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RESEARCH IN PERSONNEL AND HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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CHAPTER 1

IS LEADERSHIP MORE THAN “I LIKE MY BOSS”?*

Francis J. Yammarino, Minyoung Cheong,
Jayoung Kim and Chou-Yu Tsai

ABSTRACT

For many of the current leadership theories, models, and approaches, the answer to the question posed in the title, “Is leadership more than ‘I like my boss?’,” is “no,” as there appears to be a hierarchy of leadership concepts with Liking of the leader as the primary dimension or general factor foundation. There are then secondary dimensions or specific sub-factors of liking of Relationship Leadership and Task Leadership; and subsequently, tertiary dimensions or actual sub-sub-factors that comprise the numerous leadership views as well as their operationalizations (e.g., via surveys). There are, however, some leadership views that go beyond simply liking of the leader and liking of relationship leadership and task leadership. For these, which involve explicit levels of analysis formulations, often beyond the leader, or are multi-level in nature, the answer to the title question is “yes.” We clarify and discuss these various “no” and “yes” leadership views and implications of our work for future research and personnel and human resources management practice.

Keywords: leadership theories; liking/likability; relationship leadership; task leadership; multi-level leadership; leadership operationalizations

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INTRODUCTION

Is leadership, both conceptually and empirically, something more than the simple notion of “I like my boss”? Or in the current vernacular regarding “like,” is leadership something more than the analog to the *Facebook* thumbs-up icon or the *Twitter* retweet symbol? Has about 100 years of leadership research provided the field with leadership theories, models, and approaches that offer sophisticated conceptual understanding and sound empirical work on leadership, or simply offered just nuanced versions of people liking, or not liking, their bosses? This is the issue explored here; and although we cannot provide a definitive answer, only comprehensive empirical work can do so, our conclusion is that for many current and past leadership theories, models, and approaches, the answer to the title question is “no,” with many of the concepts and measures being simply versions of *liking the boss*. The answer to the title question is “yes,” however, for several other current leadership views that generally involve explicit levels of analysis formulations, often beyond the leader, or are multi-level in nature.

To fully understand this somewhat controversial position, it is important to explore *Liking* and its key derivatives, *liking of Relationship Leadership* and *Task Leadership*, as well as some basic levels of analysis issues and the ways in which levels can contribute to the formulation and operationalization of leadership approaches that go beyond simply *liking the boss*. After developing these fundamental issues, we summarize several leadership approaches that fit the view of liking the leader as the primary conceptual dimension or general empirical factor foundation, and with secondary conceptual dimensions or specific empirical sub-factors of relationship leadership and task leadership. For these “no” answer to the title question leadership approaches, we highlight the tertiary conceptual dimensions or empirical sub-sub-factors that comprise these numerous leadership views as well as their operationalizations (e.g., via surveys).

Subsequently, we develop, primarily through a multi-level focus, what is required to move beyond liking of the leader and even liking of relationship leadership and task leadership. Determination for these leadership approaches that offer formulations beyond primarily *liking the boss* is whether they have a focus on the leader but with dimensions and factors that are not simply relationship leadership or task leadership, a focus beyond the leader with an explicit level of analysis higher than individual/leader level, or are multi-level in nature. For these “yes” answer to the title question leadership approaches, we then highlight and summarize the key elements that comprise these leadership views by focusing on their levels of analysis aspects.

By explicating the underlying dimensions and factors of both sets of leadership approaches, those that derive from liking the leader as well as those that rely on other notions, we hope to clarify the current state of leadership work from a conceptual perspective and to lay the ground work for future empirical work examining and fully testing these notions. In this regard, we also discuss the implications of our work for future research and personnel and human resources management (PHRM) practice.

LIKING: PRIMARY DIMENSION AND G FACTOR IN LEADERSHIP

The main theme and key point we develop in the next several sections is summarized in Fig. 1. As shown in the figure, there is a hierarchy of leadership dimensions and concepts that is also reflected in the operationalizations and measures, particularly survey-based ones, in the leadership field. The primary conceptual dimension and the general empirical or *g* factor in leadership is *liking the boss*. Deriving from this dimension and factor are two secondary conceptual dimensions and specific empirical s_1 and s_2 sub-factors of *relationship leadership* and *task leadership*, and more specifically, the *liking* of these leader styles. Deriving from these dimensions and factors are all the tertiary conceptual dimensions and actual empirical t_1 to t_n sub-sub factors that comprise many leadership views and their connections to relationship, task, or both types of leadership. Liking, at the top of the hierarchy, is viewed as the general or *g* factor that runs through the specific or s_1 and s_2 sub-factors of relationship leadership and task leadership that then run through the various actual or t_1 to t_n sub-sub-factors, at the bottom of the hierarchy, that comprise numerous leadership theories, models, and approaches as well as most operationalizations. This hierarchical view of leadership provides a way to integrate leadership conceptualizations and their operationalizations (see Bass, 2008) under a simplified framework and also offers an explanation of and

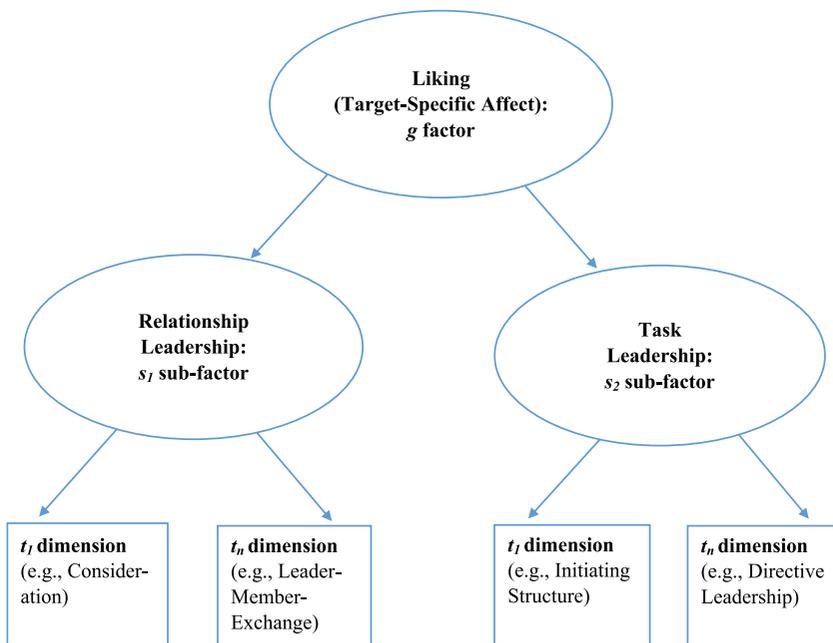


Fig. 1. Hierarchy of Leadership Concepts Based on “Liking.”

solution to the issue of construct redundancy and construct proliferation in leadership and related work (see [Banks, Gooty, Ross, Williams, & Harrington, 2018](#); [Le, Schmidt, Harter, & Lauver, 2010](#)).

Foundations

Leadership is a very broad and wide-ranging field with a long history that includes literally 1000s of definitions and 100s of theories, models, views, and approaches (for reviews, see [Bass, 2008](#); [Dinh et al., 2014](#); [Dionne et al., 2014](#); [Lord, Day, Zaccaro, Avolio, & Eagly, 2017](#); [Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005](#); [Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012](#); [Zhao & Li, 2019](#); [Zhu, Song, Zhu, & Johnson, 2019](#)). For some scholars, this has resulted in a construct proliferation and redundancy problem in leadership ([Banks et al., 2018](#)), and others have attempted to simplify and integrate these leadership formulations (e.g., [Yammarino & Dansereau, 2009](#)). As noted by [Bass \(2008\)](#), [Dansereau and Yammarino \(1998a, 1998b, 1998c\)](#), and [Yammarino \(2012, 2017\)](#), despite this breath and multitude of formulations, there are some key commonalities in leadership work. Essentially, various antecedents of leadership (precursors or predictors such as fundamental underlying human processes) drive the numerous leadership processes and approaches that in turn result in various leadership consequences (outcomes or criteria such as leadership effectiveness). Moreover, leadership is inherently multi-level because you cannot be a leader without at least one follower; and as a leader, you (individual level) have to link with other people either on a one-to-one basis (dyad level) or on a one-to-many basis (group/team and collective/organization levels) and in a context (multiple levels). In this regard, *leadership* is a multi-level leader–follower interaction process that occurs in a particular situation where a leader and followers share a purpose and jointly and willingly accomplish things (see [Yammarino, 2012, 2017](#)).

In terms of the assessments of leaders, whether done in practice on-the-job through interactions with them or in a research setting primarily via surveys for example, essentially, followers'/subordinates'/direct reports' assessments of leaders, are typically a function of their affective evaluations of the leaders (see [Martinko, Mackey, Moss, Harvey, McAllister, & Brees, 2018](#); [Mumford & Higgs, 2020](#)). Although these evaluations can, in turn, impact subsequent (and perhaps even concurrent) behaviors, many current leadership approaches are thus simply assessing whether followers/subordinates/direct reports *like their boss*. And liking is a key element of an implicit or ideal leader type that followers hold and endorse (see [Brown & Keeping, 2005](#); [Hall & Lord, 1995](#); [Lord & Maher, 1993](#); [Martinko et al., 2018](#); [van Knippenberg, 2011](#); [Wayne & Ferris, 1990](#)).

These implicit and ideal leader-type notions seem to provide a foundation for the liking of a boss/leader. [Lord and Maher \(1993\)](#) and [Hall and Lord \(1995\)](#) noted that perception and information-processing literatures imply that perceptions and implicit views of leadership are based on both affective and cognitive processing strategies. Affect and emotions work in leadership (e.g., on affect and various emotions; and emotional intelligence, labor, and contagion) has received increased attention (e.g., [Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010](#); [Rajah, Song, &](#)

Arvey, 2011; Sadri, Weber, & Gentry, 2011); and the cognitive aspects of leadership have been widely researched (e.g., Bass, 2008; Brown & Keeping, 2005; Hall & Lord, 1995; Lord & Maher, 1993; Mumford & Higgs, 2020). These processing mechanisms determine followers’ and subordinates’ perceptions of leaders and have a key role in the often rapid formation of liking or disliking of a leader. Also, information about the situation and past events is used by followers and subordinates to judge a leader’s intentions and draw conclusions about his/her (subsequent/concurrent) behavior and effectiveness.

What Is Liking?

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Maya Angelou

What specifically is “liking”? In neuroscience, a multidisciplinary field which utilizes knowledge from psychology and biology/life sciences to study the nervous system as a whole (i.e., brain, spinal cord, and peripheral nerves), and in neuropsychology which studies the role of the nervous system in human and animal behavior and learning (e.g., Kolb & Whishaw, 2009; Squire et al., 2012), *emotion* is a body state triggered by external stimuli that emerges from perception and processing of stimuli in brain circuits and in the context of an unfolding event between social partners. *Feeling*, in these disciplines, is the mental state or conscious experiences that accompany the body state changes (see King, 2019). Moreover, the neural structures associated with emotion and cognition are deeply intertwined (Kolb & Whishaw, 2009), which suggests that each emotion may have a cognitive aspect to it, and each cognition may have an emotional aspect to it.

As such, for us then, “I like/dislike my boss” is a *feeling* that results from an emotion (or perhaps several emotions) based on an event (or perhaps a series of events) or social interaction involving the leader/supervisor/boss and follower/subordinate/direct report. Thus, *liking/disliking* is target-specific affect (e.g., Brown & Keeping, 2005; Gooty et al., 2010), and, cognitively, it can be perceived differently (i.e., follower and leader individual differences) or similarly (i.e., leader–follower dyadic agreement), for the parties involved. In other words, *liking/disliking* the leader may be used as an experiential reference point, which all affect and emotions do to some extent; and thus, *liking/disliking* attributions may have cognitive implications and can impact perceptions.

To be clear, there is nothing incorrect about liking/disliking the boss or that this notion is an important part of conceptualizations and operationalizations of leadership. McAllister, Moss, and Martinko (2019) have used the term “likership” to describe the phenomenon. They noted that *likership* is not the opposite of leadership, but rather a key ingredient of effective leadership. There is nothing wrong with a leader being liked. In fact, liking/disliking can be critical in the determination of both subjective (e.g., various forms of satisfaction, commitment, and loyalty) and objective (e.g., performance, absenteeism, and turnover) leadership outcomes (see Bass, 2008; Dansereau & Yammarino, 1998c; Yammarino, 2012, 2017). What is incorrect, or at least inappropriate, however, for many extant

leadership conceptualizations and operationalizations is to ignore liking/disliking completely or imply that these leadership views go well beyond liking when liking/disliking is actually a key conceptual component and underlying factor of them.

Relatedly, [Potter \(2019\)](#) noted that *likability*, as an important personality trait, traces to the late 1800s with associations to virtue, character, and success in business. In the 1900s, likability became a prominent part of advertising, public relations, and politics; projecting and selling oneself as likable was viewed as critical in multiple arenas for success and effectiveness and for being viewed as a leader ([Potter, 2019](#)). As such, liking the boss can be seen as a primary dimension or general factor in leadership.

In a similar sense, [Sanders \(2005\)](#) discussed four critical elements of likability: (a) friendliness, the ability to communicate liking and openness to others; (b) relevance, the capacity to connect with others' interests, wants, and needs; (c) empathy, the ability to recognize, acknowledge, and experience other people's feelings; and (d) realness, the integrity that stands behind likability and guarantees its authenticity. He asserted that by accentuating these aspects of personality, executives could learn to be effective leaders. This implies that liking is not only a primary dimension and general factor in leadership but also that it drives secondary dimensions and sub-factors of relationship leadership (elements a, c, and d above) and perhaps task leadership (element b above).

Likewise, [Bhargava \(2012\)](#) noted that likability is critical to the establishment of an emotional connection to others; and people do business with, vote for, and build relationships with people they like. In particular, he asserted that likability is all about building deeper and more trusted personal relationships in business and life based on truth, relevance, unselfishness, simplicity, and timing. Again, this implies that liking is not only a primary dimension and general factor in leadership but also that it drives the secondary dimension and sub-factor of relationship leadership.

Overall, "I like my boss" can be specified as *liking/disliking* from the perspective of the follower/subordinate/direct report which reflects *likability*, a characteristic/trait of the leader/superior/supervisor. Likability is thus associated with an emotional connection between a leader/superior/supervisor and a follower/subordinate/direct report. The feeling that is created from this connection, liking/disliking, may be shared and positive, making the leader worthy of trust by the follower; or not shared and negative, making the leader untrusted and suspected by the follower.

Liking Basis and Levels of Analysis

These ideas can be explored further by considering the potential theoretical bases for liking and likability and the relevance of levels of analysis for understanding these issues. *Levels of analysis* are the entities or objects of study for theory building and theory testing (see [Dansereau, Alutto, & Yammarino, 1984](#); [Yammarino, 2012, 2017](#)). Levels are generally hierarchically ordered, with lower-level entities nested or embedded in higher-level entities ([Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008, 2009, 2011](#)). The multi-level aspect means multiple levels of analysis are

involved; and for leadership work, there are four critical levels or perspectives on the human beings who comprise organizations (see Yammarino & Dionne, 2018). *Individuals* or *persons* (e.g., both leaders and followers) allow for the exploration of individual differences, and the focus can be on a leader or a follower, or how leaders or followers differ from one another. *Dyads* are two-person groups with interpersonal relationships involving one-to-one interdependence between dyadic partners; and the focus can be on superior–subordinate or leader–follower dyads, independent of the work group or team (see Yammarino & Gooty, 2017).

Groups/Teams are collections of individuals who are interdependent and interact on a face-to-face or non-co-located (virtual) basis with one another. Groups and teams generally consist of a leader and his/her immediate followers/direct reports, and may include formal/appointed leaders or informal/emergent leaders. *Collectives* are clusters of individuals, larger than groups/teams (e.g., departments, functional areas, strategic business units, organizations), where members are interdependent based on a hierarchical structuring, a set of common or shared expectations, or even networks (see Yammarino & Dionne, 2018). Collectives, organizations, and networks are often (but not always) overseen by formal or informal leaders.

These levels of analysis and associated theoretical positions can provide some potential underlying bases for liking from the perspectives of individual differences, dyadic agreement, and widespread agreement in group/teams and collectives. From an individual differences perspective, an individual/person level of analysis, an underlying basis for liking and likability may be self-expansion theory which has a long history in social psychology (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1986, 1996, 2000; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Self-expansion is a fundamental theory about close relationships involving a psychological process in which a focal individual psychologically incorporates another individual into himself/herself to improve or enhance the focal individual. In particular, self-expansion begins with a comparison of the current self to the potential self. If the potential self represents some improvement on the present self, an individual is then motivated to self-expand to include another individual to help achieve that improvement. Thus, as a person includes another person into the self, an expansion of the self takes place via this relationship building process.

Self-expansion is a relatively new concept in the leadership realm. Dansereau, Seitz, Chiu, Shaughnessy, and Yammarino (2013) conceptualized self-expansion to underlie and be the common theoretical grounding or foundational process of numerous leadership approaches. Specifically, they identified and conceptualized how the leader–follower relationship, a key to most leadership approaches, is developed via self-expansion. Dansereau et al. (2013) reviewed and then integrated, via a self-expansion explanation, numerous leadership approaches that are based on individuals, groups, organizations, development, visions, outcomes, and even non-leadership. These approaches, as developed below, conceptually rely on relationship leadership and task leadership and even more basically on liking and likability; but to date, there has been no empirical work testing the connections among self-expansion, leadership, and liking/likability.

Along these same lines, at the individual level, another underlying basis for liking and likability may be individual differences that are evident based on attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1979, 1982). Attachment theory asserts that individuals examine the behaviors of significant others with whom they interact by relying on internal working mental models of relationships. These internal models include both affective and cognitive components and provide rules for behavior in relationships and for attention and memory. Individuals form these mental models based on early childhood experiences, and the associated attachment styles are cognitive representations of an individual's orientation toward others, and include secure attachment, insecure avoidant attachment, and insecure ambivalent attachment styles.

For adult situations, Hazan and Shaver (1987, 1990, 1994) translated these early childhood attachment patterns into the attachment styles of secure, insecurely avoidant, and anxious ambivalent. The secure adult attachment style includes behaviors that emphasize trust, comfort with closeness, a positive sense of worthiness, and an expectation that others are accepting and supportive of the focal individual. Secure individuals find it relatively easy to get close to others and are comfortable depending on others and having others depend on them. They don't worry about being abandoned or about others getting too close to them. The insecure adult attachment styles include both avoidant and anxious ambivalent individuals. Avoidant attachment is characterized by reluctance to trust and a preference for maintaining an emotional distance. Avoidant individuals are somewhat uncomfortable being close to others and find it difficult to trust others and to allow themselves to depend on others. They get nervous when anyone gets too close to them or wants a closer relationship. Anxious ambivalent is characterized by separation anxiety and viewing others as unpredictable. Anxious ambivalent individuals find others are reluctant to get as close as they would like. They often worry about relationships staying intact and desire closer relationships with others which can scare others away. These three adult attachment styles can be a potential source of the implicit leadership and ideal leader-type notions and are directly linked to liking/likability as well as whether others see the focal individual as a potential leader (see Berson, Dan, & Yammarino, 2006).

Whereas both self-expansion and attachment focus on individuals and how they build relationships, from a purely dyadic perspective, a dyad level of analysis, underlying bases for liking and likability may be attraction, similarity, and exchange (e.g., Blau, 1964; Byrne & Nelson, 1965; Heider, 1958; Homans, 1974; Liden, Anand, & Vidyarthi, 2016; Secord & Backman, 1974) as well as positive interpersonal relationships (e.g., Algoe, 2019; Fredrickson, 1998; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000; Secord & Backman, 1974), all of which have long histories in social psychology. At the dyad level, attraction and exchange are important fundamental human processes. For example, similarity or a match on a mutual interest or characteristic can lead to mutual liking of one another. Likewise, attraction and exchange can be linked to positive interpersonal relationships. The importance of positive interpersonal relationships based on positive emotions such as amusement (having fun and sharing laughter), joy (disclosing good news), and gratitude (showing kindness) (see