Implicit Followership Theories: A review, clarification, and synthesis

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What are implicit followership theories (IFTs)? What is the operating mechanism for IFTs and its effects on workplace outcomes? These are central questions for this emerging sub-branch of leadership research. As an emerging construct, a number of ambiguities have arisen and the clarification of these issues is critical for forward progress. Accordingly, this research provides an important review, clarification and synthesis regarding the 1) theoretical underpinnings of IFTs, 2) measurement and assessing IFTs, 3) workplace outcomes associated with IFTs, and 4) interventions using IFTs.

Theoretical Foundation of IFTs

IFTs are defined as socially shared schemas about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers (Sy, 2010). The term “implicit” denotes that IFTs reflect naïve schemas of laypeople (in contrast to explicit or formal theories of scientists) (Levy, Chiu, & Hong, 2006; Rosenberg & Jones, 1972). Thus, IFTs represent subjective reality and perceptions, in contrast to (explicit) scientific theories that strives to approach objective reality. A review of the literature (Tram, Sy, & Kruse, 2012) distinguishes IFTs from the extant (primarily practitioner-oriented) followership literature proposing various formal (explicit) models of followership (Chaleff, 2009; Kelley, 1988). These explicit models posit that certain followership styles (e.g., variously described as Pragmatists, Bureaucrats, Donkeys, Game Players, Superfollowers, etc.) exist in the real world (i.e., actual instances of real employees with certain follower “styles,” defined by traits or behaviors). In contrast to the (purported) actuality of followers, IFTs reflect socially shared knowledge structures about followers. Regardless of accuracy, individuals use
their IFTs as a sensemaking function (Weick, 1995) to understand and respond to followers (Shondrick & Lord, 2010; Sy, 2010). In fact, individuals rely on and make use of their implicit theories even when confronted with overwhelming contradictory scientific evidence (Lewandowsky, Oberauer, & Gignac, 2013).

The term “implicit” also reflects that IFTs tend to operate in implicit (preconscious) fashion, although IFTs may also be processed explicitly (consciously) (Lord & Maher, 1991). In contrast to early perspectives that imposed a strict dichotomy of explicit versus implicit processing, the current consensus is that most schemas may be processed explicitly and implicitly, with implicit processing being the default mode and explicit processing operating only in situations when sufficient motivation and opportunities (e.g., time and cognitive capacity permitting, etc.) are present (Bargh, 2006; Gawronski & Payne, 2010; Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Strack & Deutsch, 2004).

Implicit processing within the leadership domain (i.e., with regards to ILTs and IFTs) means that individuals tend to lack impact awareness (i.e., unaware that certain schemas have been activated and its processing may impact action tendencies without one’s awareness, e.g., a negative interaction with a follower may activate schemas associated with “bad followers” that may subsequently, without full conscious awareness, have a momentary impact on one’s action tendencies to view and treat followers in a negative manner). Implicit processing does not necessarily imply a lack of content awareness (i.e., phenomenon that is inaccessible to consciously introspection) (Gawronski, Hofmann, & Wilbur, 2006). The notion that lack of content awareness is a necessary precondition of implicit processing is a common misperception (Bargh, 2006; Fazio & Olson, 2003; Gawronski et al., 2006; Gawronski & Payne, 2010; Gawronski,
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2009; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Moreover, reviews of the literature shows that there is no strong evidence that individuals possess implicit theories to which they lack introspective access (De Houwer, Teige-Mocigemba, Spruyt, & Moors, 2009; Fazio & Olson, 2003; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006a; Gawronski et al., 2006).

Indeed, research has demonstrated that individuals possess content awareness of their implicit theories in a variety of phenomena, including morality (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997), emotions (Izard, 2007), employee voice (Detert & Edmondson, 2011), person malleability (Heslin, Latham, & VandeWalle, 2005), and leadership (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004, 2005; Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996; Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994). More germane to the context of followership, corroborating evidence demonstrates that leaders and followers have introspective access to IFTs (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Kruse, Sy, & Tram, 2012; Kruse & Sy, 2011; Sy, 2010; Tram & Sy, 2013; Whiteley, Sy, & Johnson, 2012). Individuals may have introspective access (content awareness) to many phenomena (e.g., explain their assumptions and beliefs about followers) and yet at any given moment lack impact awareness whereby the activation of such phenomena (e.g., followers should be conformists) may impact their action tendencies (e.g., evaluate dissenting followers negatively because they do not fit the prototypical model of a conformist follower).

**IFTs at Different Levels of Analysis**

As parallel constructs, ILTs and IFTs are organized at different levels of analysis. Although applicable to both ILTs and IFTs, we focus our discussion on IFTs for didactic purpose. Cognitive categories are organized hierarchically into three levels:
Superordinate, basic, and subordinate (Lord et al., 1984; Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982). Each level reflects the degree of inclusiveness for the cognitive categories. That is, the three vertical levels are defined as the number of different kinds of stimuli that can be classified at each level. Each vertical level also includes a horizontal dimension that differentiates categories at the same vertical dimension. A simplified graphic representation of the followership categorization theory (modeled after a figure in Lord et al., 1984, p. 347) is shown in Figure 1.

At the superordinate level (highest and most inclusive level), target individuals are classified as followers or non-followers (followers vs. non-followers reflect the horizontal dimension). Theoretically, there should be few attributes that apply to all followers and very little overlap between followers and non-followers. At the basic level (middle level), contextual information is taken into account that results in different, contextually defined followership categories. That is, the basic level accounts for the different types of followers that may exist in the world. For example, different followership categories may exist for military, religious, or business followers. At the subordinate level (lowest and least inclusive level), different types of followers within a particular context are differentiated. Thus, the basic level is an abstract representation of subordinate level categories. For example, the subordinate categories for the basic level category of business follower may be mechanical engineers in the Automotive Manufacturing industry or software engineers in the Information Technology industry. As the figure below illustrates, the superordinate category of follower (vs. non-follower) is further differentiated by the business context at the basic level and the type of industry
at the subordinate level (e.g., the prototype of mechanical engineers may be quite different from software engineers).

In addition to the levels of abstracted representation discussed above, IFTs may be further represented at different levels within the context of an organization (i.e., within the hierarchy of a company). IFTs may be hierarchically distinguished at the company, group, and individual levels. IFTs may range from higher order levels capturing broader abstracted representations (i.e., company and group level IFTs) to lower order levels capturing more personalized abstracted representations (i.e., a generalized impression of a particular follower). A simplified graphic representation of IFTs within an organizational context is provided in Figure 2.

Continuing with our business example, differences on IFTs may exist at the company level within the information technology sector because organizational culture likely shape IFTs (Sy, 2010). For example, research on differences in organizational culture and identity (Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008) suggest the Conformity dimension of IFTs may be more heighten at IBM than at Apple. Moreover, differences in IFTs may exist at the group level within the same company. For example, IFTs may differ between the Engineer and Marketing groups because of differences in group-level culture. Moreover, sub-group differences in IFTs may also exist within the same group. As an example, researchers have found differences in IFTs across different management groups within the same engineering function of a federal agency (Wofford, Goodwin, & Whittington, 1998).

People use both category-based representations (a prototype) and target-based representations (an exemplar or specific person) to represent categories (Schneider, 1991,
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2005; Smith & Zarate, 1990). Just as people store information about groups, they store information about the individuals in those groups (Judd & Park, 1988; Park & Rothbart, 1982). Consequently, in addition to forming category-based abstracted representations (impressions across individuals), people also form target-based abstracted representations for single individuals (impressions of a target follower across situations and time) (Schneider, 2005). These individual-level IFTs are distinct from evaluations of individual performance, just as organizational-level IFTs are distinct from evaluations of organizational performance. Individual-level IFTs reflect a general impression or summary of who the follower represents (i.e., a reflection of a follower prototype), and 2) performance evaluation reflect how well a follower has performed which may be tied to a specific task or time period (e.g., performance on a given project). Indeed, research shows that individual-level IFTs and evaluations of individual performance are related (correlations range from -.43 for the Antiprototype factor to .65 for the Prototype factor) (Duong, 2012) but distinct constructs because none of the correlations exceed the recommended cut-off point of .85 for establishing parallel constructs (Kline, 1998). Moreover, research on individual level IFTs shows that 1) leaders do form IFTs for specific followers, 2) the factor structure of IFTs at the individual level parallels those at the superordinate level, and 3) leaders’ IFTs for a target follower predict outcomes for the target follower on relationship quality, organizational citizenship behavior, and performance (Duong, 2012).

Content and Factor Structure of IFTs

Two empirical studies have examined the content of IFTs (Carsten et al., 2010; Sy, 2010). Although IFTs may reflect a wide range of attributes (e.g., Sy initially
identified 1030 descriptors), there seems to be consensus regarding their representative core dimensions. Analogously, whereas there are thousands of traits that can describe personality, they can be organized by five factors ((John, Hampson, & Goldberg, 1991; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Similarly, whereas leadership behaviors can exhibit an enormous range, their representative core is captured by the two dimensions of Initiating Structure and Consideration behaviors (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). More germane to this research, whereas implicit theories of leadership may exhibit an enormous range, their representative core is captured by four positive (Intelligence, Sensitivity, Dedication, and Dynamism) and two negative (Masculinity, Tyranny, dimensions (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Offermann et al., 1994).

Sy (2010) conducted a series of validation studies regarding the content of IFTs. Results support the psychometric properties of the IFTs instrument, providing evidence for content, convergent, discriminant, criterion, and incremental validity, internal and temporal consistency, as well as generalizability across multiple industries and independent samples. Results indicate that IFTs are represented by six first order factors consisting of Industry, Enthusiasm, Good Citizen, Conformity, Insubordination, and Incompetence. In addition, the first and latter three factors represent a second-order structure of Followership Prototype and Antiprototype, respectively. Beyond Sy’s (2010) series of validation studies, the factor structure and validity of IFTs (e.g., criterion validity, predictive validity, convergent validity, and divergent validity) have been demonstrated in multiple independent samples (Carsten et al., 2010; Kruse et al., 2012; Kruse & Sy, 2011; Sy, 2010; Tram & Sy, 2013; Whiteley et al., 2012), including dissertation research (Duong, 2012; Whiteley, 2012).
Moreover, Carsten et al.’s (2010) qualitative research provides corroborating evidence for the content, factor structure, and validity of IFTs. Carsten et al.’s results show the traits and behaviors of followers are represented on a continuum of passive to proactive characteristics. Passive Followership is characterized by obedience, deference, flexibility and low levels of responsibilities (similar to the Conformity factor that consists of the characteristics “Soft Spoken,” “Follows Trends,” and “Easily Influenced”). Reflecting the midpoint of the continuum, Active Followership is characterized by taking ownership, expressing one’s voice, and being a team player (similar to the Good Citizen factor that consists of the characteristics “Loyal,” “Reliable,” and “Team Player”). Proactive Followership is characterized by initiative taking and advancing the goals of the organization (similar to the factors of Enthusiasm and Industry that consists of the characteristics “Excited,” “Hardworking,” “Productive,” and “Goes Above and Beyond”).

Measurement of IFTs

The IFTs scale (Sy, 2010) is the only validated and published assessment to date. Results based on five studies involving 1362 participants provide evidence for content, convergent, discriminant, criterion, and incremental validity, in addition to internal and temporal consistency. The IFTs instrument consists of 18 items that represent six dimensions: Industry, Enthusiasm, Good Citizenship, Conformity, Insubordination, and Incompetence. The first 3 and latter 3 also represent a second-order factor of Prototypic (positive) and Antiprototypic (negative) IFTs, respectively. In this self-report assessment, participants are asked to indicate the degree to which these items are characteristic of followers. A potential proxy measure of IFTs is (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2009, 2012) 5-item
belief in the co-production of leadership scale, which assesses beliefs about the degree followers should be proactive in the leadership process (e.g. “Followers should be on the lookout for suggestions they can offer to superiors” and “As part of their role, followers must be willing to challenge superiors’ assumptions”). The co-production of leadership construct is akin to the construct of Implicit Performance Theories (Engle & Lord, 1997; Wernimont, 1971), which captures performance expectations for followers (e.g., “Find out what supervisor expects,” “Accept some control from supervisor,” “Take and give suggestions,” etc.). Thus, the latter measures, which capture expectations about what followers should do or perform, are related to and complement IFTs, which capture schemas of who followers are.

As noted earlier, a common misperception is that implicit theories necessarily imply a lack of content awareness (i.e., individuals do not have introspective access to their IFTs) (Bargh, 2006; Fazio & Olson, 2003; Gawronski et al., 2006; Gawronski & Payne, 2010; Gawronski, 2009; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Consequently, this misperception may lead to further misunderstanding that implicit theories cannot be assessed via (direct) self-report. This common misunderstanding may be due to the popularity of the Implicit Association Tests, which reflect (indirect) methodological assessments (vs. conceptual representation) that purportedly taps into socially undesirable unconscious mental associations (e.g., attitudes about racial minorities) that were initially theorized to be inaccessible to conscious introspection, but recent research shows that individuals do have access to such mental associations (De Houwer et al., 2009; Fazio & Olson, 2003; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006a).
Research shows that many implicit theories are introspectively accessible and can be articulated when prompted, including morality (Chiu et al., 1997), emotions (Izard, 2007), voice theories (Detert & Edmondson, 2011), leadership (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004, 2005; Kenney et al., 1996; Lord et al., 1984; Offermann et al., 1994) and followership (Carsten et al., 2010; Kruse et al., 2012; Kruse & Sy, 2011; Sy, 2010; Tram & Sy, 2013; Whiteley et al., 2012). Because individuals’ have introspective access, they can self-report their endorsed IFTs. These endorsements reflect individuals’ automatic predispositions, i.e., natural tendencies to perceive followers in certain ways that subsequently shape daily action tendencies (that oftentimes operate outside full conscious awareness) to interpret, understand, and react to followers (Lord & Maher, 1991; Sy, 2010). That is, individuals’ lack impact awareness with regards to their IFTs (as measured by self-report). We note that the lack of impact awareness is a core defining feature of implicit theories (Bargh, 2006; Fazio & Olson, 2003; Gawronski et al., 2006, 2006; Gawronski & Payne, 2010; Gawronski, 2009; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Thus, the self-report method is an appropriate assessment of IFTs because both the methodological approach and theoretical construct are aligned. Moreover, the self-report method is the predominant method for assessing IFTs (Becker, Cropanzano, & Sanfey, 2011; Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Levy et al., 2006)

Because indirect and direct measures have distinct advantages and disadvantages, development of both measures would allow for a holistic assessment of individuals’ IFTs. Direct, self-report measures may be short in length, thus not time consuming to administer, can easily be administered by organizational personnel, and are easy to score. Indirect measures may complement direct measures of IFTs because direct
measures may be more susceptible to social desirability and self presentation issues (although indirect measures are not completely immune) (Gawronski, 2009). Consequently, indirect and direct measures are more predictive in different domains (Nosek, Hawkins, & Frazier, 2011). Indirect measures have been found to predict attitudes that may be sensitive or emotionally charged such as racial preferences (Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), sociosexuality (Penke, Eichstaedt, & Asendorpf, 2006), and homosexuality (Banse, Seise, & Zerbes, 2001). On the other hand, direct measures have been found to be better predictors in less stigmatized areas, such as consumer preferences (e.g. soda brands, meat and vegetable consumption) and voting behavior (Karpinski, Steinman, & Hilton, 2005; Karpinski & Steinman, 2006; Swanson, Swanson, & Greenwald, 2001).

Indirect measures infer mental associations individuals hold based on their responses on tasks, or reaction times on tasks (Greenwald et al., 1998). There are different types of implicit measures such as projective measures (Harms & Luthans, 2012), and word completion tasks (R. E. Johnson & Lord, 2010), but the most popular and commonly used types are affective priming measures (Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell, & Kardes, 1986) and implicit association tests (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998) (Nosek et al., 2011; Uhlmann et al., 2012). For example, the IAT infers positive and negative mental associations about objects based on how quickly individuals pair words together (Greenwald et al., 1998).

Research is being conducted to develop indirect measures of IFTs. Sy (Sy, 2012) employed a projective approach, paralleling the approach used to indirectly assess Psychological Capital (Harms & Luthans, 2012). Participants are given scenarios
depicting followers at work (e.g., “group member talks to supervisor”) and asked to invent stories for the scenarios. Subsequently, participants are asked to assess the followers in the scenarios using items from the IFTs scale (Sy, 2010). Although participants do assess the followers, the assessment is indirect in that it is based on participants’ projections that were made previously. That is, the projective method does not directly ask participants to self-report their personal responses, rather, participants believe they are merely reporting the characteristics of the followers in the stories. Accordingly, participants are less susceptible to social desirability and self-presentation issues.

Another indirect measure of IFTs employs the IAT approach. Despite the popularity of the IAT, it surprisingly has rarely been used to assess organizational concepts (Uhlmann et al., 2012). Tram (Tram, 2013) has developed an implicit measure of IFTs based on the Single-target IAT (Karpinski & Steinman, 2006) and items from the IFTs scale (Sy, 2010). This Single-target IAT IFT measure assesses individuals’ evaluative association with followers. In the Single-target IAT IFTs measure there is one target category, which is “follower”, and two attribute categories, which are “positive” and “negative.” Using a computer, participants are presented with words representing one of the three categories (e.g., subordinate, worker, productive, reliable, rude, arrogant), one word at a time. In the first stage, participants are asked to press a response key when follower words or positive words (i.e., follower + positive) appear, and to press a different response key when negative words appear (i.e., negative). In the second stage, participants press a response key when positive words (i.e., positive) appear, and press a different response key when follower words or negative words (i.e., follower + negative)
appear. Participants are asked to respond quickly while making as few mistakes as possible. The timed performance difference between the two stages represents the direction and strength of the association to followers (Greenwald et al., 1998). A large discrepancy indicates a strong, positive or negative attitude towards followers, whereas a small discrepancy indicates a slight, positive or negative attitude towards followers. Because the Single-target IAT IFTs measures response latencies in milliseconds, individuals are less able to deliberately control their responses and fake their endorsement of followers. Altogether, development of both implicit and explicit measures can advance our understanding of how controlled and uncontrolled processing shape leader-follower processes and outcomes.

**Mechanism Linking IFTs and Workplace outcomes**

IFTs are antecedents of workplace outcomes (see empirical discussion below), such as trust, liking, job satisfaction, and relationship quality (Sy, 2010) and follower performance (Whiteley et al., 2012). One causal mechanism is explained by the benchmark proposition whereby individuals use IFTs to interpret, understand and react to followers (Lord & Maher, 1991). In this account, target individuals (e.g., followers) are compared to one’s IFTs and depending on the degree of fit, impressions of followers are formed that subsequently shapes one’s treatment of followers. This mechanism parallels that described for ILTs. Moreover, this matching process may be more relevant to ILTs than IFTs given organizations’ romance with leadership and preoccupation to identify leaders from the masses (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985); the identification of
followers is not a primary goal and may reflect the default mode for the masses because of its subordinate status (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007).

A complementary and perhaps more prevalent mechanism for IFTs is the predisposition proposition whereby individuals may internalize and endorse certain IFTs over time that predispose them to perceive and treat followers in a certain fashion (Engle & Lord, 1997; Sy, 2010). This proposition reflects the entrenched notion that leaders tend to have a stable management style that is a reflection of their assumptions about the fundamental nature of followers. Although the number of studies is small, research indeed lend support to this proposition. For example, transformational leaders hold primarily positive IFTs that accounts for their transformational behaviors (Goodwin, Wofford, & Boyd, 2000; S. K. Johnson, Sy, & Kedharnath, 2012). The predisposition proposition is explained by the perception-behavior link.

The perception-behavior link (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Chartrand & Bargh, 1999) posits the perception or activation of a schema (e.g., IFTs) elicits corresponding behaviors consistent with that cognition because both cognitive concepts and corresponding social responses are represented mentally, and the activation of one leads to the activation of the other (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Dijksterhuis & Van Knippenberg, 1998). The perceived world consists of highly correlated representations, and the link between perception and behavior is developed on the basis of repeated observations of co-activation (Feldman, 1981; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Thus, repeated co-activation of perception and behavior overtime develops a strong linkage such that behavioral response eventually becomes a habitual action tendency and triggered upon
the mere presence of the relevant stimuli (Bargh, 1989; Berkowitz, 1984; Carver, Ganellen, Froming, & Chambers, 1983; Mischel, 1973; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977).

Ample empirical evidence lends support to the perception-behavior link. For example, activating schemas and stereotypes associated with “African Americans” or “hostility” (Bargh et al., 1996; Snyder & Swann Jr, 1978) and “professor” or “intelligent” (Dijksterhuis & Van Knippenberg, 1998) increases more hostile behaviors and cognitive performance in perceivers, respectively. Moreover, recent discoveries of mirror neurons (Fogassi & Ferrari, 2007; Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004) lend support to the perception-behavior link demonstrating that the same neural networks in the brain are activated whether one perceives (e.g., thinks or reads about) or performs the actual behavior. Likewise, the embodied cognition literature demonstrates a strong link between conceptual representation and behavior response, which operate in implicit fashion (without conscious impact awareness).

Within the leader-follower contexts, individuals develop response tendencies that are triggered without much conscious impact awareness upon activation of their internalized and endorsed IFTs (Engle & Lord, 1997; Sy, 2010). Accordingly, leaders who internalize and endorse the Industry dimension of IFTs (that followers go above and beyond expectations, are hardworking and productive) are more likely to have higher expectations for followers and provide them with more autonomy. Similarly, leaders who internalize and endorse the Conformity dimension of IFTs (that followers are uneducated, slow, and inexperienced) are more likely to micro manage and set lower expectations for followers. Indeed, the tenets of the perception-behavior link have been demonstrated by research showing the influence of IFTs on Pygmalion effects (Whiteley et al., 2012).
Direct causal evidence for the implicit nature of IFTs (i.e., IFTs elicit automatic action tendencies) has been demonstrated across experimental and field settings (Kruse & Sy, 2011; Sy, 2012; Whiteley, 2012). Sy utilized a supraliminal priming methodology (Bargh, Chartrand, Reis, & Judd, 2000; Bargh et al., 1996; Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001) to elicit positive IFTs to examine its salutary influence on corresponding action tendencies. Participants’ positive IFTs were activated with a word search puzzle. The word search puzzle consisted of a 15 x 20 matrix of letters with a list of the words representing positive IFTs (Sy, 2012) imbedded in the puzzle. Compared with the neutral prime condition (consisting of word search puzzles imbedded with a list of neutral words representing colors, hobbies, and animals), participants in the activated positive IFTs condition evaluated an employee described in a neutral vignette more positively on relationship quality and performance. These experimental effects were corroborated with a field study of leader-follower dyads demonstrating the positive associations of positive IFTs with high relationship quality and follower performance. Utilizing the same priming methodology, Whiteley (2012) demonstrated that participants in the activated positive IFTs condition reported higher levels of performance expectations, liking, LMX quality, affect, and effort for an employee described in a neutral vignette, than participants in the activated neutral or negative IFTs conditions.

The causal effect of IFTs on automatic action tendencies were further corroborated in four experiments (Kruse & Sy, 2011). First, results provide support for automaticity effects in that activated affect (i.e., sadness, happiness, and anger) via a directed writing task correspondingly activates congruent IFTs (i.e., activated positive affect elicits positive IFTs, and activated negative affect elicits negative IFTs). More
importantly, results support automaticity effects whereby activated IFTs impacts evaluations of actual followers. This effect was demonstrated by having participants randomly identifying three subordinates prior to activating IFTs. Then after activating IFTs (unbeknownst to participants via the manipulation of affect), participants were instructed to rate the second subordinate using the IFTs scale (Sy, 2010). Finally, participants rated the performance of the target follower. This protocol (i.e., randomizing the evaluation of a target follower) allows for the examination of the effect of activated IFTs on the evaluation of an actual workplace follower while showing that the effect is a function of activated IFTs and not a reflection of a specific performance evaluation of an actual employee. Results show that participants in the activated positive IFTs condition rated the performance of the target follower higher than participants in the activated negative IFTs and neutral IFTs conditions. Similarly, participants in the activated negative IFTs condition rated the performance of the target follower lower than participants in the activated positive IFTs and neutral IFTs conditions. In sum, paralleling the abundant evidence in the social psychological literature demonstrating the linkage of perception and behaviors, the above studies provide direct evidence for the influence of IFTs in shaping corresponding action tendencies.

**Empirical Research Findings: IFTs and Workplace Outcomes**

A criticism of ILTs research is that much is focused on the classification and identification of leaders (i.e., perceptions), with fewer demonstrations of the link between ILTs and workplace outcomes. In contrast, the research on IFTs is focused on work related outcomes, although this literature is small given its novelty as an emerging
area of research. Herein we review the emerging research on IFTs and workplace outcomes. Given the novelty, we review both published as well as unpublished results.

**LMX.** To date, a number of studies have examined the relationship between IFTs and LMX. Sy (2010) found that leaders’ Followership Prototype and Antiprototype were positively and negatively related to follower outcomes on liking for leaders, relationship quality with leaders, and trust in leaders. Similarly, leaders’ Followership Prototype and Antiprototype has consequences for leader outcomes such as liking for followers, and relationship quality with followers. In another study on Pygmalion leadership, Whiteley et al., (2012) found that Leaders’ positive IFTs shaped positive relationship quality in leader-follower dyads. Moreover, Sy (2013) found that leaders and followers (positive) IFTs interacted to influenced relationship quality. Specifically, relationship quality is highest when both leaders and followers hold more positive IFTs. Furthermore, Duong (2012) found that leaders’ IFTs measured at the individual level (i.e., a general perceptual representation of a target follower) was significantly related to relationship quality. These preliminary results indicate a moderate relationship between IFTs and relationship quality, suggesting that perceptual representations of followers are related to the quality of interactions between leaders and followers.

**Performance.** With regards to performance, Whiteley et al. (2012) found that leaders’ positive IFTs influenced follower performance by shaping leaders’ performance expectations for their followers. This research demonstrated that IFTs serve as antecedents to naturally occurring Pygmalion effects that shape performance (vs. the body of research on Pygmalion effects involve artificial experimental manipulation of
leaders’ performance expectations for their followers). Complementing Whiteley et al.’s focus on dyadic level effects, Tram and Sy (Tram & Sy, 2013) also found an effect of leaders’ positive IFTs on follower performance at the group level. This group level finding suggests that IFTs may shape leader performance expectations across all followers rather than being limited to a subset of followers. Paralleling these results, Johnson and colleagues (S. K. Johnson et al., 2012) found that leaders’ positive IFTs influenced follower performance because IFTs shapes leaders’ enactment of transformational behaviors. Moreover, Duong (2012) found that Leaders’ negative IFTs was negatively related to follower performance. In addition, leaders’ positive and negative IFTs measured at the individual level was positively and negatively related to follower performance, respectively. Whereas these studies focused on the effect of Leaders’ IFTs on follower performance, Sy (2013) found that leaders’ and followers’ IFTs may interact such that leaders’ IFTs influenced follower performance more positively when followers conceived of their roles in less positive terms, suggesting that leaders’ IFTs activate salutary action tendencies (e.g., set high goals and expectations) that compensate for a lack of self-generated actions on the part of followers. In sum, research has focused on the relationship of IFTs and follower performance, suggesting that IFTs shape performance via Pygmalion processes. These effects were found in dyadic and group level settings, as well as when IFTs were measured at the Superordinate category (a general perceptual representation across all followers) and at the individualized level (a general perceptual representation of a target follower). The effects were moderate and stronger at the individualized level than generalized level.
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Transformational Leadership. Researchers have long proposed that leaders’ style and treatment of followers is a function of their perceptions of followers (Eden, 1990; McGregor, 1960). Specifically, Transformational leaders’ behavioral style that elicit high follower performance is a function of leaders’ positive IFTs (Goodwin et al., 2000; S. K. Johnson et al., 2012). Johnson et al. found that leaders’ positive IFTs influenced attributions of charismatic leadership and this relationship was mediated through follower liking of the leader. Similarly, Duong (2012) found a significant relationship between leaders’ positive IFTs and transformational leadership. Specifically, leaders’ positive IFTs mediated the relationship between Extraversion and Transformational leadership. Duong found that leaders’ positive IFTs (but not negative IFTs) measured at the individual level were positively related with transformational leadership, suggesting that leaders who have more positive views of their own followers exhibit more transformational leadership. Moreover, transformational leadership mediated the relationship between leaders’ positive IFTs and followers’ organizational commitment and job satisfaction. In sum, these results indicate that IFTs are antecedents of leadership style, and positive IFTs activate action tendencies that are germane to Transformational leadership, which has significant implications for follower outcomes such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

Affect. Affect and IFTs possess structural similarities in that both are positively and negatively valenced. Given their structural similarities, Kruse and Sy (Kruse & Sy, 2011) proposed that affect and IFTs may be connected through their shared valence within the structure of associative networks (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) that reflect interconnections of related constructs. Across four experiments incorporating multiple
affect (sadness, anger, and happiness) and samples (students, working adults, and leaders), Kruse and Sy demonstrated that affect activated corresponding IFTs such that sadness and anger activated negative IFTs (but not positive IFTs), and happiness activated positive IFTs (but not negative IFTs). Similarly, Johnson and colleagues (2012) found in a field sample of leaders a positive association between negative IFTs and negative affect but not positive affect. These results demonstrate the associative nature of IFTs and affect, and indicate that the action of one (e.g., affect) result in the activation of the other (e.g., IFTs). Similarly, emerging research in ILTs show parallel results whereby, ILTs have also been linked to affect (S. K. Johnson, Walczak, & Sy, 2013; Kruse & Sy, 2011).

**Changing IFTs to Develop of Leaders and Followers**

Whereas context, such as group and organizational characteristics, may influence individuals’ implicit theories (Hanges, Lord, & Dickson, 2000), they tend to be relatively stable across time and context (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). In addition, while implicit theories may vary across national culture, existing research suggests there may be significant overlap (House et al., 2004) and differences are likely reflections of levels of endorsement for a given dimension (e.g., charisma) rather than differences in dimension content (Ensari & Murphy, 2003; Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, Reichard, 2008). Furthermore, IFTs may consist of both universal dimensions endorsed across contexts and idiosyncratic dimensions that are context specific (van Gils et al., in press). Consistent with the literature, Sy (2010) found that IFTs remained stable across time (over 3 weeks).
Although resistant to change, empirical evidence indicates that implicit theories are malleable. One pathway to change is to challenge existing schemas with counterfactual evidence (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001). For example, exposure to counter-exemplars (e.g., successful woman CEOs such as Meg Whitman of Ebay and Indra Nooyi of PepsiCo) may weaken the link between leadership and being male (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004). Although counterfactuals may weaken existing schemas, new associations may need to be formed for change to take hold. Research points to several possible intervention strategies. First, leaders and followers may need to develop awareness about the expectations for their leadership context (i.e., the ILTs and IFTs that are operating) and how implicit theories shape action tendencies. This is particularly important given that much of daily behaviors operate without full conscious awareness (Wood, Quinn, & Kashy, 2002) and individuals may not be fully aware of how their implicit theories shape action tendencies without such training. One effective training intervention for raising self and social awareness regarding the expectations for leaders and followers is the drawing exercised developed by Schyns and colleagues (Schyns, Kiefer, Kerschreiter, & Tymon, 2011).

Although raising awareness and developing an understanding of implicit theories is important, such interventions may be limited to contexts where individuals are consciously aware of their behaviors and have sufficient motivation and opportunities (e.g., time and cognitive capacity permitting, etc.) to control their behaviors (Bargh, 2006; Gawronski & Payne, 2010; Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). Two other interventions show promise for changing implicit processes: Conditioning and Selective Prototype Activation (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006b). Conditioning
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involves pairing a concept (e.g., follower) with a new association (e.g., productive). Such conditioning may require several hundred trials (Olson & Fazio, 2001), although this process may be facilitated via readily available software training programs that have shown positive results for changing implicit associations (e.g., IAT) (Kemps, Tiggemann, Martin, & Elliott, 2013). Selective Prototype Activation assumes that individuals hold multiple (positive and negative) IFTs, and any given prototype may be activated in a given instance (Hanges, Lord, & Dickson, 2000; Lord & Shondrick, 2011; Sy, 2010; Sy et al., 2010). Accordingly, this intervention involves repeated cueing of positive prototypes (of leadership and followership) such that they become chronically accessible. Selective Prototype Activation can be implemented via games and by eliciting emotions (Kruse & Sy, 2011; Sy, 2013), as described earlier. In turn, the activated prototypes shape action tendencies because individuals use schemas that are most readily accessible in responding to others (Chen & Bargh, 1997; Devine, 1989; Srull & Wyer, 1979). In addition to proximal effects, selective prototype activation may have distal effects in that over time it may shift individuals’ implicit theories toward a permanent positive change.

Conclusion

Whereas research on ILTs spans more than 30 years, IFTs is an emerging area of focus. Since its inception (Carsten et al., 2010; Shondrick & Lord, 2010; Sy, 2010; van Gils, van Quaquebeke, & van Knippenberg, 2010), interest and considerable research has been generated. In our review and synthesize, we clarify common misperceptions regarding the implicit nature of IFTs. We further explain the theoretical construct and causal mechanisms. IFTs reflect shared lay theories and involve implicit processing (i.e., IFTs may impact downstream behaviors without individuals full conscious awareness)
that operates via the Benchmark and Predisposition propositions. We also synthesize research to date (e.g., in relation to LMX, follower performance, etc.) and highlighting yet to published new developments (e.g., in relations to Transformational leadership, affect, indirect assessment methods, selective activation of IFTs, etc.). Together, these results demonstrate that IFTs have significant practical implications for workplace outcomes. We accordingly provide perspectives on practical interventions for using IFTs for the development of leaders and followers. In sum, IFTs has infused new perspective and excitement in our understanding of leadership and followership.
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Figure 1. A hierarchy model of followership categories
Figure 2. An organizationally based hierarchy model of followership categories