, by strengthening the relationships between the individual and the group the individual belongs to. Furthermore, they do so by engaging in various types of behavior (viz., idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) that theorists believe activate or prime two different levels of an individual's self concept: the relational-self and the collective-self (Howell & Shamir, 2005; Kark & Shamir, 2002; Lord et al., 1999). At the relational level, individuals define themselves in terms of their relationships with a significant other (e.g. leader) and self-worth is derived from appropriate role behavior (e.g. being a good follower). At the collective level, individuals define themselves predominantly in terms of their membership in larger collectives or social categories (e.g. particular work team or department) and contributing to collective achievements derives self-worth. Different levels of self-construal are important because once activated, they lead to different consequences, in terms of followers' responses to the leaders' influence attempts (Lord et al., 1999). In this regard, Kark and Shamir (2002) maintained that by priming aspects of the relational-self, transformational leaders not only increase followers' performance by helping them develop as individuals, but also through the creation of strong emotional bonds. Relatedly, transformational leaders are also known to engage followers' sense of collective-self (Shamir et al., 1993) and, at the same time, strengthen individuals' collective efficacy beliefs and sense of group potency (Kark & Shamir, 2002; Shamir et al., 1998).

We chose to represent the first type of effect (i.e. personal growth) by examining the association between high-level leaders' transformational leadership and followers' self-ascriptive tendencies to enact transformational behaviors (dubbed *followers' transformational leadership*).

Transformational leadership theory emphasizes that such leadership develops followers to their full potential and this includes developing the capacity to become leaders themselves. Transformational leaders 'may convert followers into disciples and motivate them to develop themselves' (Avolio & Bass, 1995). Likewise, Avolio (1999) suggested 'the legacy of any great leader is typically witnessed in the ability of his or her second, third, and fourth in command to assume the responsibilities of the first – and that is, of course, to lead in new directions' (p. 4). Consistent with this perspective is the view proposed by Manz and Sims (2001), wherein they suggested that an effective leader is capable of turning followers into extraordinary self-leaders.

Recall that the second effect of transformational leadership concerns the strengthening of individuals' connections to the group or organizational units to which they belong. Thus, transformational behaviors that emphasize the organizational unit are likely to empower followers by increasing their positive beliefs about their groups and heightening interests in the welfare of their group as a whole. We have chosen to represent this facet of development with two outcomes: *positive emotional climate*, defined as the perception that individuals hold concerning the emotional tenor of their work environment (James et al., 2008), and *collective efficacy*, defined as the individual's beliefs concerning the ability of his or her group to successfully perform its work tasks and function effectively (Riggs & Knight, 1994). We conceptualized both outcomes as being individual-level attributes, assessed in terms of perceptions that are psychologically meaningful to the individual (James & James, 1989).

Social distance as a contextual moderator

Park (1924) originally defined social distance as the degree of 'understanding and intimacy, which characterize personal and social relations' (p. 339). Later, Bogardus (1927) used Park's definition in the first writing about leadership and social distance. While Bogardus (1927) made the association between leadership and distance over 80 years ago, the idea that the dynamics of the leadership process might differ depending on how close or distant followers are from their leader has not received much attention. In part, we attribute this lack of attention to the fact that many leadership theories, while claiming general validity, were formulated with one type of leadership in mind, and therefore, their authors probably viewed leader-follower distance as a constant. For instance, Fiedler's contingency theory (1967) and House's path goal theory (1971) focused on direct supervisory leadership and therefore on close leadership. On the other hand, charismatic leadership was considered by several authors as applying only to

leadership-at-a-distance (e.g. Katz & Kahn, 1978). Thus, scholars interested in developing contemporary charismatic/transformational leadership theory faced the daunting task of combining the notion of charisma, as traditionally applied to prominent figures in large social systems (e.g. kings, presidents, and leaders of religious movements), with the more recent focus on micro-leadership processes that subsume direct leader-follower contact (Shamir, 1995); and in doing so, they overlooked important differences between socially close and socially distant leadership effects (Yammarino, 1994).

It is only following the claim of more recent theories that transformational and charismatic leadership apply to all levels of leadership within the organization (Bass, 1990), from small groups to total organizations, that leader-follower distance has started to receive empirical attention. Shamir (1995), in his attempt to reconcile the 'older' and 'newer' theories of charismatic/transformational leadership, observed that it is not that such leadership is possible only from a distance but rather that followers' perceptions of socially close and distant leaders are different. With this premise in mind, Shamir (1995) conducted an exploratory study and discovered that followers perceived some traits and behaviors of close and distant charismatic leaders differently. In a similar vein, Yagil (1998) found that followers attributed different charismatic qualities to close and distant leaders. She also demonstrated that socially distant charismatic leaders have a group-level effect, whereas socially close leaders were found to have individual-level effects.

In spite of the interesting work reported by Shamir and Yagil, an important question remains unanswered. To what extent do close and distant followers act differently as a result of viewing the *same* leaders differently? In other words, how might social distance moderate the relationship between transformational leadership and follower outcomes? Drawing from the 'dual effect' model of transformational leadership (Kark & Shamir, 2002), we suggest that there is no single answer to this question because social distance may both reduce and enhance the effects of transformational leadership. Therefore, the answer would depend on the nature of the outcome examined.

Social distance as a neutralizer

Leadership neutralizer variables are characterized as moderators that create an influence vacuum or neutralize the predictive relationships between leader behaviors and criteria (Howell et al., 1986). Thus, when social distance prevents transformational leader behaviors from having an association to follower outcomes, a neutralizing effect is occurring. This is likely to be the case for follower outcomes that require strong personal identification with

the leader (Kark & Shamir, 2002). In other words, to prime followers' concept of relational-self (i.e. interpersonal connections between leader-followers), transformational leaders must practice intimate behaviors such as consideration, sensitivity to followers' needs, and support. Because this type of transformational relationship assumes some contact between the leader and followers, it may apply primarily to close leadership situations. In Shamir's (1995) study, for example, individuals more frequently attributed socially close leaders as inducing their desires to emulate the leaders' behavior and socially close leaders were reported to also generate more positive feelings among these same individuals.

Followers' transformational leadership

Because we were interested in followers' performances of transformational leadership, we believed that a salient source of such information would be the followers' focal leaders. The notion that individuals use the behavior of salient others to inform and regulate their own behavior is consistent with social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and empirical research on leadership emergence (Bommer et al., 2004). Shamir et al. (1993) suggested that the focal leader 'becomes an image that helps define for the followers just what kinds of traits, values, beliefs, and behaviors it is good and legitimate to develop' (p. 585). On this basis, Dvir et al. (2002), among others, noted that several aspects of followers' development are implied by transformational leadership theory. One aspect that has received only little attention is the leader's influence on followers' leadership style, or the development of transformational behaviors (i.e. self-leadership) among followers. Yammarino (1994) concluded, for example, that the most successful of transformational leaders are those who have shaped followers (and even colleagues) into leaders in their own right. Kark and Shamir (2002) claimed that by empowering followers, stimulating them intellectually, and raising their motivation, transformational leadership elicits personal identification with the leader (by priming relational aspects of the self-concept), thereby activating followers' desires to mimic the leader's behavior as a means to develop and grow as individuals (see also Shamir, 1991, 1995). Therefore, we detect a relationship between this aspect of follower development and individuals' personal identification with the leader and internalization of the leader's motives, values, and behavior patterns – a contention previously argued by various leadership scholars (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Howell, 1988; Kark & Shamir, 2002).

For Yammarino (1994), transformational leaders are 'the ultimate developers of others' (p. 45). Thus, as noted above, one aspect in which this development is likely to be evident is followers' desire to emulate their

leader's transformational behaviors. Incidentally, Bass et al. (1987) observed a cascading phenomenon, showing that charismatic leaders were more likely to have subordinates who exhibited similar leadership qualities. Likewise, Yammarino (1994) suggested that in hierarchical organizations, transformational leadership has a 'falling dominoes' effect by which transformational leaders increase transformational behaviors among their direct and indirect followers. Based on this logic, we anticipate that direct and indirect followers of high-level transformational leaders will identify with the leader in the sense of wanting to be like the leader and imitate the leader's behavior.

Nonetheless, this positive association between leader and follower behavior should be stronger when the social distance between the leader and followers is low. Katz and Kahn (1978) stated that if leaders are to provide models for identification in the sense of being 'representative characters', their followers must perceive them as alike in some readily perceptible ways. Socially close leaders are by definition more similar to followers in status, job responsibilities, professional background, and other characteristics (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Further, being close to the leader in terms of status and role, close followers are more likely to experience their leaders' behavior across different situations and receive richer information about their leader through a variety of channels. Additionally, being more approachable and observable, socially close leaders, more so than their distant counterparts, are in a better position to provide behaviorally relevant role modeling (Shamir, 1995; Yagil, 1998). While followers may adopt both close and distant role models, effective role modeling of behavior requires some similarity between leader and follower, and the behavior of socially distant, and therefore dissimilar, leaders may be seen as less relevant, applicable or possible for the follower. By extension, a socially close leader should find it easier to transmit through his or her behavior just what kinds of behaviors are good and legitimate to replicate. In other words, close transformational leaders are more likely to shape the 'subjective norms' perceived by followers. As Ajzen (1988) stated, individuals are more likely to perform a behavior 'when they evaluate it positively and when they believe that important others think they should perform it' (p. 117). By behaving in a transformational manner, close leaders will provide behavioral cues that, in all likelihood, communicate to followers that such behavior is 'normal', providing an additional basis for expecting individual followers to manifest transformational behaviors as well (see Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978).

As these ideas suggest, followers' relational self-concept is more likely to be activated in socially close situations (see e.g. Kark & Shamir, 2002). Consequently, there is also a greater likelihood that followers will report that they themselves enact in more transformational behavior in the case of close

transformational leaders than in the case of distant leaders (Shamir, 1995). Parenthetically, Avolio (1999) referenced a doctoral dissertation by Bryce (1989) in which she found a positive correlation between superiors' and subordinates' transformational leadership. Based on this logic and empirical findings, we hypothesize:

> *Hypothesis 1*: Social distance between leader and followers will moderate the positive relationship between leaders' transformational leadership and followers' enactments of transformational behaviors. The relationship between leaders' transformational leadership and their followers' personal-reports of transformational leadership will be stronger when social distance is low rather than when it is high.

Followers' positive emotional climate

House and Shamir (1993) associated transformational leadership with the evocation, framing, and mobilization of positive emotion. Whereas Bass (1985) claimed that transformational leadership 'packs an emotional wallop' (p. 36), George (2000) went so far as to conclude that transformational leadership is essentially based on emotional processes. Transformational leaders, according to Kark and Shamir (2002), build strong emotional connections with followers because they are capable of priming relational aspects of the self. Indeed, scholars attribute the effects of transformational leadership, in part, to the creation of such emotional bonds and the positive feelings that result. For example, prior research has demonstrated transformational leaders not only enhance followers' positive affective states (Bono et al., 2007; Cherulnik et al., 2001) but also create a 'positive environment' (Erez et al., 2008). Given both theory and prior findings, we expect that transformational leadership will have a positive relationship to the affective tenor of followers' work environments (i.e. psychological climate) or what we dubbed *followers' positive emotional climate*.

We anticipate, however, that the above relationship would be stronger when the social distance between leader-followers is low rather than when it is high. Prior research demonstrates that positive emotions flow from person to person vis-à-vis emotional contagion processes (Bartel & Saavedra, 2000), wherein persons 'catch' the emotions of others. Consistent with this perspective, we assume that followers' affective reactions will be influenced more by emotional contagion processes than by the content of the leader's message (e.g. Bono & Ilies, 2006; McHugo et al., 1985) and that socially close leaders are more contagious (e.g. Sy et al., 2005). Because transformational

leaders tend to be optimists (Berson et al., 2001; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002), they should also experience positive emotions (Walter & Bruch, 2007) and display overtly positive behaviors, such as smiling and being warm and affable (Cherulnik et al., 2001; Erez et al., 2008). Prior research has shown that transformational leaders employ emotions to motivate their followers (Bass & Avolio, 1994) and to persuade them to engage in positive thinking (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000). These latter findings are important because research has shown that leaders transmit their emotions to groups of followers through emotional mimicry and other contagion mechanisms such as vocal and postural expressions (Erez et al., 2008; Sy et al., 2005). Furthermore, emotions are not only private feelings. They include social and interpretative elements and are influenced by social interactions among group members. Bartel and Saavedra (2000) found, for example, social interdependence positively influenced the convergence of emotions among group members. Finally, because social distance in many cases creates a psychological distance as well (Collinson, 2005), it might act as a barrier to emotional contagion in organizational circumstances and hierarchical relations. Accordingly, we posit that followers' positive emotional climate should more strongly associate with transformational leadership in socially close rather than socially distant leader-follower relations. Based on these considerations, we propose:

> *Hypothesis 2*: Social distance between leader and followers will moderate the positive relationship between leaders' transformational leadership and followers' positive emotional climate. The relationship between leaders' transformational leadership and their followers' positive emotional climate will be stronger when social distance is low rather than when it is high.

Social distance as an enhancer

Enhancers in leadership research are defined as moderators that augment relationships between leader behaviors and criteria (Howell et al., 1986). Shamir et al. (1993) argued that the influence of charismatic/transformational leaders depends on their success in getting followers to transcend their self-interests for the sake of their unit's. They further suggested that leaders achieve this effect by engaging the followers' self-construal, primarily those aspects of the self that connect the individuals to the groups to which they belong. Likewise, according to Kark and Shamir's (2002) dual effect model of transformational leadership, leaders can shift

individuals' self-concepts from the relational-self to the collective-self by emphasizing followers' contributions to and membership in a particular group or organizational unit. Because leader behaviors that prime the collective-self are more 'ambient' behaviors directed toward the entire group rather than individual followers (Kark & Shamir, 2002), we expect that distant transformational relationships will have a stronger impact on follower outcomes that emphasize the group or organizational unit (Yagil, 1998).

Followers' collective efficacy beliefs[2]

Bass (1985) and Burns (1978) originally suggested that transformational leaders connect individuals' self-concepts to collective entities and collective efforts; and, transformational leaders raise members' motivation to contribute to the group by aligning the individual's motives with the purpose of the collectivity as a whole (Shamir et al., 1993). According to Shamir and his colleagues (1990; Shamir et al., 1998), the individual's tendency to contribute to collective efforts depends on his or her sense of collective efficacy, referring to one's beliefs that his/her group can perform its tasks successfully. Prior research supports this logic, showing that leaders who primed followers' collective-self not only increased their willingness to contribute to group efforts (Shamir et al., 1998) but also contributed positively to followers' collective efficacy beliefs (Kark et al., 2003).

We predicted that senior level leaders rated high on transformational leadership and whose followers were socially distant would be the most effective in positively influencing followers' collective efficacy beliefs. Senior level leaders are important links between followers and their organizations (Lord et al., 1999), and as Shamir et al. (1998) have shown, some behaviors of these high-level leaders (e.g. communicating a vision) can be particularly salient in strengthening followers' connections to their groups. Moreover, because of their higher rank, their involvement in strategic decision-making, and their perceived impact on organizational success, socially distant leaders have more legitimate power and are likely to be afforded more prestige by organizational members (Bogardus, 1927). They are also likely to be more idealized and be attributed with positive qualities. Extending this argument, because of the attributed prestige, experience, knowledge and expertise, we can assume that some of the socially distant leaders' messages might carry more weight and have a greater impact on followers than the same messages when they come from socially close leaders. Shamir et al. (1998) demonstrated, for example, that the symbolic activities of leaders are important ways to motivate and empower followers. Thus, even simple aspects of a leader's confidence-building communications are likely to provide salient

cues that prime the collective self (Kark & Shamir, 2002), and thereby enhance followers' feelings of group competence and belonging to the group (Yagil, 1998).

Socially distant leaders are also perceived by followers as powerful and authoritative figures (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Indeed, in distant-leadership situations, transformational behavior relates to the ascription of extraordinary qualities to the high-level leader and, by extension, a distant leader can project a superhuman image (Shamir, 1995). Yagil (1998) theorized that charismatic/transformational leaders are perceived by distant followers as 'larger than life, as saviors and even wizards, and they are believed to possess qualities that are superhuman or at least exceptional' (p. 164). Relatedly, Katz and Kahn (1978) argued that only a leader at the top echelons is sufficiently distant from the rank-and-file memberships to make such an image possible. Hence, when social distance is high, transformational relationships between leaders and followers should be particularly powerful in elevating followers' efficacy perceptions because of the power, status and exceptional qualities attributed to the leader. In contrast, socially close leaders are unable to construct an aura of magic about them because 'day-to-day intimacy destroys the illusion' (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Consistent with this logic, Shamir (1995) found that his research subjects more frequently attributed socially distant leaders with generating confidence in them. Yagil's (1998) findings led her to conclude that socially close leaders empower followers mainly through an individual's self-efficacy, whereas distant transformational leaders create a sense of collective efficacy. These considerations lead to our final hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 3*: Social distance between leader and follower will moderate the relationship between leaders' transformational leadership and individuals' collective efficacy beliefs. The relationship between leaders' transformational leadership and their followers' collective efficacy will be stronger when social distance is high than when it is low.

Method

Sample and procedures

Targeted respondents were drawn from a high-tech manufacturing company operating within the global marketplace and headquartered in Europe. Respondents were identified and invited to participate in the study if they a) worked in a company location where the correspondence was either in English or German and b) had Internet access to complete the web-based

survey. Once identified, potential participants were sent an e-mail from the Chief Executive Officer's (CEO) personal e-mail address that described the purpose of the study and explained that they were chosen to participate in a study of leadership. The e-mail also provided a link to a web-based survey. When completing the survey, respondents were asked to record an identifier so that followers' responses could be linked back to their respective leader. We apply the term 'leader' to refer to senior level, business unit managers who were being evaluated by study respondents or 'followers'. We view a follower as an individual who 'acknowledges the focal leader as a continuing source of guidance and inspiration, regardless of whether there is any formal reporting relationship' (Howell & Shamir, 2005: 98–9). By requesting followers to rate the leadership style of their business unit's most senior level manager, it was possible that each focal leader might be evaluated by close followers (e.g. follower was also a member of the executive/senior management team) and distant followers (e.g. leader and follower were three hierarchical levels apart). Upon being redirected to the web-portal, followers chose between identical English- or German-language versions of the web-based survey. Study measures were translated into German by professional linguists following a double-blind back-translation procedure.

Of the 864 respondents invited to participate, 316 voluntarily completed the survey for an overall response rate of 37 percent. To be included in the study, two criteria had to be satisfied: 1) the most senior level leader had to have two or more followers (per hierarchical level) rate his or her leadership behavior, and 2) at least two followers who completed the leadership measures had to complete measures assessing the study outcomes. A total of 26 senior level managers, each charged with leading an independent, strategic business unit, received two or more follower ratings. A total of 268 useable follower responses were provided, with an average of five follower responses per leader-group (min. = 2; max. = 28). To further break down followers' responses by leader-distance category, two or more followers residing within a single distance category rated 10 senior level managers. Consequently, n = 10 leader-follower groups were created. Followers could be classified as existing in one of four distance categories (i.e. followers and senior manager existed at highest hierarchical level, followers were one level below senior manager, followers were two levels below senior manager, or followers were three levels below senior manager). The other 16 senior level managers received ratings from multiple distance categories. Followers in two distance categories rated eight senior level managers. As a result, n = 16 leader-follower groups were created (8 senior managers by 2 distance categories; $8 \times 2 = 16$ leader-follower groups). For example, a senior level manager might have received ratings from a very

'close' category of followers (e.g. followers were also members of the business unit's senior management team) *and* received ratings from a very 'distant' follower category (followers were non-management employees). Thus, in the present example, the two categories of distant followers were nested within the same senior level manager. Finally, followers in three distance categories rated eight senior level managers, $n = 24$ leader-follower groups were created (8 senior managers by 3 distance categories; $8 \times 3 = 24$ leader-follower groups). In all, we created a total of 50 leader-follower groups by identifying two or more alike followers (residing in the same hierarchical level) that also provided leadership ratings on the same senior level manager. Participants were primarily male (80%) and reported a mean organizational tenure of seven years (SD = 6.4).

Measures

Leaders' transformational leadership

In the initial section of the survey, we asked followers to assess the transformational leadership behavior of their units' most senior level manager. Followers indicated, using a five-point frequency scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *frequently*, *if not always*), how often their top manager exhibited each of the 20 leadership behaviors that comprised the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire's (MLQ; Bass & Avolio, 2000) transformational leadership component. Because we focused on overall transformational leadership, the five transformational subscales were averaged to form a global, group-level score (internal consistency = .96). We chose to combine the five transformational components on the basis of prior evidence that they are best represented as a higher order construct (Avolio et al., 1999; Nemanich & Keller, 2007), and to enhance our statistical power by reducing the number of estimated parameters in the ensuing analysis (Cole & Bedeian, 2007). With respect to aggregation, there was significant between-group variance, $F(49, 217) = 1.53$, $p < .05$. The ICC(1) = .09, ICC(2) = .35, and median r_{wg} value = .82 justified aggregating this variable to the group level of analysis by calculating the average value within social distance categories.

Social distance

We operationalized social distance as the difference in hierarchy level between followers and their business unit's top manager. Our operationalization of social distance as the difference in hierarchical levels between

follower and his or her focal leader (see Howell & Shamir, 2005) is an attempt to remove possible effects of *indirect* leadership, namely leadership that is mediated by other managers between the senior manager and the follower (Yammarino, 1994). In the demographic section of the survey, participants were asked to report both their own hierarchical level as well as their manager's that was being evaluated (to help ensure accuracy in coding). It was possible for followers to exist in the same hierarchical level as their senior level manager (i.e. senior manager and follower were both members of executive/senior management; 14%), one level lower (i.e. follower was head of local management team; 46%), two levels lower (follower was a work team leader; 35%), or even three levels lower (follower was non-management employee; 5%). We created social distance scores, ranging from 0 (senior manager and follower were at equal hierarchal levels) to 3 (senior manager was three hierarchical levels above follower), for each social distance group (M = 1.08, SD = .78).

Followers' transformational leadership

At the end of the survey (but prior to the demographic items), respondents self-reported the frequency in which they engaged in the 20 transformational leadership behaviors (MLQ-5x; Bass & Avolio, 2000) using a five-point response scale, ranging from 1 (= *not at all*) to 5 (= *frequently, if not always*). We averaged the items to form an overall, personal self-report score (internal consistency = .92).

Followers' positive emotional climate

We slightly modified Van Katwyk et al.'s (2000) job-related affective well-being scale (JAWS) to assess individuals' perceptions about the emotional climate of their business unit. The JAWS contains 30 statements developed to assess a variety of emotional reactions experienced while at work; we chose to include the 20 emotions identified by Van Katwyk et al. (2000) as being the most 'extreme items' (p. 225). We also adapted the instructions by asking respondents to assess their general perceptions of the emotions currently being felt in their business unit; this modification is commonly known as a referent shift (Chan, 1998). The items used in the present study reflected both positive and negative feelings. Examples include: 'excited', 'enthusiastic', 'angry', and 'furious'. Respondents provided their responses using a five-point scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *extremely often or always*). Consistent with Van Katwyk et al. (2000), we reverse scored the negative emotions

and then combined them with the positive emotions to produce an overall score. Thus, a high score on the resulting measure represents a high level of overall positive emotion (internal consistency = .91).

Followers' collective efficacy

We used six items from the collective efficacy beliefs scale developed by Riggs and Knight (1994) to gauge individuals' beliefs concerning the ability of their work unit's members to successfully perform their tasks. Sample items include, 'The members of this business unit have excellent job skills' and 'The members of this business unit have above average ability'. Respondents indicated their agreement with these items using a five-point response scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). The internal consistency of this measure was .74.

Control variable

Data relating to a potential covariate were also collected as a possible control variable. Given our operationalization of social distance vis-à-vis managers' hierarchical distance, one might argue that the present study's distance measure is confounded with followers' sense of autonomy. That is, followers who are removed from their business unit's manager are probably performing fundamentally different work, and experience greater independence. It might also be argued, however, that followers who are closer in hierarchical level to the senior manager are more senior themselves and therefore enjoy greater rather than lesser autonomy (Shamir & Howell, 1999). Followers' job autonomy was, therefore, assessed using three items (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*; Barrick & Mount, 1993). There was evidence that a reverse-scored item contributed to the unreliability of the measure; this item was dropped and responses to the remaining two items (r = .36, p < .001) were summed and averaged, with a higher score indicating a higher level of autonomy. With respect to aggregation, there was significant between-group variance, $F(49, 204) = 1.42$, $p < .05$. The ICC(1) = .08, ICC(2) = .30, and median r_{wg} value = .75 justified aggregating this variable to the group level of analysis by calculating the average value within social distance categories.

Potential confound of survey translations

Respondents completed the questionnaire in one of two offered languages, thereby opening up the possibility that respondents' ratings were confounded by translation. To examine this issue, we followed prior research and tested

the measurement equivalence (see e.g. Vandenberg, 2002) of each measure by conducting multigroup confirmatory factor analyses (MGCFA). When evaluating cross-language measurement equivalence, researchers have argued that equivalence is supported when a measure's factor loadings (metric equivalence) are found equivalent across groups (Cole et al., 2006). Therefore, based on the ΔCFI critical value (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002) index for nested MGCFA models, equal factor loadings across language groups (English n = 192; German n = 124) were used as the determinant in the present study to support cross-language equivalence. The baseline comparative fit index for each measure was acceptable (ranging from .930 to .982). In comparing the configural (i.e. baseline) and constrained models (i.e. metric equivalence), there was no indication of model degradation (largest ΔCFI = 0.003), thus fully supporting metric equivalence across languages for each of the study measures.

Data analyses strategy

We aggregated individual follower's responses to the group level of analysis based on social distance classification and leader being rated; therefore, the effective group level sample size was n = 50. Multilevel random-coefficient modeling (MRCM) was used to test our cross-level hypotheses that social distance (Level-2) would moderate the relationships between senior level managers' transformational leadership (Level-2) and individual (Level-1) outcomes.[3] Analyses were conducted using the Nonlinear and Linear Mixed Effects (NLME) program for S-PLUS and R (Pinheiro & Bates, 2000). We grand-mean centered the cross-product terms to ease interpretability of our results. Given low statistical power at the group level and in an effort to balance Type I and Type II errors, we interpret $p < .10$ as supporting our hypotheses (Chen et al., 2005). We refer to these results as 'marginally significant'.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the variables in this study.[4] It should be noted that the correlation table does not account for the cross-level relationships among the data. Relationships associated with these variables should be viewed with caution until modeled in the MRCM analyses. Despite this qualification, the table shows that social distance was not correlated with followers' ratings of their most senior managers' transformational leadership and minimally correlated with the

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	*M*	*SD*	*r*				
			1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
1. Leaders' transformational leadership	3.46	.79	–				
2. Social distance	1.25	.70	.01	–			
3. Followers' transformational leadership	3.81	.52	.34**	–.14*	–		
4. Followers' positive emotional climate	3.53	.59	.50**	–.03	.31**	–	
5. Followers' collective efficacy	3.62	.88	.31**	.08	.12	.55**	–
6. Job autonomy	3.46	.89	–.06	.07	.00	–.05	–.03

Note: $n = 268$.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

outcomes; Baron and Kenny (1986) describe such a condition as being desirable when testing moderation hypotheses.

Hypotheses 1

A preliminary step in testing a cross-level interaction involves examining the group-level properties of the outcome variable (i.e. intercept variation, τ_{00}, of individuals' self-reports). Results indicated that there was significant variation ($p < .05$) in terms of followers' personal-reports of transformational leadership across leader-follower groups. The ICC(1) value was .084, signifying that 8 percent of the variation in followers' self-ascriptive leadership behavior was a function of individual's leader-follower group membership (Bliese, 2000). Presented in Table 2, the cross-level interaction between senior-level managers' transformational leadership and social distance (coefficient = –.20, $p = .03$, $\Delta R^2 = .022$) was related to followers' personal reports of engaging in transformational leadership behavior. Recall that we expected followers of leaders who engaged in transformational behavior to also report that they themselves were more likely to display transformational behaviors in socially close as compared with socially distant conditions. In reviewing the interaction plot (Figure 1), the relationship between transformational leadership of senior level managers and transformational leadership of their followers was more positive in the case of followers who were

Table 2 Multilevel random coefficient models (MRCM)

Step and variable	*Criterion variables*					
	Followers' transformational leadership		*Followers' positive emotional climate*		*Followers' collective efficacy*	
	Parameter estimate	*SE*	*Parameter estimate*	*SE*	*Parameter estimate*	*SE*
1. Leaders' transformational leadership (TFL)	.17*	.08	.41**	.09	.36*	.14
ΔR^2 after step 1	.016		.075		.025	
2. Social distance (SD)	–.11*	.05	–.01	.05	.12	.08
ΔR^2 after step 2	.021		.001		.010	
3. TFL × SD	–.20*	.09	.18†	.09	.28†	.15
ΔR^2 after step 3	.022		.012		.014	

Note: n = 50 leader-follower groups; 268 individuals. Unstandardized parameter estimates are reported.
† < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01.

socially close to their managers than in the case of followers who were socially distant from their managers. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypotheses 2

The preliminary analysis indicated that there was significant variation (p = .05) in terms of positive emotional climate sentiments across leader-follower groups. The ICC(1) value was .071, suggesting that 7 percent of the variation in followers' climate perceptions was a function of leader-follower group membership (Bliese, 2000). Shown in Table 2, the cross-level interaction between transformational leadership and social distance was marginally significant (coefficient = .18, p = .06, ΔR^2 = .012). It was predicted that transformational leadership would correlate more strongly with followers' beliefs about the positive emotional climate of the unit when their leader was socially close rather than distant. The form of the interaction is depicted in Figure 2. Contrary to our prediction, the figure illustrates that the positive relationship between transformational leadership and positive emotional climate was relatively stronger for followers reporting to socially distant

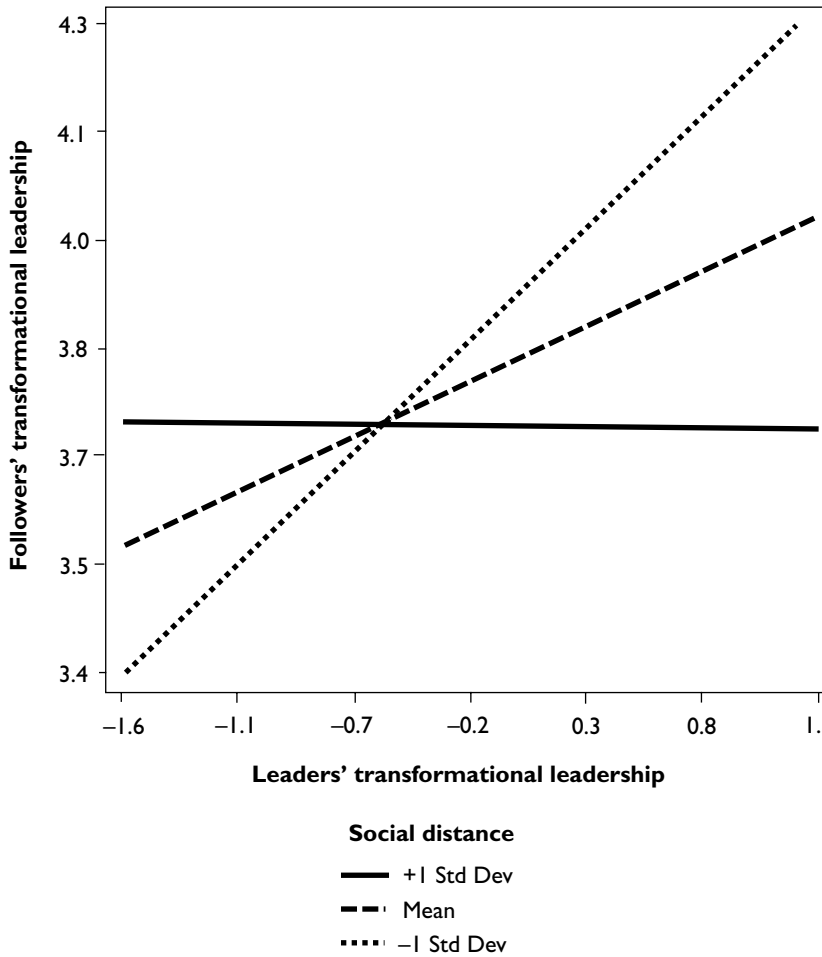

Figure 1 Cross-level effect of leaders' transformational leadership × social distance interaction on followers' transformational leadership

+1 Std Dev = one standard deviation above the mean. –1 Std Dev = one standard deviation below the mean

leaders than for followers reporting to socially close leaders. Consequently, the hypothesis was not supported.

Hypotheses 3

A preliminary analysis indicated that followers' collective efficacy beliefs did not vary significantly across leader-follower groups ($p > .05$). Nonetheless, because this test is conservative (Pinheiro & Bates, 2000), it has become

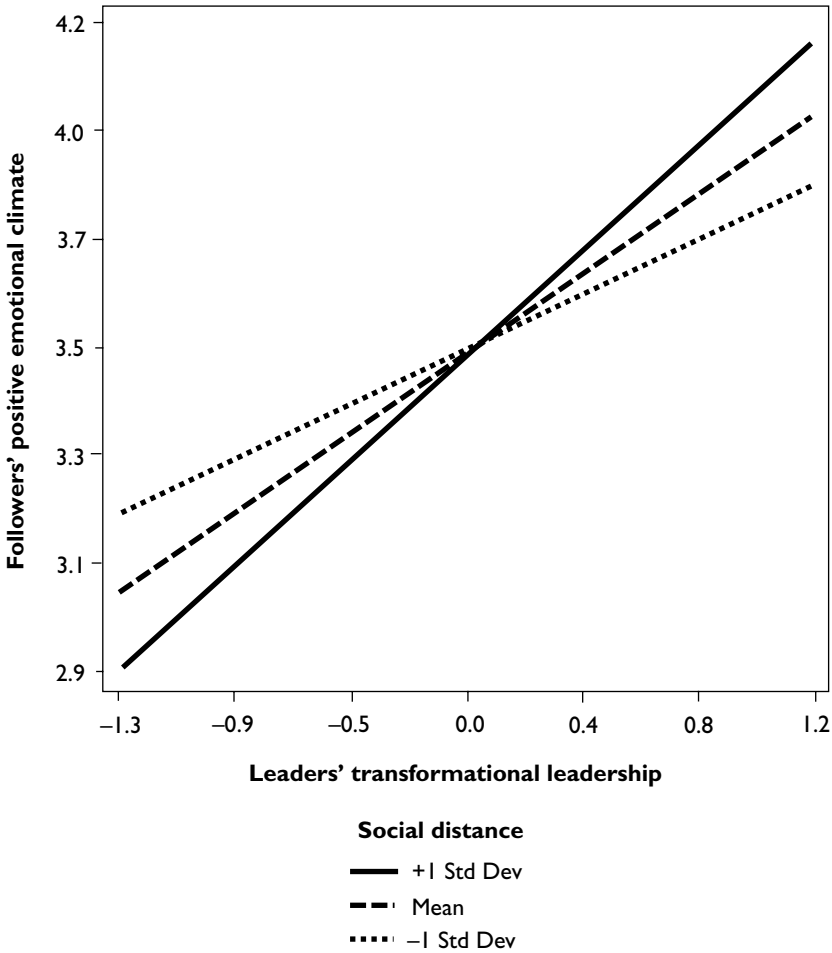

Figure 2 Cross-level effect of leaders' transformational leadership × social distance interaction on followers' positive emotional climate

+1 Std Dev = one standard deviation above the mean. –1 Std Dev = one standard deviation below the mean

common practice to test for cross-level interactions in the absence of significant variation if one has a strong theoretical basis (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). Accordingly, Table 2 provides the results for followers' collective efficacy beliefs. The cross-level interaction between transformational leadership and social distance was marginally significant (coefficient = .28, p = .07, ΔR^2 = .014). Recall that we expected the positive association between transformational leadership and followers' collective efficacy beliefs would be enhanced when social distance was high rather than low. Figure 3 supports

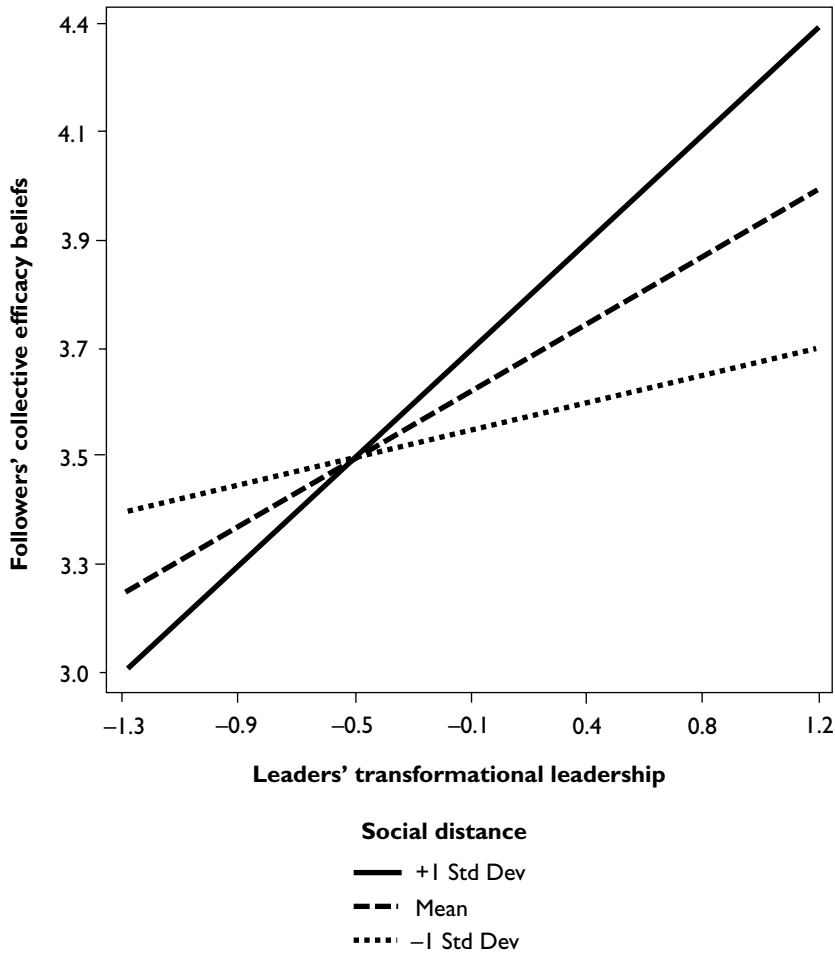

Figure 3 Cross-level effect of leaders' transformational leadership × social distance interaction on followers' perceptions of collective efficacy

+1 Std Dev = one standard deviation above the mean. –1 Std Dev = one standard deviation below the mean

the hypothesis in that the positive association between transformational leadership and followers' collective efficacy beliefs was stronger for individuals who reported to socially distant leaders than for individuals who reported to socially close leaders.

Exploratory analyses

As conceptualized by Bass and Avolio (2000; Avolio et al., 1999), transformational leadership comprises five leadership dimensions (i.e. styles) that

are specified in the full-range leadership theory and assessed by the MLQ. Although it has been argued that the various transformational dimensions should be highly interrelated (Bass, 1985, 1998), it is also possible that the type of charisma (i.e. attributional versus relational) ascribed to leaders and the types of full-range behaviors that leaders employ are moderated by social distance (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). At the request of an anonymous reviewer, we conducted additional analyses to directly explore this possibility. In doing so, we created three leadership variables from the MLQ's transformational leadership dimensions. *Attributed idealized influence*, also termed 'attributional charisma', refers to 'follower attributions about the leader as a result of how they perceive the leader's power, confidence, and transcendent ideals' (Antonakis & House, 2002: 9). *Charismatic leadership behavior*, also termed 'relational charisma', most clearly represents the behavioral aspect of charismatic leadership (Walter & Bruch, 2007). This leadership style refers to the behavioral idealized influence dimension and the inspirational motivation dimension (Kark & Shamir, 2002; Walter & Bruch, 2007), reflecting such behaviors as talking about the importance of values, beliefs, and purpose, promoting confidence in the achievement of goals, and articulating a compelling vision (Dionne et al., 2004). For completeness, we also created a variable dubbed *general leadership behavior*, wherein we combined the dimension of intellectual stimulation with the two dimensions (viz., behavioral idealized influence and inspirational motivation) defining charismatic leadership behavior. With respect to aggregation, there was significant between-group variance for each variable, and the aggregation indexes exceeded common thresholds (see Table 3). In the exploratory analyses, we did not consider the individualized consideration dimension because the dimension's items have been criticized for focusing on the exchanges between leaders and individual followers rather than the group as a whole (Schriesheim et al., in press).

Table 3 presents the results for the exploratory (cross-level) analyses. The pattern of relationships between the three leadership variables and social distance on followers' enactments of self-reported transformational behavior were consistent with the confirmatory results (see Table 2). We also found that social distance moderated the relationship between attributed idealized influence and followers' positive emotional climate such that the positive association was relatively stronger when social distance was high (also consistent with confirmatory results). In contrast, social distance did not moderate the relationship between charismatic leadership behavior and positive emotional climate. These latter findings are interesting because they suggest that the effects associated with charismatic/transformational leadership are more attribution based in high social distance situations. This

Table 3 Post hoc analyses

Step and variable	*ICC(1)*	*ICC(2)*	r_{wg}	*Criterion variables*		
				Followers' transformational leadership	*Followers' positive emotional climate*	*Followers' collective efficacy*
1. Attributed idealized influence (AII)	.13	.43	.67	.17*	.32**	.26*
2. Social distance (SD)				–.11*	–.01	.11
3. AII × SD				–.18*	.19*	.21
1. Charismatic leadership behavior (CLB)	.08	.31	.82	.15†	.39**	.36*
2. Social distance (SD)				–.10*	–.02	.11
3. CLB × SD				–.19*	.12	.22
1. General leadership behavior (GLB)	.06	.25	.82	.15	.43**	.40*
2. Social distance (SD)				–.11*	–.01	.12
3. GLB × SD				–.20*	.16	.30†

Note: n = 50 leader-follower groups; 268 individuals. Unstandardized parameter estimates are reported.
† < .10; *p < .05; ** p < .01.

observation, albeit post hoc, is consistent with the prior works of Antonakis and Atwater (2002) and Kark and Shamir (2002) and Yagil (1998). With regard to the outcome, followers' collective efficacy beliefs, the only cross-product term to approach conventional levels of significance (p = .06) was between general leadership behavior × social distance. The form of this interaction mirrored the confirmatory results.

Discussion

Drawing from research that casts leader distance as a contextual moderator (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002), we explored whether social distance influences the direction and strength of the relationship between senior level managers' transformational leadership and individual-level outcomes. Despite concerns as to whether context is an important boundary condition for leadership research (e.g. Dionne et al., 2002), our findings indicate that social distance

reduced or neutralized the effects of transformational leadership on some outcomes (viz., followers' leadership behavior) but enhanced its effects on other outcomes (viz., positive emotional climate, collective efficacy beliefs). Prior to this study, no direct empirical evidence had been obtained regarding social distance's moderating effect on the linkages between leader behaviors and follower outcomes. Given difficulties in detecting moderator effects in leadership research (Villa et al., 2003), the current findings affirm that there is value in contextual factors, in general, and social distance in particular.

The most striking finding of the study was to show that social distance can act as *either* a neutralizer or enhancer of transformational leadership. This is a unique contribution of the present study and it supports Antonakis and Atwater's (2002) contention that the effects of transformational leadership 'can be partly explained by the distance that exists between leaders and their followers' (p. 675). Further, we contend that a strength of this study relates to its design, wherein we took into account Shamir (1995). He counseled that in order to contribute to the refinement of leadership theory on social distance, future researchers should: a) gauge the perceptions of close and distant followers for the same 'real-life' leaders and relate these assessments to organizationally relevant outcomes and b) sample senior level leaders employed by the same company, thereby controlling for the organizational environment and the type of leadership investigated (e.g. business, military, educational) (Shamir, 1995). In the present application, we accomplished both.

In addressing Hypothesis 1, the present data indicated that social distance served as a cross-level contextual factor as it was found to moderate the relationship between senior level managers' transformational leadership behavior and followers' emulation of such behavior. As anticipated, followers reported that they themselves were more likely to enact transformational behaviors when associated with a socially close transformational leader as opposed to a distant leader. Such a finding lends support to the claim that charismatic/transformational effects are possible in close leadership situations (Shamir, 1995). This result further implies that socially close leaders, more so than distant leaders, transmit their belief systems to followers through role modeling, guidance in the form of direct feedback, and reinforcement for adopting behavior that mirrors the leader's behavioral pattern. Thus, following prior research that suggests transformational leaders can influence different aspects of follower' self-concept (Kark & Shamir, 2002; Lord et al., 1999), we likewise suggest that close leaders' ongoing interactions with followers may shape aspects of followers' relational-self and thereby encourage their growth and development as self-leaders.

In considering Hypothesis 2, social distance also served as a boundary condition on the senior level managers' transformational leadership-followers' positive emotional climate relationship. As noted, however, the interaction when graphically plotted was different from what we had initially hypothesized. Drawing from prior research (e.g. Erez et al., 2008), we predicted a 'traditional' emotional contagion effect in that low social distance was expected to amplify the strength of the positive relationship between transformational leadership and emotional climate of the unit (as perceived by followers). On the contrary, our results (see Figure 2) demonstrated that the slope of the relationship between transformational leadership and positive emotional climate was stronger when leaders were socially distant.

Why would social distance have a more beneficial effect on positive emotional climate when the distance between leader and followers is high? One explanation for this finding is that the majority of individuals in lower echelons are not in a position to realistically evaluate the leader's actions and, thus, subordinates are forced to make assumptions and attributions about the leader's behavior (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Shamir & Howell, 1999). It follows, therefore, that the images followers construct about a distant transformational leader may have a significant influence on followers' feelings (and cognitions) about their work environments. This explanation is consistent with leadership research based on a follower-centric perspective (e.g. Howell & Shamir, 2005) and the romance of leadership notion (see Meindl, 1995). Alternatively, evidence provided by McHugo et al. (1985) has shown that emotional contagion is not unique to close one-on-one interactions. These researchers demonstrated that 'distant' observers (Republicans and Democrats) of a television newscast, despite having very different views of Ronald Reagan, mimicked Reagan's emotional expressions. A more recent study conducted by Cherulnik et al. (2001) found similar results. With this prior research in mind, perhaps the unexpected finding can be linked to the qualitatively different kinds of behavior displayed by senior level leaders as compared with low-level leaders. The communication of a positive message and vision might, for example, require some social distance between leaders and followers to be convincing and emotionally inspiring. Indeed, Bono and Ilies (2006) demonstrated that charismatic leaders expressed more positive emotions in their written vision statements and displayed more behaviors indicative of positive emotion in their speeches. Thus, an articulated vision that promotes an optimistic or ideal future may be one of the most important vehicles at a leader's disposal for increasing the positive emotional tenor of followers. A third alternative is related to the nature of the outcome, which, like collective efficacy, refers to the individual's belief about the collectivity. Clearly, more research attention should be devoted to this result given

the inclusion of positive emotion as a transformational effect in a number of studies (Cherulnik et al., 2001; Erez et al., 2008).

In addressing Hypothesis 3, social distance was found to moderate the relationship between senior level managers' transformational leadership and followers' collective efficacy beliefs. It was predicted that the power and prestige associated with high-level leadership positions (high social distance situations) would interact with transformational leadership to further enhance followers' collective efficacy sentiments. As anticipated, in distant versus socially close circumstances, our findings show that transformational leaders increased individuals' collective efficacy beliefs. Initially proposed by Shamir (1995), this result implies that followers may perceive their distant leaders as having greater character, strength, skill, and power (e.g. 'aura of magic'; Katz & Kahn, 1978) compared with followers of socially close leaders who are unable to hide their fallibilities from followers. Additionally, perhaps with increasing social distance, transformational leaders are more able to activate or prime the collective aspects of followers' self-identity, leading to the attribution of positive qualities about the work unit and enhanced collective efficacy beliefs (Kark & Shamir, 2002).

Although caution is always warranted when interpreting exploratory results, the post hoc analyses revealed a few differences between the overall measure of transformational leadership (confirmatory analyses) and the alternative or disaggregated leadership measures (exploratory analyses) as to the strength of their relationships with follower outcomes. To the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first studies to make such connections. For future research, our study illuminates the importance of considering both the aggregate form of transformational leadership and its component parts in order to be more theoretically inclusive, and to (possibly) obtain more meaningful results regarding the effects of transformational leadership on followers' behaviors, emotions, and cognitions.

Study limitations

One of the study's potential limitations is that the ratings of senior level managers' leadership behavior and follower outcomes were assessed in the same survey. This raises the possibility for common-method variance. Several points should be made in this regard. First, our social distance variable (viz., hierarchical differentiation) was an objective indictor. Second, we acknowledge that method bias may have inflated the magnitudes of the observed linear effects; however, our hypotheses focused on the interactive effects. Within a correlational framework, the moderator is considered a third variable that affects the zero-order correlation between two other variables

(Baron & Kenny, 1986). Thus, if our results were an artifact of common-method variance, social distance (the moderator) should influence the strength of the anticipated relationships in the same way. Yet, as noted, the observed interactions both neutralized and enhanced the zero-order correlations between senior level managers' transformational leadership and outcomes. Finally, Evans (1985) conducted an extensive Monte Carlo study to determine whether method variance can generate artifactual interactions and he concluded that artifactual interactions cannot be created but true interactions can be attenuated. Based on the presented evidence, it is unlikely that our results are due to common-method bias.

A second limitation is that because our study design was cross-sectional, ambiguity of causal direction is also an issue. Although we cannot rule out this possibility, we contend that the order of relationships tested is plausible for two reasons. First, the relationships we tested are consistent with prevailing theory and published results. Second, transformational leadership was aggregated to a second level of analysis, whereas the follower outcomes were not aggregated and served as Level-1 variables.

Another limitation is that there is potential for bias in followers' self-reported tendencies to engage in leadership behavior. One could argue that different results might be observed had we obtained peer ratings of followers' transformational leadership. Further, because we cannot demonstrate that our perceptual measure is a valid indicator of more 'objective' leadership performance, it is also possible that followers' self-assessments were somehow biased (e.g. Schoorman & Mayer, 2007). Whereas the use of personal-ratings does not invalidate the current research, future studies that collect ratings of leadership (high-level managers and subordinates), social distance, and other outcomes from multiple sources over time would provide confidence in the robustness of the observed findings. Clearly, the current study represents an initial step in exploring 'transformational followership'. On a related note, because social distance was operationalized as being 'top-down', the present findings do not consider its converse, namely a 'bottom-up' leadership approach. As we acknowledge in our discussion of future research, we anticipate that complementary studies will aid in our understanding of social distance from this opposing viewpoint.

A remaining limitation of this study involves our focus on social distance while neglecting other forms of distance (see Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Their conceptual analysis implied that the simultaneous consideration of the three forms of distance might provide interesting implications. We agree and would suggest that the present study be considered a small, but noteworthy step toward fully understanding how leader-follower distance impacts leadership's nomological network.

Future research

We investigated social distance's role as a potential boundary condition on the relations between transformational leadership and behavioral, emotional, and motivational outcomes. There is, however, accumulating evidence that transformational leadership is an influential form of leadership associated with high levels of individual, group, and organizational performance (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Future research should re-examine such relationships in conjunction with social, physical, and interactional distance as contextual moderators. This study also opens the door for the development and testing of the moderating effects of social distance on other leadership aspects associated with the full-range leadership theory. For example, transactional leadership, which emphasizes individual rewards for individual achievements, would be expected to prime a third level of self-construal – the individual level of self (Lord et al., 1999). Given the greater frequency and immediacy of transactions between the leader and followers in close situations, one might expect transactional leadership behavior to have an impact on followers in close but not distant leadership situations (e.g. Shamir, 1995). Future research should, therefore, account for the full-range of leadership behaviors (viz., transformational, contingent-reward reinforcement, management-by-exception, and laissez-faire) exhibited by high-level leaders; such a study would be interesting. Leader distance research that considers other leadership behaviors that extend beyond the full-range leadership model may also prove fruitful.

As indicated earlier, we viewed social distance as being a 'top-down' phenomenon. Like most forms of leader behavior, we assumed transformational leadership begins with senior management and then cascades itself down the hierarchy to lower level leaders and, ultimately, individual employees. By doing so, 'close' leadership was operationalized as the leader and follower both residing at high levels within the organizational hierarchy, while 'distant' leadership referred to the relationship between the high-level leader and follower (i.e. subordinate), but the follower occupied a much lower hierarchical position. Contrast this with a perspective where 'close' leadership would reflect the leader and follower both existing at a low hierarchical level and high distance situations defined as the relation between the high-level leader and low-level followers. Because of the conceptual discrepancies associated with these opposing approaches to leadership, it is possible that by adopting the 'top-down' approach, we may have influenced the study's results and our inferences of them in some way. As is often the case with scholarly research, this study raises additional questions to be addressed.

We also note that Antonakis and Atwater's (2002) leader distance theory subsumes three, conceptually independent dimensions of distance and, yet, in reality they tend to coexist in varying degrees. An interesting avenue for empirical research would be to determine how these distance dimensions interact with the full-range of leaders' behavior to influence follower outcomes. It is plausible to expect that the three dimensions occur simultaneously and, more importantly, jointly influence the effects of leadership behavior. It might also be interesting to explore the moderating effects of leader distance as a whole, that is, their combined nature as a function of perceived social distance, physical distance, and interaction frequency. In this regard, research that reports on the development and validation of survey type measures designed to assess the three distance dimensions is greatly needed.

Implications for practice

Our results also have practical relevance. Contrary to earlier writers that discussed the advantages of social distance (e.g. Katz & Kahn, 1978), the current study indicates that followers (and leaders) in close leadership situations may enjoy advantages that are absent in more distant leader-follower relations. Specifically, it has been suggested that one of the most challenging tasks for any leader, regardless of organizational level, is to instill transformational leadership in others (Fiedler, 1996). There are clearly additional factors that may encourage followers to become self-defining or transformational leaders; however, our findings suggest having a socially close transformational leader (e.g. similar in organizational status, nature of the work) increases the probability of followers emulating transformational behaviors. In contrast, distant followers may be unable to discern certain transformational behaviors and, in turn, they cannot role-model a leader's behavioral pattern. This notion is supported by a study conducted by Bommer et al. (2004), wherein they found transformational leadership behavior exhibited by managers was positively related to the transformational leadership exhibited by managerial peers. Thus, organizations concerned with developing transformational leaders throughout the organization may wish to consider creating a supportive context where appointed leaders are perceived by subordinates as being socially close. Alternatively, organizations could actually reduce or even eliminate any differences across hierarchical levels (e.g. the 'corner office'). We should note however this may come at the price of decreased positive emotional environment and collective efficacy beliefs.

Why is it of practical import to enhance followers' positive feelings and sense of empowerment? An accumulating body of evidence demonstrates that individuals in a positive affective state think better and make better decisions, are more creative, are higher performers and less likely to turnover, and make prosocial behaviors more likely (see Barsade & Gibson, 2007 for a review). A healthy, positive affective climate also promotes more co-operation and better teamwork in groups (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). Increases in individuals' collective efficacy beliefs are known to have similar effects on followers (Bandura, 1997).

Conclusion

On the whole, the differential effects associated with socially close and distant transformational leaders identified in this research are directly relevant to the propositions made by Antonakis and Atwater (2002) and Shamir (1995). Results demonstrate that in close transformational relationships, followers' relational-self is possibly activated, leading to certain outcomes, whereas in distant relationships the collective-self is activated, leading to other types of outcomes. Following earlier scholars (e.g. Kark & Shamir, 2002; Lord et al., 1999), we likewise suggest that followers' self-concepts, once primed, may be powerful determinants of their subsequent behavior and connected thought processes. The challenge for future research is to identify the leadership 'behaviors' that are most relevant to the priming effects of transformational leadership in socially close versus distant situations. We believe such possibilities offer an exciting opportunity for scholars interested in understanding how a transformational relationship emerges from a leader's behavior, subordinates' perceptions, and their shared social context. Although the present study (see also Kark et al., 2003) has initiated this course of action, the tentative nature of some of its findings awaits further scrutiny. Nonetheless, our results do provide a solid basis for future research on leader distance.

Notes

1 In spite of our observation, we should note that Antonakis and Atwater (2002) concluded that the three distance dimensions coexist as a cluster of independent factors and, thus, do not always co-vary. For example, it is realistic for a leader to be proximally located to followers, but socially distant; however, it is equally possible for a leader to be distally located, but socially close. Further, it is possible for a leader to be proximally located, but maintain infrequent contact with followers (e.g. owing to a specific personality trait).

2 Self-efficacy beliefs refer to judgments that individuals make concerning their own ability to do what is required to successfully perform work tasks. The use of the term collective in reference to efficacy is not meant to imply that we are examining groups' aggregated beliefs (e.g. generalized potency; Gully et al., 2002). Rather, following Kark et al. (2003), we apply this terminology to refer to individually held beliefs about the groups to which each member belongs.

3 The 50 leader-follower groups are inherently nested in 26 business units; consequently, the group level (Level-2) data have some degree of non-independence owing to business unit membership (Level-3). Such non-independence can influence standard error estimates used to determine statistical significance. To examine this possibility, we added a random intercept term for business unit membership to the reported MRCM analyses. The pattern of relationships for the re-estimated models was nearly identical. To provide maximum power for the MRCM tests, we report the results for the cross-level models that do not consider business unit membership (Level-3). Results are available from the first author.

4 Inspecting the correlations yield a relative absence of effects among what was considered a potential covariate and study variables, the average absolute correlation being .04. This result suggests the leadership ratings and social distance variables were not confounded by differences in followers' sense of autonomy or greater independence. Consequently, this variable was excluded from further analyses, not only to reduce the number of parameters to be estimated and, thus, provide maximum power for the following statistical tests, but because analyses that include unnecessary control variables may yield biased parameter estimates (Becker, 2005).

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