Do "Protean" Employees Make Better Leaders? The Answer is in the Eye of the Beholder

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Abstract

While the protean career (Hall 1976; 2002) has been lauded for its advantages in helping individuals adapt to changing career contexts, it is not clear how this career orientation may impact how others perceive a person's leadership ability. In this study we hypothesized that those with a protean career orientation would receive higher leadership ratings from subordinates and superiors, but lower leadership ratings from peers, in part based upon social comparison theory. Using structural equation modeling, our hypotheses regarding subordinates and peers were supported, but not with respect to superiors, who along with peers rated those with a protean career orientation lower in terms of transformational leadership as measured by the MLQ. We discuss potential reasons for these findings and the consequences for research and theory. Also, we examine the implications of this research for leadership development, workforce recruitment and retention, and possible generational significance.

Keywords: Protean Career; Transformational Leadership; Leadership Development; Career Development

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to establish whether individuals with a "protean" (Hall, 1976; 2002) or independent orientation toward their careers are perceived by workplace others as effective leaders and to discuss the implications. More specifically, we examine leadership ratings of full-time employees by their staff (subordinates), peers, and superiors to see if a protean career orientation on the part of the focal employee is associated with their leadership ratings.

A repeated refrain across the last several years is that we need more people in supervisory roles to act not only as managers but also as leaders in organizational contexts (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000; Zaleznik, 1977). However the type and availability of leaders may be shifting as a result of changes in the psychological contract (employee and employer beliefs about what each is owed in the employment relationship; see Rousseau, 1995). According to Rousseau and others (e.g., Hall & Moss, 1998), employers and employees increasingly treat each other in more transactional and performance-based terms as opposed to relationships defined by paternalism and loyalty. Societal and generational shifts (at least in Western Europe and English-speaking countries; see Schwartz, 1994) that emphasize lifestyle and personal development to a greater degree suggest a more independent management of the "career" by today's career actors.

As more people become more independent in their careers and less dependent upon the organization, will this affect their ability to lead? Will they be less committed to the workplace and coworkers, and somehow be less effective leaders because of this? Or will this new career outlook make for open-minded, fresh, adaptive (Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Senge, 1990), and as a result, effective leaders? Furthermore, what are the implications for the "talent war" for proven

and potential leaders (Ready & Conger, 2007; Spragins, 2005; Trank, Rynes, & Bretz, Jr., 2004)? As well, the dynamics of a performance-based psychological contract and the opportunistic negotiating posture of many employees complicate the recruitment and retention of contemporary leadership talent. Companies can no longer hope to retain employees based upon loyalty or high pay alone.

Our research seeks to explore whether self-directed career actors are more or less effective leaders. Furthermore, we address practical considerations of whether and how organizations should actively recruit, develop, and promote such employees. These questions are critical but to our knowledge have not been answered by existing research.

2. Emergence of the "New" Career

The scholarly interpretation of the "new" career can be traced back to 1976 when Douglas T. Hall wrote (ironically in a book called Careers in *Organizations* [emphasis added]) of an emerging career he labeled the "protean" career (based upon the Greek God Proteus who changes his shape as suits necessity). In the protean career--in contrast to traditional perceptions of the career–the *individual* rather than the organization establishes the standards upon which success is judged and pursues career management action in a self-directed fashion in order to achieve the desired ends.

In the 1980's Derr (1986) emphasized the "internal" (subjective) versus "external" (objective) career, highlighting career success as a very individual phenomenon. So in many ways career scholarship was beginning to emphasize individually-directed careers more than organizationally-directed careers. Moreover, in the 1990's attention to "boundaryless" careers produced a groundswell of interest in agentic careers which cross organizational, geographic,

work-home, and other boundaries and which emphasize multiple vocational opportunities more than continuity with a single employer (Arthur, 1994).

In the last ten years research on protean and boundaryless careers has dominated careers scholarship. Unfortunately, much of the empirical work that has occurred has been somewhat speculative and has taken the key constructs for granted. Only recently have relevant concepts been operationalized to the extent that more precise empirical investigation can be conducted (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006). One limitation of this situation is that careers and organizational scholars alike have supposed many things that have not yet been supported empirically. For example, while the protean and boundaryless careers have been spoken of as though they were inevitable (Hall, 1996; Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999) we have no quantifiable documentation or sense of the degree to which such careers subjectively or objectively exist.

A strongly implicit if not explicit assumption in much of contemporary careers and organizational behavior research is that if one is more protean and/or boundaryless, he or she will be less committed to the organization. This is true only to a limited degree (Briscoe & Finkelstein, 2005) and initial research (Gasteiger & Kaschube, 2005; Gratton, Zaleska, & de Menezes, 2004) suggests that commitment can be expected from protean and even boundaryless employees when basic nurturing conditions are met. The available evidence suggests that with adequate psychological support and opportunities to innovate, protean employees are no less committed than their counterparts (Briscoe & Finkelstein, 2005; Gasteiger & Kaschube, 2005; Gratton, et al., 2004).

But to whatever degree the new career does or does not exist in people's minds and in their actions, there is no question that economic conditions seem to now favor more of a "free

agent" (Pink, 2001) approach to careers, where competition for human resources is active and increasingly transparent (Capelli, 1999). And to the degree to which one is protean in their career orientation or behaviors, they are assumedly more independent than the traditional employee who is seeking primarily to "fit in" and follow a more traditional, organizational career path.

This begs the question of whether protean employees are "good" for organizations. Could it be that employees who independently manage their careers are not advantageous to organizations, who are often interested in inculcating their own values? This perspective may seem especially true for the "rank and file" employee who can be easily managed to perform routine tasks; but these types of tasks are increasingly rare in a rapidly changing, technology-driven economy and many call for leaders at all levels who are willing to think and act independently (Tyler & Blader, 2005; Senge, 1990; Manz & Sims, 1987). We explore the issue of leadership implications of the new career in more depth below.

3.   Leadership and the New Career

The case of leadership in the context of the new career is an important research area for both theoretical and practical reasons. Leaders according to many are those who are *not* predictable, easily swayed, nor looking to the status quo for direction (Zaleznik, 1977; Bennis, 1989). Rather, leaders are comfortable with conflict and even use it to stimulate and galvanize followers (Burns, 1978). However, the corporate model of leadership seems to emphasize what leaders have in common. This is nowhere more true than in the widespread embrace of competency frameworks which rely on prescribing standardized, sanctioned leader behaviors, usually in large corporations (Briscoe & Hall, 1999; Derr, Jones, & Toomey, 1988). The competency movement seems to have resulted from the need for convenience (for example,

creating a common internal "language for leadership") in human resource staffing and training as much as a thoughtful and strategic approach to leadership and leadership development. And in this environment, protean and boundaryless leaders would seem more threatening than sustaining, if the assumptions on the part of many about proteans' lack of commitment and divergent interests are borne out. Nevertheless, this frames a very provocative question which this paper directly confronts: can employees who are more protean lead effectively, or are they by their nature less likely to be perceived as competent in leadership roles? Will such employees approach their supervisory roles with the minimum effort needed to manage subordinates, or will they attempt to energize and inspire their followers?

3.1 Transformational Leadership

In 1978 James MacGregor Burns published his theory of transformational leadership as interpreted from the psychobiographical analyses of several political leaders from across the world. Burns saw transformational leaders as those who engaged with others to lead them to "higher levels of motivation and morality." In this framework, followers and leaders can both participate in leadership relationships in terms of dynamically and interchangeably engaging and transforming one another. In the 1980's and into the 1990's, various authors began to examine the leader's role in visionary change (Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Schein, 1992; Tichy & Deveanna, 1986). And the emphasis shifted from skills of internal (organizational) integration to also include external adaptation (Schein, 1992) to the rapidly changing global economy. In this vein, Bass and Avolio extended Burns' theory of transformational leadership and applied it to organizational contexts (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1990). They developed several subcategories of transactional and transformational leadership that evolved as efforts were made to make these concepts more reliable (Avolio & Bass, 2004). The current rendition of their

framework associates transactional leadership with leaders who bestow contingent rewards (via appropriate and fair exchanges), engage in passive management by exception (emphasize failure when noticed), and engage in active management by exception (actively monitor and emphasize failure). In contrast, transformational leadership is defined by leaders who engage in idealized influence (exhibiting ideals, acting as a role model), inspirational motivation (charismatic and motivational actions), intellectual stimulation (challenging the status quo, thinking "outside of the box") and individualized consideration (treating followers in a personalized way). In many ways the transformational emphasis upon visionary leadership has remained central to leadership studies. In fact, a substantial portion of leadership articles published in the last several years have focused upon charismatic or transformational leadership (Yukl, 2002).

Returning to an earlier argument, authors have emphasized the need for individuals throughout the organization to take a leadership role (e.g., Manz & Sims, 1987; Senge, 1990). The working logic is that it is no longer possible for the person at the top to think for the whole organization (Senge, 1990); visionary initiative is needed throughout (Sosik & Dinger, 2007). This seems to indicate a need for relative intellectual independence and autonomy on the part of all employees if they are to act in leadership mode, even in relatively small, lower-level, and/or informal organizational spheres. The call for this type of leader has strong parallels with protean career attributes in our view. In managing -- both one's self in one's career, or others in various contexts -- leadership is relevant.

3.2 Links between transformational leadership and the protean career orientation

According to Hall (2002) the protean career is composed of 1) self-directed career management (taking proactive and independent actions to pursue developmental/career opportunities) and 2) a values-driven career orientation in which the individual is self-aware of

their personal values and uses them to guide their career and development decisions. Briscoe and Hall (2006) discussed how various combinations of being values-driven and self-directed in career management (two independent constructs) result in different strengths and weaknesses. For example, they portray one who is neither values-driven nor self-directed as "dependent" in career management, essentially adrift waiting for ideas and opportunities to be identified by others. A person who is clear on their career values but not very behaviorally self-dependent enjoys more consistency in terms of values and beliefs, but is less able to act effectively on those values; Briscoe and Hall (2006) label such a person as "rigid." They label as "reactive" those who are able to regulate their career management in terms of behavior, but are not very self-directed in terms of being driven by their own values. Finally, Briscoe and Hall label a career actor as "transformational" who is both self-directed and values-driven in career management. Such a person is not only aware of his or her values, but also able to effectively act on them.

We postulate that these dimensions are very relevant not only for the protean career orientation, but also in leadership. As with career management, a follower or leader can be dependent, rigid, reactive, and transformational. Briscoe and Hall (2006) suggest that a real danger for organizations is the reactive leader, one who is able to ask "how high" when told to jump but who does not know why they are jumping. Corporations may be seduced by such a manager's "good soldier" display, but overlook the fact that the same person is not capable of generating effective leadership and vision, only reacting to other sources of the same.

We propose that because of the strong overlap between leadership needs and the career management skills defined by the protean perspective (self-directed career management and values-driven career orientation), those with a protean career orientation may be likely to provide effective leadership. This is an important research hypothesis because if protean workers are in

fact likely to excel at leadership, efforts should be made to attract and retain them. Whereas, as it currently stands, in companies where "independent" employees are seen as a poor fit with the organization and/or the job, just the opposite may be occurring.

4. Rater-level perspectives on transformational leadership and the protean career orientation

A central part of this research is based in the assumption that protean employees may not be universally appreciated as transformational leaders depending upon the relative perspective of the rater. That is, their leadership ability may be "in the eye of the beholder." It has been shown that raters at different levels of organizations have been shown to hold varying perceptions of the same leaders. That is, differing relationships with a focal leader are associated with significant disparities in overall assessment and criteria utilized to make conclusions about leadership ability (Parry, Proctor-Thomson, 2002; Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, & Popper, 1998). Specifically, our various perspectives affect the perception, memory, and recall of others' behaviors (Morgan, 1993). Superiors, subordinates, and peers have different environments in which to observe a focal leader's behavior. For example, peers and subordinates typically have greater opportunity to observe the day-to-day behavior of managers as compared with superiors (Morgan, 1993). In sum, formal power differences, varying hierarchical perspectives, and unique working environments may explain variation in evaluations.

We posit that peers are unlikely to equate protean manager perceptions with leadership ability. Peers are more likely to make direct performance comparisons with one another than are those at different levels of the organization (Suls & Willis, 1990). Because peers may perceive others at their same level as competitors, they may be threatened by behavior that is seen as

deviating from an organizational or performance norm. Employees with strong protean career orientations, who rely on their own values at times (perhaps in contrast to their organization's values) and who are highly self-directed, may not be seen as legitimate organizational actors. Furthermore, a peer may in fact admire a protean employee, yet not evaluate them favorably if they feel that duplicating their behavior is hard to achieve (Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1990). Social comparison theory suggests that people are motivated to see themselves as better than others (Wood & Taylor, 1990). If they feel they are inferior (for example, in education, experience, or compensation), in order to achieve parity, individuals will either compete, cooperate, or cease comparison (Festinger, 1954). For example, individuals who perceive another's abilities as being beyond their own mastery may attribute such talents to "genius" ability in the other, and cease comparison (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997). In terms of leadership, this may mean that peers will view leaders' protean orientation as innate and inimitable, and thus may not associate it with transformational leadership. Or, peers may attribute leaders' protean orientations to dispositional factors (e.g., need for achievement) rather than ability (i.e., leadership skills) (Jones & Nisbett, 1972) in order to negate threatening self-comparisons. For these reasons, we feel leaders' protean career orientation will relate negatively to peers' assessment of their transformational leadership behavior.

On the other hand we posit that subordinates will appreciate leaders' self-directed and values-driven career orientations. They (the subordinates) stand to benefit from the values-driven and independent behavior of a protean leader and at the same time are unlikely to have a reason to feel threatened by such behavior. In general, previous research has found that subordinates are more likely to rate leaders as transformational than are peers (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2002).

Finally, while it is possible that superiors may not always approve of employee behavior that does not "fit" with status quo responses and prescriptions for how to think, feel, and behave in organizations, we believe that superiors will likely see the benefit of independent-minded leaders, respect their unique vision, and, in turn, rate them positively in terms of transformational leadership. As leaders themselves, superiors' leadership training and perhaps experience has taught them what behaviors are "leader-like," and when they see their charges acting in ways that connote, for example, vision and independent initiative (that is, as proteans), we feel superiors will equate these behaviors with leadership qualities. Furthermore, Morgan (1993) found that, in general, leadership ratings by superiors are commonly significantly more favorable than the ratings provided by peers and subordinates.

Hypotheses 1a,b,c: *Leaders' reports of self-directed and values-driven protean career orientation will be positively related to subordinates' perceptions of the leaders' a) idealized influence, b) intellectual stimulation, and c) inspirational motivation dimensions of transformational leadership.*

Hypotheses 2a,b,c: *Leaders' reports of self-directed and values-driven protean career orientation will be negatively related to peers' perceptions of the leaders' a) idealized influence, b) intellectual stimulation, and c) inspirational motivation dimensions of transformational leadership.*

Hypotheses 3a,b,c: *Leaders' reports of self-directed and values-driven protean career orientation will be positively related to superiors' perceptions of the leaders' a) idealized influence, b) intellectual stimulation, and c) inspirational motivation dimensions of transformational leadership.*

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5. Method

5.1 Sample

The sampling procedure began with part-time MBA and Executive MBA students from a public Midwestern university who worked full-time. As part of a self-assessment assignment (extra-credit was not given) students were asked to complete a survey where they rated themselves on protean career orientation. In addition, students were instructed to distribute surveys to all relevant work associates with knowledge of their leadership behaviors, that is, to all of their subordinates, supervisors, and peers (those at their same level, doing their same job). These fellow workers completed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; Avolio & Bass, 2004), with the MBA student as the focal person. Raters self-identified as to their relationship to the student: subordinate, superior, or peer. Surveys were returned in sealed envelopes to either the class professor or the student directly.

Three hundred and six subordinates, 296 superiors, and 387 peers rated 292 leaders (MBA students). On average, 1.35 superiors, 1.81 peers, and 1.49 subordinates rated each leader[1]. Data were not kept on how many respondents refused or failed to fill out the survey and thus no response rate is available. However, this type of snowballing procedure has been used in other studies of managers, and has been found to generate heterogeneous samples (e.g., Martins, Eddleston, & Veiga, 2002; Tepper, Uhl-Bien, Kohut, Rogelberg, Lockhart, & Ensley, 2006). Students were provided with five surveys each, with permission to make additional copies; hence a fairly robust response rate is indicated. Respondents were well-distributed among over 80 self-reported industries, with the modal responses of manufacturing, health care, and financial

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[1] Each leader had at least one superior, peer, or subordinate rate them. Respectively the number of leaders with no superior ratings was 34, no peer ratings was 32, and no subordinate ratings was 54.

services. The average age was 31.8 years, 34% were female, and 70% were native to the United

States. See Table 1 for a more detailed description of the focal employee sample.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

5.2 Analytic Strategy

We chose structural equation modeling (SEM) to test our proposed model. SEM was

chosen for its ability to isolate measurement error through an observed and latent variable

structure, simultaneous calculation of model parameters, and tests of overall fit of the model to

the data (Anderson, 1987; Bentler, 1984; Rogosa, 1979). SEM consists of two basic elements:

the measurement model and the structural model. When a model consists of latent variables, as

was the case here, the pattern of relationships between the observed variables and the latent

variables must first be specified (Hoyle, 1995). Our *measurement model* contained at least three

indicators (i.e., observed variables) per latent variable (Bentler & Chou, 1987). Following

Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) recommendation, the measurement model was evaluated first

before proceeding to evaluation of the structural model, to ascertain that the operationalization of

constructs was adequate. The method of estimation used was maximum likelihood (ML). The

software utilized was AMOS 4.0 (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1995). As far as measures of goodness-

of-fit, the widely-used χ^2 statistic was used, yet because it is not interpretable as a standardized

value and is sensitive to sample size, other fit indices were employed as well. As Bentler (1990)

argues, multiple goodness-of-fit indices, which "assess [a chi-square test statistic] in relation to

the fit of more restrictive models" (p. 238), should be utilized in SEM research. Based upon a

survey of the literature, we exercised two respective indices of fit—the *comparative fit index*, or

CFI (Bentler, 1990), and the *nonnormed fit index*, or NNFI (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). A

predetermined cut-off for overall fit indices was set at .9 (Hoyle, 1995). We also report the

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RMSEA (root-mean-square error of approximation; Browne & Cudek, 1993) as it is a recommended *absolute* fix index immune to sample size (Widaman & Thompson, 2003).

A few model modifications were made to reflect relationships between factor structures. First, the error terms associated with two relationships between the protean self-directed and protean values-driven factors were allowed to covary. "I'll follow my own conscience if my company asks me to do something that goes against my values" (protean values-driven; VD) and "In the past I have sided with my own values when the company has asked me to do something I don't agree with" (protean VD) were freed because of their shared introspective, values-laden qualities and overall similarity. And the error term associated with "I prefer to navigate my own career" (protean VD) was allowed to cross-load on the protean self-directed (SD) factor due to the action- and career-oriented nature of this item, which is similar to this VD item. Second, the error terms associated with two transformational leadership items were allowed to covary: [the person being evaluated] "…displays a sense of power and confidence" and "…articulates a compelling vision of the future." This modification was made due to these items' physical proximity in the MLQ (one following the other) and the fact that the former, at face value, seems to also indicate a call to inspiration and followership.

WABA Analyses. MBA students were rated by from one to six of their peers and subordinates. Therefore, we used WABA (within and between analysis; see Dansereau & Yammarino, 2000) to establish whether variance in leader behavior varied within leader work groups, between groups, or both. The results of the 15° E test suggested that each leadership dimension should be treated as parts (E ratios = .75 for idealized influence, .75 for inspirational motivation, and .72 for intellectual stimulation); that is, non-independence was not an issue requiring us to model the rater effect (Dansereau, Alutto, &Yammarino, 1984). The

independence of ratings may reflect the argument that leaders use different approaches in interactions with different persons, for example, to bring out the best in each person (e.g., Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008).

Common Method Variance Test. We conducted a common method variance test to provide evidence against our proposed relationships being explained by a single, common factor. We performed the test suggested by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003) that allowed us to examine the potential increase in model fit attributed to modeling this common methods factor. As recommended, we did not allow this factor to correlate with the other latent variables of our measurement model (see Model M1 in section 6.1 below for measurement model fit statistics). The modeling of the common method factor resulted in a decrement in fit as compared to our hypothesized model represented in Figure 1 (Δ *df* = 47; $\Delta \chi^2$ = 7.5, n.s.). Podsakoff and colleagues (2003) advise that evidence of common method variance is present only when model fit significantly, positively increases.

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]

5.3 Measures

Protean Career Orientation. Protean career orientation was assessed using two scales from Briscoe and colleagues (2006) that assess values-driven (6 items) and self-directed (8 items) career management attitudes. Sample items include "I navigate my own career, based on my personal priorities, as opposed to my employer's priorities" (values-driven), and "ultimately, I depend upon myself to move my career forward" (self-directed). Respondents used a 1-5 Likert scale to indicate the degree to which they identified with these statements. Items were averaged to form a score for both dimensions respectively (values-driven α = .73; self-directed α = .82).

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Transformational Leadership. We employed a three-factor subscale of Avolio and Bass' (2004) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, version 5x Short, asking respondents to rate the leader on three factors of transformational leadership: idealized influence (e.g., "Talks about his/her most important values and beliefs"), inspirational motivation (e.g., "Talks optimistically about the future"), and intellectual stimulation (e.g., "Re-examines critical assumptions to question whether they are appropriate"). We chose to exclude the individualized consideration dimension of the MLQ from our hypotheses because we and others have viewed it as not so much stemming from a unique *leadership* vision, but more from seeing followers as individuals. This fourth dimension also focuses on "establishing congruence with…organizational needs" (Avolio & Bass, 2004, p. 30), which may be unassociated with protean values.

Fellow workers judged how frequently the MLQ statements fit the person they were evaluating with a 5-point Likert-type scale where 0 denoted "not at all," and 4 denoted "frequently, if not always." Each scale contained four items which were averaged to form scores for each of the three factors (II α = .71; IM α = .76; IS α = .72).

Control variables. To control for other possible variables responsible for protean career orientation's association with transformational leadership, we modeled the effect of the focal employee's gender (see Carless, 1998) and age (see Rest, 1994) on perceptions of transformational leadership. Additionally, because increases in level and/or significant increases in job responsibilities or job scope may imply to others increased leadership ability, we controlled for the number of promotions the focal employee reported they had received.

6. Results

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables under study. Highly significant correlations suggested, for example, that when leaders reported a

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higher protean self-directed orientation, their subordinates rated them as more inspirationally motivational ($r = .15$, $p < .01$), yet their superiors rated them lower in idealized influence ($r = -.15$, $p < .01$). The correlations also reflect to some degree correspondence between raters' perceptions of transformational leadership, most notably between peers and superiors. For example, a strong correlation between peers' perceptions and superiors' perceptions of inspirational motivation was found ($r = .33$, $p < .01$). Interestingly, correlations among control variables showed that a higher number of promotions reported by the focal employee was related to being male, perhaps not surprisingly to being older (that is, having had more time in an organization to be promoted), and, across all three categories of raters, to providing greater intellectual stimulation.

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

6.1 Three-Group Comparison Testing

To test our hypotheses, we followed Byrne's (2004) procedures for testing multigroup invariance with the AMOS program. First, we tested for the validity of our factor structures across the three groups simultaneously, which provides a set of fit statistics against which other models are compared. This structural model contains paths from values-driven protean career orientation, self-directed protean career orientation, and our three control variables to a higher order transformational leadership factor (see Figure 1). The structural model fit the data well. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Non-normed Fit Index (NNFI), and RMSEA were .94, .92, and .032, respectively. While the CFI and NNFI were less than Hu and Bentler's (1999) cutoff criterion of .95, they still represented a relatively good fit across the three groups (See Table 3).

[Insert Table 3 about here.]

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Following Bryne's (2004) steps for testing invariance across groups, we next put into place two logically ordered sets of equality constraints. First, in Model M1b, we constrained factor loading paths and then compared this to the fit of the unconstrained three-group model (M1) which resulted in a statistically nonsignificant $\Delta \chi^2$ of 59.8 with 46 df (*n.s.*). Given these findings we gained some confidence that all measures were operating the same way across groups. Next, constraining the structural regression paths (model M1c) resulted in an incremental statistically significant value of $\Delta \chi^2$ of 26.8 with 10 df (*p*<. 01). Therefore, equality constraints in the regression paths were known to not hold across our three populations. So in Model M2 we began testing for invariance across two of the three groups, holding all factor loadings as equal (Byrne, 2004), and beginning with the groups represented in H1 and H2-- subordinates and peers. Table 3 illustrates that, compared with the base model (Model M2), the change in chi-square is statistically significant when imposing regression path (M2b) constraints ($\Delta \chi^2 = 20.2$ with 5 df, *p*<. 01). Hence, subordinates' and peers' perceptions do seem to vary across groups. Next, in our third set of models, we tested for invariance across subordinate and superior groups. Again, Table 3 illustrates that Model 3b, where regression paths were constrained for both groups, produced a significant change in chi-square as compared to the baseline Model 3 ($\Delta \chi^2 = 18.5$ with 5 df, *p* <. 01). These results suggest that subordinates' and superiors' perceptions of transformational leadership vary across groups.

In Model M1 we noted that the signs on the paths from self-directed and values-driven protean career orientation to subordinates' reports of the three transformational leadership dimensions were positive (in support of H1). And for peers' reports, the signs on the paths were negative (in support of H2). However, we also noted that self-directed and values-driven protean career orientation were negatively related to superiors' reports of the three transformational

leadership dimensions (H3 was not supported). Hence, given this information and the variance

between subordinate and 1) peer and 2) superior groups detected in the series of Model 2 and 3

tests above, we next tested whether this variance between groups means that, in our study, it is

reasonable to treat the peer and superior groups as one (Byrne, 2004). Hence, we merged the

peer and superior group data for a fourth series of group invariance testing (see Model 4 tests in

Table 3). In Model 4b, imposing regression path constraints resulted in a significant change in

chi-square value, suggesting that the peer and superior groups together are different from the

subordinate group ($\Delta \chi^2 = 19.7$ with 5 df, $p <. 01$). Given the parsimony of this model, M4 is our

final model and one that fits the data well ($\chi^2 = 2023.3$ with 739 df; CFI = .94; NNFI = .93;

RMSEA = .04). Path estimates are detailed in Table 4.

[Insert Table 4 about here.]

Taken together, these findings provide support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. As predicted, our

model suggests that when leaders report a protean career orientation, 1) subordinates perceive

them as more transformational, and 2) peers see them as less transformational. And,

unexpectedly, in regard to Hypothesis 3, superiors view protean leaders as *less* transformational.

In sum, our SEM analyses provide support for our model of protean career orientation's

association with fellow workers' leadership perceptions.

7. Discussion

Our results provide compelling evidence that workplace perceptions of those with a

protean career orientation as transformational leaders are in "the eye of the beholder."

Specifically, we found a positive relationship between protean career orientation and

transformational leadership when the employees in question were rated by subordinates. On the

other hand, when transformational leadership was rated by superiors and peers, a negative

relationship with protean career orientations was found. Our results indicate that perceptions of leadership in protean career actors depend less on who the leader is (that is, the independence of ratings was shown in our WABA test) and more on the structural relationship of the rater to the leader. To some degree, this study flies in the face of trait theories of leadership (c.f., Bass, 1990). We support that it may not only be your leadership behavior which makes workplace others perceive you as a good leader, it may be also about the view from workplace others' vantage points

Compelling questions arise from these findings. First and foremost, why do subordinates see leaders with a protean career orientation as transformational leaders while peers and superiors do not? It is possible that focal leaders vary their behavior based upon different requirements of the situation as they vary across different hierarchical relationships. Or, might it be that the behavior is consistent, but the same behavior is not equally valued by raters at different levels, as the arguments we presented above and previous research suggest (Shamir et al., 1998)?

In regard to subordinates, our findings seem to indicate that the qualities of those high in protean career orientations may be what subordinates are looking for in leaders today. And we submit that the perspective of the subordinates in this study is of paramount importance. The superior-subordinate interface is powerful in terms of motivation and influence. Organizational research has demonstrated that employees' personification of their organization is often times their direct supervisor (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). While research has yet to produce definitive data, initial findings and anecdotal data suggest that younger generations are more independent, more willing to experiment with structure, and more insistent upon expressing their values than previous generations have been (Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Davis, 2003; Kunreuther,

2003). It is likely that this younger generation of workers sees these characteristics in leaders who are more protean and therefore is more likely to respond positively to them. Perhaps our subordinate sample was younger in age, and that may have been related to their perceptions of protean leaders as transformational. If subordinates' appreciate and desire protean leaders, but organizational decision-makers may not, this may be problematic for younger generations of workers.

For organizations, these findings suggest that when organizational decision-makers (e.g., recruiters, bosses) overlook or negatively judge employees because of their independence and their insistence upon "marching to the beat of their own drummer" in terms of their career, they may be rejecting the very leadership qualities which may lead to the retention of these individuals' subordinates. This has implications for winning "the war on talent" as far as retaining human capital in a dynamic business environment.

So how are we to understand the finding that superiors and peers negatively associated protean career orientations with transformational leadership? One explanation is that, as in our earlier social comparison argument, both peers and superiors are threatened by the nonconventional ways of protean actors. We acknowledge that research has illustrated that some superiors may be threatened by their charges, especially when the latter are viewed as low in rule- or norm-following. When protean actors are seen as self-interested and agentic in maximizing personal outcomes, managers and organizations may meet this with command-and-control mechanisms (surveillance, time clocks, other performance-tracking methods) to bring their behavior into compliance (Tyler & Blader, 2005). Hence, higher conforming workers are desirable and protean actors may be seen both not as leaders, but perhaps also as non-compliants.

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If peers and superiors are "right" does this mean that protean employees should be "purged" or selected out via recruiting, promotion, etc.? As a practical matter, will peer and superior attitudes toward protean employees result in an informal or subconscious culling of such employees? This would be consistent with what Kanter (1977) has labeled (and others have lamented [Hall, 1986]) "homosocial reproduction" in which only leaders who look like those presently in power seem good enough to carry the torch forward for the organization.

Regarding research on leadership and protean career theory, we call for further studies focusing on the two. That is, because the protean dimensions of values-driven and self-directed career attitudes predicted transformational leadership, we wonder if these may in fact be basic underlying psychological dimensions that could improve our understanding of leadership itself in addition to careers.

In regard to gender, one might expect, based on gender role theory (e.g., "think leader, think male" - Schein, 1973; 1975), that we would have found negative zero-order correlations between being female and ratings of transformational leadership. However, as Table 2 illustrates, these relationships were non-significant. Yet, in our full model tests, being female was positively related to transformational leadership ratings, but just for the peer and superior rating groups (see Table 4). These group comparison findings support Carless' (1998) research that evidenced superiors rating female managers as more transformational than males. Yet her study found that subordinates rated male and female leaders equally, and peers were not included in this research. Our findings suggest that peers, like superiors, may rate female leaders as more transformational. And given that the relationship between gender and leadership surfaced only in the full model test and not in the zero-order correlations, the role that protean career orientation may play in regard to gender and leadership may be a fruitful avenue for future study.

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7.1 Implications for Managing Leadership Talent

As stated, the "war for talent" has returned and, according to various sources, will be with us for the foreseeable future. Can organizations afford to lose the talent of more protean individuals? It may be time for senior executives and human resource professionals to reexamine their assumptions in identifying leaders and in tolerating individual differences.

Mentoring and succession planning are particularly important issues. Research suggests that leadership attitudes toward learning goal orientation/transformational leadership and transformational leadership/work-life balance are actually more predictable when using the mentor-protégé *dyad* as the unit of analysis rather than a singular focus on the individual leader (Sosik, Godshalk, & Yammarino, 2004). That is, the mentor has a huge influence on the leadership beliefs and values of those they mentor. Who then will mentor protean employees or even see them as worthy mentoring targets if superiors view them as lacking in leadership ability? Furthermore, if protean employees need socialization regarding organizational norms to be successful, who will teach them?

A key issue is *how* to identify, select, develop, and retain self-directed employees, and leverage their leadership skills. While corporations tend to standardize leadership competencies and development strategy, as stated above, there have been calls to individualize leadership development in ways that may portend promising results for protean employees and others who do not "fit the corporate mold." Individualizing executive development (Fulmer, 1997; Ulrich & Greenfield, 1995) involves creating individual goals and plans, involving the leader heavily in their own development planning, and developing the whole person (Hall, 1996). At least in the United States., many companies have recently discovered that individualized development may be the only practical avenue to any sort of real development. Indeed, emerging executives have

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more interest in a whole-life perspective and are stretched so thin at work that they can barely find time for formal development (Derr, Briscoe, & Buckner, 2002).

Hence, individualized development may be what is needed to develop the protean workforce into leaders and/or to sustain conditions that will encourage already competent leaders to stay. Companies that fail to provide development opportunities that appeal to diverse learning styles and needs risk 1) inculcating a homogonous set of leadership skills that may prove maladaptive in situations requiring myriad responses and 2) losing talented employees who are impatient with a cookie cutter approach to leadership development and who are likely to seek other employment opportunities better suited to their needs.

7.2 Limitations

A central limitation of our study is the snowball sampling design, with its associated possibility of sampling bias. A concern that can not be ruled out is that by putting MBA students in charge of survey administration, this may have skewed the leadership ratings obtained, most likely in an upward direction. They may have given surveys to people whom they like—and those who in general think highly of them. In retrospect, a better design would be to have the MBA students provide the researchers with the contact information for their peers, subordinates, and superiors, and for the researchers to then administer the surveys. We acknowledge this flaw, yet the variance in leadership ratings (see Table 2) does provide a measure of confidence that not all surveys were distributed to workplace friends.

Second, while we did control for the effects of the focal employee's gender, age, and the number of promotions they had received on others' ratings of their transformational leadership ability, the formidable extant research on leadership has illustrated the veritable plethora of

determinants of leadership effectiveness. A stronger study would be one which models a greater

number of these antecedents, for example, the amount of time each rater is exposed to the leader

on a daily basis. As well, future studies should reach beyond demographic variables to rule out

additional competing explanations for our findings, and to possibly qualify the association

between our variables of interest. As an anonymous reviewer suggested, self-efficacy may play

a moderating role. Leaders may have a strong protean orientation, yet lack confidence in the

ability to do their job, which may negate the otherwise positive effects of a protean orientation

on subordinates' leadership ratings. Relatedly, because we employed the MLQ version 5X

Short, which does not ask raters to report their own demographic characteristics, we fail to know

much about our rater populations beyond their simple reporting relationship to the focal

employee. As the leader-member exchange (LMX) research has illustrated, research which

acknowledges both the upward and downward influence of leaders' and followers' attitudes and

behaviors is more realistic and provides a richer understanding of this workplace relationship. In

this vein, future research on protean career orientation and leadership should seek to more fully

understand what the raters bring to the relationship.

A third limitation is one common to the use of SEM in general. SEM can determine that

a model represents the given data, yet other equivalent models which fit the data equally well are

always present. Whether the data represents the "reality" of the population is another question

entirely. Hence, a limitation of our study is that other, equivalent models may explain our

findings as well as our hypothesized model. Researchers who use SEM fail to disconfirm a

model more than they actually confirm the model that they are testing (Williams, Bozdogan, &

Aiman-Smith, 1996). Replication of our design and analyses would enhance confidence in the

results.

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Future research may do well to employ a finer-tuned examination of the superior to leader gap. A fourth limitation is that we, unfortunately, did not measure how many levels each superior rater was above the focal leader. One way of interpreting our results is that an immediate supervisor may view protean behaviors as attempts to preempt and usurp power, and hence does not view these as leadership behaviors. However, a senior manager may look upon the same behaviors with a more benevolent eye and a wider organizational perspective. It could be that at a certain point above the leader (two rungs, three rungs up the hierarchical ladder) a superior may begin to admire protean characteristics without feeling threatened by them.

Fourth, it should be noted that the sample involved individuals living and working in the United States. While the MLQ has garnered impressive statistical results in several countries (Bass, 1997), less is known about the universality of protean attitudes, especially in collectivistic cultures, where protean behaviors may be seen as self-serving, and run counter to social norms. Thus, application of these results to other cultures may be short-sighted. Future research is needed to test whether the protean career orientation is consistent across cultures.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the protean career orientation scales employed in our study measure attitudes. Do these attitudes in fact correlate with independent career *behavior*? Does it matter in terms of predicting potential leaders? Because protean career research is still in its infancy, the link between attitude and behavior needs empirical confirmation. If this link is established, the practical implications of this study may then begin to inform practitioners and organizations who wish to capitalize on the advantages of protean employees. That is, selection measures may then be developed to reliably identify protean workers through attitudinal scales or actual behavior.

8. Conclusion

Our results support the idea that employees high in protean career orientation are effective leaders in the eyes of those they supervise. For reasons that can only be speculated upon at present, peers and superiors of protean employees do not rate them highly in terms of transformational leadership. We assert, however, that given the right environment, protean employees may be the free-thinkers needed to lead today's organizations. The right equilibrium between independent career actors who serve both as leaders and as organizational employees who are still largely governed by group norms, remains to be discovered. But organizations who do not seek to solve this puzzle may do so at their own peril.

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Table 1

Description of focal employee sample

	Mean	SD	Frequencies
Length of Employment with Current Employer (in years)	4.5	3.89	
Hours Worked Per Week	43.9	12.70	
Time in Workforce (in years)	11.8	7.78	
Income (in dollars)	63617.4	45742.46	
Number of Promotions (since entering workforce)	4.0	2.62	
Number of Different Employers (since entering workforce)	3.5	2.33	
Self Employed			5.4%
White Collar Employees			93.5%
Blue Collar Employees			18.4%
Work from Home			12.0%
Management Classifications			
Manager			38.5%
Non-Manager			61.5%
Occupational Categories			
Sales			8.0%
Human Resources Manager			0.7%
Marketing			8.8%
Bank Employee			4.4%
Accountant, Controller, Financial Analyst			21.2%
Management Consultant			2.2%
MIS Consultant			0.7%
Manager (type unspecified)			30.7%
Office Manager			2.2%
Clerical, Office Worker			1.5%
Production, Operations Manager, or Specialist			3.6%
Software Technician			0.7%
Basic Services (Cashier, Teller, etc.)			4.4%
Scientist, R&D			2.2%
Engineer			8.0%

Note. $n = 137$ for income; n= 198 for all other categories

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Table 1 (continued)

Description of focal employee sample

	Mean	SD	Frequencies
Industry Classifications			
Construction & Real Estate			4.2%
Finance & Insurance			15.7%
Food & Agriculture			3.0%
Healthcare			8.4%
Manufacturing			16.3%
Public Services, Education & Recreation			7.8%
Retail			13.3%
Services			8.4%
Technology & Communications			13.9%
Transportation, Energy & Storage			7.8%
Wholesale			1.2%
Education			
Some College			58.1%
Some Vocational Training			32.4%
Graduated Vocational Training			26.5%
Some Undergraduate			78.8%
Bachelors Degree			83.9%
Graduate Courses			65.1%
Master's Degree			29.2%
Beyond Master's Degree			12.8%

Note. $n = 137$ for income; n= 198 for all other categories

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Table 2

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Idealized Influence (Sub)	3.2	.68	--													
2. Inspirational Motivation (Sub)	3.2	.67	.74**	--												
3. Intellectual Stimulation (Sub)	3.0	.67	.65**	.67**	--											
4. Idealized Influence (Peer)	3.2	.59	.16	.19	.21*	--										
5. Inspirational Motivation (Peer)	3.1	.60	.16	.22*	.12	.58**	--									
6. Intellectual Stimulation (Peer)	3.0	.61	.01	.25*	.25*	.58**	.41**	--								
7. Idealized Influence (Sup)	3.2	.56	.12	.11	.16	.24**	.17*	.17*	--							
8. Inspirational Motivation (Sup)	3.1	.60	.12	.20*	.11	.25**	.33**	.18*	.65**	--						
9. Intellectual Stimulation (Sup)	2.9	.61	-.11	-.06	.09	.11	-.11	.12	.50**	.53**	--					
10. Protean - self-directed	4.0	.57	.05	.15**	.17**	-.09*	-.01	-.01	-.15**	-.03	-.11*	--				
11. Protean - values-driven	3.6	.62	.07	.03	.14**	-.11**	-.07	-.08*	-.14**	-.04	-.05	.47**	--			
12. Gender [a]	34% female	--	.02	.06	.06	.12	.14	.13	.03	-.02	-.15	-.08	.01	--		
13. Age (year)	31.8	8.3	.12	.14	.10	.01	-.04	.10	-.01	-.06	.07	.11	.12*	.07	--	
14. Number of Promotions	3.8	2.6	.19*	.16	.22*	.08	.15	.18*	.06	.15	.25**	.09	.07	.15*	-.49**	--

Note. $n = 1,281$. Sub = Subordinates' perceptions; Peer = Peers' perceptions; Sup = Superiors' perceptions.
[a] 1 = Male; 2 = Female.

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Table 2 (continued)

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among variables

	Mean	SD	11	12	13	14
1. Idealized Influence (Sub)	3.2	.68				
2. Inspirational Motivation (Sub)	3.2	.67				
3. Intellectual Stimulation (Sub)	3.0	.67				
4. Idealized Influence (Peer)	3.2	.59				
5. Inspirational Motivation (Peer)	3.1	.60				
6. Intellectual Stimulation (Peer)	3.0	.61				
7. Idealized Influence (Sup)	3.2	.56				
8. Inspirational Motivation (Sup)	3.1	.60				
9. Intellectual Stimulation (Sup)	2.9	.61				
10. Protean - self-directed	4.0	.57				
11. Protean - values-driven	3.6	.62	--			
12. Gender [a]	34% female	--	.01	--		
13. Age (year)	31.8	8.3	.12*	.07	--	
14. Number of Promotions	3.8	2.6	.07	.15*	-.49**	--

Note. $n = 1,281$. Sub = Subordinates' perceptions; Peer = Peers' perceptions; Sup = Superiors' perceptions.

[a] 1 = Male; 2 = Female.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

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Table 3

Model fit indices

Model	Comparative Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta \chi^2$	Δ df	Statistical Significance
M1 – Unconstrained 3-grp.	--	2128.1	1074	--	--	--
M1b – Constrained Factor Loadings 3-grp.	M1	2187.9	1120	59.8	46	*n.s.*
M1c – Constrained Structural Regression Paths 3-grp.	M1b	2214.7	1130	26.8	10	*p<.01*
Subordinates vs. Peers						
M2 – Constrained Factor Loadings 2-grp.	--	1572.1	739	--	--	--
M2b – Constrained Structural. Regression Paths 2-grp.	M2	1592.3	744	20.2	5	*p<.01*
Subordinates vs. Superiors						
M3 – Constrained Factor Loadings 2-grp.	--	1432.6	739	--	--	--
M3b – Constrained Structural. Regression Paths 2-grp.	M3	1451.1	744	18.5	5	*p<.01*
Subordinates vs. Peers and Superiors						
M4 – Constrained Factor Loadings 2-grp.	--	2023.3	739	--	--	--
M4b – Constrained Structural. Regression Paths 2-grp.	M4	2043	744	19.7	5	*p<.01*

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Table 4

Path estimates – Model 4

	ProtSD – TL	ProtVD-TL	TL – II	TL-IM	TL-IS	Gender-TL	Age-TL	Promotions-TL
Subordinates	.27**	.18**	.93**	.90**	.85**	-.10	.05	.11
Peers and Superiors	-.11*	-.24**	.94**	.86**	.80**	.13*	-.07	.17**

Note. All path estimates are standardized values.
*p < .05 **p < .01

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Figure 1

Theoretical model: Leader protean career orientation and fellow workers' transformational leadership perceptions