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Abstract

Purpose – Research on implicit followership theories – that is, individually held assumptions about how followers are and how they should be – is still in its infancy. The few existing approaches differ in what they define as the object of these theories. The authors consider the lack of two aspects in the existing literature: first, the authors consider it important to not only focus on effective but also on ideal followers – which allows investigating follower characteristics that go beyond just performance; and second, the authors demonstrate the importance of the study of characteristics which leaders explicitly see as undesirable for followers (i.e. counter-ideal follower prototypes). The purpose of this paper is to fill these gaps and to extend the literature by introducing the concept of implicit followership theories as assumptions of ideal followers.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors first present three studies conducted to develop a scale to measure ideal and counter-ideal follower prototypes, respectively. In a fourth study, the authors apply this scale and compare it to existing measures of implicit followership theories regarding their value for predicting leaders' follower ratings.

Findings – Results show that the newly developed measure is reliable and valid, and comprises a useful tool for future research.

Practical implications – The scale can be used for leadership development programs.

Originality/value – The study is among the few that provide theory and evidence for the relevance of implicit followership theories and is the first to consider the ideal follower in this regard.

Keywords Scale development, Counter-ideal follower, Ideal follower, Implicit followership theories

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Leadership and followership are two sides of the same coin. Kouzes and Posner (1990) stated that "leadership is a reciprocal process in that it occurs *between* people. It is not done by one person *to* another." (p. 29). Furthermore, according to Uhl-Bien *et al.* (2014), "[…] leadership can only occur if there is followership – without followers and following behaviors there is no leadership. This means that following behaviors are a crucial component of the leadership process. Following behaviors represent a willingness to defer to another in some way" (p. 83). Thus, leadership emerges through interactions between leaders and followers, in which leaders share power and engage their followers' talents through empowerment (Hollander and Offermann, 1990). While the part of the leader in these interactions has been extensively studied, the role of follower characteristics and behavior has been investigated less often. During the last two decades, however, the follower role for forming leadership received increasing attention. Researchers began to see followers not only as passive recipients of but as active contributors to leadership (Notgrass, 2014;

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Oc and Bashshur, 2013). Research conducted under this focus can be summarized as follower-centered leadership research (as opposed to leader-centered leadership research, see, e.g. Carsten *et al.*, 2010).

Complementing the recently developed perspective of implicit leadership theories (ILTs; e.g. Van Quaquebeke *et al.*, 2014), another line of research focuses on preconceived notions about followers and followership: implicit followership theories (IFTs; Sy, 2010; van Gils *et al.*, 2010). Similar to ILTs, IFTs are proposed to influence how individuals judge and respond to followers, thereby influencing outcomes important to followers such as performance appraisals. Uhl-Bien *et al.* (2014) categorize followership into five dimensions from purely leader-centric, over follower-centric and relational to constructionist with IFTs falling into the category of role-based followership with the leader as recipient or moderator of follower influence in producing outcomes. Albeit a relatively young field of research, IFTs have already been proven useful for understanding leadership processes (for reviews see Epitropaki *et al.,* 2013; Junker and van Dick, 2014). For instance, better fit in leaders' IFTs with follower characteristics seems to cause higher LMX ratings (Sy, 2010) and leads to better performance (Whiteley *et al.*, 2012). Yet, many questions about IFTs have remained unanswered. While we know how the typical follower is perceived (Sy, 2010), we do not yet know what people expect from a person to be recognized as ideal follower. Research on ILTs showed that images of ideal and typical leaders can differ tremendously (Schyns and Schilling, 2011) and that ideals are more important in working contexts than the average group member (Van Quaquebeke *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, we have no knowledge about counter-ideal follower prototypes, i.e. attributes which prevent someone to be recognized as outstanding follower. Furthermore, researchers of both ILTs (e.g. Den Hartog *et al.,* 1999) and IFTs (e.g. Wernimont, 1971) have focused on effectiveness prototypes in the past, i.e. on attributes which are ideal to be perceived as effective leader (or follower, respectively) – even though calls have been made to consider other types of ideal prototypes (Junker and van Dick, 2014; van Gils *et al.,* 2010). We are the first to empirically assess another subtype of ideal prototypes, namely, images of followers who are good in building relationships.

The typical and the ideal follower – two distinct approaches to studying IFTs

Junker and van Dick (2014) argued that leadership and followership prototypes can be differentiated on two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the norm of prototype, i.e. whether they represent images of typical leadership and followership or whether they represent images of ideal leadership and followership. Implicit theories regarding ideal leaders and followers depict the best possible leaders or followers imaginable for a specific goal. Followers might be seen ideal if they are most effective, best liked, or even most able to balance work and life. While it might be possible that one person fulfills all of these goals, it is more likely that three different followers provide the best fit with each of these goals. Therefore, each goal represents a different subtype or facet of a broader ideal prototype. In the past, effectiveness prototypes have been the predominantly researched ideal prototypes (e.g. Den Hartog *et al.,* 1999; Wernimont, 1971). In the studies presented in the following, we build on the tradition of the Michigan and Ohio studies on leadership and differentiate in task and relationship aspects. We will consider a follower prototype, which is ideal to master the tasks, and a second subtype, namely, a follower who is good in building relationships. We show that these two subtypes are not identical as they are similar on some attributes, but differ on others.

Sy (2010) developed a scale to operationalize typical follower images. Typical followers are seen, for example, as industrious or enthusiastic and they are not perceived as incompetent or conformist. But how can the ideal follower be described? Wernimont (1971) partially answered this question as she found that followers should be, amongst other things, independent thinkers and qualified for the job to be perceived as effective followers. As van Gils *et al.* (2010) stated and as described above, effectiveness prototypes only partially encompass IFTs and should not be equated with these broader theories. Follower attributes such as being enthusiastic are important for the working context, while they are not necessarily perceived as direct predictors of performance (see Van Quaquebeke *et al.*, 2014, for a similar argument in the ILT domain). IFTs regarding ideal followers therefore need to go beyond performance. Little is known so far about such broader IFTs. We aim to fill this gap. Furthermore, we demonstrate that participants' images of typical and of ideal followers are not identical.

The ideal and the counter-ideal follower – two distinct dimensions of IFTs

The second dimension proposed by Junker and van Dick (2014) is the valence of prototype. Valence means whether an attribute is perceived to be positive or negative for the respective category. Positive attributes represent desirable attributes. These are crucial for being perceived as an ideal member of the category and they are instrumental to achieving a specific goal. Negative attributes, in contrast, represent undesirable characteristics. They are hindering the achievement of a specific goal.

Ideals and counter-ideals do not represent two poles of the same dimension. Instead, they have proven to be distinct dimensions in past research on leader prototypes (Junker *et al.,* 2011) and values (e.g. Graf *et al.,* 2011). In these studies, counter-ideals explained variance on different follower outcomes over and above ideals. Based on these findings, we propose that IFTs are also composed of an ideal and a counter-ideal.

So far, we do not know which characteristics represent counter-ideal follower attributes. We cannot draw any inferences from Wernimont's (1971) study as she solely focused on attributes which are perceived to be instrumental for follower effectiveness. Therefore, we were especially interested in developing a scale which comprises both ideal and counter-ideal follower attributes.

The relevance of IFTs

IFTs serve as benchmarks to categorize target persons. If a leader's IFTs (e.g. "followers should be honest") and the evaluated follower match (i.e. the respective follower is honest), this follower gets the label of the category (i.e. he/she is an ideal follower) and is stored in long-term memory with this label (Phillips, 1984). Subsequently, this label helps to interpret the follower's behavior and to behave adequately toward him or her (Weick, 1995). As soon as a person is categorized, a pattern completion process sets off and individuals automatically complete their image of this person by non-observed but prototype-consistent information (Shondrick *et al.,* 2010).

Sy (2010) provided first evidence for the relevance of IFTs. In his study, IFTs were related to leader and follower liking, leader trust, follower job satisfaction, and the relationship quality between leader and follower (see also Engle and Lord, 1997).

From a theoretical point of view, IFTs have been linked especially to leader-member exchange (LMX; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX is an exchange theory which explains differences in the quality of leader-follower relationships. According to Liden and Maslyn (1998), the quality of LMX varies in terms of liking, professional respect,

loyalty, and contribution to mutual goals. Recently, van Gils *et al.* (2010) proposed a theoretical model to explain LMX. They assume that both leaders and followers compare their own image of how they are against their benchmark of how they should be, and how the image of their dyadic partner compares to their own benchmark of how their partner should be. These two comparisons influence each partner's willingness to engage in the relationship, which is the first step in forming good or poor LMX. If the partner is perceived to live up to the respective standards of good leadership (ILTs) or followership (IFTs), one will be motivated to reciprocate by living up to the standards oneself. Empirical evidence for this model is, however, still scant.

The norm of prototype – whether people have to live up to an ideal or average – might have a tremendous impact on how leaders and followers are perceived. If followers fit the perceptions of typical followership, they will be perceived average and as being more or less like all other followers. In contrast, comparing followers against an ideal IFT will lead to judgments of how well these followers perform (as one example of an attribute) compared to the best conceivable follower. A good follower might be recognized as a "big fish in a small pond" if this follower has to live up to an average, but might be recognized as a "small fish in a big pond" when compared to an ideal. Therefore, from our point of view, a key question in IFT research is whether typical or ideal prototypes are more relevant in the workplace, that is if individuals automatically compare followers to an average or an ideal follower, respectively. Van Quaquebeke *et al.* (2014) showed in their study that a match of the leader with an ideal predicted the followers' responses such their satisfaction with their leader, while a match with a typical prototype did not explain additional variance. With the scale we developed, we provide an appropriate operationalization to test if this result can be generalized to the IFT domain.

To achieve our aims, we conducted a series of four studies:

(1) in Study 1, we inductively generated a pool of ideal and counter-ideal follower characteristics;

(2) in Study 2, we refined and condensed these characteristics into a concise scale through psychometric analysis;

(3) in Study 3, confirmatory analyses to test the theoretical structure of the scale were conducted; and

(4) Study 4 finally served to test how fit of the follower with an ideal followership prototype affects leaders' ratings of follower organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), LMX, and follower performance.

Study 1: item generation

Method

Participants. A total of 127 participants – 73 psychology students and 54 employees (thereof 41 working as a supervisor) – completed a questionnaire. The student sample had an average age of 22.90 (SD = 6.25) years, the employee sample had an average age of 40.14 (SD = 10.22) years. The sex distribution was representative for the population: 84 percent of the students and 46 percent of the employees were female. Participants in both the student (87 percent) and the employee sample (96 percent) were mainly German. Employees had an average of 19.32 years (SD = 10.79) of working experience and had been working for their current employer for 10.57 years (SD = 7.82). A minority of 13 students also had work experience.

Procedure. Student participants were recruited during a psychology course at a German university, and employee participants were recruited at a training center located in Germany. Both groups were instructed to picture an ideal follower, who was described as "the best follower they could imagine." We did not provide any further details about this follower. Then, participants were asked to indicate at least six attributes for this ideal follower.

Results

We did not find any systematic differences between students and employees regarding the total number of attributes and regarding the content of these attributes, which provides first support that there is indeed a universal understanding of what constitutes an ideal follower irrespective of participants' backgrounds. This result also provides initial support, that – in line with findings from ILT research (Ayman-Nolley and Ayman, 2005) – IFTs are independent of first-hand experiences with followers. We collapsed the data of both samples for further analysis.

The 127 participants provided a total of 878 answers with an average of 6.97 answers. We then reduced the data by applying the following criteria. First, we reformulated substantives to adjectives and we eliminated attributes which we could not find in dictionaries or which did not represent characteristics but behavioral patterns. Next, we searched the data for synonyms using dictionaries and expert discussions. We always kept the attribute, which was mentioned most often. This procedure resulted in a final set of 92 distinct attributes.

Discussion

Although we explicitly asked a subsample of 26 participants to think of both ideal and counter-ideal attributes, this did not result in any significant differences in the total amount of counter-ideal attributes. One possible explanation might be that the ideal attributes are more accessible in memory than counter-ideal attributes, as we asked for an ideal follower in both conditions. Nevertheless, a fifth of the attributes in the remaining item pool were negative. Taken together with the attributes that are characteristic for ideal followers, the resulting 92 attributes comprise a comprehensive list of the ideal IFTs.

Study 2: item reduction and dimensionality of IFTs

The second study served three primary aims. First, we aimed at developing a scale which comprises the image of an ideal follower that most people share. Second, we wanted to reduce the item set and to examine the underlying factor structure. Third, we wanted to show that participants' images of typical followers could be distinguished from those of ideal followers and that images of good task-performers could be distinguished from those of good relationship-builders.

Method

Participants. The 250 employees answering our questionnaire were working in four different industries, namely, hotel, food industry, meat packing, and technical consulting. A majority of 209 (84 percent) participants were male with an average age of 41.43 years (SD = 9.04) and an average working experience of 21.95 years (SD = 10.24). Employees had been working for their current employer for an average of 11.21 years (SD = 8.51). The sample consisted of 142 (57 percent) supervisors, 99 (40 percent) subordinates and 5 (2 percent) freelancers.

Procedure. Participants were recruited in a vocational training center. Participation was voluntary. We provided the 92 final attributes from Study 1 in random order and participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. Half of the participants were asked to indicate how characteristic (on a scale from 1 = not characteristic at all to 5 = very characteristic) the attributes were for an ideal follower or a typical follower. The second half of the participants were asked to rate how beneficial (on a scale from 1 = very obstructive to 5 = very beneficial) the items were for good relationships between followers or mastering the tasks.

Results

Non-significant results for our tests for differences between the four industries provide support that we measured basic-level follower prototypes (see also Study 1). We collapsed the data for further analysis. We used three steps to deduce our final item set and to achieve the above presented goals for this study.

First, and given our goal to complement existing theory by addressing IFTs regarding ideal and counter-ideal followers, we conducted *t*-tests to identify those items that differentiated between ideal and typical employees. We found significant differences for 68 of 92 items. Typical and ideal followers were perceived to be, for example, equally healthy ($M = 3.74$ vs 3.91, $T = 0.99$, $p > 0.05$) or good looking ($M = 2.35$ vs 2.24, $T = 0.61$, $p > 0.05$). For all significant differences, participants perceived typical employees to show the positive characteristics to a smaller degree and the negative characteristics to a larger degree than ideal employees. In this sense, typical followers were, for example, perceived to be less intelligent ($M = 3.42$ vs 3.94, $T = 3.67$, $p < 0.01$) but more aggressive ($M = 2.26$ vs 1.58, $T = 3.64$, $p < 0.01$) than the ideal follower. This supports our assumption that individuals' images of typical followers differ from their images of ideal followers.

Second, we aimed at the most representative attributes of ideal and counter-ideal followers. An item was identified as counter-ideal if the value was at least one standard deviation below the scale mean and as ideal if the value was at least one standard deviation above the scale mean. We compared the attribute means of the three conditions "ideal follower in general," "task mastering follower," and "relationship-oriented follower" and tested whether an attribute was categorized as ideal in one condition, but as counter-ideal in at least one of the other two conditions. Due to the different instructions we used, different categorizations would suggest that we operationalized two counterparts of the ideal follower, namely, a neutral prototype and a counter-ideal prototype. As only one item ("submissive," which was eliminated) was categorized differently, we can assume that we operationalized a counter-ideal follower prototype in all three conditions.

Third, we used exploratory factor analysis to explore the dimensionality of the remaining items. We used principal component analysis and varimax rotation. We analyzed all four conditions together and we used three criteria to further reduce our item set. First, item commonalities were set to exceed 0.60, as recommended by MacCallum *et al.* (1999). Second, factor loadings were expected to be higher than 0.50 to result in solid factors (see also Costello and Osborne, 2005). Third, we used Scree tests and the eigenvalues above one criterion to determine the number of factors. This resulted in a remaining set of 21 items. Scree tests indicated a four-factor solution (see Table I). This factor structure could be interpreted easily and represented scales with sufficient internal consistencies (Cronbach's α ranging from 0.67 to 0.89). As can be seen in Table I, two factors represent positive characteristics which can be interpreted

	Item	Ideal (task) (0.89)	Counter-ideal (relationship) (0.88)	Ideal (relationship) (0.79)	Counter-ideal (task) (0.67)	Communalities	*M*	SD
1	Thinking ahead	0.75				0.65	4.15	0.74
2	Educated	0.74				0.65	3.83	0.79
3	Intelligent	0.74				0.58	3.92	0.79
4	Assumes responsibility	0.70		0.31		0.61	4.19	0.79
5	Engaged	0.67				0.54	4.18	0.66
6	Interested	0.67				0.59	4.33	0.63
7	Determined	0.67				0.53	4.10	0.67
8	Conscientious	0.66				0.55	4.26	0.74
9	Cooperative	0.52				0.42	4.13	0.63
10	Aggressive		0.79			0.69	1.70	0.93
11	Malicious		0.77			0.71	1.56	0.94
12	Uncooperative		0.73			0.65	1.61	0.92
13	Insubordinate		0.70			0.57	1.97	0.96
14	Indifferent		0.69			0.55	2.01	1.03
15	Rude		0.69			0.58	1.67	1.00
16	Irritable		0.68			0.58	1.90	0.88
17	Communicative			0.78		0.66	4.13	0.79
18	Team-minded			0.69		0.68	4.35	0.80
19	Creative	0.49		0.58		0.60	4.00	0.86
20	Passive				0.80	0.74	2.03	0.88
21	Incompetent		0.31		0.79	0.75	1.59	0.84

Notes: Factor loadings above 0.30 are presented. Numbers in parentheses represent Cronbach's α

Table I. Factor structure of the final item set Study 2

as "ideal task (e.g. intelligent)" and "ideal relationship (e.g. team-minded)." Two further factors represent negative attributes and can be interpreted as "counter-ideal task (e.g. passive)" and "counter-ideal relationship (e.g. uncooperative)." Means of counter-ideal attributes are 2.0 or below, and means of ideal attributes are 4.0 or above (with the only exceptions of "educated" with a mean of 3.83 and "intelligent" with a mean of 3.92).

Table II shows how characteristic the final attribute set was for ideal and typical followers, as well as for good task masters and good relationship-builders. In sum, ideal followers possess the desired characteristics to a greater extent and the undesired characteristics to a smaller extent than typical followers.

The four scales were not related to participants' age ($r = -0.04$ to 0.04, $p > 0.05$), sex ($r = -0.09$ to 0.06, $p > 0.05$), work experience ($r = 0.00$ to 0.07, $p > 0.05$), position in the organization (leadership vs no-leadership position; $r = 0.00$ to 0.05, $p > 0.05$), span of control ($r = -0.01$ to 0.06, $p > 0.05$), organizational tenure ($r = -0.03$ to 0.05, $p > 0.05$), and formal education ($r = -0.10$ to 0.03, $p > 0.05$).

Discussion

The aim of Study 2 was to reduce the initial item set, which resulted in a four-factorial structure – i.e. ideal (task), ideal (relationship), counter-ideal (task), and counter-ideal (relationship) – and a total of 21 items. Furthermore and as expected, we were able to show that individuals' images of typical, ideal, good task-mastering, and relationship-oriented followers differ.

A multitude of attributes in our original item set (68 out of 92) differed significantly between images of the typical and the ideal follower. Participants perceived typical

Table II.
T-tests for significant differences between the four conditions (ideal follower, typical follower, good task mastery, good relationships) for the final item set in Study 2

	M (ideal)	*M* (typical)	*M* (task)	*M* (relation)
Thinking ahead	4.26	3.58**[a]	4.40**[b]	4.34**[b]
Educated	3.84	3.48*[a]	4.08*[a]/**[b]	3.94**[b]
Intelligent	3.94	3.42**[a]	4.25**[a]/**[b]	4.06**[b]
Assumes responsibility	4.35	3.66**[a]	4.42**[b]	4.34**[b]
Engaged	4.27	3.81**[a]	4.27**[b]	4.36**[b]
Interested	4.34	3.98**[a]	4.45**[b]	4.55*[a]/**[b]
Determined	4.23	3.79**[a]	4.15**[b]	4.22**[b]
Conscientious	4.40	3.81**[a]	4.42**[b]	4.41**[b]
Cooperative	4.13	3.80**[a]	4.20**[b]	4.38*[a]/**[b]
Aggressive	1.58	2.26**[a]	1.62**[b]	1.36**[b]/*[c]
Malicious	1.24	2.24**[a]	1.60*[a]/**[b]	1.16**[b]/**[c]
Uncooperative	1.45	2.21**[a]	1.52**[b]	1.27**[b]
Insubordinate	1.73	2.43**[a]	1.93**[b]	1.78**[b]
Indifferent	1.61	2.89**[a]	1.87**[b]	1.69**[b]
Rude	1.56	2.26**[a]	1.52**[b]	1.36**[b]
Irritable	1.61	2.56**[a]	1.73**[b]	1.70**[b]
Communicative	4.27	3.79**[a]	4.17*[b]	4.25**[b]
Team-minded	4.63	3.79**[a]	4.42**[b]	4.58**[b]
Creative	4.15	3.35**[a]	4.23**[b]	4.25**[b]
Passive	1.89	2.41**[a]	1.95**[b]	1.90**[b]
Incompetent	1.26	2.06**[a]	1.48**[b]	1.56*[a]/**[b]

Notes: Task = good task mastery; relation = good relationships. [a]Significantly different from ideal condition: *[a] $p < 0.05$; **[a] $p < 0.01$; [b]Significantly different from typical condition: *[b] $p < 0.05$; **[b] $p < 0.01$; [c]Significantly different from task condition: *[c] $p < 0.05$; **[c] $= p < 0.01$

followers to possess the ideal attributes to a smaller extent and the counter-ideal attributes to a greater extent than ideal followers. Thus, the benchmark to be perceived as ideal follower is – as expected – higher than the benchmark to be perceived as typical follower. This makes it more difficult for employees to fit the ideal requirements which is in line with Barsalou (1985) (see also Van Quaquebeke *et al.,* 2014) who stated that ideals are more in the periphery of the respective category.

Even though not all mean differences were significant, our results demonstrate that the images of ideal, typical, relationship-oriented and task-mastering followers are not identical. All items in the final set clearly represent ideal and counter-ideal follower characteristics. Items which were perceived as uncharacteristic for an ideal follower were also rated as obstructive for being good in mastering the tasks and for building good relationships.

The remaining item set differed considerably from the scale developed by Sy (2010). Several explanations may account for these differences. First, cultural differences between the USA and Germany may have contributed. Second, we used a different approach for item collection and item reduction than Sy (2010). While he focused on current and former leaders, we used a heterogeneous sample of students, employees and leaders. However, as our final item set was independent of participants' formal education, this explanation seems not very plausible. Also, independence of participants' age and sex is a first indication of the universality of our items. Nevertheless, this assumption should be explored further in a longitudinal design.

Third, and most likely, the different norms of followership prototypes (typical vs ideal), as explained above, might be the reason for the differences in these two scales.

We focused on images of ideal and counter-ideal followers, whereas participants in Sy's (2010) studies were asked to think about typical followers. As intended, our scale is able to capture differences between typical and ideal followers.

Study 3: confirmatory analyses

Method

Participants. Participants were 279 psychology students with (at least part-time) work experience from several German universities, who were recruited online. The majority (70 percent) was female and participants had a mean age of 24.63 years (SD = 6.25) and 2.45 years of working experience (SD = 4.25). On average, participants had been working for their current employer for 2.38 years (SD = 3.46), thereof nine as supervisors.

Procedure. We used a scenario study in which participants adopted the view of a team leader. This team leader evaluated one of his/her followers who either represented an ideal follower or a counter-ideal follower. The ideal follower was described as "You are always satisfied with Mr/Mrs Mueller's behavior and you see him/her as an ideal follower. He/she always completes the tasks outstandingly. Thus, he/she is very important for the department's success." The counter-ideal follower was described as "You are very unhappy with Mr/Mrs Mueller's behavior and see him/her as a counter-ideal follower. He/she does often not complete the tasks satisfactorily. Thus, he/she is quite a hindrance for the department's success." This type of experimental performance manipulation was also used in the original studies on ILTs (see e.g. Eden and Leviatan, 1975).

Afterwards, the participants rated to which degree the target follower would possess the 21 attributes derived from Study 2 on a scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much.

Analysis and results

One-sided *t*-tests revealed that participants in the counter-ideal follower condition rated the target follower significantly lower on the ideal items ($M = 2.50$, SD = 0.95 compared to $M = 4.05$, SD = 0.70; $t = 14.12$, $p < 0.01$) and significantly higher on the counter-ideal items ($M = 2.68$, SD = 1.02 compared to $M = 1.54$, SD = 0.51; $t = 10.59$, $p < 0.01$) than participants in the ideal follower condition.

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses to test the four factor structure derived from Study 2. We wanted to test a hierarchical model in which the four factors were indicators of two higher order factors (ideal and counter-ideal followership) and we expected this hierarchical model to provide the best fit. Table III shows the results of our confirmatory factor analyses. The four-factor model provided poorer fit than the two-factor model but in line with our expectations, the hierarchical model fit our data best.

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	NFI	RMSEA
Independence model	–	230	–	0.00	0.00	0.34
Two-factor model	365.40	119	3.07	0.96	0.94	0.09
Four-factor model	1,126.80	171	7.65	0.83	0.80	0.15
Hierarchical model	209.30	98	2.14	0.98	0.96	0.07
Saturated model	–	0	–	1.00	1.00	–

Notes: CFI, comparative fit index; NFI, normed fit index; RMSEA, root mean squared error of approximation

Table III. Overall fit indices for the four-factor model and concurrent models in Study 3

Discussion

Aim of Study 3 was to confirm the factor structure of Study 2. Deviating slightly from the results derived in Study 2, the four-factor model did not provide a better fit than the two-factor model. However, a hierarchical model, in which the two positive factors "ideal (task)" and "ideal (relationship)" loaded on a higher order "ideal follower"-factor, and in which the two negative factors "counter-ideal (task)" and "counter-ideal (relationship)" loaded on a higher order "counter-ideal follower"-factor fit the data best. Such second-order factors are well established in ILT and IFT research (see e.g. Epitropaki and Martin, 2004; Sy, 2010). One explanation for the differences in the factor structure might be that our instructions in Study 3 differed from those in Study 2. In Study 3, we focused on effective and ineffective followers, in general, whereas we additionally asked participants to indicate how important the attributes were for good task masters or for good relationship builders in Study 2.

Study 4: criterion and incremental validity of the IFT measure

Finally, we aimed to test the validity of the IFT scale in a fourth study. We intended to test the construct validity with the scale developed by Sy (2010). To do so, we used the same scale introduction for our IFT scale as well as for Sy's (2010) scale. We expected to find high – but not perfect – correlations between the IFT sub-scales developed in Studies 1-3 and the Sy (2010) sub-scales. Our hypotheses are as follows:

H1. Ideal IFTs operationalized with the 21-attribute scale are positively related to Sy's (2010) prototype IFTs and negatively to antiprototype IFTs.

H2. Counter-ideal IFTs operationalized with the 21-attribute scale are positively related to Sy's (2010) antiprototype and negatively related to prototype IFTs.

To test the predictive validity, we used OCB, overall performance, and LMX as criterion variables:

H3. Ideal fit is positively related to OCB, performance, and LMX.

H4. Counter-ideal fit is negatively related to OCB, performance, and LMX.

Method

Participants. We used a German leader panel to recruit the participants. The panel members agreed to be contacted regularly to take part on surveys for a small compensation. None of the participants took part in a study on IFTs in the past. A total of 201 leaders answered the online questionnaire. The sample comprised 59 percent men. Mean age was 45.46 years (SD = 11.59), the sample had a mean working experience of 21.95 years (SD = 12.09), and had been employed by their current employer for 11.96 years on average. The span of control ranked from 1 to 10,000, with a mean span of control of 152 employees (SD = 967.80; the large standard deviation was caused by two participants who were managing 10,000 and 7,000 employees, respectively. Excluding these two cases resulted in a mean of 45.66 and a standard deviation of 122.36).

Measurements

Ideal and counter-ideal IFTs were measured using the scale developed in Studies 1-3 and we adapted Sy's (2010) 18-items IFT scale for our purpose. We asked participants to think of their ideal follower and rate how characteristic each of the attributes was for this ideal follower on a scale from 1 = not characteristic at all to 7 = very characteristic. Cronbach's α for these scales ranged between 0.78 and 0.94.

The actual follower was rated on the same attributes as the ideal and counter-ideal follower. Cronbach's αs were between 0.75 and 0.96.

OCB was measured using Becker and Randall's (1994) scale, which differentiates in-role and extra-role behaviors (Cronbach's α 0.69 and 0.95). Leaders evaluated the employee on a scale from 1 = not at all to 7 = completely.

Overall performance was measured with one item developed by Reb and Greguras (2010): "On a scale from 1 (= very poor) to 7 (= very high), this employee has an overall performance of: _____."

The LMX-seven scale by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) was used to operationalize LMX. This scale measures the quality of the dyad with seven items on a seven-point Likert scale. Cronbach's α was 0.85.

Analysis

We used Pearson correlations to test the criterion validity hypotheses. Hierarchical regression analysis with Eucledian distances (see e.g. Graf *et al.,* 2011) as predictor variables were used to test the fit hypotheses. To compute the Eucledian distances, we subtracted the IFT values from the ratings of the actual follower.

Results

Table IV provides reliabilities, descriptive statistics, and correlations. All scales showed good to very good internal consistencies (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.69$ to 0.96). Ideal IFTs were moderately negatively related to counter-ideal IFTs ($r = -0.50$; $p < 0.01$). Ideal and counter-ideal IFTs were substantially related to Sy's (2010) sub-scales ($|r| = 0.37$-0.82; $p < 0.01$). The relations between the two positive scales ($r = 0.82$; $p < 0.01$) and the two negative scales ($r = 0.79$; $p < 0.01$) were high, but not perfect. *H1* and *H2* are thus supported. Furthermore, this finding provides first support for our prediction that ideal followership and typical followership represent distinct norms. Both prototypes show some overlap as some attributes (e.g. "being a team-player") describe both typical and ideal followers, but they differ on other attributes.

In sum, construct validity of the scale developed in Studies 1-3 was supported.

To test the hypotheses regarding fit between ideal and counter-ideal IFTs and actual follower characteristics, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses. We entered age, gender, work experience, span of leadership, time working for the current employer, as well as education as controls in the first step. Ideal or counter-ideal fit were entered in the second step. The results for all outcome variables are represented in Tables V and VI. Our hypotheses were largely confirmed.

Ideal fit (see Table V) significantly predicted leader ratings of LMX ($\Delta R^2 = 0.12$; $p < 0.01$), followers' in-role behavior ($\Delta R^2 = 37$; $p < 0.01$), extra-role behavior ($\Delta R^2 = 0.53$; $p < 0.01$), and performance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.33$; $p < 0.01$). The effects of counter-ideal fit (see Table VI) were smaller but also significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.05$-0.27; $p < 0.01$). Thus, *H3* and *H4* are supported.

Discussion of Study 4

Study 4 aimed to test the validity of the scale developed in Studies 1-3. Substantial correlations of the IFT scale with Sy's (2010) scale support the construct validity.

Table IV.
Reliabilities, descriptive statistics and correlations in Study 4

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 IFT_ideal	4.31	0.53	(0.91)											
2 IFT_counter-ideal	1.65	0.81	−0.50**	(0.94)										
3 IFT_real	3.30	1.06	0.14	0.02	(0.96)									
4 IFT_counter-real	2.53	1.03	−0.10	0.12	−0.77**	(0.92)								
5 Sy_ideal	4.02	0.53	0.82**	−0.37**	0.10	0.02	(0.82)							
6 Sy_counter-ideal	2.09	0.60	−0.49**	0.79**	0.05	0.08	−0.30**	(0.78)						
7 Sy_real	3.21	0.94	0.14	0.04	0.92**	−0.74**	0.17*	0.09	(0.92)					
8 Sy_counter-real	2.60	0.69	−0.12	0.22**	−0.62**	0.74**	0.00	0.22**	−0.53**	(0.75)				
9 LMX	3.70	0.65	0.33**	−0.18*	0.55**	−0.41**	0.28**	−0.16*	0.56**	−0.36**	(0.85)			
10 OCB_in	4.05	1.00	0.17*	−0.21**	0.74**	−0.57**	0.09	−0.16*	0.70**	−0.46**	0.58**	(0.69)		
11 OCB_extra	3.09	1.01	0.03	0.04	0.79**	−0.59**	0.00	0.08	0.78**	−0.41**	0.58**	0.72**	(0.95)	
12 Performance	4.96	1.47	0.06	0.11	0.59**	−0.38**	0.02	0.12	0.55**	−0.34**	0.53**	0.52**	0.65**	(–)

Notes: LMX, Leader-member exchange; OCB_in; in-role behavior; OCB_extra, extra-role behavior. Numbers in parentheses represent Cronbach's α. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

	LMX			In-role OCB			Extra-role OCB			Performance		
	B	SE B	*β*	*B*	SE B	*β*	*B*	SE B	*β*	*B*	SE B	*β*
Model 1												
Age	0.00	0.01	0.06	0.02	0.01	0.19	0.01	0.02	0.12	0.01	0.02	0.07
Gender	0.06	0.12	0.04	0.02	0.16	0.01	0.12	0.18	0.06	0.34	0.26	0.11
Work experience	0.00	0.01	0.05	−0.01	0.01	−0.14	−0.02	0.02	−0.18	−0.02	0.02	−0.16
Span of leadership	0.00	0.00	−0.05	0.00	0.00	−0.08	−0.03	0.00	−0.03	0.00	0.00	0.07
Time at CE	0.01	0.01	0.15	0.02	0.01	0.20	0.02	0.01	0.24*	0.03	0.02	0.21
Education	0.02	0.03	0.07	0.03	0.04	0.07	0.01	0.05	0.02	0.05	0.07	0.06
ΔR^2	0.06			0.07			0.05			0.04		
ΔF	1.57			1.89			1.19			0.98		
Model 2												
Age	0.01	0.01	0.10	0.02	0.01	0.26	0.02	0.01	0.21	0.02	0.02	0.13
Gender	0.01	0.11	0.01	−0.09	0.13	−0.05	−0.03	0.12	−0.01	0.20	0.21	0.07
Work experience	0.00	0.01	0.07	−0.01	0.01	−0.12	−0.01	0.01	−0.15	−0.02	0.02	−0.13
Span of leadership	0.00	0.00	0.00	−0.00	0.00	−0.01	0.06	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.15
Time at CE	0.01	0.01	0.08	0.01	0.01	0.08	0.01	0.01	0.08	0.01	0.01	0.10
Education	0.02	0.03	0.07	0.04	0.03	0.08	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.05	0.06
Follower ideal fit	0.22	0.05	0.35**	0.54	0.06	0.62**	0.71	0.05	−0.75**	0.80	0.09	0.59**
ΔR^2	0.12			0.37			0.53			0.33		
ΔF	20.16**			91.64**			178.76**			71.63**		
Total R^2	0.18			0.44			0.58			0.37		

Notes: CE, current employer. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

Table V. Results for multiple regression analysis of leader-member exchange (LMX), in-role organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and performance on follower ideal fit in Study 4

Criterion validity was also supported as a fit between the leaders' ratings of their actual followers and their IFTs predicted substantial variance on LMX, in-role and extra-role behavior, and performance.

General discussion

We developed a scale to measure ideal and counter-ideal IFTs in three studies and tested the scale's construct and criterion validity in a fourth study. We derived higher-order factors, which are in line with research on ILTs (see e.g. Epitropaki and Martin, 2005) and IFTs (Sy, 2010). The two facets that we found in both ideal and counter-ideal – i.e. task and relationship – are in line with the two leadership factors initiating structure and consideration (e.g. Judge *et al.,* 2004). These two facets as well as our findings that images of ideal followers differ from the images of good task-mastering followers and of relationship-oriented followers show that it is worth considering other than purely performance-based prototypes in implicit research.

We demonstrated that the norm of prototype should be considered in IFT research. The scale we developed complements the existing instrument by Sy (2010). While Sy's scale should be applied if researchers are interested in typical followers, i.e. in comparisons with an average, the scale we developed should be applied for research that focuses on ideal followers.

Table VI.
Results for multiple regression analysis of leader-member exchange (LMX), in-role organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and performance on follower counter-ideal fit in Study 4

	LMX			In-role OCB			Extra-role OCB			Performance		
	B	SE B	*β*	*B*	SE B	*β*	*B*	SE B	*β*	*B*	SE B	*β*
Model 1												
Age	0.00	0.01	0.06	0.02	0.01	0.19	0.01	0.02	0.12	0.01	0.02	0.07
Gender	0.06	0.12	0.04	0.02	0.16	0.01	0.12	0.18	0.06	0.34	0.26	0.11
Work experience	0.00	0.01	0.05	−0.01	0.01	−0.14	−0.02	0.02	−0.18	−0.02	0.02	−0.16
Span of leadership	0.00	0.00	−0.05	0.00	0.00	−0.08	−0.03	0.00	−0.03	0.00	0.00	0.07
Time at CE	0.01	0.01	0.15	0.02	0.01	0.20	0.02	0.01	0.24*	0.03	0.02	0.21
Education	0.02	0.03	0.07	0.03	0.04	0.07	0.01	0.05	0.02	0.05	0.07	0.06
ΔR^2	0.06			0.07			0.05			0.04		
ΔF	1.57			1.89			1.19			0.98		
Model 2												
Age	0.05	0.01	0.09	0.02	0.01	0.24	0.02	0.01	0.20	0.02	0.02	0.13
Gender	0.05	0.11	0.03	−0.01	0.15	−0.00	0.08	0.15	4	0.29	0.23	0.10
Work experience	0.00	0.01	0.07	−0.01	0.01	−0.11	−0.01	0.01	−0.13	−0.02	0.02	−0.12
Span of leadership	−0.05	0.00	−0.08	−0.00	0.00	−0.13	−0.09	0.00	−0.10	0.02	0.00	0.02
Time at CE	0.01	0.01	0.10	0.01	0.01	0.12	0.01	0.01	0.10	0.02	0.02	0.11
Education	0.03	0.03	0.08	0.04	0.04	0.08	0.01	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.06	0.07
Follower counter-ideal fit	−0.13	0.04	−0.24**	−0.26	0.06	−0.34**	−0.44	0.06	−0.54**	−0.49	0.09	−0.42**
ΔR^2	0.05			0.11			0.27			0.17		
ΔF	8.51**			19.30**			56.63**			29.52**		
Total R^2	0.12			0.19			0.32			0.21		

Notes: CE, current employer. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

Practical implications

IFTs involve various practical implications. First, the IFT scale could serve as an important tool to discover causes for difficulties between leaders and their followers. Are there differences between the leaders' and the followers' perceptions in what makes an ideal follower? Is a follower unable or unwilling to fulfill certain characteristics to the leader's ideal threshold? Questions like these could be (partially) answered if both leaders and followers give insight into their IFTs. A discussion about the attribute match and mismatch can be the basis for a systematic training to reduce the discrepancies and to make the implicit assumptions explicit.

Furthermore, and as could be shown for ILTs (see House *et al.,* 1999), IFTs might differ between cultures. Consequently, the ratings of followers, who have a different cultural background than their leaders, might be systematically biased by the leaders' IFTs, resulting in undesired disadvantages of these groups. Training leaders to be aware of their IFTs and of the – mostly implicit – influence of their IFTs in evaluating their followers would help overcome these biases.

To be perceived as ideal followers, employees need to be perceived possessing the positive attributes and not possessing the negative attributes. This has huge implications for organizations. So far, both follower and leader assessments are often limited to desired attributes, which the target person should possess. Once the respective person has been

employed or promoted, undesired attributes, such as also being malicious or rude, might be revealed. To reduce this problem, counter-ideals should be considered in addition to ideals in recruitment and development to get a full picture of the employees' abilities.

Limitations

The four studies presented here are, of course, not without limitations. Most importantly, all four studies were cross-sectional. Consequently, we cannot draw any conclusions on the stability of our construct. Within each study, we focused on questionnaire data and answers from one perspective. Thus, we are facing the possibility to overestimate the relations due to common-method and common-source biases. Future studies should comprise both different methods (subjective and objective measures), as well as different sources (e.g. follower, colleague, and leader perspective) to overcome these limitations.

Future research directions

To our knowledge, our studies were the first to examine IFTs outside of the USA. With regard to the content overlap of our IFT scale and Sy's (2010) scale, we provide first support for the cultural stability of IFTs. But, as we focused on ideal IFTs whereas Sy (2010) measured typical IFTs, a confirmation of our results with a test of the ideal IFT scale in the USA is important to draw further conclusions. Furthermore, we suggest testing IFTs in Asian cultures. As could be shown for ILTs (e.g. Ling *et al.,* 2000), assumptions of ideal leaders in Eastern cultures differ substantially from assumptions of ideal leaders in Western cultures.

We intended to develop attributes which represent ideal followers in general. An important next step, would be to explore differences between, amongst others, sectors, companies, or departments. Some follower attributes might be desired in one context, but be undesired in another context. A need to develop context-specific operationalizations for the ideal (and counter-ideal) follower might result from these comparisons if systematic differences would be found.

We did not test for moderator or mediator variables in Study 4. One important moderator in ILT fit is the leader's gender – a moderator that was researched under the "think manager – think male" phenomenon (e.g. Eagly *et al.,* 1992). Eagly *et al*., for instance, were able to demonstrate that male leaders show a substantially better ILT fit than female leaders. Can this pattern be found for IFTs as well? Do women fit the image of an ideal follower less or better than men? We assume no gender differences concerning the two higher-order factors, but differences on the four first-order factors. Women are seen as more communal, while men are traditionally perceived as more task-oriented (e.g. Powell *et al.,* 2002). Consequently, a female follower might have a better fit on the ideal (relationship) factor, while a male follower might have a better fit on the ideal (task) factor. Concerning the two counter-ideal factors, we assume that men might be rated higher on the counter-ideal (relationship) factor while women might be rated higher on the counter-ideal (task) factor.

From our point of view, follower age might represent another important moderator in the influence of IFT fit. Although illegal under many countries' laws, age discrimination in the workplace is prevailing (e.g. Gordon and Arvey, 2004). Stereotypically, older employees are often expected to be incompetent (Posthuma and Campion, 2007), although there is no hard evidence for this assumption (Ng and Feldman, 2008). Follower age might account for perceived fit and misfit with the leader's IFTs.

We believe that our attempt to develop a scale to measure IFTs comprising both ideal and counter-ideal aspects was successful. We hope that our approach will stimulate further research in this field.

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