Follower developmental characteristics as predicting transformational leadership: a longitudinal field study

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Abstract

The leadership literature has focused on the effects of leaders whereas much less attention has been given to the followers’ role in shaping their leader’s style. Therefore, this longitudinal field study tested follower developmental characteristics as predictors of transformational leadership. The sample included 54 military units and their leaders, in which there were 90 direct followers and 724 indirect followers. Results at the group level of analysis indicated that followers’ initial developmental level, as expressed by the initial level of their self-actualization needs, internalization of the organization’s moral values, collectivistic orientation, critical-independent approach, active engagement in the task, and self-efficacy, positively predicted transformational leadership among indirect followers, whereas these relationships were negative among direct followers. The different role of followers’ initial developmental level as a predictor of transformational leadership among close versus distant followers is discussed.

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1. Introduction

"Without his armies, after all, Napoleon was just a man with grandiose ambitions." (Kelley, 1992)

There is a widespread bias to perceive leaders as causal agents who shape events, rather than as being shaped by them. Yukl (1998) stated, “most research and theory on leadership...
has favored a definition of leadership that emphasizes the primary importance of unilateral influence by a single, ‘heroic’ leader” (p. 504). The majority of the leadership literature, while ostensibly focused on the effects of leaders, has neglected the important role of followers in defining and shaping the latitudes of leaders’ actions (Hollander, 1993). Consequently, much less is known about the follower side of the leadership equation (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). Several researchers emphasized, however, that leadership is a relationship that is jointly produced by leaders and followers. For example, Shamir and Howell (2000) asserted that leadership and followership might both play an active role in forming their mutual relationships, in spite of their imbalanced power, and ultimately in shaping organizational outcomes. This field study offers a conceptual framework of followers’ developmental characteristics that are assumed to predict transformational leadership and tests it empirically within a longitudinal framework.

2. Followership within traditional and new leadership theories

Early transactional theories explained how to achieve or maintain results as contracted between the leader and his or her followers. Leadership behavior was typically described in terms of a leader–follower exchange relationship, in which leaders provide direction, support, and reinforcement and followers achieve agreed-upon levels of performance (Avolio & Bass, 1988; House & Shamir, 1993). These traditional leadership theories typically posited follower characteristics as dependent variables that are affected by the leader. The various models concentrated on the impact of the leader’s traits, behavior, power bases, and influence tactics on followers’ characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors (Yukl, 1998). The most comprehensive effort to give follower characteristics a more central and active role was made by the situational leadership theories (e.g., Fiedler, 1964; House, 1971; Vroom & Yetton, 1973), which have sometimes defined follower characteristics as moderators.

Much less effort (e.g., Merton, 1957; Osborn & Hunt, 1975) has been made to include follower characteristics as independent variables that influence leader behavior. The relatively few studies that examined follower variables as predictors of leadership have focused on follower behavior (e.g., feedback and performance, review in Bass, 1990) rather than on follower characteristics, predispositions, or attitudes. Another line of leadership research, especially the leader–member exchange (LMX) studies, has examined the reciprocal relationships between leaders and followers and focused on relational variables such as, liking, similarity, and expectations. We are unaware of any study that examined follower initial characteristics as predictors of leadership behavior within the new versus the more traditional leadership theories.

A stream of new theories has occupied center stage in leadership research over the past two decades. These theories are alternatively referred to as “transformational,” “charismatic,” “inspirational,” and “visionary.” Despite different emphases in each theory, most scholars agree that these theories are all of a common genre and point to a strong convergence of the findings from studies on these theories (e.g., House & Shamir, 1993). Transformational leaders exhibit charismatic behaviors, arouse inspirational motivation, provide intellectual
stimulation, and treat followers with individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Such leaders transform their followers’ needs, values, preferences, and aspirations toward reaching their full potential and generate higher levels of performance, as compared to transactional leaders (Seltzer & Bass, 1990).

Meindl (1990) claimed that, consistent with traditional leadership theories, transformational and charismatic leadership theories are based on leader-centered assumptions. The theories’ central assumption, according to Meindl, is that an understanding of charismatic or transformational leadership must somehow proceed from an understanding of the unique character or behavior of the leader. Conger and Kanungo (1988) suggested, “followers’ predispositions in a context of charismatic leadership ... require significant further study” (pp. 328–329). Klein and House (1995) also asserted that, “Unfortunately, the characteristics of followers within charismatic relationships have not, to our knowledge, been investigated empirically. Thus, the topic of follower characteristics is ripe for empirical study” (p. 185).

More recently, Ehrhart and Klein (2001) concluded, “little has changed in the intervening years” (p. 154). We are aware of only one recent empirical study that examined the role of follower characteristics as independent variables within the framework of the new leadership theories. Ehrhart and Klein found that followers’ achievement orientation, self-esteem, intrinsic work values, and value attached to participation in decision-making were moderately related to a preference for charismatic leadership over relationship- or task-oriented leadership. Ehrhart and Klein did not examine leader’s actual leadership style as their dependent variable and based their conclusions on a scenario design among college students. The next step should then be the examination of follower initial characteristics as predictors of actual transformational leadership style in a real-life situation.

A few scattered theoretical references to follower characteristics as potential independent variables can be traced in the transformational and charismatic leadership literature. Burns (1978) conceived of transforming leadership as a dynamic, reciprocal process in which both leaders and followers are transformed by each other. He specifically referred to the possibility that “leaders may modify their leadership in recognition of followers’ preferences, or in order to anticipate followers’ responses, or in order to harmonize the actions of both leaders and followers with their common motives, values, and goals” (p. 426). Similarly, Shamir and Howell (2000) suggested that followers might play an active role, not only in the emergence of charismatic leaders and in reinforcing their influence, but also in affecting the leaders and empowering them.

Klein and House (1995) suggested alternative views on the differences between followers in charismatic versus noncharismatic relationships. The view according to which followers in charismatic relationships are compatible with the leader’s vision and style, to a great extent, from the outset, is clearly more in line with the new leadership theories. For example, Shamir and his colleagues elaborated on the concept of compatibility addressed by Klein and House. Shamir, House, and Arthur (1993) asserted that charismatic leaders respond to their potential followers no less than the followers respond to their leadership. Their theory gives followers a central place by implying that the selection of a leader and the decision to follow him or her is an active process, based on the extent to which the
leader is perceived as representing the followers’ values and identities. Such perception of the leader can only occur when the values of the followers and the leader are compatible, a situation labeled “value congruence.”

Shamir and Howell (2000) suggested that value congruence is primarily an effect of charismatic leadership, but some value congruence is also a necessary condition for such leadership. This view is also consistent with recent theoretical work by Lord, Brown, and Freiberg (1999) who argued that leadership is most effective when there is a match between the values and identities stressed by leaders and the cognitive structures held by followers.

Therefore, in the present study, we assumed that the most suitable followers for transformational leaders hold orientations that are more initially compatible with the leader’s orientation. However, we have extended the concept of compatibility implied in previous work. Compatibility with the leader as used here does not mean only the possession of characteristics that increase proneness or susceptibility to the leader’s influence, but also the ability and inclination of followers to contribute actively to the emergence of transformational leadership. We suggest that a potentially important way in which followers’ initial characteristics contribute to the transformational leadership process is by influencing the leader’s style. The question of which specific follower characteristics are likely to contribute to transformational leadership is still open for theoretical and empirical investigation, although the existing literature suggests some initial directions.

3. Follower developmental characteristics and transformational leadership

Follower developmental level is one of the effects of transformational leadership (Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002). However, in line with Shamir and Howell (2000), we assume that some initial level of leader–follower compatibility also contributes to the emergence of transformational leadership. When encountering such followers, leaders will be more encouraged to activate a transformational style because they will perceive their followers as having the appropriate characteristics for such leadership. Our literature review revealed that the most central follower characteristics under the new leadership framework are related to the followers’ developmental level in the three domains of motivation, morality, and empowerment. These follower characteristics were partially confirmed as consequences of transformational leadership among direct followers in previous studies (Dvir et al., 2002). However, in congruence with scholars who suggested that transformational leadership is a reciprocal process in which leaders and followers are transformed by each other, we claim here that these developmental variables are also potential predictors of transformational leadership.

Shamir and Howell (2000) discussed the potential role of followers’ work orientation in charismatic leadership. Specifically, they distinguished between followers with an instrumental orientation to work, who view their work primarily as a means for obtaining extrinsic rewards, and expressively oriented followers, who expect their work to provide opportunities for self-expression and self-actualization. According to Shamir and Howell, because charismatic leadership arouses expressive motivations, it is assumed to better suit followers
who have an expressive orientation to work. Such an expressive versus instrumental orientation to work reflects the motivational domain of follower characteristics as it touches upon the underlying needs of follower motivation.

In the present study, motivational development was represented by the followers’ initial level of self-actualization needs. Self-actualization need, which is at the highest level of the need hierarchy (Maslow, 1954), is the aspiration to realize one’s own potential or the need to become what one has the capacity to become. Ehrhart and Klein (2001) confirmed that followers with intrinsic work values, who value responsibility, initiative, and challenge at work, preferred to work under a scenario-portrayed charismatic leader. Their variables have some conceptual similarity to our motivational-related developmental domain.

In addition, followers may differ in the extent to which they have pragmatic versus principled relations to others (Shamir & Howell, 2000). Followers with a more principled orientation are hypothesized to be more compatible with charismatic leaders who typically emphasize ideological values. A principled versus pragmatic orientation is part of the moral domain of follower developmental characteristics as it reflects the level to which the follower is guided by solid, inner moral principles. In the present study, we represented followers’ principled orientation by their internalization of the organization’s moral values, which is defined as the adoption of and acting upon of organizational values. Cognitive developmentalists (e.g., Kegan & Lahey, 1984) have proposed that the way people judge which action in a situation is morally right is governed by their developing understanding of moral values. We assume that when followers adopt the moral values of the organization, they act more often according to these internalized values.

Another aspect of follower moral development is their collectivistic orientation. Collectivistic orientation occurs when the demands and interests of the group take precedence over the desires and needs of the individual (Wagner, 1995). According to Kohlberg (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987), an individual’s transition from a desire to exclusively satisfy personal interests to a desire to satisfy the broader collective is part of moral development. Ehrhart and Klein’s (2001) scenario study confirmed that followers who value participation in decision-making and working for mutual benefit preferred to work under a charismatic leader.

Other models concentrate on classifying the characteristics of effective followership and have not examined them as predictors of leadership. However, we rely on their ideas because the specific follower characteristics appearing in these models are in line with the general assumptions of the new leadership theories regarding follower characteristics that are compatible with transformational leadership. As opposed to early charismatic characteristics (e.g., Weber, 1924/1947), transformational and neocharismatic theories never assumed that leadership relationships are based on follower weakness. Rather, they consistently emphasized follower strength, independence, and proactivity, which reflect the empowerment domain of follower developmental characteristics (Bass & Avolio, 1990; Shamir, 1991).

Kelley (1992), based on interviews with leaders and followers, derived two dimensions of followership style: independent-critical thinking and active engagement in the task.
Followers with a critical-independent thinking were described as “think for themselves,” “give constructive criticism,” “their own person,” and “innovative and creative.” Although Kelley used the term “critical-independent thinking,” he was actually referring to thought and action or, in his words, “to become a full contributor, you need to cultivate independent, critical thinking and develop the courage to exercise it” (Kelley, 1992, p. 114, emphasis added). Followers who are actively engaged in the task are “proactive,” “self-starters,” “take initiative,” “participate actively,” and “go above and beyond the job.”

According to Moore (1976), fully effective leadership depends on mature followership. A leader’s knowledge of followers’ maturity can enhance and facilitate modification of the behavior of followers and leader alike. Block’s (1993) stewardship model, in which individuals see themselves as stewards of the organization’s purpose, implies opportunities for partnerships and choices at all levels. Stewardship requires individuals to act on their own account, for it is impossible to be stewards of an institution and expect someone else to take responsibility. Regardless of the custodial nature of the organizational environment, individuals decide whether to support efforts to treat them as dependent or to take the initiative to create a space of their own choosing. Although Block referred to all members of the organization, his ideas have specific relevance to the characteristics of followers. Chaleff (1998) suggested that courageous followers benefit themselves, their leaders, and their organization. He noted five areas in which follower courage is necessary to make a contribution to leadership development: the courage to assume responsibility, to serve, to challenge, to participate in transformation, and to leave the leader and group when they are detrimental to the common purpose.

The abovementioned followership-centered models support the characterization of effective followers as highly developed, empowered individuals. Such followers have critical-independent orientation towards work, are active, and dominant rather than submissive. In the present study, the empowerment domain of follower development was represented by three variables, which are all expressions of the empowered followers described by various frameworks as effective followership (Block, 1993; Chaleff, 1998; Kelley, 1992, Moore, 1976). We defined critical-independent approach as thinking and acting autonomously. Active engagement in the task is the energy invested in the follower role in terms of high levels of activity, initiative, and responsibility. Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to perform a task or to execute a behavior successfully (Bandura, 1986). Ehrhart and Klein (2001) confirmed a preference for a charismatic leader among followers with an achievement orientation and self-esteem. The nominal definitions of these variables (i.e., independent, hard working, confident) have some conceptual overlap with our definitions of the empowerment-related variables.

Given the above conceptual arguments and empirical evidence, we hypothesized that followers’ initial developmental level in the domains of motivation, morality, and empowerment, as expressed by their initial level of self-actualization needs, internalization of the organization’s moral values, collectivistic orientation, critical-independent approach, active engagement in the task, and self-efficacy, positively predict transformational leadership over time.
4. Method

4.1. Design and sample

This was a longitudinal field study conducted during a 4-month basic training infantry course in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The platoon leaders were the focal leaders and the noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and recruits were the followers. The NCOs, who are part of the training staff and maintain close and frequent interactions with their platoon leaders, were the direct followers. The recruits, whose contact with their platoon leaders is more distant, were the indirect followers. The focal leaders were 54 platoon leaders and the respondents were 90 NCOs and 729 recruits, all men aged 18–22.

Preliminary analyses (of outliers of 2.5 standard deviations from the mean and of platoons with unacceptable \( r_{WG} \) scores, which will be discussed below) showed that for the NCO subsample, three platoons had to be omitted from further analyses. Nine additional platoons had missing data with regard to the NCOs and were also excluded from further analyses. For the recruit subsample, two platoons had to be excluded from further analyses. Therefore, the analyses were conducted on a sample of 42 platoons for the NCOs’ data and 52 for the recruits’ data.

Because all IDF soldiers go through basic training and a major part of military service is spent in training, the situation in which the study was conducted is a natural field condition, representing the nature of active military. The leadership role of platoon leaders in basic training goes beyond simply teaching technical, mechanical, or physical skills, in that they are charged with the broad socialization of the recruits to the IDF. All the platoon leaders and followers who underwent infantry basic training at the time the study was conducted participated in it.

The study was part of a large-scale leadership project (Dvir et al., 2002), which examined the impact of transformational leadership, enhanced by training, on followers’ development and performance. In Dvir et al.’s (2002) study, follower development, as measured by the change in the followers’ developmental level between the beginning and the end of the basic training course, served as a dependent variable. In the present study, we were interested in the opposite, that is, the extent to which followers’ initial developmental characteristics at the beginning of the basic training course predict transformational leadership at the end of the basic training course. It should be noted that the proposition that guided Dvir et al.’s study does not contradict, but complements, the proposition that underlines the present study. In line with the reciprocal process of influence that was suggested by several writers (e.g., Burns, 1978; Shamir et al., 1993; Shamir & Howell, 2000) to occur between leaders and followers, we argue that in addition to transformational leadership’s effect on follower development over time, followers’ initial developmental level may predict transformational leadership behaviors over time.

The first proposition was examined by Dvir et al., whereas the latter was examined in the present study. However, we controlled for any potential effects that may have stemmed from the experimental manipulation conducted in Dvir et al.’s study in two ways. First, since the platoon leaders underwent leadership workshops two months before
they met their followers for the first time in the basic training course, we controlled for participation in the earlier workshops. In addition, we controlled for the effects that may have stemmed from the platoon leaders’ transformational leadership ratings at the beginning of the basic training course. By employing such a design, we were able to examine the role of follower developmental characteristics in predicting their leaders’ transformational leadership while controlling for other possible sources of variance of these leaders’ transformational leadership.

4.2. Measures

We pretested measures in a pilot sample of 320 infantry leaders and followers, which led to a revision of measures. Except where noted, identical measures were used for NCOs and recruits.

4.2.1. Follower development?

Six variables that represented the domains of follower motivation, morality, and empowerment were used for measuring this construct.

4.2.1.1. Self-actualization needs. Self-actualization needs were evaluated by 10 items (α=.88 for NCOs and .89 for recruits) mainly based on Hackman and Oldham’s (1980) Growth Needs Strength Index. Sample item: “[How important is it for you, in your conception of the ideal military position,] that it creates opportunities for personal growth and development?” The response scale ranged from 1 (slightly important or not important at all) to 5 (highly important).

4.2.1.2. Internalization of the organization’s moral values. Internalization of the organization’s moral values was assessed by 17 items for NCOs and 20 items for recruits, based on the organizational values specified in the IDF Code of Ethical Conduct, namely, perseverance, comradeship, discipline, sanctity of human life, loyalty, personal example, professionalism, purity of arms, representation, responsibility, and trustworthiness. Sample item: “So much pressure is put upon us that I understand peers who try to evade their assignments from time to time” (reversed). The response scale was 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) Coefficient alphas were .70 and .78 for NCOs and recruits, respectively.

4.2.1.3. Collectivistic orientation. Collectivistic orientation was measured using a seven-item measure, based on Wagner’s (1995) individualism–collectivism questionnaire. Sample item: “People who belong to a group should realize that they’re not always going to get what they personally want.” The response scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Coefficient alphas were .68 and .67 for NCOs and recruits, respectively.

4.2.1.4. Critical-independent approach. Critical-independent approach was measured with 16 items developed on the basis of Kelley’s (1992) concept of critical-independent thinking.

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2 All measures of follower development are available from the first author.
Followers responded to statements about their critical and independent thinking and actions involving themselves, their peers, their leaders, and the organization. Sample item: “I express my views regarding important subjects even when my opinion contradicts my commanders’ opinion.” Responses ranged from 1 (to a very little extent or not at all) to 5 (to a very great extent). Cronbach coefficient alphas were .77 and .81 for NCOs and recruits, respectively.

4.2.1.5. Active engagement in the task. Active engagement in the task was evaluated with 12 items (coefficient alphas were .85 and .89 for NCOs and recruits, respectively), mainly based on Kelley’s (1992) construct and items. Sample item: “I actively develop the skills necessary for completing the task.” The scale of responses ranged from 1 (to a very little extent or not at all) to 5 (to a very great extent).

4.2.1.6. Self-efficacy. To assess their self-efficacy (coefficient alphas were .75 and .79 for NCOs and recruits, respectively), followers evaluated their ability to succeed in light weapons (written), light weapons (practical), physical fitness, obstacle course, and marksmanship on a five-point scale (Dvir, Eden, & Banjo, 1995).

4.2.2. Leadership

Transformational leadership was measured using 20 items from the short version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ 5X; Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1996). We used the global transformational factor, the mean of all transformational items, because our goal was to assess the relationship between follower development and leader overall transformational leadership style. Sample item: “[My platoon leader] articulates a compelling vision of the future.” The response scale ranged from 0 (not at all) to 4 (very frequently or always). For the NCOs, coefficient alphas were .88 and .93 for the first and second measurements, respectively. For the recruits, coefficient alphas were .89 and .91 for the first and second measurements, respectively.

4.3. Procedure

For the purpose of the present study, we used two measurements. Measurement 1 took place during the first week of basic training. NCOs and recruits completed questionnaires dealing with their initial developmental level and transformational leadership of their platoon leaders. Ratings of transformational leadership at Time 1 served as a control variable. To avoid overloading the new recruits with long questionnaires, we used the split-sample technique (Rousseau, 1985). Thus, to measure all the development variables among the recruits, each half of the recruits in each platoon completed a different version of the questionnaire. The two versions were distributed alternately, according to the recruits’ seating pattern. Version A (n = 354) included critical-independent approach, self-efficacy, and collectivistic orientation. Version B (n = 376) contained active engagement, internalization of moral values, and self-actualization needs. Measurement 2 was conducted during the final week of basic training, 3.5 to 4 months after the first measurement. All NCOs and recruits rated their platoon leader’s transformational leadership.
4.4. Analysis and aggregation issues

According to Rousseau (1985), “theories must be built with explicit description of the levels to which generalization is appropriate” (p. 6). Therefore, no construct is level-free. Furthermore, the level of theory, measurement, and statistical analysis should be congruent (Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994). In defining our level of analysis, we relied on the assumption that leader–follower relationships may theoretically exist at various levels (Yammarino & Dubinsky, 1994). When examining follower characteristics as predictors of leadership style, it is possible that a leader will behave differently toward each follower according to the follower’s initial developmental level and that a leader will behave differently toward groups of followers according to the group’s initial developmental level. Therefore, from a theoretical point of view, our hypotheses could be examined at both the individual and the group level of analysis. However, in order to tap shared perceptions and reduce potential common source biases at the individual level, and in spite the loss of degrees of freedom, the analyses were conducted at the platoon level of analysis.

To do so, individual scores had to be aggregated to the group level by taking the average of group members’ scores. There is a difference between our independent and dependent variable in this regard, stemming from the theoretical levels at which the variables are defined. Our independent variables, follower characteristics, are essentially individual-level constructs; the respondents were asked to rate their own characteristics. However, we were interested in the composition of these characteristics within each group. We did not expect each leader’s followers to be homogeneous on these individual characteristics, but we did expect variability between groups. Following Chan’s (1998) typology of composition models, we viewed these variables as additive measures. For such measures, the researcher should average the individual characteristics within each group, regardless of the within-group variance. To establish the between-group variability in group members’ characteristics, we conducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), predicting follower developmental level on the basis of group membership (e.g., Klein, Buhl Conn, Brent Smith, & Speer Sorra, 2001).

Our dependent variable, leadership, is a direct consensus measure (Chan, 1998) because we assume that leaders differ in the extent to which they exhibit transformational leadership toward their group of followers. In a group consensus composition model, a researcher proposes that the members of each group are homogeneous with respect to the construct of interest and that groups differ in the absolute level of the construct. We, therefore, assessed the extent of within-group agreement in leadership in each group by using James, Demaree, and Wolf’s (1984) \( r_{WG} \) coefficient (e.g., George, 1990). To examine the between-group variability, we conducted a one-way ANOVA, predicting leadership on the basis of group membership (e.g., Klein et al., 2001).

For hypothesis testing, we conducted a multiple regression analysis of transformational leadership in Time 2 on follower initial developmental level in Time 1, with transformational leadership ratings in Time 1 and participation in the earlier leadership workshops as control variables. Because of training schedules, injuries, leave, and attrition, not all respondents were present at both measurements during basic training. The final sample size (reported
above) and the analyses are based on the same sample of respondents, using only data from respondents who completed the questionnaires twice.

5. Results

5.1. Aggregation to the group level

Our independent variable was analyzed according to the additive composition model (Chan, 1998) to assess the appropriateness of aggregating the individual scores to the platoon level. ANOVA showed a significant main effect of platoon membership on follower development among the NCOs, $F=1.47, p=.05$, and for Version B of the recruits’ development questionnaire, $F=2.23, p<.0001$. However, the platoon effect was insignificant for Version A of the recruits’ development questionnaire.

Our dependent variable, leadership, was analyzed according to the direct consensus composition model (Chan, 1998). We first assessed the extent of within-group agreement. For the NCOs, mean $r_{WG}$ in the first measurement was .97 and .95 in the second measurement. For two platoons $r_{WG}$ scores were unacceptable and they were excluded from further analyses of the NCOs’ data. For the recruits, mean $r_{WG}$ values were .94 and .95 in the first and second measurements, respectively. One platoon had an unacceptable $r_{WG}$ score and was therefore omitted from further analyses of the recruits’ data. We then assessed between-group variability. For the NCOs, one-way ANOVAs detected significant platoon main effects in the first and second measurements, $F=1.67, p<.05$ and $F=2.13, p<.001$, respectively. For the recruits, significant platoon main effects also emerged, $F=4.25, p<.0001$ and $F=7.30, p<.0001$, for the first and second measurements, respectively.

Overall, we conclude that the individual scores of our independent and dependent constructs can be aggregated to the group level. Yet, one version of the recruits’ development questionnaire showed too little between-group variability. Since some researchers (George, 1990; George & James, 1993) doubt the need for between-group differences to justify group-level analyses, especially when all groups belong to the same organization, and because all

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of variables in the direct followers’ subsample</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>WOR</th>
<th>DEV</th>
<th>TFL1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WOR</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEV</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TFL1a</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TFL2b</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WOR = participation in earlier transformational or control leadership workshops; DEV = followers’ initial developmental level in Time 1; TFL = transformational leadership.

a 1 = Time 1.
b 2 = Time 2.
* $p < .05$. 
other tests of the development variable produced a sufficient level of variability among groups, results related to this version will be presented.

5.2. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables at the group level using the NCO subsample. The correlations between transformational leadership ratings in Times 1 and 2 and between follower development in Time 1 and transformational leadership in Time 1 were positive and significant. The correlation between transformational leadership at Time 1 and transformational leadership at Time 2, while relatively high ($r=.36$), indicates that a considerable change occurred in the NCOs’ ratings between the two measurements. It may indicate that transformational leadership is not only inherent in the leader but also changes in interaction with followers.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and correlations at the group level using the recruits’ subsample. The correlation between development in Time 1 and leadership in Time 2 was positive and significant as compared to a negative, insignificant correlation among the NCOs.

Table 3
Multiple regression of transformational leadership in Time 2 on follower initial development in Time 1 among direct followers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Earlier leadership workshops$^b$</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TFL1$^c$</td>
<td>.156</td>
<td>.145</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>.48**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follower initial developmental level</td>
<td>.238</td>
<td>.082</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>.30*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$ $n=42$ platoons.

$^b$ Earlier leadership workshops = participation in earlier transformational or control leadership workshops.

$^c$ TFL1 = transformational leadership in Time 1.

* $p=.05$.

** $p<.01$. 

5.3. Follower development and transformational leadership

Table 3 presents the multiple regression of transformational leadership ratings in Time 2 on follower development in Time 1, controlling for participation in earlier workshops and transformational leadership ratings in Time 1. Among the NCOs, the additional variance in transformational leadership ratings in Time 2 explained by NCOs’ initial developmental level was significant ($\Delta R^2 = .082, p < .05$). We concluded that the initial level of direct follower’s development predicted transformational leadership ratings over time. However, contrary to our hypothesis, the correlation was negative; when platoon leaders encountered groups of NCOs with high initial development levels, their transformational leadership ratings decreased over time, and vice versa.

Table 4 shows that the opposite pattern was found among the indirect followers. The additional variance in transformational leadership ratings in Time 2 explained by the recruits’ initial level of development was significantly positive ($\Delta R^2 = .077, p < .05$). Thus, it can be concluded that when the platoon leaders encountered recruits with a high initial developmental level, their transformational leadership ratings increased over time.

6. Discussion

The present study went beyond the traditional focus on leadership effects on follower characteristics toward a more balanced equation according to which follower characteristics also have the potential to predict leadership, as recommended by several authors (e.g., Burns, 1978; Klein & House, 1995; Shamir & Howell, 2000; Yukl, 1999). As such, the present study promotes integration of the various leadership and followership frameworks, which have referred only rarely and anecdotally to the predictive role of follower characteristics in the leadership process in general, and within the genre of the new leadership theories in particular. We confirmed that followers’ initial developmental level predicted transformational leadership ratings over time; yet, the relationships were more complex than hypothesized with regard to close versus distant followers.
6.1. Levels of followership

The present study included two levels of followership, direct and indirect. Leaders and their immediate followers have direct or close interactions with each other that are characterized by two-way communication, personal acquaintance, limited number of followers, direct work relations, spontaneity, reactivity, adaptation, and face-to-face evaluation. Indirect or distant leader–follower interaction occurs between leaders and followers who do not report directly to them, and are described in the opposite terms of direct relationships (Yammarino, 1994). In the absence of theory and research on close versus distant followers’ effects on their leader’s style, we took advantage of the opportunity to discover whatever differences may lie between these followership levels. It is assumed that transformational leadership at any level can have an impact upon both direct and indirect followers (Yammarino, 1994). Yet, there are likely to be differences between the processes that influence close versus distant followers (Shamir, 1995). We are unaware of any attempt to distinguish the effects of direct versus indirect followers on their leaders. Therefore, the present study enables conclusions not only about the role of follower initial developmental level in predicting transformational leadership perceptions, but also on the different mechanisms operating among direct versus indirect followers.

6.2. Initial developmental level of close versus distant followers

Followers’ initial developmental level evidently plays an important role in predicting transformational leadership. Our findings may suggest that it is the actual leadership behavior that changed or the followers’ shared perceptions of their leader. In any case, we conclude that this change in transformational leadership ratings suggests that transformational leadership is not solely inherent within a leader as a trait, but can change by leader–follower relations over time.

Our findings also suggest that the predictive role of followers’ initial developmental level in transformational leadership ratings is more complicated than hypothesized. The initial developmental level of indirect followers positively predicted transformational leadership ratings, whereas this relationship was negative among direct followers. The results among indirect followers are consistent with the previous scattered references to highly developed followers as those who match transformational leadership (e.g., Shamir & Howell, 2000). In the present study, the indirect followers represented the formal target of our focal leaders, whose performance serves as the main criterion for the leaders’ effectiveness. It is possible that when leaders encounter such “flammable material” (Klein & House, 1995, p. 185), that is, compatible target followers who are highly developed, in terms of their motivation, morality, and empowerment, their transformational leadership is boosted as a consequence of working with followers who enhance the probability of positive outcomes.

The unexpected negative relationships between initial developmental level and transformational leadership perceptions among direct followers are, in our opinion, especially interesting. In the absence of previous theory and findings that directly examined such effects, we speculate that they may operate through three distinct mechanisms: a threat mechanism, a
compensatory mechanism, and a disillusion mechanism. The first two explanations refer to an actual change in transformational leadership behavior, whereas the third explanation indicates a perceptual change.

According to a threat explanation, when the direct followers, the leaders’ partners to the management team, their ‘right hand’ in working with the indirect followers, are strong, autonomous, and critical, it may pose a threat to the leaders’ leadership. Such a threat may weaken leaders and suppress their transformational leadership. The indirect followers’ position, on the other hand, is sufficiently remote from the leader’s position, so that their initial developmental level poses no threat to the leader. Future research may benefit from exploring the role of threat in the relationships between leaders and their close versus distant followers.

According to a compensatory explanation, when leaders perceive their partners to the management team, the direct followers, as weak, they feel obligated to compensate for their relative weakness. Thus, they assert their transformational leadership to a greater extent. On the other hand, when the management team exhibits a high initial developmental level, leaders can afford to relax their active transformational leadership. No such compensatory relationships exist between leaders and their group of indirect followers because the latter do not formally share the leadership responsibility with the focal leaders. This may result in less transformational leadership manifested by the leader and more shared transformational leadership within the management team. Future research could benefit from further exploration of the complex leadership mechanisms operating within management teams.

According to a disillusion mechanism, it is possible that some of the differences stem from the varied access of close versus distant followers to direct information about the leader. Direct followers may be more exposed to the actual behavior of their leaders due to daily, face-to-face interactions while the indirect followers are assumed to rely more on symbolic behavior, such as rhetorical skills (Shamir, 1995). Perhaps when highly developed direct followers, who have more crystallized inner standards and a high initial level of critical and independent approach, have a chance to observe the leader closely, they become ‘disillusioned’ over time. The dictum “no man is a hero to his valet” (in Shamir, 1995, p. 19) may apply only to highly developed direct followers. This negative effect was not observed among the more distant recruits for whom the distance from the leader was maintained throughout basic training. Future research should explore these potential mechanisms at different levels of followership. In addition, future research may explore the possibility that these mechanisms operate differently among male and female leaders, for example, that male leaders are more threatened by highly developed management team members than female leaders.

6.3. Methodological considerations

The main potential weakness of our study is that the ratings of both independent and dependent variables were based on the evaluations of either direct or indirect followers. The number of NCOs and recruits in each platoon did not allow the use of the split-sample technique for assessing the independent and dependent variables. However, the likelihood of a common source bias is greatly reduced for several reasons. First, in our longitudinal design,
the independent and dependent variables were measured at least 3.5 months apart. Several methodologists (e.g., Avolio, Yammarino, & Bass, 1991; Podsakoff & Organ, 1986) advocated that separation of measurement is one of the key remedies against a common source bias. Such a technique “would mitigate the problem of transient mood state and common stimulus cues, and perhaps reduce the effect of respondents’ strain toward consistency” (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986, p. 540). In addition, such a design enabled us to control for leadership ratings at Time 1, which likely absorbed the common variance between the two measurements.

Second, we relied on the shared perceptions of individuals in each platoon by conducting the analyses at the group level. When perceptual measures are aggregated to the group or organizational level, many of the individual-level random errors and sources of bias tend to cancel each other (Glick, 1985). Finally, the likelihood of a common method bias is further reduced by the fact that reversed patterns of results were found among direct and indirect followers, despite the fact that both subsamples completed almost identical questionnaires. However, to strengthen causal interpretation, future research should attempt replication with more rigorous field experimental designs using multisource–multimethod data.

Furthermore, the organizational features in our sample are not unique to the military. Adherence to hierarchy and professionalism, a salient organizational mission that depends on strong individual commitment and teamwork, stressful jobs on which leaders and followers spend most of their time, and the need to work with direct and indirect followers characterize many organizations. Yet, the study was conducted in a military context during training with relatively young, all-male participants. Generalizability of the present findings should therefore be examined in future research in other types of organizations, with mixed-gender samples, and with older participants.

To conclude, the present results suggest that transformational leadership is not solely inherent within a leader, but can change by leader–follower relations over time. This finding highlights the importance of a more balanced approach to the study of leadership, an approach that incorporates characteristics of the followers. After the long fixation on leader attributes and their contribution to organizational effectiveness, learning about the ways in which followers affect their leaders opens new avenues for research and application in organizations, for managers and followers alike.

References


