CHALLENGES OF IMPLICIT LEADERSHIP THEORIES FOR MANAGEMENT

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Abstract:

   This qualitative study explores the subjective experience of being led by investigating the impact of their Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) on followers' cognitive processes, affective responses and behavioural intentions towards leadership- claimants. The study explores how such responses influence the quality of hierarchical work-place relationships using a framework based on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory. The research uses focus groups to elicit descriptions of ILTs held by forty final year undergraduate Business and Management students. The data was then analysed using an abductive process permitting an interpretative understanding of the meanings participants attach to their past experiences and future expectations. This research addresses a perceived gap by making a theoretical contribution to knowledge and understanding in this field, focusing on how emotional responses affect their behaviour, how this impacts on organisational outcomes, and what the implications are for HRD practitioners.

Keywords: ILT, HRD, LMX.

1. INTRODUCTION

Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT) is a follower-centric area of leadership research that focuses on the traits and behaviours that people expect of leaders. This paper seeks to understand notions of leadership from the perspective of the follower, exploring participants' meanings of the experience since, while considerable progress has been made in the theory and measurement of cognitive processes, similar research areas in regard to affective processes have been all but ignored (Lord & Brown, 2004).

There seemed to be a paucity of evidence regarding what follower's ILTs mean to them and it is argued that follower emotional responses to leadership-claimants have a major impact on their behaviour. This study adapts and combines a priori theoretical frameworks to provide a conceptual model that explains why people possess ILTs, how they work, and enables an understanding of how followers feel. However, there are many psychological antecedents, that whilst acknowledged, lay outside the scope of the current paper.

This study used focus groups to elicit descriptions of the ILTs held by final year undergraduate Business and Management students at the University of Gloucestershire. Specifically the study asks what Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) are held by the participants? and how do their ILTs impact on their interactions with those claiming leadership roles in the workplace? This paper investigates the impact of these ILTs on cognitive processes, affective responses and behavioural intentions when expectations   are,

or are not, met. It then explores how these affect leader- member exchanges (LMX) and important workplace outcomes.

2. RELATED WORK

Albeit that there is a growing body of literature looking at the leadership from the perspective of the follower, with a few exceptions it focuses mainly on the cognitive processes involved. Most follower-centric research emanates from the disciplines of psychology each of which offer different explanations based on different approaches, which contribute to our understanding of how our personalities and cognitive processes affect our attributions of others, and bias our explanations of their behaviour. Schema-use enables rapid decision making but they are extremely resilient, being resistant to conflicting or disconfirming information, which is generally either ignored or reinterpreted and entail biases that lend themselves to making erroneous dispositional attributions. Static schema models (Lord & Maher, 1991) allow that changes do occur, albeit slowly, whereas connectionist models (Brown & Lord, 2001) propose that prototypes and schemas are more dynamic.

It is argued that the two fields are not mutually exclusive with Attribution Theory explaining the reason, and Social Cognition explaining the processes by which we "perceive, organise, process and use information" (Burger, 2011, p.405). ILTs are likewise categorised within a hierarchy, at superordinate, basic and subordinate levels and we are able to differentiate not only between those who are leaders and those who are not, but between different types of leaders at different hierarchical levels. If sufficient prototype related traits/behaviour are recognised in an individual the observer will automatically assign them to the leader category and will thereafter be influenced by what is attributed to 'the leader'. In terms of cognitive processing, categorisation precedes attribution and the actual behaviour of the leader is effectively coded out of perceptions, going unrecognised. It has been suggested that congruence between perceiver ILTs and leader's actual, or perceived, behaviour will affect the degree to which followers will even accept attempts at leadership (Engle & Lord, 1997; Schyns, 2006). Leadership claimants who do not match the prototype can, in extreme cases, be considered "illegitimate" (Hunt, Boal & Sorenson, 1990. p.56). As stated by van Vugt, Hogan and Kaiser (2008, p.182) leadership, in the wider sense, involves a "choice to initiate, and the choice to follow".

3. METHODOLOGY

The study took an interpretive approach and the qualitative analysis and interpretation have been guided equally by themes arising from the data, and by a priori knowledge of existing frameworks. This paper describes, explores and explains elements of ILT using data generated via focus groups. It should be noted however that there was no intention to form a group consensus but to determine, via dialogue and discussion, what individual participants thought and felt. While sharing the understanding of meaning constitutes an explanatory process, at least at a theoretical level, there is no assertion that the findings are generalisable beyond the study. Final year undergraduate students undertaking Business/Management courses at the University of Gloucestershire's Business School in Cheltenham during the 2012/2013 academic year were identified as potentially having access to in-depth knowledge and/or experience of the issue under investigation. 60 students undertaking a Leadership module were selected via a purposeful non-probability sampling strategy as collectively representing instances likely to produce the most valuable data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Co-facilitators were subsequently enlisted from amongst doctoral students at the same university.

Transcription was carried out manually in order to thoroughly familiarise ourselves with the data, prepared in an orthographic style resembling a playscript. In the first cycle of coding the transcripts and accompanying audio files were also distributed to co-facilitators who separately applied preliminary descriptive codes. The separate transcripts were then merged, on a session by session basis, with the Master Transcript becoming the main document for further coding.

To move up from the data to more abstract concepts a second cycle of coding took the preliminary –emic codes and combining both concept-driven and data-driven approaches arrived at more abstract –etic categories that allowed analysis of patterns and themes. These –etic categories formed the basis of a final coding list containing 18 categories reflecting the three broad themes of Cognitive, Affective and Behavioural data, which were then further analysed and linked to the a priori theory reflected in the literature.

4. ANALYSIS

This paper aimed to expand on our existing understanding on Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) by exploring the consequences of subjective meanings that participants attach to their own ILTs, with particular reference to the affective component, thereby making a theoretical contribution to knowledge and understanding in this field. Cognitive aspects of participant ILTs are discussed below together with an investigation into emotional responses and behavioural consequences when their ILT needs are met, or not met. It is argued that followers' emotional response to leadership-claimants, an area that appears under-researched, has a major impact on their behaviour. While the cognitive processes, affective responses and behavioural impacts are discussed here, the specific personality issues that cause these are not since they lay outside the scope of this particular paper. Note also that the 'leader' circle is reduced in scale to show that it is the followers' perception, not the actual traits and behaviours of the 'leader' that are the focus of the study. whereby high quality LMX predicted job satisfaction, but also demonstrating that Job Satisfaction predicted the quality of the LMX relationship. However, since they were engaged in non-experimental quantitative research they were keen to specify that no causal inferences could be made. This study, on the other hand, conducting interpretive analysis of qualitative data can appreciate the common-sense notion of such a relationship. Further, if the findings of both sets of authors are combined in relation to reciprocity then, based on this study's findings, it is suggested that similar reciprocal links exist.

Findings that illustrate this can be found where those expecting (or experiencing) high LMX relationships were enthusiastic in terms of job satisfaction commenting that they could "achieve so much more". They demonstrated Organisational Commitment they expressed their liking for "participating in something" and their well-being is illustrated by statements such as feeling "validated, valued, empowered". However, those experiencing low LMX relationships were left feeling depressed and demoralised. Low job satisfaction is shown in responses such as "I feel unmotivated, makes me hate the place, not want to come into work, I'm less productive". Similarly, lack of organisational commitment is demonstrated by those who would be "happier to quit, or maybe start my own company".

CONCLUSION

The research findings demonstrated that the ILTs held by the participants closely mirrored that of existing research in terms of content and structure in that the categorisation process was fundamental in

recognising leaders. Whether the leadership claim was recognised or not resulted in entirely different relationships. Whereas previous research often looked at the relationship between superiors and subordinates from a purely transactional perspective this study showed that for 'followers' the exchange is of a different order. Participants exhibited a strong desire for a more transformational relationship with the leader's role perceived in terms of the creation of meaning and purpose that satisfied their motivations and desires. In interpreting the findings through the lens of LMX Theory, in order to understand the impacts on relationship quality and outcomes relating to job satisfaction, commitment, and well-being, it was found that this relationship was not linear as expected, but that the outcomes fed back to reinforce positive or negative perceptions that further mediated, or partially mediated, the nature and quality of the relationship.

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