

Implicit leadership theories: Think leader, think effective?

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Abstract:	<p>While research into leadership in general acknowledges negative aspects of leadership, research into implicit leadership theories lags behind in this respect. Most implicit leadership theories research implies that the image of a leader in general reflects an effective leader. However, recent results in leadership research as well as headlines and reports in the popular press cast doubt on this assumption. This paper reports a qualitative study, focusing on general implicit leadership theories rather than effective images of leaders. The analysis of 349 statements results in fifteen categories that describe leaders in general. The results imply that implicit leadership theories are composed of both effective and ineffective attributes. The study challenges prior assumptions on the effectiveness implied in implicit leadership theories.</p>

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For Peer Review

Abstract

While research into leadership in general acknowledges negative aspects of leadership, research into implicit leadership theories lags behind in this respect. Most implicit leadership theories research implies that the image of a leader in general reflects an effective leader. However, recent results in leadership research as well as headlines and reports in the popular press cast doubt on this assumption. This paper reports a qualitative study, focusing on general implicit leadership theories rather than effective images of leaders. The analysis of 349 statements results in fifteen categories that describe leaders in general. The results imply that implicit leadership theories are composed of both effective and ineffective attributes. The study challenges prior assumptions on the effectiveness implied in implicit leadership theories.

Keywords: implicit leadership theories, prototypes

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Introduction

Many recent headlines such as the Siemens scandal around bribery or the question whether Sir Fred Goodwin deserves to receive a generous pension after being considered responsible for the slump in RBS profits imply that the public opinion of leadership is often not very positive. Vance (2009) summarizes this sarcastically in his “foundations of a sound economy” where he defines essential traits of contemporary leadership as “arrogant, greedy, over-controlling, out of touch, and clueless” (p. 179). The speed with which the public blamed leaders for the current economic crisis indicates that ineffectiveness in leaders is just as much part of the general image of leaders as is hailing them for success (cf. the Romance of Leadership approach; Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich, 1985). However, research into people’s everyday images of leaders or implicit leadership theories (Eden & Leviatan, 1975, 2000) mainly focuses on images of effective or ideal leaders. Some researchers even assume that implicit leadership theories equal everyday beliefs regarding *effective* leadership (e.g., House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004).

However, theoretical assumptions of the Romance of Leadership approach and the empirical evidence based on the concept shows that leaders are regarded as responsible for success *and* failure of organizations (e.g., Meindl, 1990). Consequently, leaders are not exclusively considered effective but also at times considered ineffective. The present paper aims at contributing to a fuller picture of leader images by investigating whether implicit leadership theories include of both effective and ineffective leader traits.

Need for this study

Research into cynicism implies that a negative view of leadership can lead to problems with leadership influence. Kouzes and Posner (2005) claim that a large proportion of the workforce is cynical and that cynics are “less inclined to be influenced”. Thus, leaders may find it difficult to influence followers who hold negative views about leaders. For research into everyday images of leadership, so-called implicit leadership theories, this means that knowing about negative views towards leadership is important to prevent a lack of influence of leaders on their followers. We already know that implicit leadership theories influence the perceptions of actual leaders (e.g., Schyns, Felfe & Blank, 2007; Shamir, 1992). However, the prior focus of research into implicit leadership theories is mainly around effective or ideal leaders. Therefore, it is not surprising that such leader images do not include notions of ineffectiveness. While looking into images of effective leader is an important area of research, we will argue that this limited focus on ideal leadership leaves a blind spot concerning the notion of effectiveness or ineffectiveness comprised in leadership beliefs. The main question of our study is, therefore, to investigate which effective *and* ineffective characteristics are ascribed to leaders in general. More specifically, we are aiming to add to the knowledge about implicit leadership theories by, first, examining which dimensions people use to describe leaders in general, not (only) ideal leaders. Second, we look into these dimensions to examine to what extent they are seen as effective or ineffective by the individuals themselves, thereby challenging the common assumption that images of leaders in general equal images of effective leaders.

Implicit leadership theories - Definition and prior research

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Implicit theories represent a special form of cognitive schemata which – in analogy to scientific theories – are seen as a cognitive network of everyday concepts. With the help of such naive models people try to explain and predict their own and the behavior of others as well as derive their action strategies. General definitions of implicit *leadership* theories imply that they are cognitive structures containing the traits and behaviors of leaders (Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996).

Thus, people in general but specifically followers use their implicit leadership theories to explain their leader’s behavior. Consequently, the same behavior maybe interpreted in a different way by different people based on their implicit leadership theories. For example, a leader giving his/her opinion in a meeting might be seen as dominant by one follower (possibly leading to no further involvement in the discussion) or consultative by another (possibly leading to an involvement in a discussion around the issue in question).

Certainly the most extensive groundwork in this area has been undertaken by Robert Lord and his associates (e.g. Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Lord & Maher, 1991; Phillips & Lord, 1986). Lord and colleagues developed the theoretical foundation of implicit leadership theories based on Rosch’s (1978) cognitive categorization theory. The basic idea of leadership categorization theory is that perceivers (e.g., followers) classify stimulus persons (e.g., their supervisors) by comparing them to prototypes of a category (e.g., effective leader).

Examples for studies into implicit leadership theories include research focusing on the influence of performance information on the perception of leadership, thereby examining the social construction of leadership (see Lord & Maher, 1991, for an overview); the content of implicit leadership theories (e.g., Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994); the effect of implicit leadership theories on the perception of a specific leader (e.g., Ensaria & Murphy, 2003; Shamir, 1992); and

the effect of a fit between implicit leadership theories and actual leader behavior (Nye, 2005; Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). For the pupose of this paper, research into the content of implicit leadership theories is of special importance.

Implicit leadership theories as theories of effective leaders

What we are interested in our study is the question of whether or not implicit leadership theories of individuals comprise of effective as well as ineffective characteristics. Effectiveness and ineffectiveness respectively are usually defined as (not) being successful with regard to the achievement of goals. As we focus here on everyday images of leaders in general, effectiveness is not meant in any objective way but purely as a mental model about whether or not characteristics named by participants are felt by them to be successful or not. An example may illustrate this point: Prior research into implicit leadership theories has found “tyranny” as one characteristic that is used to describe leaders in general (Offermann et al., 1994). Whereas clearly several participants of that research have mentioned characteristics that can be subsumed under tyranny, we do not know whether or not they thought it was an effective or an ineffective leadership characteristic. People may indeed differ in their judgment, with some thinking that effective leaders need to be tyrannical and others disagreeing. We argue here that without asking the people who name characteristics relevant to tyranny to rate these characteristics on effectiveness, researchers have no way to tell in how far aspects of people’s implicit leadership theories include effectiveness or ineffectiveness. It has to be noted that effectiveness may mean different things for different people: Some people may think of “hard” criteria for effectiveness (such as company performance), others of “soft” criteria (e.g., job satisfaction).

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In some lines of research, this focus on effective leaders is explicitly chosen. For instance, Kenney and his colleagues (Kenney et al., 1996) examined the leader category “leaders worthy of influence”. Gardner and Avolio (1998) introduce the “charismatic leader” as a subtype of the general leader prototype that is reserved for those leaders who engage in visionary behavior. Another example is Keller (1999) who assesses ideal images under the heading of implicit leadership theories. Similarly, research on the think-manager-think-male phenomenon (Schein, 1973, 1975; Sczesny, 2003) and research on match between implicit leadership theories and actual leader behavior (Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Nye, 2002, 2005) focused on ideal or effective leaders.

Other research seems to more or less tacitly concentrate on effective leader traits. One of the biggest endeavors to capture implicit leadership theories across different cultures has been the GLOBE project (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness: Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quantanilla, & Dorfman, 1999). As the main result the authors show that managers from different countries had in part very similar ideas about leader attributes (contributing or inhibiting outstanding leadership). While the researchers in this project assert to assess implicit leadership theories and define them as ideas about how leaders are and the expectations others have of them (House et al., 2004), their assessment of implicit leadership theories is limited to attributes that facilitate or inhibit *effective* leadership (indeed the wording of the answer scale refers to inhibition of outstanding leadership; House et al., 2004). We think that it is not enough to say that something inhibits *effective* leadership when drawing conclusions about ineffective leadership. Inhibition of effective leadership could simply mean that this characteristic does not contribute to effectiveness. It could be meaningless or its absence may lead to less effectiveness. In our opinion, this does not mean the same as ineffective leadership.

Differentiating leaders and effective leaders

A study that explicitly differentiates between the categories “leaders” and “effective leaders” was conducted by Offermann et al. (1994). Their extensive investigation focused on characteristics comprised in implicit leadership theories. Their starting point was to ask their participants to list characteristics of leaders / supervisors. They extracted 160 characteristics which were then rated by a different set of participants as characteristic or not characteristic for either (1) leaders, (2) effective leaders, or (3) supervisors. Using parallel analysis, they found that the factor solutions for all targets were comparable and yielded six factors describing leaders (sensitivity, tyranny, intelligence, devotion, charisma, and attractiveness). Additional analysis separated by gender showed an additional factor (‘strength’) and that ‘attractiveness’ could be further differentiated into ‘attractiveness’ and ‘masculinity’. Ultimately, Offermann et al. derived a list of forty-one characteristics that can be used to assess implicit leadership theories quantitatively. Sample characteristics comprise: intelligent, knowledgeable, educated, clever (intelligence dimension) and domineering, pushy, manipulative, loud, conceited, selfish (tyranny dimension).

Two main results of the study are especially noteworthy for our purpose. First, the factor structure did not differ across the different targets of leader, effective leader and supervisor. Second, the largest difference in the level of rating was found between the category supervisor and the two other targets of leader and effective leader. These latter two significantly differed only on two of the eight dimensions (i.e., tyranny and strength).

Based on this work of Offermann et al., Epitropaki and Martin (2004) set out to cross-validate the findings and develop a shorter implicit leadership theories scale. They come to a reduced set of items (i.e., 21) and factors (i.e., sensitivity, intelligence, dedication, dynamism, tyranny, and masculinity) which form higher order factors, which the authors called the leadership

prototype (including sensitivity, intelligence, dedication, and dynamism) and the leadership antiprototype (tyranny and masculinity).

Based on these results, it seems that there is (1) no important difference between implicit theories of leaders and effective leaders with regard to structure and level of rating, and (2) that attributes usually regarded as favorable (i.e., sensitivity; intelligence; dedication; dynamism/charisma and strength) receive higher prototypicality ratings than those commonly regarded as unfavorable (tyranny, masculinity). It seems evident to conclude that leaders in general are seen as effective with prototypical attributes that are all favorable. Accordingly, the unfavorable attributes such as tyranny and masculinity compose an antiprototype and are an expression of ineffectiveness. But can we really draw these conclusions?

First, the terms ‘prototype’ and ‘antiprototype’ are probably misleading in this context. In Offermann et al.’s study, all attributes were named when asking the subjects to list traits and characteristics of a leader. Hence, also the attributes comprised in the dimensions ‘tyranny’ and ‘strength’ were connected to this category. The mean prototypicality ratings for these dimensions were lower than those for the more favorable aspects, implying that these aspects were regarded as not very characteristic for a leader. Using the term ‘antiprototype’ to describe these attributes, however, implies that they are absolutely uncharacteristic of a leader or, better, characteristic of a non-leader. In our opinion, Offermann et al.’s study does not support this view as all attributes were named as characteristic for a leader.

Second, the study by Offermann et al. (1994) does not allow concluding that the images of leader in general and effective leader do not differ substantially. The authors themselves are rather cautious in this respect and state “it is possible that the cue ‘leader’ naturally calls forth the image of an effective leader” (Offerman et al., 1994, p. 55). Interestingly, a study of implicit leadership

theories in the political context (Foti, Fraser & Lord, 1982) found considerable differences between the prototypes of political leaders and effective political leaders (though on the same dimensions). This is interesting as political leaders may not trigger the same notion of effectiveness as the label “leaders” and, thus, participants are more likely to mention ineffectiveness as part of their implicit leadership theories in this context.

Third, if the respondents really thought of effective leaders when giving their answers, then the low mean ratings for tyranny and masculinity would actually mean that these traits are not very characteristic for effective leaders. This is not the same as to say that they are traits of ineffective leaders. Consequently, negative attributes need not per se to be an expression of ineffective leadership.

Implicit leadership theories - Conclusion

To summarize, most research on implicit leadership theories is concerned with the attributes of effective or ideal leaders and or does not question the effectiveness of dimensions used to describe leaders in general. There is a lack in prior research concerning the question whether leaders in general are considered effective. We therefore investigate the attributes people use to describe leaders in general more closely. It seems promising to compare the views on leaders in general with prior findings to see to what extent they overlap. It seems that researchers into implicit theories assume the term “leader” only has a positive connotation, and therefore do not acknowledge or explore where negative or ineffective leadership qualities may fit into one’s general leadership schema. The question we want to answer here is: Does the term “leader” only have positive connotations, as most implicit leadership theorists seem to assume, or does it also invoke have associations of ineffectiveness?¹

Method

Design, procedure and instrument

Conger (1998) stresses the importance of qualitative research as the concept of leadership involves “multiple levels of phenomena, possesses a dynamic character, and has a symbolic component” (Conger, 1998: 109). Given the focus of the present study on implicit leadership theories, the symbolic and subjective character of leadership is particularly emphasized. As Offermann et al. (1994) probably provide the most extensive example of a qualitative research in the area of characteristics included in implicit leadership theories, we take their work as a starting point for our analysis and therefore concentrate on traits comprised in implicit leadership theories rather than behaviors. The attributes named should be evaluated concerning their effectiveness to examine if our participants’ image of leaders in general is that of an effective leader or an ineffective leader.

In order to assess implicit leadership theories, the participants were asked to name six attributes of a leader in general and to rate these characteristics and the leader in general on effectiveness. Participants were presented the following request: “Imagine a leader in general. This refers to your image of a leader, based on your experience with different leaders on different levels in the organization during your work life. Describe this ‘leader in general’ using at least six attributes. These can be positive/effective but also negative/ineffective.”² Participants were asked to rate the leader in general on a scale from 1 = *very ineffective* to 5 = *very effective*. The participants were also asked to indicate for each attributes if they found this to be an effective or an ineffective characteristic.

Participants

Our study was conducted in the Netherlands in 2005 and 2006, thus prior to the current economic crisis. Indeed, at the time, the labor market in the Netherlands showed very low unemployment rates. 76 participants took part in our study. 20 of these worked in a clothes shop (15% men, 85% female), 22 in a grocery shop (50% male, 50% female) and 34 came from various backgrounds (61.8% male, 35.3% female). The average age was 29 years ($SD = 6.36$), 29 ($SD = 10.78$), and 41 ($SD = 11.66$), in the grocery shop, the clothes shop and the heterogeneous sample, respectively. The average of work experience was 9.28 years ($SD = 6.74$) in the clothes job, 9.94 ($SD = 11.32$) in the grocery shop and 17.13 years ($SD = 12.85$) in the heterogeneous sample.

Content analysis procedures

In qualitative studies, the data analysis procedures are often only described vaguely if at all (Conger, 1998). But if qualitative research wants to break free from the stigma of being “not scientific”, “arbitrary”, or “subjective”, it has to follow systematic and transparent ways for data collection, analysis, and reporting (Bachiochi & Weiner, 2002; Creswell, 1998). To achieve this, qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) was chosen as an approach that combines the strengths of the grounded theory approach in the discovery of “natural” categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with strategies from traditional content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). It is characterized by the aim to achieve a systematic qualitative text interpretation which is characterized by the following principles (Mayring, 2000; Schilling, 2006):

- Fitting the material into a model of communication: Based on the aims of the assessment, it has to be determined what parts of the communication are in the focus of analysis (e.g. the topic, the communicator himself, the text itself or the effect of the message).
- Rules of analysis: The material is analysed step by step in a rule-based procedure, devising the material into content analytical units.

- Categories in the centre of analysis: The different text units are categorized. The categories can be developed inductively or applied deductively, but should be carefully founded and revised within the process of analysis.
- Criteria of reliability and validity: The procedure should be comprehensible in order to compare the results to other studies and carry out checks for reliability.

As the questions concerning the ideal and the actual leader mainly served the purpose of focusing the participants and preventing intrusions from other leader images (see above), the following steps of qualitative content analysis were applied only to the answers concerning the leader in general:

1. Structuring the material into different dimensions (i.e., attributes and behaviors). As we were only interested in the statements concerning traits of leaders in general, all statements referring to leader behavior were deleted (as proposed by Offermann et al., 1994). We asked participants specifically in our instructions to indicate attributes of leaders. Therefore, participants indicating behaviors violated the instructions. Therefore, not all participants may have used both attributes and behaviors, leading to a bias in the analyses if we had included behaviors that some participants named but not including those of participants that followed instructions. All the material was controlled by a second researcher for the appropriateness of the reduction (i.e., checking if the deleted statements really addressed behavior and the remaining statements were focused on attributes).
2. Step by step formulation of categories based on a preliminary category system. This included the basic processes of naming and comparing the data fragments to develop categories for multiple statements (i.e., different notions from one person) and if necessary subsuming old or

formulating new categories (Conger, 1998). As we aimed at comparing our results with existing research, Offermann et al.'s (1994) categories (sensitivity, tyranny, intelligence, devotion, charisma, attractiveness, masculinity, and strength) served as a preliminary model guiding the content analysis.

3. Revising the categories after 50 percent of the material was coded. The agreement of different raters was checked, cases of doubt and problems with the scope and overlapping of the categories were discussed within the research team consisting of two researchers and three students (Mayring, 2000). The categories were refined in a way that each category was extended by its opposite (e.g., devoted/disinterested; tyrannical/participative). This two-sidedness of categories used to describe person images is a well-known result from research on personal constructs theory (Bannister & Fransella, 1981).
4. Checking the category codes: About two-thirds of the way through the material, the developing category system was checked to prevent drifting into an idiosyncratic sense of what the codes mean (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Six typical examples (three in the original direction, three opposites) were assigned to each category to illustrate the content of the respective category (e.g., tyrannical/participative: authoritarian, bossy, imperious versus cooperative, collegial).
5. Final revision of the material. The data set was reexamined to make sure that the categories are fully described. Cases of doubt were categorized independently by two researchers; differences in the coding were discussed and resolved.³

Quantitative analyses

Descriptive numerical analyses were used to complement the qualitative content analyses. Even the rather basic measures of absolute topic frequency (i.e., total number of times a category is addressed

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across all interviewees), relative topic frequency (i.e., average percentage of a category in comparison to the total number of statements across all interviewees) and person frequency (i.e., how many of the participants address a certain theme at all) are helpful to avoid weighting single comments too heavily and generalizing findings too quickly (cp. Schilling, 2006). Although it is tempting to include the most vivid, interesting or surprising quotes (Bachiochi & Weiner, 2002), these frequency analyses can help to critically evaluate how representative these statements are for the whole sample.

Results

Attributes of leaders in general. In total, the participants made 349 statements concerning their views on the attributes of leaders in general. The average number of statements was 4.59 (SD = 1.82; minimum = 1, maximum = 8). Including two new categories that emerged in the last step of our analyses, fifteen categories emerged (see Appendix for further explanation of the categories). With the exception of masculinity, all of Offerman et al.'s (1994) categories were also addressed (sensitivity, tyranny, intelligence, devotion, charisma, strength, and attractiveness). New categories concerning the characteristics of leaders in general include being *pleasant*, being a *team-player*, *communicative*, *extraverted*, *organized*, *conscientious*, *honest*, and being *open for new experiences*.

Frequencies. Having a look at both directions of our category system, the six subcategories that were used most often by our participants were charismatic (30), tyrannical (28), team player (25), communicative (25), devoted (24), and conscientious (20). The subcategories honest and unattractive were not used at all (i.e., only the categories' opposites were addressed). Extra- (2) and introverted (1), participative (1), attractive (1), unorganized (1), and dishonest (2) yielded very few statements. The bandwidth of the statements is expressed by the fact that there are no single

subcategories dominating the views of the subjects. Also, an inspection of topic and person frequencies does not reveal outstanding dissimilarities concerning the importance and pervasiveness of a subcategory (see Table 1). Concerning the combined categories (original category plus its opposite), team player/individualist (38; 10.9%), charismatic/non-charismatic (34; 9.7%) pleasant/unpleasant (33; 9.5%) and communicative/not-communicative (31; 8.9%) receive the highest number of statements. The categories attractive/unattractive (1; 0.3%), honest/dishonest (2; 0.6%) and introvert/extravert (3; 0.9%) only play a minor role in the beliefs of the participants.

Effectiveness/ineffectiveness. Concerning the effectiveness of leader attributes, the participants categorized 225 statements as effective (64.5%), 119 (34.1%) were regarded as ineffective, 5 statements (1.4%) were not clearly labelled as either effective or ineffective. The relative high number of statements rated as ineffective (119) indicates, as we assumed, that implicit leadership theories are composed of both effective and ineffective attributes. Moreover, by way of an exploratory analysis, we used both sides of our category systems to compare the effectiveness ratings concerning the subcategories. Table 2 shows the cross-table indicating the number and percentage of statements that are normally seen as “favorable” (e.g., pleasant, attractive, teamplayer, charismatic) and those that are usually regarded as “unfavorable” (e.g., unpleasant, unattractive, individualist, non-charismatic; cp. Offermann et al., 1994) that were rated as effective and ineffective by the participants. The most interesting numbers for our purposes are the “unfavorable” statements that are considered effective (6.0%) and the “favorable” ones that are considered ineffective (7.3%). While these proportions are small, they still show that there is at least no deterministic connection (i.e., all favorable traits are seen as effective and all unfavorable are seen as ineffective) between favorable and effective or unfavorable and effective in the implicit leadership theories of our participants.

Summary and discussion

The starting point of our study was to address the question which effective *and* ineffective characteristics are ascribed to leaders in general. Based on qualitative statements we derived fifteen categories describing leaders in general such as tyrannical, intelligent and organized. Asking our participants to rate the characteristics they named revealed that implicit leadership theories are composed of both effective and ineffective attributes.

We used Offermann et al.'s (1994) categories as a foundation for our categorization and found some overlap between our and their categories. Like Offermann et al. (1994) and Lord et al. (1984), we found charisma (charismatic/non-charismatic), decisiveness/strength (strong/weak), dedication (devoted/disinterested), tyranny (tyrannical/participative), verbal skills (communicative/not-communicative) understanding/sensitivity (sensitive/hard) and intelligence (intelligent/stupid) as important aspects in implicit leadership theories. However, some categories found in prior research were seldomly addressed (attractiveness; cp. Epitropaki & Martin, 2004, who argue that attractiveness may be neither a core prototypic or antiprototypic leadership attribute) or even non-existing (honesty, masculinity), others had to be added (especially teamplayer/individualist, pleasant/unpleasant and open/narrow-minded). Compared to the results of Offermann et al. (1994), the statements in the present study are much more varied resulting in a larger and more complex category system. The resulting category system should be regarded as a starting point for a fresh look at the contents of implicit leadership theories. The relatively high degree of unfavorable attributes named to characterize leaders may indicate that, while implicit leadership theories are mainly coined by positive images, the images of leaders in general are not completely romanticized. Our results also indicate that the quite reasonable assumption that

favorable characteristics reflected in implicit leadership theories are effective and unfavorable characteristics are ineffective cannot be upheld completely. Over 13% of statements of our participants fell into the positive/ineffective and negative/effective quadrant. It seems to be necessary to distinguish more carefully between implicit theories concerning leaders in general, effective and positive (i.e., sympathetic) leaders. As the connectionist model of Lord, Brown, Harvey, and Hall (2001) pointed out, the 'leader' category is not as static and fixed as formerly believed. The present results underline the importance of being very careful with the specific questions we are asking in implicit leadership theories studies. They most certainly work as constraints in sense of Lord et al. (2001) and may activate quite different aspects of our leadership beliefs.

With respect to the practical implication of our research, some tentative conclusions can be drawn. We know from prior research that implicit leadership theories are related to the perception of actual leaders (e.g., Schyns et al., 2007; Shamir, 1992) and their evaluation (Nye & Forsyth, 1991). While there is more research needed into the different degrees of effectiveness included in implicit leadership theories and how those implicit leadership theories affect the perception of leaders, we can assume that people with a more ineffective image of leaders may view their actual leaders in a more negative light and may rate them more negatively. There is a danger of a self-fulfilling prophecy when followers that hold ineffective implicit leadership theories do not exert as much effort for their leader as they could do. The question also arises in how far followers who hold implicit leadership theories that comprise ineffectiveness will respond to attempts of leaders to influence them (cf. Kouzes & Posner, 2005).

Limitations and future research

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As any research, our study has limitations that are worth noting. First, while our study has a relatively large sample size for a qualitative study, the sample is still too small to generalize. Thus, our study can only serve as a starting point for future research. Second, our study took place in the Netherlands and can therefore not necessarily be cross-culturally generalized. Prior qualitative research on implicit leadership theories in China (Ling, Chia, & Fang, 2000) found completely different categories as compared to Offermann et al.'s (1994) US American results. Although we used Offermann et al.'s categories as a starting point, it cannot be ruled out that some of our categories are unique to the Dutch working context. However, the categories that were not supported in our study (attractiveness and masculinity) were also the weakest ones in Offermann et al.'s study, which indicates that our data are not completely different from prior American research.

The interpretation of the statements into categories by our participants was undertaken by researchers and not confirmed by the participants themselves. In order to enhance the credibility of our interpretation, we excluded cases that were unclear without the context that only the respective participant could provide. Although this led to quite a few items in the miscellaneous category, it left the categorization less open to speculation.

In our categorization scheme, we use a favorable and an unfavorable anchor for our categories. However, the judgment was made by the researcher and not confirmed with the participants. While led by prior research such as Lord et al. (1984), Offermann et al. (1994) and Epitropaki & Martin (2004), this may be criticized as our personal interpretation. Although it seems unlikely that, for example, stupid or unattractive are considered positive characteristics, we cannot completely rule out that our participants perceived them as such. Future research should therefore examine the emotional value (e.g. likeability) attached to our categories.

We asked our participants to rate the attributes they named themselves with regard to effectiveness. However, we did not explain to them what effectiveness means. Rather we wanted to assess effectiveness as a part of their implicit leadership theories. Therefore, we do not know which criteria our participants used to rate effectiveness. Indeed, we would assume that similar to implicit leadership theories themselves, ratings of effectiveness draw on different dimensions. That is to say that our participants will likely mean different things when it comes to defining effectiveness. A general example from prior literature is that leaders seem to consider objective performance as more important than followers whereas followers find job satisfaction more important (Dansereau, 1995). Thus, whether or not our participants were thinking of “hard” or “soft” effectiveness, we do not know. To study this in more detail, a future study could either ask each individual about his/her criteria for effectiveness or clarify which type of effectiveness is to be used to rate the named characteristics.

Again, in terms of effectiveness, we referred to effectiveness of actual leaders in the instructions for our participants. One may discuss, whether there are indeed different types of effectiveness, depending on whether someone is already in leadership position or indeed wants to emerge as leader⁴. Some characteristics may be useful in leader emergence (e.g., dominance) but maybe less so in leader effectiveness once in the position.

Our instructions explicitly asked our participants to name characteristics that could be negative/ineffective. This might have triggered more negative/ineffective attributes than a neutral instruction. Although we collected further data without this possibly biasing instruction and the results were comparable, we would still recommend for future research to use neutral instructions to avoid demand characteristics.

Conclusion

Our study addressed a shortcoming in prior research into implicit leadership theories, namely the assumption that images of leaders in general comprise of images of effective leaders. Using a relatively large sample (for a qualitative study), we could show that images of leaders in general contain characteristics that are regarded as effective and characteristics that are regarded by our participants as ineffective. Consequently, future research needs to distinguish more carefully between the different implicit leadership theories of participants depending on the goal of the respective study. This is crucial when conducting research regarding the perception of leaders, as ineffective implicit leadership theories may have different effect on the perception of leaders than effective ones. Leaders may find it more difficult to influence followers who hold ineffective implicit leadership theories. Knowledge about ineffective implicit leadership theories can help leaders to overcome this problem, for example, by trying to influence their followers' implicit leadership theories or by making clear that they as leaders are very much different from these implicit leadership theories.

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Table 1: Frequency of categories

	Absolute and relative amount of statements (topic frequency): <i>subcategories</i>	Absolute and relative amount of statements (topic frequency): <i>categories</i>	Number of persons (person frequency)	Rated as effective	Rated as ineffective
Introvert	1 (0.3 %)	3 (0.9%)	1	1	0
Extravert	2 (0.6%)		2	1	1
Pleasant	18 (5.2%)	33 (9.5%)	16	16	2
Unpleasant	15 (4.3%)		14	0	15
Communicative	25 (7.2%)	31 (8.9%)	21	22	3
Not-communicative	6 (1.7%)		5	0	6
Strong	16 (4.6%)	28 (8.0%)	14	13	3
Weak	12 (3.4%)		11	1	11
Sensitive	18 (5.2%)	21 (6.1%)	16	17	1
Hard	3 (0.9%)		3	0	3
Team player	25 (7.2%)	38 (10.9%)	23	21	2
Individualist	13 (3.7%)		11	1	11
Charismatic	30 (8.6%)	34 (9.7%)	27	27	3
Not-charismatic	4 (1.1%)		4	1	3
Devoted	24 (6.9%)	29 (8.3%)	19	24	0
Disinterested	5 (1.4%)		5	0	5

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Tyrannical	28 (8.0%)	29 (8.3%)	21	15	12
Participative	1 (0.3%)		1	1	0
Intelligent	13 (3.7%)	21 (6.0%)	11	10	3
Stupid	8 (2.3%)		8	0	8
Attractive	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.3%)	1	1	0
Unattractive	0 (0%)		0	0	0
Organised	7 (2.0%)	8 (2.3%)	7	5	1
Unorganised	1 (0.3%)		1	0	1
Conscientious	20 (5.7%)	28 (8.0%)	18	19	1
Not					
conscientious	8 (2.3%)		7	0	8
Honest	0 (0%)	2 (0.6%)	0	0	0
Dishonest	2 (0.6%)		2	0	2
Open	10 (2.9%)	16 (4.6%)	9	7	3
Narrow-minded	6 (1.7%)		6	2	4
Miscellaneous	27 (7.7%)	27 (7.7%)	22	20	7

Table 2: Crosstable on the percentages of favorable/unfavorable and effective/ineffective statements

	Effective	Ineffective
Favorable	184 58.04%	23 7.26%
Unfavorable	21 6.02%	89 28.08%

Note. From the total number of 349 statements, 27 fell into the category miscellaneous and 5 were seen as indeterminate with regard to their effectiveness/ineffectiveness.

Appendix: Category system and examples

Introvert	Extravert
Quiet	Vivid
Silent	Curious
Pleasant	Unpleasant
Friendly	Unfriendly
Nice	Not nice
Communicative	Not-communicative
Eloquent	Not communicative
Articulate	Difficulties to express
Strong	Weak
Perseverant	Unstable
Takes decisions	Unsure
Sensitive	Hard
Sensitive	Insensitive
Gentle	Heartless
Team player	Individualist
Altruistic	Egoistic
Interest in the group	Selfish
Charismatic	Not-charismatic
Visionary	Bureaucratic
Persuasive	No vision

Appendix (continued): Category system and examples

Devoted	Disinterested
Committed	Indifferent
Engaged	Inactive
Tyrannical	Participative
Authoritarian	Cooperative
Bossy	Comradely
Intelligent	Stupid
Knowledge	Stupid
Smart	Ignorant
Attractive	Unattractive
Good-looking	Ugly
Charming	Repulsive
Organised	Unorganised
Strategic	Leave things over to chance
Goal oriented	Thinking short/term
Conscientious	Not conscientious
Dutiful	Chaotic
Conscientious	Careless
Honest	Dishonest
	Not always honest
	Intransparent

Appendix (continued): Category system and examples

Open	Narrow minded
Open minded	Not interested in new ideas
Innovative	Rather administrative

¹ We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for the formulation of this question.

² As one reviewer commented, these instructions may have prompted our participants to think of positive/negative, effective/ineffective which they otherwise might not have done. To address this concern, we drew a small sample of (Dutch) employees ($N = 11$), to whom we administered the same questionnaire as the one used in this study with two alterations: (1) We asked to indicate not more than six attributes (to ensure easy comparison between the participants) and (2) altered the instruction by leaving out the reference to positive/negative, effective/ineffective. We wanted to check in how far participants would still use positive/negative, effective/ineffective attributes without the prompt. On average, the participants named 5.7 characteristics out of which they rated 2.9 as ineffective. Many of the attributes were indeed quite negative (e.g., incapable, inconsequential). Comparing our results to the original data in terms of being favourable/unfavourable and effective/ineffective, the following distribution emerged:

	effective	ineffective
favorable	43.10%	8.62%
unfavorable	3.45%	44.83%

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Thus, we conclude that that our instructions did not prompt our participants to name positive/negative, effective/ineffective characteristics but that these are indeed part of an image of leaders in general.

³ We used the new data outlined in footnote 2 to calculate the inter-rater reliability of the two coders. In 73% of the cases both coders independently agreed on the same category. The resulting Cohens Kappa was .71 which can be evaluated as a good degree of inter-rater agreement (cp. Altman, 1991).

⁴ We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to us.