



Is leadership a part of me? A leader identity approach to understanding the motivation to lead

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on social comparison and identity literature, we suggest that individuals' comparisons of themselves to their own standards of leadership relate to their leadership motivation. We propose and test a model of motivation to lead (MTL) based on two types of self-to-leader comparisons: self-to-exemplar and self-to-prototype comparisons with respect to affiliation. In our main study, using data from a sample of 180 executives, we apply structural equation models to test our predictions. We find that self-comparisons with concrete, influential leaders of the past or present (self-to-exemplar comparisons) relate positively to MTL. We also find that self-comparisons with more general representations of leaders (self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation) relate to MTL. Whereas the effect of self-to-exemplar comparisons is mediated through individuals' leadership self-efficacy perceptions, the effect of self-to-prototype comparisons is not. We replicate these findings in three follow-up studies using different research designs. We derive implications for theory and practice.

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Introduction

Leadership is considered the key to success in today's organizations, and research strengthens this view by extensively documenting its positive consequences (e.g., Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, & Hiller, 2009). Scholars have noted that *knowing how* is not enough to make one effective in managerial roles (Arthur, Claman, DeFillippi, & Adams, 1995); one must also be truly *motivated to lead* to persist in the leadership role despite the challenges leaders face in modern organizations. Therefore, it is not surprising that an increasing number of studies have recently focused on understanding the motivation to lead (e.g., Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007; Kark & van Dijk, 2007; Van Iddekinge, Ferris, & Heffner, 2009).

Motivation to lead (MTL, Chan & Drasgow, 2001) is defined as individuals' willingness to engage in leadership training activities and assume leadership roles. Although Chan and Drasgow (2001) identify three MTL components (affective, social-normative, and non-calculative), following other scholars (Hannah, Avolio, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2012; Van Iddekinge et al., 2009) we choose to focus on the affective MTL component, for theoretical and practical reasons.¹ From a theoretical standpoint, affective MTL has been related to intrinsic motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). In contrast, those who score high on the other two components of MTL would lead for other reasons—either a high sense of duty or responsibility (social-normative MTL) or beliefs about the costs and benefits associated with leading (non-calculative MTL). Moreover, from a practical standpoint, research has consistently

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¹ We use "MTL" and "affective MTL" interchangeably throughout the paper. A more detailed discussion on the dimensionality of leadership motivation is beyond our purpose in this article (see Chan & Drasgow, 2001 for a review on the topic).

shown that, among the MTL components, the affective one is the strongest predictor of leadership outcomes such as ratings of leadership potential made by supervisors (Chan & Drasgow, 2001), leadership emergence (Hong, 2005), and overall team effectiveness (Hendricks & Payne, 2007).

Despite its importance, only a handful of studies have explored the antecedents of affective MTL. These studies show that relatively stable personal characteristics, such as personality and values, shape individuals' MTL. However, MTL is also in part malleable with experience (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007). Identity scholars (Ibarra, Snook, & Guillén Ramo, 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005) suggest that incorporating the leadership role into the sense of self motivates individuals to seek out leadership opportunities. Although previous studies have identified leadership self-efficacy perceptions as key antecedents to MTL (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007), research has not yet identified other cognitive sense-making variables that explain individual differences in MTL.

We propose that cognitive variables underlying social comparisons can be particularly relevant for understanding MTL and its malleability via self-efficacy perceptions. According to Bandura (1982), social comparisons affect self-efficacy, motivation, and ultimately performance. Complementarily, social comparison theory suggests that information about the self is meaningful only in relation to others (Cooley, 1902; Festinger, 1954). However, the role of social comparisons has not received much attention in leadership research (e.g., Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007; Ibarra et al., 2010). This gap is particularly surprising since a growing number of scholars are claiming that individuals' self-motivation can be understood only in relation to others (e.g., Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Gibson, 2003; Ibarra et al., 2010).

In this paper, we propose that *self-to-leader comparisons*, defined as the extent to which individuals' views on attributes that characterize leaders match the attributes they ascribe to themselves, relate positively to leadership self-efficacy perceptions and, ultimately, explain MTL. In particular, we focus on *self-to-prototype* comparisons with respect to a key leadership dimension, *affiliation*, and *self-to-exemplar* comparisons to specific, influential leaders of the individual's past or present. Our underlying assumption is that how people feel toward the leadership role is governed by their own expectations associated with that role (Lord & Maher, 1993) and by their need to align those expectations to their sense of self (Ibarra et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005). When managers are asked to define what being a leader means to them, they may use various attributes, such as smart, funny, creative, visionary, eloquent, unique, self-centered, perfectionist, decisive, sociable, fair, humble, efficient, or supportive, to name just a few.² The extent to which people are willing to lead may be influenced by self-comparisons with their own view of leadership. If someone, for example, thinks of her/himself as a people person, and considers maintaining interpersonal connections an essential attribute for leadership, s/he will be more motivated to lead than if s/he thinks that the quality of relationships at work is not especially relevant for leaders. Thus, we bridge literature on social comparisons (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Greenberg et al., 2007) and leadership identity (Ibarra et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005) to propose and empirically test a leader identity model of MTL. Importantly, we further predict that leadership self-efficacy perceptions mediate the relationships between self-to-leader comparisons and affective MTL.

This paper makes several contributions to different streams of literature. First, we contribute to the body of research on leadership motivation by identifying a set of identity antecedents that relate to affective MTL. This is important, because despite the positive consequences of MTL, the intrapersonal psychological processes underlying it are still largely unknown. Although MTL has been theorized to be partially determined by cognitive variables, research to date has not really gone beyond identifying leadership self-efficacy as one antecedent to MTL (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007). Second, we contribute to general leadership research by presenting and testing a conceptual framework that explicates how socio-cognitive processes central to the self-concept relate to leadership (see calls for research by Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2007; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Third, we contribute to research on self-efficacy by showing that leadership self-efficacy perceptions mediate the relationship between self-to-leader comparisons and MTL. Since self-efficacy perceptions have been shown to have positive consequences at work (Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008), our finding has both practical and theoretical implications for enhancing leadership motivation. Finally, we explore self-comparisons not with external entities—such as the job, the supervisor, the group, or the organization (e.g., Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005)—but with *internal* expectations associated with the leadership role.

Theoretical framework

Motivation to lead

Affective MTL is an individual difference construct that affects individuals' decisions to assume and persist in leadership tasks because they derive positive affect from the act of leading itself (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). People high in affective MTL enjoy leading, like to think of themselves as natural-born leaders, and are often driven to lead out of a need to satisfy their own leadership standards (Kark & van Dijk, 2007). Affective MTL relates to intrinsically motivated behavior that is undertaken purely for its own sake (Kark & van Dijk, 2007). Enhanced intrinsic motivation is related to greater identification with the leadership role (Walumbwa, Avolio, & Zhu, 2008).

Identity theory suggests that managers work toward the development of a leader identity as a central part of their self-concepts (Ibarra et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005). When enacting leadership roles, individuals want to be perceived as leaders by others and

² These attributes are taken from the qualitative responses of anonymous participants taking part in this research. Participants were required to think about what attributes characterize leaders.

by themselves (Schlenker, 1986; Swann, 1990) and make deliberate efforts to display the characteristics they ascribe to the leader's role (Lord & Brown, 2004). If their self-image matches how they perceive the role, they may hold favorable perceptions of leadership (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003) and see themselves as leaders (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Arguably, self-to-leader comparisons help form individuals' intrinsic leadership motivation.

Self-to-leader comparisons

Literature on self-other comparisons proposes that there are two types of internal comparisons (e.g., Andersen & Chen, 2002; Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995; Smith & Zarate, 1992): *self-to-prototype comparisons* with abstract, general representations of members of a social group; and *self-to-exemplar comparisons* with particular individuals with whom people have interacted or still do interact to some extent in their daily lives.

The self-concept contains elements related to both types of comparisons, and they work together in guiding people's perceptions and reactions (Ritter & Lord, 2007). For example, imagine the case of David, a manager who has worked four years in a sales position under the supervision of the same boss. David trusts and respects his boss, as she recognizes his good work and is always willing to celebrate the successes of her team members in front of others. When he hears about an open position in the management team, he applies and gets the job. In his new position he is responsible for leading an entirely new sales team. He expects to build trustful and respectful relationships with his direct reports, as that was what he enjoyed most when working with his previous boss. In fact, the old boss turns out to be still very present in his mind, and David often finds himself comparing his behavior with his former supervisor's. He also relies on certain beliefs about how leaders in general should behave (i.e., leadership prototype)—for example, that they should be forceful and determined. Many factors influence the generation of leadership prototypes such as context (e.g., business vs. government) and national culture (Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001). Thus, standards emerge to nourish how he would like to behave and be perceived as a leader.

While prototypical representations set general, socially shared, normative and categorical leadership norms and standards, exemplary role models (such as a supervisor or a senior manager) fill the leadership role representation with more idiosyncratic, specific, detailed leadership contents and meanings (Ritter & Lord, 2007). Cognitively, prototypes reduce information and form simplified mental representations that guide social perceptions quite automatically (Hogg, 2001; Lord & Hall, 2005). In contrast, exemplars serve to develop a rich and detailed list of more concrete features that jointly represent who the significant other is and how s/he tends to behave (Andersen et al., 1995). Research has supported both the distinction between and the co-existence of exemplar and prototypical comparisons (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Andersen et al., 1995; Hogg, 2001; Ritter & Lord, 2007; Smith & Zarate, 1992).

Self-to-prototype comparisons

People actively observe leaders in multiple fields (school, politics, family) and develop generic and nuanced views of them. Implicit leadership theory suggests that managers compare leaders to the mental representation of a *leader prototype* (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984). We propose that the leader prototype is used not only to judge others as leaders (Maurer & Lord, 1991) but also to judge oneself. Although leadership prototypes vary across individuals (Lord et al., 2001), there are some dimensions that are consistently ascribed to leaders (e.g., Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996) and therefore are likely to form the basis of self-verification matching processes.

Individuals evaluate and judge others quite automatically with respect to affiliation and power-related attributes (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2006). Behavior attributed to leaders exhibits the same two dimensions (being sympathetic or kind vs. taking charge or being authoritative) (Kenney et al., 1996; Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994), and therefore individuals may judge their own ability to lead by evaluating their ability to manage relationships and deploy resources. Affiliation refers to valuing the feeling of being liked and supported by one's colleagues, and it reflects the influence of social desirability and socialization processes. In contrast, power refers to valuing control over resources, getting ahead of others, agency, and having an impact on others (Digman, 1997). Managers with high levels of affiliation are considered good team players, organizational citizens, and service providers (Mount, Barrick, & Stewart, 1998), whereas managers with high levels of power are perceived as achieving results, providing direction, communicating a vision, and motivating others (Conway, 1999).

As this definition suggests, power is deeply ingrained in the core of how most people define leadership and has been consistently associated with leadership effectiveness. For example, implicit leadership theory depicts power-related behaviors, such as being strong and energetic (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord et al., 1984), as essential to leadership. Social perceptions research highlights that people in competitive and high-status groups (i.e., leaders) are primarily perceived as powerful (Fiske et al., 2006). Finally, the gender literature has noted that leaders are seen (by both men and women) as displaying *power-related* behaviors (e.g., assertiveness, direction, competitiveness) (Martell, Parker, Emrich, & Crawford, 1998; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989; Schein, 2001). Not surprisingly, research has also shown that individuals with power concerns are more successful in leadership roles (McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982), are judged as providing leadership to others (Conway, 1999), and possess higher leadership ambitions (Hogan & Holland, 2003).

The relationship between affiliation and leadership is less straightforward. On the one hand, much recent theory emphasizing shared leadership (e.g., Pearce & Conger, 2003), empowering leadership (Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006), or servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008) has suggested that individuals with affiliation concerns are more likely to emerge and persist as leaders. Other scholars warn that affiliation does necessarily relate to leadership perceptions (e.g., Guillén & Saris, 2013; McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982; Nevicka, Ten Velden, De Hoogh, & Van Vianen, 2011).

We draw on identity theory (Ibarra et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005) to propose that the extent to which affiliation relates positively to MTL depends on individuals' own leadership prototype with respect to that same dimension. And individuals may differ greatly in how affiliative they perceive typical leaders to be. While some scholars describe affiliation as prototypical for leaders (e.g., Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Kenney et al., 1996), others note that certain affiliative behaviors, such as displaying sensitive and helpful behaviors, are anti-prototypical for leaders (Lord et al., 1984). Research on transformational/charismatic leadership has argued that leaders must transcend self-interest and nurture positive relationships at work (e.g., Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1987). However, the gender literature points out that being sociable and empathetic might actually backfire because it goes against the leadership prototype (Heilman et al., 1989; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002; Schein, 2001); and social perception research (Fiske et al., 2006) has shown that typical individuals in competitive and high-status groups are not necessarily perceived by others as high in affiliation. Similarly, more recent research on the dark triad of personality suggests that non-affiliative individuals like subclinical narcissists or psychopaths have traits that are adaptive in leadership positions, and thus tend to be perceived as leaders (Lilienfeld et al., 2012; Nevicka et al., 2011).

When highly affiliative individuals also have a highly affiliative leadership prototype, they will be more motivated to lead than affiliative individuals who see leaders in general as non-affiliative. For example, David may consider himself as a highly sociable person who cares for others and at the same time may acknowledge that leaders in general are self-centered and do not invest time to build fruitful relationships. In contrast, John is also highly sociable but sees leaders as generally sharing this characteristic with him. We expect John to have higher MTL than David because his view of leadership matches his own self-perceptions. The self-to-prototype match enhances positive feelings toward the job, personal affirmation, and authentic beliefs (Ibarra et al., 2010; Shamir & Eilam, 2005), and will likely result in high affective MTL. Studies on person-job fit show that when the roles employees enact fulfill their own needs, they report more job satisfaction and commitment (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Thus

Hypothesis 1. An individual's own leadership prototype with respect to affiliation moderates the relationship between his/her self-assessed affiliation and the motivation to lead. The higher the leadership prototype rating in affiliation, the stronger the association between self-assessed affiliation and motivation to lead.

Self-to-exemplar comparisons

The preceding discussion refers to people's views of leadership in general. However, managers also compare themselves to specific exemplar leaders in order to assess their own concrete leadership skills and behaviors. Since these concrete skills and behaviors are not explicitly communicated, managers must freely pick and choose among a myriad of skills and behaviors shown by people at work and use them as benchmarks to define their own leadership identity. We propose that this selection is based on the observed behavior of specific individuals people encounter throughout their professional lives who have already made it into the leadership role.

Research has shown that the effects of role models work through social comparison (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). We assume that managers will spontaneously recall positive role models. Studies have shown that individuals are spontaneously inspired by positive role models (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) and are motivated by negative role models only when they are asked to imagine a future self like a worse-off other (Lockwood, 2002). Positive significant others demonstrate how to accomplish goals and offer inspiration and hope.

Being a leader is socially attractive (Hogg, 2001), and leaders are often scrutinized by employees who try to decipher their behavior (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999). Self-comparisons with successful leaders trigger motivation to acquire modeled skills (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2007). When an individual perceives her/himself to be similar to someone who succeeded in the role s/he aspires to occupy, the role identity becomes more salient (LeBoeuf, Shafir, & Bayuk, 2010), and s/he will be more likely to try to emulate the similar other (Greenberg et al., 2007). This similarity can boost self-esteem (Byrne, 1971), strengthen role social identity (Pilegge & Holtz, 1997), validate individuals' self-concepts in that social role (Clore & Byrne, 1974), and improve personal feelings and trust toward other individuals in the social role (Clore & Byrne, 1974; O'Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989).

By definition, however, there are profound differences across individuals in the specific content of their exemplar representations, which suggest that comparisons between self and exemplars are profoundly individualistic and idiographic. Several previous studies (Andersen & Cole, 1990; Berk & Andersen, 2000; Ritter & Lord, 2007) have used idiographic descriptions of significant others using respondent-generated inventories. For example, one individual might describe an influential leader as charismatic, excellent in communication skills, and confident, while another might describe his/her influential leader as a team-player, an excellent coach, a good listener, and trustworthy. Accordingly, we define overall *self-with-exemplar congruence* as the extent to which individuals perceive themselves to share similar attributes with *their own* influential leader(s), past or present. We are interested in the overall congruence between exemplar and self and its effects on individuals' MTL, leaving aside specific differences in the attributes they select to define the exemplar leader. Accordingly, we posit that

Hypothesis 2. Self-with-exemplar congruence relates positively to affective motivation to lead.

Leadership self-efficacy perceptions

Self-efficacy can operate at different levels. At a superordinate level, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) refers to the belief that one can perform well in different roles (not just as a leader). However, individuals also maintain more narrowly defined self-efficacy beliefs about the particular social roles they enact (Hannah et al., 2008), such as leadership. *Leadership self-efficacy* (LSE) has no single, widely

accepted definition in the literature (see [Hannah et al., 2012](#) for a review). At the most concrete level, some scholars conceptualize LSE as individuals' confidence in performing one behavior (e.g., promoting idea generation or initiating behavior) ([Gist, 1989](#); [Taggar & Seijts, 2003](#)) or a set of behaviors (e.g., setting direction, gaining commitment, and overcoming obstacles) ([Paglis & Green, 2002](#)) that are considered important for successful leadership. Other scholars define LSE at an intermediate level, as the general confidence that one can succeed in leading ("I feel confident that I can lead effectively") ([Hoyt, 2005](#); [Murphy & Ensher, 1999](#); [Singer, 1991](#)). [Chan and Drasgow \(2001\)](#) and [Hendricks and Payne \(2007\)](#) frame LSE at this level to explore its linkages with MTL. In this paper, we conceptualize LSE at this same intermediate level and define it as the belief that one has the capabilities (skills, knowledge) and psychological resources (other personal characteristics that help one to persevere despite setbacks, stay focused, and cope with stress) to meet the demands of leadership ([Hannah et al., 2008](#); [Hooijberg, Hunt, & Dodge, 1997](#)).

This way of conceptualizing self-efficacy is quite broad and is more trait-oriented than state-oriented ([Hannah et al., 2008](#)). As was the case for MTL, although we see LSE as a relatively stable dispositional trait that co-varies with personality traits such as extroversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience ([Chan & Drasgow, 2001](#)), we also acknowledge that it can be developed with experience—including, according to [Bandura's \(1982\)](#) self-efficacy theory, vicarious experiences and self-to-other comparisons. Self-to-prototype comparisons differ from LSE in that they contain more abstract, generic information that may be used to assess the extent to which the leadership role matches individuals' preferences, and thus the extent to which it is attractive and desirable to them. Prototypical comparisons can then create the desire to identify oneself with a social group ([Lord & Hall, 2005](#)) and define leadership in a way that is attractive and self-relevant ([van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003](#)). Exemplar comparisons also differ from LSE, in at least two ways. First, exemplars embody certain behavioral strategies that lead to success, but do not furnish a comprehensive list of what is needed. For example, an individual might highlight that her exemplar was a good listener and a good coach, but might also acknowledge that this influential leader was not visionary or creative. Second, many of the attributes that individuals list when they are asked to recall a significant leader are quite specific ("speaks loudly"), and thus similarity on these attributes cannot explain the overall confidence that one can lead. [Hannah et al. \(2012\)](#) have shown that specific forms of efficacy in concrete leadership behaviors are conceptually different from other more general forms of LSE.

The mediating role of leadership self-efficacy

Flattering self-to-leader comparisons inflate individuals' perceptions of their competence ([Van der Zee, Buunk, & Sanderman, 1990](#); [Ybema & Buunk, 1995](#)) and make them feel better equipped to succeed in a leadership role ([Ritter & Lord, 2007](#)). Consequently, they should put more effort into the tasks at hand ([Bandura, 1977](#)), their positive feelings toward the tasks should increase ([Pfeffer & Fong, 2005](#)), and they should perceive the tasks as more self-relevant. Recent leadership literature shows that LSE relates to individuals' willingness to hold a leadership role and persist in their leadership activities ([Chan & Drasgow, 2001](#); [Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993](#)), as well as to their leadership performance (see [Hannah et al., 2008](#) for a review on the topic).

We therefore propose that the relationship between self-to-prototype and self-to-exemplar comparisons and MTL is mediated by individuals' perceptions of their leadership self-efficacy. [Chan and Drasgow \(2001\)](#) have already proposed LSE as the mechanism mediating between personality and values and MTL. However, our model hypothesizes and tests a link between socio-cognitive variables (self-to-prototype and self-to-exemplar comparisons) and LSE. Since the consequences of LSE are specific to the domain of leadership, we suggest that the basic motivational underpinnings related to self-to-leader comparisons are likely to also affect LSE. Next, we develop arguments relating specifically LSE to both types of self-to-leader comparisons.

Self-to-prototype comparisons and LSE

We expect self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation to relate positively with LSE. When people high in affiliation perceive their leadership prototype to be similarly high in affiliation, their LSE will be enhanced. We have framed LSE as the belief that one has not only the capabilities but also the psychological resources to meet the demands of the leadership role. Even if prototypical dimensions might fail to provide a specific behavioral roadmap for succeeding in the role, they might certainly relate to the extent to which individuals are attracted to and committed to it. We believe that congruence with the leadership prototype can signal to individuals that they are "in the right profession" and that what they do is personally meaningful, thus increasing their resilience and determination to succeed in that role, and their confidence that they have the psychological resources to do so (focus, resilience, perseverance), which increases LSE.

Information from leadership prototypes can cognitively activate behaviors in which individuals judge themselves capable; the cognitive activation of the most general information makes salient more concrete information associated with it ([Lord & Brown, 2001](#)). For example, Pat may be worried about her career prospects at her organization and may reflect on how typical leaders behave to judge whether she is up to their standards. If she thinks of leaders as having affiliation concerns, then affiliation-related behaviors, such as listening, helping others, or welcoming others' contributions, are likely to become salient in her mind since they may lead her to the top. If she thinks of herself as able to enact these behaviors, then she will feel that she is capable of performing (at least that part of) the leader's job well. General information from social comparisons can also help individuals experiment with new variants of behaviors and judge what is appropriate and efficacious in situations that require going beyond what they have seen or heard in others ([Bandura, 1997](#)). For example, a newly hired individual high in affiliation, perceiving that the company's leaders use affiliation skills to build and motivate their teams, may think that it would not be very difficult to extend his/her own repertoire of affiliative behaviors and emulate these leaders when s/he first gets the opportunity to lead a team. All in all, the previous discussion suggests that

Hypothesis 3. Leadership self-efficacy perceptions mediate the relationship between self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation and the motivation to lead. Individuals high in affiliation derive leadership self-efficacy perceptions when their own leadership prototype is high, rather than low, in affiliation.

Self-to-exemplar comparisons and LSE

Self-to-exemplar comparisons increase the likelihood that leaders will identify appropriate solutions and engage in successful behavioral strategies. People may try out successful behavioral strategies they observe in their influential others (Gibson, 2003), and by doing so they are likely to increase their self-efficacy perceptions. Research has shown that role models are particularly important for identifying specific knowledge (Andersen et al., 1995), understanding the idiosyncratic skills and behaviors associated with the role (Bandura, 1977), locating manifest signs of effective performance, and calibrating someone's capabilities to succeed (Greenberg et al., 2007).

We operationalize self-with-exemplar congruence as individuals' overall perceived similarity to their own influential leaders. To define exemplars, individuals can use a more or less rich repertoire of attributes that are connected with one another in their mental representations of the exemplars' styles and behavioral strategies (Andersen & Chen, 2002). It is not similarity in single attributes but the whole profile of the influential model that provides a script for action. When models are described with a detailed list of attributes, individuals use the modeled information to produce their own behavior patterns, in turn increasing their self-efficacy perceptions (Bandura, 1997).

Hypothesis 4. Leadership self-efficacy perceptions mediate the relationship between self-with-exemplar comparisons and the motivation to lead.

Overview of studies

We conducted four studies to test our hypotheses. In our main study (Study 1), we collected a large sample of executives with considerable leadership experience to test all hypothesized paths in our theoretical model. In three follow-up studies (Studies 2, 3, and 4), we gathered additional data to replicate the main effects of our model. We isolated the effect of self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation on MTL and replicated it using a survey research design with lagged measures among a sample of MBAs (Study 2) and an experimental manipulation among a more general sample (Study 3). Then we also isolated the effect of self-with-exemplar comparisons on MTL and collected data from a sample of experienced leaders at two different points in time (Study 4).

Study 1

Sample and procedure

Data were obtained from 194 participants in open-enrollment executive education programs at a major European business school, who were asked to complete on-line surveys as a pre-assignment for the program. A total of 180 participants (93% response rate), 59 females and 121 males, completed the data and constituted our final sample. The participants were between 23 and 59 years old, and the average age was 35.73 years. The respondents averaged 5.04 years of leadership experience and 9.24 direct reports. To assess the relevant constructs, except where we specify otherwise, we used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Measures

Motivation to lead. To measure affective MTL, we used Chan and Drasgow's (2001) nine-item scale—for example, “Most of the time, I prefer being a leader rather than a follower when working in groups,” and “I am the type of person who likes being in charge of others.” The coefficient alpha was estimated at .84.

Leadership self-efficacy perceptions. Eight questions reported by Murphy (2001) were used to assess LSE perceptions. Examples of items from this scale include “I feel that I know a lot more than most leaders about what it takes to be a good leader” and “I am confident in my ability to influence a work group that I lead.” The coefficient alpha was estimated at .84.

Self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation. Self-assessments on affiliation used five items of the Personality Research Form (PRF) affiliation scale (Jackson, 1984). Items include “sometimes I have to make a real effort to be sociable” and “often I would rather be alone than with a group of friends” (reversed items). Participants were asked to read each item and decide whether or not it described them (0 = false; 1 = true). Reliability was estimated at .70.

In order to capture the prototype leadership ratings, we first asked the participants to describe in writing (with no maximum or minimum of characters) what leadership meant to them. We used this strategy to prime their leadership prototypes, but did not code the generated texts. We next asked participants to complete a self-reported multi-item measure that assessed the extent to which they attributed affiliation to leaders. Specifically, we adapted King's (1985) description of affiliation in a scale comprising four items: “leaders are concerned with getting to know others,” “leaders are concerned with maintaining their interpersonal connections and with deepening their relationships with others,” “leaders have the recurrent concern for being with other people,” and “leaders prefer to have other people around in just about every situation.” Coefficient alpha was estimated at .75. We standardized

our target variables so that self and leader ratings were equivalent and self-to-leader comparisons equally represented each of the measures.

Self-to-exemplar comparisons. Following previous researchers (Andersen & Cole, 1990; Berk & Andersen, 2000; Ritter & Lord, 2007), we had respondents use self-generated inventories to characterize the leader who had been the most significant to them in the past or who was still significant to them in the present. We asked them to identify the leader by initials and to visualize him/her, with the purpose of turning their attention to the chosen concrete individual (as opposed to the more general leadership social category primed earlier on). The subjects generated a list of 10 descriptive statements and then indicated how well each of the statements matched their own characteristics on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely well*). We calculated an average aggregate score by adding up these values and dividing them by the total number of attributes the respondent generated. High values indicated high congruence, while low values indicated low congruence.

Control variables. We included personal variables such as gender (1 = female, 2 = male), age (in integers), and organizational role as controls. We offered five answer options for organizational role: 1 = CEO, most senior executive in firm; 2 = senior executive management; 3 = middle management; 4 = first-level management; and 5 = non-management or individual contributor. We controlled for gender and age because they might influence people's self-concept in ways that might relate to our variables of interest. Adult development research (e.g., Levinson, 1978) suggests that individuals at different ages cope with specific challenges that shape their self-concept in specific ways. For example, individuals in midlife often face periods of professional self-questioning that can alter their identification with their professional roles. While young managers may be particularly focused on achieving individual attainments, more seasoned managers are concerned with giving back to the community (e.g., Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001), and this concern can affect their self-perception as leaders as well as their self-assessed score. Gender influences leadership perceptions (Ely & Rhode, 2010), and therefore it is likely that identity processes differ for men and women. There might also be gender differences in self-perceptions of affiliation, which might affect self-comparisons on this dimension. We also controlled for organizational role as a proxy of participants' leadership experience, which has been related to leadership self-efficacy and MTL (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Finally, we controlled for self-assessed power. As we note above, social perceptions research has shown that individuals evaluate leaders with respect to two universal dimensions, affiliation and power (e.g., Fiske et al., 2006; Hogan & Holland, 2003; Hogan & Sheldon, 1998; Kenney et al., 1996). Thus, controlling for power ensures a better specified causal model. To measure power we selected the PRF dominance scale (Jackson, 1984) and used five items, including "I feel uneasy when I have to tell people what to do" and "I avoid positions of control over other people" (reversed items). Participants were asked to read each item and decide whether or not it described them (0 = *false*; 1 = *true*). Reliability was estimated at .87.

Analysis overview

Discriminant validity and common method variance. Because our goal was to gain an understanding of intrapersonal psychological processes, our focal variables were self-assessed. Therefore, it was particularly important to address whether common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) represented a challenge to the validity of our conclusions—that is, whether the variance in observed scores is partially attributable to a methods effect. Although some scholars have started to express skepticism about its pernicious effects (e.g., Conway & Lance, 2010; Spector, 2006), common method bias is certainly a concern. To partially address this concern, we used a number of strategies. We introduced idiographic and nomothetic methods to assess how individuals judged exemplar and prototypical leaders. We used different measures for assessing self and leader ratings, in order to obfuscate the purpose of the research to the participants as well as to avoid effects caused by social desirability, leniency bias, or item demand characteristics. Varying the methods reduces the probability of alternative explanations of the results (e.g., consistency bias, general optimism) (Kristof, 1996). We randomized the presentation of our items to avoid order effects. Finally, we used different response scales (5- and 7-point Likert scales, as well as true–false items) to avoid automatic-pilot responses that might inflate correlations among our target variables.

Before testing our hypotheses, we ran statistical analyses to address discriminant validity among the variables as well as common method variance. To address discriminant validity, we considered all the variables assessed through self-reported scales (i.e., all except self-with-exemplar congruence). The five-factor measurement model was fitted to the data and the global fit indices were as follows: $\chi^2 = 642.72$; $df = 424$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05, comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .07. We then tested a one-factor measurement model with all items loading onto the same underlying dimension. This model fit significantly less well ($\Delta\chi^2 = 946.92$; $\Delta df = 10$, $p < .05$). Because MTL, LSE, and self-assessed power constructs might overlap conceptually, we also tested a four-factor model where these three constructs load into one single underlying dimension. This model also fit significantly less well than the six-factor solution ($\Delta\chi^2 = 831.99$; $\Delta df = 3$, $p < .05$). These confirmatory factor analyses indicate the convergent and discriminant validity of the five factors (Bentler, 1989).

Next, to address common method variance, we ran a six-factor model including all variables in our model plus an additional latent common methods variance factor. Items were allowed to load on their theoretical constructs as well as on the latent common methods factor. The global fit indexes of this model— $\chi^2 = 634.72$, $df = 394$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .06—showed a non-significant improvement ($\Delta\chi^2 = 8$; $\Delta df = 30$, *ns.*) over the five-factor theoretical model; thus common method variance may not be a major concern in this study. Finally, we ran all our subsequent analyses with and without demographic controls (i.e., age, gender, and leadership role). None of these controls had significant effects on MTL and the results were essentially identical, so we

could rule out the demographic variables as explanations for our findings. Self-assessed power had significant effects on both MTL and LSE. Following Becker's (2005) recommendation, we excluded impotent variables (age, gender, and leadership role) in order to preserve power and reported only results without these controls. The coefficients between the self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation terms and MTL were almost identical when self-assessed power was included as a control variable in the model. This suggested that both dimensions, power and affiliation, independently contribute to explaining individuals' MTL.

Structural equation model: total, direct, and indirect (via LSE) effects of self-to-leader comparisons on affective MTL. We tested our complete hypothesized structural equation model using LISREL 8.80. We used single indicators for the latent constructs in our model (LSE and MTL) (Bentler & Chou, 1987). Single indicators minimize the extent to which indicators of each construct share variance, and therefore generate more stable parameters (e.g., Landis, Beal, & Tesluk, 2000). To assess the structural relationships among our target variables, we addressed two issues that might bias the estimate coefficients in structural equation models, measurement error (e.g., Saris, Satorra, & Sörbom, 1987) and endogeneity between mediator and mediation variables (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010). To address measurement error, we corrected the variance–covariance matrix for measurement error by multiplying the variance of each latent construct by its reliability (Hayduk, 1987). For the interaction term, we calculated the reliability using the formula by Moosbrugger, Schermelleh-Engel, Kelava, and Klein (2009) $((\text{Reliab } S_{\text{Aff}} \times \text{Reliab } L_{\text{Aff}}) + (\text{Corr } S_{\text{Aff}}, L_{\text{Aff}})^2) / (1 + (\text{Corr } S_{\text{Aff}}, L_{\text{Aff}}))^2$. To address endogeneity, we introduced a correlation between the error terms of our mediator (LSE) and our dependent variable (MTL).

Results and discussion

Table 1 shows means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities of all study variables. In line with our predictions, self-with-exemplar congruence was positively correlated with LSE ($r = .38, p < .01$) and with affective MTL ($r = .19, p < .05$). The self-assessed affiliation term was significantly correlated with affective MTL and LSE, while the leader affiliation one was not. Moreover, the correlation between affective MTL and LSE was positive and significant ($r = .50, p < .01$).

Self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation: Hypothesis 1. To test Hypothesis 1 regarding the effects of self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation on MTL, we first ran a regression analysis following the ordinary least-squares regression procedures recommended by Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003) and tested the significance of the direct effects of our predictors on the dependent variable. In the first step, we entered self-assessed and leader affiliation as predictors of MTL (self-assessed power was also included, as it made conceptual sense to include both power and affiliation in the model). The interaction term (self-assessed \times leader affiliation) was entered in the second step of the analysis. Table 2 shows the progression of testing these models. As the table shows, both models significantly predicted affective MTL ($R^2 = .26, p < .05$ and $R^2 = .31, p < .05$, for steps 1 and 2 respectively). As we expected, the moderation model had a significantly higher R^2 than the linear one ($\Delta R^2 = .05; p < .05$). The results showed that both self-assessed affiliation (.16, $p < .05$) and the interaction self-assessed \times leader affiliation (.29, $p < .001$) were significant predictors of MTL.

Next, we proceeded to interpret the interaction by plotting the simple slopes at one standard deviation above and below the independent variable (self-assessed affiliation) and the moderator variable (leader affiliation). We regressed MTL on self-assessed, leader, and self-assessed \times leader affiliation, using the *eivreg* command in Stata to control for measurement error in the predictors. The results, displayed in Fig. 1, showed that self-assessed affiliation was positively associated with MTL *only* when participants perceived typical leaders as highly affiliative. In this situation, the simple slope for the relationship between their self-assessed affiliation and MTL was positive and differed significantly from zero; $t = 3.16, p < .05$. For participants who perceived leaders as low in affiliation, the simple slope was negative but did not differ significantly from zero; $t = -.78, ns$. These results supported Hypothesis 1.

Self-to-exemplar comparisons and positivity of role models: Hypothesis 2. Participants produced a total of 1523 descriptors (not all of them generated a complete list of 10 descriptive statements). Most of these descriptors involved behavioral mannerisms

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities (Study 1).

Correlations											
Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Self-with-exemplar congruence	3.61	.51	–								
2. LSE	5.13	.71	.38**	(.84)							
3. Affective MTL	4.58	.89	.19**	.50**	(.84)						
4. Self-assessed Power	.87	.22	.14†	.32**	.45**	(.87)					
5. Self-assessed affiliation	.71	.29	.24**	.29**	.23**	.16*	(.70)				
6. Leader affiliation	4.32	1.10	.03	.07	–.03	–.03	–.04	(.75)			
7. Gender	1.67	.47	–.04	.08	.13†	.14†	–.01	–.03	–		
8. Age	35.73	6.98	.16*	.13†	–.06	.02	.02	–.10	.00	–	
9. Organizational role	3.49	1.12	–.16*	–.18*	–.04	–.06	–.08	–.00	–.06	–.46**	–

Note: $n = 180$.

** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

† $p < .10$.

Table 2
Regression analysis (Study 1).

Variable	Self-to-prototype comparisons			
	Model 1: Linear Model		Model 2: Moderated Model	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Self power	.42***	.06	.44***	.06
<i>Step 1</i>				
Self affiliation	.19**	.07	.16*	.07
Leader affiliation	-.01	.07	-.05	.07
<i>Step 2</i>				
Self × Leader affiliation			.29***	.08
Sample size	180		180	
R ²	.26		.31	
ΔR ²			.05*	

Note. N = 180. Entries are unstandardized coefficients.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

(e.g., encourages people to grow). Among the descriptors, 65 did not refer to leaders' characteristics (e.g., "Obama"), and were excluded from further analyses. Since our underlying assumption was that participants would primarily recall positive role models rather than negative ones, we expected the minority of the listed attributes to be negative, and indeed they were. We coded attributes as positive (e.g., "charismatic"), neutral (e.g., "speaks loudly"), or negative ("not very realistic"). Only 3% of the descriptors used by our participants were coded as negative. It is also worth noting that not a single exemplar was described clearly as a negative role model; all negative descriptors were mixed with neutral and positive ones. Since our hypothesis addressed the effects of overall perceived congruence with the exemplar leader on affective MTL, we computed an averaged exemplar comparison score representing the extent to which each participant perceived her/his own attributes to be similar to all the descriptors s/he used to characterize the exemplar. We ran a regression to assess the significance of the direct effect of self-with-exemplar congruence on MTL; the coefficient of self-with-exemplar congruence (.34, $p < .05$) was positively and significantly related with MTL. These results supported Hypothesis 2.

Total and mediated effects (via LSE) of self-to-leader comparisons on affective MTL: Hypotheses 3 and 4. After having assessed the direct effects of self-with-exemplar and self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation on MTL, and following James, Mulaik, and Brett's (2006) recommendations, we next explored the mediating role of LSE (Hypotheses 3 and 4). Results of these analyses are reported in Table 3. We first specified a partial mediation model (Model 1) that included all direct and indirect effects of both self-with-exemplar congruence and self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation on MTL via LSE. This model did not have any degree of freedom. Unstandardized coefficients of Model 1 are displayed in Table 4.

Next, we tested a series of nested models to assess our mediation hypotheses further. These models had one degree of freedom, allowing us to perform a goodness-of-fit test, which tests whether the lack of a particular path can be confirmed empirically. Support for partial mediation required significant direct and indirect effects (via the mediator) of the predictors on the dependent variable.

Hypothesis 3 stated a mediation effect of LSE in the relationship between self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation and MTL, which would require a significant coefficient of the interaction term (self-assessed × leader affiliation) on LSE. In addition, if the mediation is full, the direct effect of the interaction term on MTL would be non-significant, while partial mediation would require a significant direct effect of self-assessed × leader affiliation on MTL. We tested this, and in Model 2, we eliminated the path from

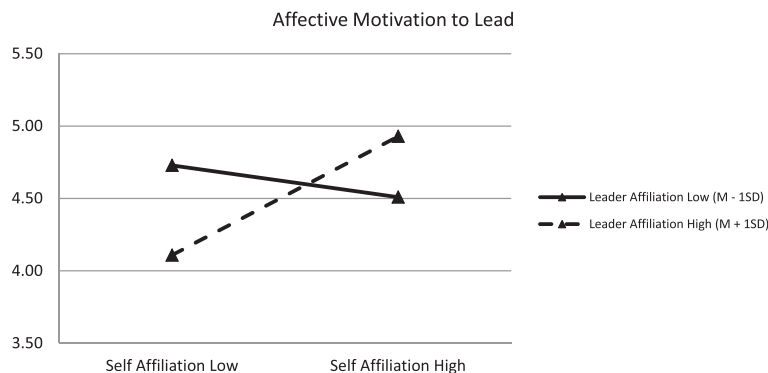


Fig. 1. Simple slopes for MTL (Study 1).

Table 3

Comparisons of alternative nested models to test direct and indirect effects (via LSE) of self-to-leader comparisons and MTL.

Comparisons of alternative models with different causal structural relationships	χ^2	df	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	p-Value	Comments
Model 1: Saturated Model	.00	.00	–	–	–	–	
Model 2: Model 1 without the path from self \times leader affiliation and MTL	11.82	1	.95	.25	.04	.00	Inspection of the modification indices suggested a significant misspecified path from self \times leader affiliation to LSE
Model 3: Model 1 without the path from self \times leader affiliation and LSE	.65	1	1.00	.00	.01	.42	
Model 4: Model 1 without the path from self-with-leader congruence and MTL	.68	1	1.00	.00	.00	.41	
Model 5: Model 1 without the path from self-with-leader congruence and LSE	18.65	1	.91	.31	.06	.00	Inspection of the modification indices suggested a significant misspecified path from self-with-leader congruence to LSE
Final Model: Model 1 without the paths from self-with-leader congruence to MTL, and from self \times leader affiliation to LSE	1.32	2	1.00	.00	.01	.52	

the affiliation interaction term to MTL. This model fit the data poorly (p -value = .00), and inspection of the modification indices provided by LISREL 8.80 suggested a significant misspecified path from self-assessed \times leader affiliation to MTL. This indicated that the direct effect of self-assessed \times leader affiliation on MTL should be retained. In Model 3, we eliminated the path from self-assessed \times leader affiliation to LSE. In this case, the model fit the data well (p -value = .42) and no misspecification was detected, suggesting that this path was indeed not necessary. These results failed to support [Hypothesis 3](#) and suggested that the effect of the affiliation moderation on MTL was not mediated via LSE.

To test [Hypothesis 4](#) regarding the mediation role of LSE in the relationship between self-with-exemplar congruence and MTL, in Model 4, we eliminated the path from self-with-exemplar congruence to MTL. The model fit the data well (p -value = .38), and no misspecification was detected. These results suggested that the direct path from self-with-exemplar congruence to MTL was not necessary. In Model 5, we eliminated the path from self-with-exemplar congruence to LSE. In this case, the model yielded a poor fit (p -value = .00), and inspection of the modification indices detected a significant non-specified path from self-with-exemplar congruence to LSE. These findings suggested, in support of [Hypothesis 4](#), that self-with-exemplar congruence related positively to MTL, and that this effect was fully mediated by LSE.

Global fit indices of the final model were as follows: $\chi^2 = 1.43$, $df = 2$, p -value = .49, CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.03, IFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00. Unstandardized coefficients of the final model are displayed in [Table 4](#). Self-assessed \times leader affiliation had a significant direct effect (.26, $p < .05$) on MTL, and self-with-leader congruence had a significant indirect effect (.21, $p < .05$) on MTL via LSE. To assure that our estimated parameters of the relationships among our target variables were accurate, we addressed the issue of endogeneity between our mediator and dependent variables. Following the approach of [Antonakis et al. \(2010\)](#), we compared the final model ([Table 3](#)) to another that allowed the disturbance terms of LSE and affective MTL to correlate. This model ($\chi^2 = .66$, $df = 1$, p -value = .42, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00) did not fit significantly better than the previous one ($\Delta\chi^2 = .77$, $\Delta df = 1$, $ns.$), and the coefficient of the correlation

Table 4

Unstandardized solutions for nested structural equation models.

	Model 1 (in Table 3)		Final Model (in Table 3)		Type of mediation via LSE
	LSE	AffMTL	LSE	AffMTL	
<i>Self-to-exemplar comparisons</i>					
Self-with-exemplar congruence	.38***	–.09	.38***		Full
<i>Self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation</i>					
Self affiliation	.18***	.04	.19***	.03*	
Leader affiliation	.07	–.09	.08	–.09†	
Self \times leader affiliation	.05**	.26***		.26***	None
<i>Mediator</i>					
LSE		.57***		.55***	
<i>Control variable</i>					
Self power	.20***	.32***	.19***	.32***	
R-Square	.32	.43	.32	.43	

Notes: $n = 180$. Unstandardized estimates for Model 1 and Final Model in [Table 3](#) are reported. In bold appear the coefficients used to test the mediation hypotheses ([H3](#) and [H4](#)).

*** $p < .001$.** $p < .01$.* $p < .05$.† $p < .10$.

between LSE and affective MTL disturbance was non-significant (.07, *ns.*). These results suggested that endogeneity did not undermine our conclusions.

These results generally supported our predictions. However, although we were cautious with the study design and ran analysis to address common method variance concerns, to increase the confidence in the validity of our conclusions it was desirable to replicate the main effects of our theoretical model, namely (1) the effect of self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation on MTL, and (2) the effect of self-with-exemplar congruence on MTL. To replicate the first one, we ran two follow-up studies (Studies 2 and 3). Study 2 relied on a survey design with lagged measures among a sample of MBA students. In Study 3, we ran an experiment to further explore the direction of causality among our target variables using a more general sample. In Study 4 we sought new data from a fresh sample of executives and used a survey design with lagged measures to replicate the second study regarding self-to-exemplar comparisons.

Follow-up Study 2: Replication test of self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation using a survey design with lagged measures

In Study 2, it was important not only to replicate Study 1 but also to address some of its limitations. First, to diminish the potential effect of common method bias in our results, we introduced a time lag between the measurement of the predictors and the measurement of affective MTL. Second, participants in the Study 1 sample were experienced leaders. To determine whether our findings applied to individuals at early career stages, we tested our hypotheses using managers-to-be, i.e., MBA candidates.

Participants and procedure

We invited 83 participants enrolled in an international MBA program to take part in this study. Participants were asked to complete a paper-and-pencil survey in an organizational behavior class assessing their individual affiliation as well as their perceptions of how affiliative typical leaders were (Time 1). At Time 2, ten days after the first survey, participants completed the MTL survey, also in class. The final sample consisted of 66 participants (80% response rate), 19 females and 47 males, aged 30.24 years on average.

Self-assessments on affiliation (Time 1). To measure affiliation, participants completed the same five items of the affiliation subscale of the Personality Research Form (PRF; Jackson, 1984) as in Study 1. Participants were asked to read each item and decide whether or not it described them (0 = *false*; 1 = *true*). The coefficient alpha was estimated at .75.

Leadership prototype ratings in affiliation (Time 1). In order to capture the leadership prototype ratings, as in Study 1, we first asked the participants to describe in writing (with no maximum or minimum of characters) what leadership meant to them. We used this strategy to prime their leadership prototypes, but did not code the generated texts. We next asked participants to complete the same four items based on King's (1995) definition of affiliation as in Study 1. The coefficient alpha was .75.

Motivation to lead (Time 2). To measure affective MTL, we used the same nine-item scale (Chan & Drasgow, 2001) as in Study 1. The coefficient alpha was .76.

Controls. As in previous studies (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007) we controlled for gender (1 = female; 2 = male) and age (in integers).

Results and discussion

Means, standard deviations, and measure reliabilities of all study variables are presented in Table 5. Results of the regression analysis showed that while self-assessed affiliation had a positive and significant effect on MTL (.45, $p < .01$), the effect of leader affiliation on MTL did not reach significance ($-.02$, *ns.*). In line with Hypothesis 1 and with our findings in Study 1, the interaction self-assessed \times leader affiliation was statistically significantly related to MTL (.27, $p < .05$). As in Study 1, none of the controls had significant effects on MTL. We plotted the simple slopes at one standard deviation above and below the independent variable (self-assessed affiliation) and the moderator variable (leader affiliation). The results, displayed in Fig. 2a, showed that affiliation was positively associated with affective MTL only when individuals perceived typical leaders as high in affiliation. In this situation, the simple slope for the relationship between

Table 5
Means, SDs, correlations and reliabilities (Study 2).

	Variables	M	SD	Correlations					
				1	2	3	4	5	
1	Self affiliation	5.23	1.06	.75					
2	Leader affiliation	4.51	1.35	.01	.75				
3	Affective MTL	4.98	.84	.43**	.05*	.76			
4	Gender	1.71	.46	.20	-.16	.03	–		
5	Age	30.24	3.63	-.06	-.15	-.12	.09	–	

Note. N = 66. Reliabilities appear in the diagonal.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

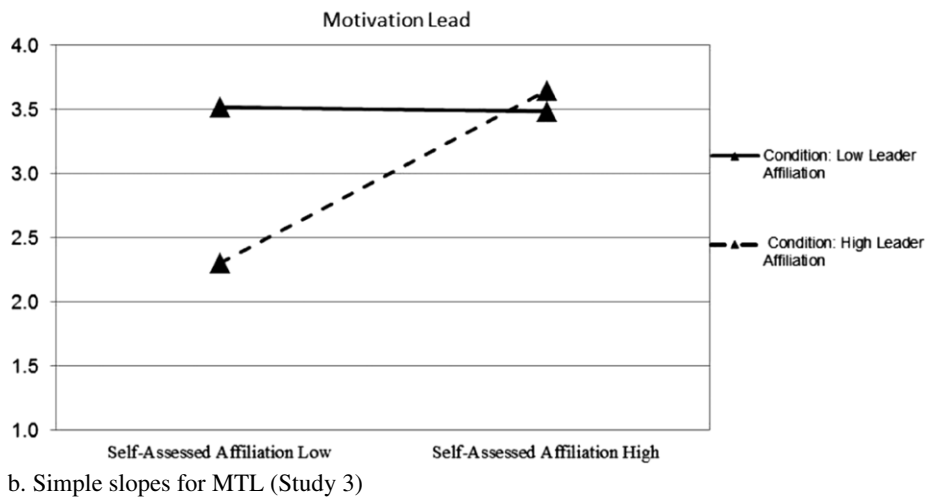
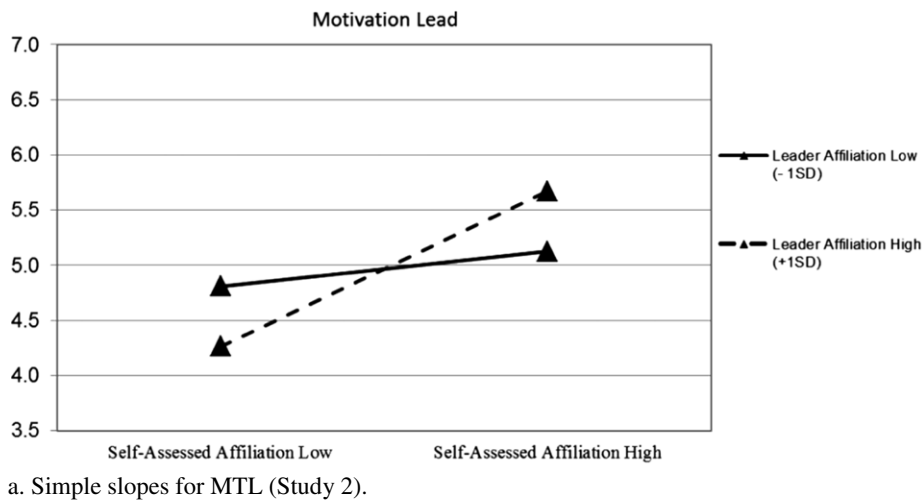


Fig. 2. a–b. Simple slopes for MTL (Studies 2 and 3).

individuals' affiliation and MTL was positive and differed significantly from zero; $t = 3.76, p < .01$. When individuals perceived prototypical leaders as low in affiliation, the simple slope did not differ significantly from zero; $t = .12, ns$. These findings further supported [Hypothesis 1](#).

Follow-up Study 3: Replication experiment on self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation

Although the findings above support our predictions, we could only assume that self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation drove the results. Given the results of Studies 1 and 2, we designed a third study to experimentally replicate the effect of self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation on individuals' MTL, using a more general sample. In Study 3, we also controlled for personality traits as potential alternative explanations of our results. This is an important addition to our model because research has shown that extroversion is related to affective MTL ([Chan & Drasgow, 2001](#)).

Materials and procedure

To test the relation between self-with-prototype congruence and MTL, we asked participants to read a fictional press-release about a company named *360GiroTech* that had supposedly been given a prestigious leadership award. Our original draft was revised and adjusted by the head of communications and marketing at the business school of one of the authors to provide a more realistic context for our manipulation, which created two same-length versions of the text, one in which leader affiliation was high and one in which it was low. We asked participants to imagine that they worked at *360GiroTech* and to answer the prompt "I would like to lead a group of people at *360GiroTech*" on a scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). It is the answer to this prompt that we model as dependent variable. Using an approach similar to that of [Chan, Rounds, and Drasgow \(2000\)](#), we adapted the operationalization of our dependent variable to non-executive respondents who might never have had the opportunity to lead a real team, and specified a

particular company. But these changes did not alter our prediction: namely, that self-assessed affiliation will have a stronger relationship with MTL in a particular company when participants perceive leaders as typically high, rather than low, in affiliation, as *Hypothesis 1* states.

Participants

Our sample included 101 participants, 48 females and 53 males, recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. They were 39.50 years old on average ($SD = 10.83$). 98 participants reported that they were originally from the US, 1 from Canada, 1 from the United Kingdom, and 1 from Vietnam. They represented a wide range of professions (book-keeper, help-desk support, office assistant, radio dj, technical support, writer). With respect to education, 6 had a high school diploma, 24 had some college studies, 19 had a 2-year college degree, 35 had a 4-year college degree, 12 had a master's degree, 1 had a doctoral degree, and 4 had a professional degree (JD, MD).

Manipulation and measures

Leader affiliation manipulation. Individuals judge the level of affiliation of others in almost every social encounter, inferring high or low levels from certain manifest behaviors and traits (Fiske et al., 2006). We manipulated leader affiliation in the press-release by using the trait adjectives in the PRF Manual (Jackson, 1994) to describe the leaders' behaviors during the leadership award ceremony, as well as their trajectories and working style. The press-release referred to a thank-you video in which an employee praised his leaders at 360GiroTech, and concluded with a reference to research findings that connected high (low) affiliation with leadership. In both the thank-you video and the article's closing paragraph, the leaders at 360GiroTech were described as *typical* leaders of organizations ("360GiroTech's leaders embody all that people have in mind when they think about leadership").³

Manipulation checks. To verify participants' perceptions of affiliation leader prototypicality, we used the sixteen-item PRF (Jackson, 1984) affiliation scale. Reliability was estimated at .88. To make sure that our manipulation did not change other leadership-related perceptions, we included two prototypical dimensions not related to affiliation. Asking participants whether each adjective described typical leaders, and using a True (1)–False (0) scale, we used the six-item intelligence subscale (e.g., "knowledgeable") and the three-item dedication subscale (e.g., "hard-working") developed and validated by Epitropaki and Martin (2004); reliabilities were .64 and .73, respectively. Our assumption was that if the manipulation worked, affiliation prototypicality would be higher when the leader was described as high in affiliation than when s/he was described as low in affiliation. In contrast, there would be no differences in the prototypicality of intelligence or dedication between the two conditions.

Controls. As in the previous studies, we controlled for gender (1 = female; 2 = male) and age (in integers). In addition, we controlled for leadership self-efficacy perceptions. We assessed LSE with a three-item scale based on Feasel's (1995) work, which included items such as "I feel confident that I can be an effective leader in most of the groups I work with." Alpha was estimated at .95. If the results of Study 1 are valid, we should not expect differences in the effects of the self-to-leader comparisons in affiliation on MTL when we control for LSE (see Table 2; results showed that the relationship between self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation and MTL was not mediated via LSE). Research has suggested that certain personality traits, in particular extroversion, are related to individuals' leadership motivation (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007). Therefore, we controlled for personality using a short personality inventory developed and validated by Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann (2003). This scale consisted of ten items; participants rated the extent to which a given pair of traits applied to them, on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Examples included "anxious, easily upset" (reversed) for emotional stability, and "dependable, self-disciplined" for conscientiousness.

Results and discussion

Participants in the high leader affiliation condition reported perceiving typical leaders as more affiliative ($M = .78$, $SD = .21$) than those in the low leader affiliation condition ($M = .59$, $SD = .29$), $t(99) = 3.66$, $p < .001$. As we expected, participants in the high leader affiliation condition ($M = .91$; $SD = .15$ for intelligence, and $M = .97$, $SD = .12$ for dedication) did not differ from participants in the low leader affiliation condition ($M = .91$, $SD = .13$ for intelligence; and $M = 1.00$, $SD = .00$ for dedication) in their perceptions of the prototypicality of intelligence and dedication ($t(99) = .04$ and 1.78 , *ns.*, respectively). Thus, our manipulation did change the extent to which participants viewed leaders as typically affiliative.

We regressed on MTL, the centered independent variable (self-assessed affiliation), the moderator (condition), and the interaction term of these two variables (self-assessed affiliation \times condition). As we expected, we found that the interaction term had a positive and significant effect ($.91$, $p < .01$), supporting *Hypothesis 1*. In addition, self-assessed affiliation had a negative and marginally significant effect ($-.56$, $p = .06$), and the condition (leadership prototype in affiliation) had a negative and significant effect ($-.21$, $p < .001$) on participants' MTL, $F = 8.50$, $R^2 = .18$, $p < .001$. When all controls were taken into account (age, gender, LSE, and personality traits), the results were similar. The addition of the controls resulted in a significant F-change = 12.15, $p < .001$, driven mainly by the strong relationship of MTL with the only control variable that was significant, LSE ($.71$, $p < .001$). However, in accord with the results in Study 1, the inclusion of LSE did not alter the significance of the affiliation self-to-leader comparison terms in predicting MTL. Finally, we tested the incremental contribution of the self-to-prototype comparison terms in predicting MTL over

³ The full text for each condition is available from the authors.

the controls; results showed a significant change in the predictive power of the model when self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation were included as predictors ($\Delta F = 5.93, p < .01$). These findings ruled out personality as an alternative explanation of the relationship between our target variables and showed the unique contribution of self-to-prototype comparisons in predicting MTL.

We then plotted the interactions (without controls). As Fig. 2b shows, self-assessed affiliation was positively associated with MTL only when the leader was highly affiliative. In that condition, the simple slope for the relationship between self-assessed affiliation and MTL was positive and differed significantly from zero; $t = 4.76, p < .001$. When leader affiliation was low, the simple slope did not significantly differ from zero; $t = -.13, ns$. These results were consistent with our findings in Studies 1 and 2, and provided further empirical support for Hypothesis 1 using a more general, non-executive sample. However, it should be noted that Fig. 2b suggested that with a more general population, individuals are more willing to lead when their leadership prototype is low in affiliation rather than when it is high.

Follow-up Study 4: Replication test of self-with-exemplar congruence using a survey design with lagged measures

In this study, we sought to replicate the findings of Study 1 with respect to the positive relationship between self-with-exemplar congruence and MTL, surveying a new sample of executives and using lagged measures.

Participants and procedure

We invited 46 executives enrolled in an executive education program to participate in this study. Participants were asked to complete an on-line survey as a pre-assignment for the program (Time 1). Then, two weeks later, participants were asked to complete a paper-and-pencil survey in class to measure our dependent variable (Time 2). A total of 44 executives (96% response rate), 14 females and 30 males, completed the data at both points in time; they ranged from 27 to 51 years old (average age of 37.02 years).

Measures

Self-to-exemplar congruence (Time 1). As in Study 1, the subjects generated a list of 10 statements describing an exemplar and were asked to indicate how well the statements could also describe their own characteristics at work, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely well*).

Motivation to lead (Time 2). To measure affective MTL, as in Studies 1 and 2, we used Chan and Drasgow's (2001) nine-item scale. The coefficient alpha was .83.

Control variables (Time 1). We included gender (1 = female, 2 = male) and age (in integers) as controls. We measured personality with the same short personality inventory (Gosling et al., 2003) as in Study 3. Finally, we asked participants to rate the extent to which they thought that their chosen exemplar was a positive role model, on a scale from 1 (*very negative*) to 7 (*very positive*).

Results and discussion

Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations are displayed in Table 6. As the table shows, the relationship between self-with-exemplar congruence and MTL was positive and marginally significant (.26, $p < .10$). Extraversion (.38, $p < .05$) and openness to experience (.33, $p < .05$) had positive and significant correlations with MTL.

We then ran a regression analysis to test Hypothesis 2. We first regressed MTL on the controls. The results showed that extroversion (.39, $p < .01$) and openness to experience (.37, $p < .05$) were positively associated with MTL (Adjusted $R^2 = .31, p < .01$). Adding self-with-exemplar congruence (.38, $p < .05$) as a predictor of MTL in a second step significantly changed R^2 (Δ Adjusted $R^2 = .10, p < .05$),

Table 6
Means, SDs, and correlations (Study 4).

Variables	M	SD	Correlations									
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1. Motivation to lead	5.10	.81										
2. Self-with-exemplar congruence	4.25	1.12	.26 [†]									
3. Extroversion	4.65	1.40	.38*	-.30*								
4. Agreeableness	4.57	1.04	-.10	-.07	.06							
5. Conscientiousness	5.48	1.17	.11	-.10	-.11	.07						
6. Neuroticism	3.06	1.24	-.04	.26 [†]	-.00	-.23*	-.16					
7. Openness to experience	5.56	1.04	.33*	.01**	.15	.25*	-.21*	-.13				
8. Gender	1.32	.47	-.35*	-.15	.03	.11	.02	-.05	-.10			
9. Age	37.02	5.66	-.03	-.03	-.11	-.16	-.07	.04	.13	-.30*		
10. Exemplar positivity	5.86	.97	-.00	.33*	.05	.14	-.22	.23	.08	.05	.23	

Note: $n = 44$.

[†] $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

showing that the incremental effect of self-to-exemplar comparisons is significant. The significant effects ($p < .05$) of control variables in this model were as follows. Gender had a negative effect ($-.26$) on individuals' MTL. Contrarily, extroversion (.51) and openness to experience (.32) were positively related to MTL. Thus, the effects of these control variables were similar in magnitude regardless of whether or not self-with-exemplar congruence was also included as a predictor. In general, these results supported [Hypothesis 2](#) and ruled out our control variables as alternative explanations of the relationship between self-with-exemplar congruence and MTL.

Discussion

Do self-to-leader comparisons help to explain individuals' MTL? Despite the benefits that favorable internal social comparisons have for shaping individuals' sense of self, such as self-esteem and self-regulation preferences, research on them has not systematically been applied to the field of leadership ([Greenberg et al., 2007](#)). In the present investigation, we integrate both lines of research. We have shown that self-comparisons with specific influential leaders of the past or present are positively related to MTL. Our findings also suggest, consistently across studies, that self-comparisons with more abstract, general representations of leaders (leadership prototypes) relate to MTL. Specifically, self-assessed affiliation has a positive relationship with MTL *only* when participants hold a leadership prototype high, rather than low, in affiliation. We hypothesized that the basic explanation for these effects is the enhanced leadership self-efficacy perceptions derived from alignment between self-perceptions and one's own leadership standards. However, while the relationship between self-with-exemplar congruence and affective MTL was mediated via LSE, the relationship between self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation and MTL was not.

Theoretical contributions

Our findings have several theoretical implications. First, self-comparisons with respect to individuals' own views of leadership have actual motivational consequences in the workplace. This is particularly relevant since despite the numerous positive consequences of MTL ([Chan & Drasgow, 2001](#); [Hendricks & Payne, 2007](#); [Hong, 2005](#)), we still know very little about the intricate psychological processes that underpin it. Research to date has not really gone beyond personality and values as antecedents to MTL ([Chan & Drasgow, 2001](#)). Bridging the literatures on social comparisons (e.g., [Greenberg et al., 2007](#); [Sluss & Ashforth, 2007](#)) and MTL (e.g., [Chan & Drasgow, 2001](#)), we show that both highly particularistic comparisons with role models (how David sees Maria behaving as a leader) and more global representations of leadership (how David sees leaders in general) can influence individuals' levels of MTL. By establishing self-to-leader comparison variables as antecedents to MTL, we open the door to studying leadership motivation as a malleable construct that is, at least in part, socially constructed.

Second, we offer additional insights into cognitive identity-based approaches to leadership ([Hogg, 2001](#); [Lord & Hall, 2005](#)). Extant research has focused on the positive effects of self-assessed personal characteristics, such as personality traits or values (e.g., [Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002](#) for a review). Our findings complement this stream of research, as we found that to understand the relationship between affiliation and MTL we need to take into account individuals' own leadership *standards* as well. Our findings urge a highly individualistic approach that combines personal characteristics with characteristics ascribed to leaders to shed light on leadership motivation. In particular, our results reveal that affiliative individuals with a congruent affiliative leadership prototype have the highest MTL. Identity scholars ([Ibarra et al., 2010](#); [Lord & Hall, 2005](#)) might use these insights to delineate more precisely the consequences of self-to-leader comparisons at work.

Third, our research also sheds light on the relationship between self-efficacy perceptions and leadership motivation (e.g., [Chan & Drasgow, 2001](#); [Hannah et al., 2012](#)). [Bandura \(1977\)](#) proposes that vicarious experience is an antecedent to leadership self-efficacy, but little is known about how individuals might use this information to guide self-perceptions ([Gist & Mitchell, 1992](#)). Our results suggest that perceived attributes of personally encountered leaders help people measure themselves against their own leadership standards. While LSE fully mediated the relationship between self-to-exemplar comparisons and MTL, it did not mediate the relationship between self-to-prototype comparisons in affiliation and MTL. This suggests that concrete role models may provide behavioral scripts that serve to boost own confidence to succeed as a leader, whereas more general leadership representations may merely reinforce the positive affect toward the act of leading (i.e., affective MTL). These differences can be taken into account to derive more concrete predictions linking different types of social comparisons and LSE.

Finally, our findings contribute to research on individuals' fit in organizations. This stream of research has traditionally focused on disentangling the effects of comparisons in certain attributes (e.g., control, extroversion, or proactive personality) ([Glomb & Welsh, 2005](#); [Zhang, Wang, & Shi, 2012](#)) between oneself and external entities—i.e., person–job, person–organization, or person–boss comparisons (e.g., [Kristof-Brown et al., 2005](#)). Extending this line of research, we have shown that it is the interplay between self-assessment and one's own leadership standards that has consequences at work. Previous studies generally point to the benefit of being high, rather than low, in several personal attributes (e.g., extroversion). The reason is that such action-oriented characteristics have more potential to energize behavior (e.g., [Higgins, 1997](#); [McClelland, 1985](#)). Our study suggests that individuals high in one of such dimensions, affiliation, are more motivated to lead than are individuals low in affiliation only when their self-image fits their leadership prototype. This perspective spotlights identity-related factors that may be central for understanding leaders' attitudes at work ([DeRue & Ashford, 2010](#); [Ibarra et al., 2010](#); [Lord & Hall, 2005](#)) and opens up fresh areas of inquiry for fit research adopting an intrapersonal comparisons perspective.

Limitations and future research

A first limitation of our main study is its cross-sectional design. Although the causal flow depicted by our model is anchored in theory and research, additional studies using longitudinal designs would help shed light on the relationships among our targeted variables. Relatedly, it is possible that common method bias inflated the effects of the self-to-leader comparisons on MTL in our main study. However, we were able to replicate our main effects with three follow-up studies that manipulated leadership prototypicality in affiliation (Study 3) and used panel designs with lagged measures (Studies 2 and 4), which suggests that common method bias does not challenge the validity of our conclusions. Future research including non-self-rated outcome variables is desirable. Also, future research should explore further how self-to-prototype comparisons influence individuals' MTL differently in managerial vs. more general samples.

The nature of our data also limits our ability to disentangle the relations between exemplar and prototype. On the one hand, one might think that exemplar leaders shape the leader prototype. But how they do so may involve specific information that we do not have. For example, imagine an individual whose influential leader was quite different from how s/he thinks of leaders in general: it is precisely this role model's unique and unconventional behavior that makes the individual value and appreciate her/him. On the other hand, it is also possible that the individual's leader prototype influences how s/he perceives exemplars with whom s/he interacts, making salient certain behaviors that s/he will use to judge the exemplary leader. For the purpose of this paper, we kept exemplar and prototypical comparisons separate in our model, but future research should take into account the mutual influences between them.

Another limitation is that our main study does not provide a comprehensive model of antecedents to MTL. To focus on social comparisons, we left aside other relevant predictors of MTL identified in previous research, namely extroversion, individualism, and goal orientation (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007). To address in part this limitation, we introduced personality as a control variable in Studies 3 and 4, and the results suggest that our key self-to-leader comparison variables do make an incremental contribution to MTL beyond personality traits. But further theorizing is needed to integrate the findings of the MTL literature into a more complete theoretical model and to address the incremental contribution of self-to-leader comparisons beyond still other potential alternative antecedents (e.g., values, goal orientation).

Further, among the many dimensions on which people may compare themselves with a (real or ideal) leader (see Edwards & Cable, 2009; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), we addressed only self-to-leader comparisons with respect to affiliation. It is possible that other leadership-related variables (e.g., Schwartz, 1992), such as self-to-leader comparisons in creativity or innovation, affect individuals' MTL. Another limitation is that our data did not allow us to identify the boundary conditions for the relationships between self-to-leader comparisons and MTL. Future research can take into account moderators, such as self-esteem, to explore these relationships more fully.

Our idiographic approach to self-to-exemplar matches is prone to social desirability bias, in that people might inflate self-ratings to match perceived attributes of the influential leader. However, all participants of our study should in principle be equally susceptible to this bias. The fact that our variable had enough variance to support significant effects on MTL leads us to believe that this issue does not invalidate our study. However, future studies might consider including social desirability as a control variable.

In addition, we do not have specific information in our main study about who the influential leaders were. This is important because, for example, Brown, Ferris, Heller, and Keeping (2007) have warned that upward and downward social comparisons have different psychological consequences. Imagine an individual whose very first boss, though expert, fair, and trustworthy, was in a middle management position and thus was not particularly influential at the organizational level; even though this boss may have greatly influenced the individual, s/he may not have finally determined how the individual perceives leaders more generally. Whom do people think of when they are asked to recall the most influential leader in their career? In Study 4, we asked participants to provide more detailed information about their chosen exemplar leaders. All reported that their exemplars occupied a higher position than theirs in the organizational hierarchy at the time they first met; 91% reported that their first boss was their most influential leader, and that on average participants met him/her when they were novice managers with an average age of 27 years ($SD = 5.65$). Specific questions about exemplars can be more precisely addressed in the future.

Also, one could argue that the importance of exemplars might differ depending on whether they are positive or negative role models. Even though in our main study only 3% of the descriptors were negative and in Study 4 all participants reported that their role model was positive (Mean = 5.86, $SD = .98$), a complete treatment of social comparisons and leadership would also require developing predictions about how negative role models affect motivation at work. In some circumstances (for example, when they are put in a mindset where it is important to avoid mistakes), people might recall negative role models. Future research could expand our findings by considering the nature of the role model people use in the comparison process.

Practical implications and conclusions

Our study highlights the importance of reflecting on experiences managers have had with influential leaders of their past or present in order to understand what leadership means to them. Our results suggest that leadership prototypes are highly idiosyncratic with respect to the important dimension of affiliation. Some managers may tend to think of the prototypical leader as someone concerned with getting to know others and striving to maintain high-quality relationships with others at work, while other managers may conceptualize "the leader" as somewhat more socially distant. Our study suggests that individuals use their own experiences to develop leadership prototypes that boost or hinder their leadership motivation. By reflecting on the standards one uses to assess leadership competence, one can grasp and potentially challenge underlying assumptions about one's own motivation to lead.

In developing these reflections, managers might benefit from questioning the rationale for their own inner standards. A commonly held assumption in the academic literature, as well as the popular press, is that self-awareness triggers personal development. However, apart from getting feedback from supervisors or through 360-degree instruments, it is not clear what strategies may help managers to become more self-aware in a systematic way. Exercises that enhance reflection on influential leaders in the past or present and what made them influential can help people explore these inner standards and, potentially, readjust them. Discussions with coaches and peers can expand the potential repertoire of effective leadership attributes and help managers reassess and redefine how they judge themselves as leaders. When managers perceive themselves as rather similar to their role models, this reflection can be reassuring. And when managers perceive themselves to be rather different from those models, peer or coaching discussions may help them modify their self-limiting beliefs about leadership. Exploring the negative experiences that managers have had with leaders is not a common practice in leadership development, but it can be a powerful opportunity to diagnose resistance toward embracing a leadership role, and a starting point for exploring alternative views on leaders.

Also, our results suggest that managers are role models scrutinized by others at work. Reflecting on what kind of role model they would like to be and how they would like to be described by those others (such as subordinates or colleagues) may inculcate a sense of responsibility in shaping the next generation of leaders. Organizations may wish to pay closer attention to the influence current leaders have on younger employees. At a minimum, they should make managers aware of the impact they have on the long-term leadership development of their subordinates. The leadership picture they generate for their subordinates may be evaluated with the help of 360-degree surveys and potentially corrected through developmental interventions. Thus, mentoring programs need to select leaders who embody the values and behaviors that are important for the organization, and mentors should be made aware of their role in developing protégés' views on leader qualities. All in all, our results suggest that there might not be a one-size-fits-all approach to understanding the motivation to lead, and that we might benefit from exploring what leadership means to different individuals, using a highly particularistic approach.

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