An Examination of Personality Traits Among Student Leaders and Nonleaders

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Previous research has shown a relation between leadership and characteristics such as extroversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness in many populations. This study attempted to extend these findings to a general college population. Ninety-nine undergraduates (36 leaders and 63 nonleaders) participated in this study. Previous research suggested leaders would exhibit higher levels of extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness than peer nonleaders. Results did not show significant relations between leadership and either extroversion or agreeableness. However, leaders scored higher on a measure of conscientiousness than nonleaders. Conscientiousness appears to distinguish student leaders from nonleaders.

Leadership is important in shaping the progress of society. Identifying traits among youth, more specifically the college population, can yield early recognition and development of leadership skills. Recognition of such skills will make it easier to identify people to place in positions of leadership. Within psychology, there is a long tradition of understanding leadership as resulting from an ensemble of personality traits. For example, Kickul and Neuman (2000) looked at such traits as openness to experiences and extroversion in relation to emergent leadership.

Recent applications of the five-factor model have been especially robust and pragmatic in clarifying the nature of people who make effective leaders (McCrae & Costa, 1997). The five characteristics in this model are conscientiousness, extroversion/introversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. Three of these five characteristics—conscientiousness, extroversion, and agreeableness—have been particularly relevant in research into personality traits of leaders (McCrae & Costa, 1997).

Among these traits, extroversion is perhaps the characteristic most commonly studied in relation to leadership among college students. Kickul and Neuman (2000) showed the importance of extroversion among leaders in undergraduate psychology students. When students were organized into teams to accomplish tasks, extroversion was noted as one predictor of emergent leaders in each of the groups (Kickul & Neuman, 2000). It is important to note, however, that only psychology majors were used, perhaps limiting generalizability.

Seibert and Kraimer (2001) explored the relation of extroversion to promotion of professionals. More specifically, their study examined extroversion in emerging leaders. Interactional influences of personality traits, such as being people-oriented, explained the vital role of extroversion in emergent leaders because such influences may moderate the relationship between extroversion and leadership (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001). Seibert and Kraimer suggested that the trait of extroversion makes certain people more likely to thrive in social interaction, thus leading to greater career success. Early recognition of such traits as extroversion in emergent leaders was the primary objective of Seibert and Kraimer's study, which established grounds for further exploration of extroversion's role in emergent leaders of other populations.

Jordan and Cartwright (1998) concluded that moderate levels of extroversion were a key compo-
nent in selection of managers. Their results lend support to the idea that recognition of such traits related to leadership can aid in selecting effective leaders. The results of these studies provide strong evidence that extroversion is a personality trait related to leadership that, with early recognition, extroversion can help identify emergent leaders.

Conscientiousness has also been shown to be a characteristic related to leadership in multiple areas. According to the literature, however, conscientiousness has not been studied in college student samples. For example, McCall (1994) found that conscientious individuals were among those with the highest executive and leadership potential in a business environment. Furthermore, Kickul and Neuman (2000) found conscientiousness to be related to being effective leaders who improved their team members' performance. Again, the literature supports a relation between leadership and conscientiousness in certain environments.

Agreeableness is another trait related to leadership. Sperry (1997) showed that agreeableness is applicable to leaders in a business-oriented environment. He cited such components of the agreeable character structure as empathy and cooperativeness. Judge and Bono (2000) found agreeableness to be related in particular to transformational leadership, a style of leadership that emphasizes inspiration of followers through personality characteristics such as charisma. Judge and Bono concluded that agreeableness is a key trait of this particular type of leadership.

Until now, leadership research has focused mainly on professional environments. These include, but are not limited to, business and managerial establishments that emphasize a hierarchical power structure of leadership. Although Kickul and Neuman (2000) found extroversion as a characteristic among college student leaders, few studies have focused on other characteristics such as agreeableness and conscientiousness in college leadership roles. The purpose of the present study is to extend the base of leadership research to the college level to help employers and organization mentors identify emerging leaders at an early stage in development.

The present study addressed three hypotheses: First, student leaders are more extroverted than nonleaders. Second, student leaders are more conscientious than nonleaders. Third, student leaders have a higher level of agreeableness than nonleaders.

Method

Participants

Participants were 99 undergraduate students at a small, private university on the east coast. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 23, with a mean age of 20.21 years ($SD = 1.09$). Fifty were male and 49 were female. Twelve were first-year students, 36 were sophomores, 21 were juniors, and 30 were seniors. Within the sample, there were 63 nonleaders and 36 leaders as determined by participants' responses on the questionnaire.

Materials

Demographic information. The first page of the questionnaire packet was a demographic survey. It included questions on age, gender, and whether the participant currently held a position of leadership on campus.

Leadership. A leader is a person who holds authority over and delegates tasks to others. Leadership was measured with the following question: "Are you in a leadership position where you are in advance of others, hold authority, and delegate? (Some examples are Student Government Association, resident assistant, club officer, sports team captain, work supervisor.)" If participants answered yes, they then listed what positions they held. Leadership roles were determined by self-report of the participants.

Extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Extroversion was defined as outgoingness and degree of interest in the outside world in relation to inner thoughts and feelings. Agreeableness was defined as the extent to which people get along with others as opposed to being antagonistic. Conscientiousness was defined as the degree to which people are hardworking, energetic, and ambitious. All three traits were measured with the Mini-Markers adjective checklist (Saucier, 1994), which also measures emotional stability and openness to experience. Each of these characteristics is measured with an eight-item scale. Participants rated how much each adjective describes them on a 9-point Likert scale. It was found that the markers had the following alpha coefficients: .90 for extroversion, .90 for conscientiousness, and .86 for agreeableness (Dwight, Cummings, & Glenar, 1998). All of these were at acceptable levels of validity (Dwight et al., 1998). Reliability characteristics were as follows: .41 for extroversion, .43 for conscientiousness, and .43 for agreeableness (Saucier, 1994). These were not only acceptable levels, but noted to be significantly higher than the marker's predecessor (Saucier, 1994).

Procedure

Twenty members of a research methods class (including the study investigators) distributed four survey packets to a convenience sample of undergraduate students at a small, liberal arts college on the east coast. Participants were obtained over a 2-week period by the researchers asking participants if
they would take 10 minutes to fill out a brief survey. Each class member solicited 2 male and 2 female participants. The remainder of the data were collected by recruiting additional student leaders with the help of the office of student life. This sample included 10 resident assistants (5 male and 5 female) and 9 students who held other leadership positions (5 male and 4 female). All surveys were distributed on campus and in person. Participants were told that the series of questions pertained to psychological traits of students. Participants were also informed that all information was anonymous and that they could withdraw at any time. A consent form was given to all participants before they filled out the questionnaire, and only those who consented took part in the study. Anonymity was ensured by requiring no name on the questionnaire, detaching the consent form (which had a signature), and maintaining statistical information through a coded number system. After completing the survey, each participant was debriefed as to the purpose of the study.

Results

Only one of the three comparisons between leaders and nonleaders was significant. In a two-tailed independent samples t test, conscientiousness scores for leaders were significantly higher than scores for nonleaders, t(97) = 2.41, p < .05. Leaders had a mean score of 52.63 (SD = 11.59); nonleaders had a lower mean score of 46.97 (SD = 11.07). The effect size for this relationship was r^2 = .06.

Two additional comparisons between leaders and nonleaders were not significant. In a two-tailed independent samples t test, extroversion scores for leaders were not significantly larger than scores for nonleaders, t(97) = 1.04, p > .05. Leaders had a mean score of 49.33 (SD = 10.64); nonleaders had a mean score of 47.06 (SD = 10.38). In a two-tailed independent samples t test, agreeableness scores for leaders were not significantly larger than scores for nonleaders, t(97) = .92, p > .05. Leaders had a mean score of 38.67 (SD = 9.20), and nonleaders had a mean score of 47.06 (SD = 10.38).

Discussion

Until now, leadership research has focused primarily on professional environments such as business and politics. The purpose of the present study was to identify traits of college-level leaders to aid prospective employers and organizations in recognizing and cultivating these young leaders. Results support only one of the hypotheses tested.

The hypothesis that leaders are more conscientious than nonleaders is supported by the present study. Results support the previous findings of McCall (1994) and Kickul and Neuman (2000). The results from the current study indicate that conscientiousness plays a role in characterizing leaders at the college level.

The other two hypotheses are not supported by the present study. Findings of no relation between extroversion and leadership in this study contradict previous findings, such as those of Kickul and Neuman (2000) and Seibert and Kraimer (2001). Findings of no relation between agreeableness and leadership are not in line with previous findings of Sperry (1997) and Jordan and Cartwright (1998). These outcomes could be due to a number of factors such as differences in traits between college and professional leaders, differing types of college leadership, or sampling error.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that the personality traits of college leaders may differ from those of professional leaders. Previous research that found support for agreeableness and extroversion as common leadership traits in professional positions was not extended to the college population in the present study. However, conscientiousness appears to be a common trait of leaders at various stages of development.

The inconsistency in results relative to previous research may be due to sample differences. Most previous studies examined professional (adult) leadership and not student leadership at the college level. Previous research, which focused on professional areas such as politics and business, found significant relationships between leadership and the three variables of interest. Leaders at the college level may not possess the same traits found in professional settings. Furthermore, it has been documented that personality constructs such as extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness do not fully develop, or are not fully achieved, until people are well into their thirties (Finn, 1986). This fact may indicate a reason why no relations were found between leadership and either extroversion or agreeableness. Characteristics found in professional levels of leadership may not necessarily be found in college students because they have not fully developed their personalities. The findings of past research and the present study indicate that conscientiousness, although not necessarily fully developed in college leaders, may still play a role at both levels. The finding that conscientiousness is significant among college leaders may require employers or organizations to look for other traits in college students when attempting to identify emergent leaders.

One limitation of this study may be that the sample included different types of leadership positions, such as student government members, resident assistants, and club presidents. Traits of one type of leader may not be the same as those of another type of leader. For example, students who choose to run for student
government positions could be more inclined toward higher scores in extroversion due simply to the public exposure involved in becoming elected. On the other hand, resident assistants, who are appointed, may be more likely to score higher in agreeableness because they have to work more in teams and answer to supervisors on a regular basis. Varying types of student leadership would require investigating each type to find common traits among them. Perhaps knowing what traits are related to appointed positions versus elected positions would explain the lack of significant findings in the present study and would help further identify emergent leaders.

An additional recognized limitation of this study was the use of a convenience sample. The nonrandom sampling could have been biased and could lead to the possibility that the sample was not representative of the population of student leaders. The sample could have been biased in that researchers used participants who were nearby or who traveled in groups. This could promote homogeneity of the sample because participants who live with each other may be similar in character.

Finally, it is possible that first-year students have not had the chance to assume positions of leadership, and, therefore, results may not adequately represent leadership characteristics in first-year college students. First-year students comprise one quarter of the college population, and potentially the same portion of student leaders. However, they have not had adequate time to find their niche among student leadership roles. Not including enough first-year students in the sample could have influenced the results in two ways. First, the sample was not truly representative and thus there were differing traits within the sample. Second, as seen in the findings of Finn (1986), personality constructs may not be fully developed in first-year students. Therefore, traits that are present in upper-class leaders may or may not be present in first-year leaders.

Possible directions for future research include examining leadership and these three characteristics among the different age groups. As mentioned earlier, personalities do not fully develop until people are in their thirties, and it may be helpful to observe the disparities or similarities of traits in differing generations of leaders and nonleaders. Finding common traits in college and professional leadership could help in early recognition of emergent leaders.

In addition, it may be of interest to examine developmental changes in leadership across college years. Comparing first-year to upper-class students may be helpful in exploring how students become accustomed to a new environment and new responsibilities. Examining what traits are common among leaders at all four college levels can help identify and place new students in programs or positions in college in which they would thrive.

Future research would also benefit from looking at particular characteristics that may be associated with a particular leadership position. Possible differences between student leaders in student government, resident assistant positions, and other leadership roles could be further explained by distinguishing different types of leadership in a future study. It is likely that each type of leadership position, because of the nature of its requirements and whether the position is elected or appointed, entails differing personality traits.

References


