



Review

Follower transformation as the linchpin of transformational leadership theory: A systematic review and future research agenda[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Transformational leadership theory represents a cornerstone in leadership research. Despite an impressive empirical record highlighted by both the breadth of its nomological network and magnitudes of effects, scholars raise serious construct and content validity concerns. In this article, we address a remarkable oversight in the transformational leadership literature. Few studies have assessed the theory assumption that the positive individual, group, and organizational effects of transformational leadership are due to the transformation of followers in specific and enduring ways. We offer a systematic review of empirical evidence related to follower transformation as the conceptual foundation of transformational leadership theory. Findings from this review highlight the radical leap in the evolution of transformational leadership theory from nascent phenomena to mature paradigm. Calling for a return to nascent and intermediary phases of theory development, we conclude with a research agenda aimed at creating a stronger theory, better measures, and more actionable leadership models.

Introduction

Transformational leadership theory has garnered substantial scholarly attention since its inception more than 40 years ago and continues to be one of the most actively researched leadership paradigms (Day & Antonakis, 2012; Dinh et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016). The notion that leaders transform followers in ways that lead to greater organizational performance provides a compelling conceptual foundation for both research and practice. Hundreds of empirical studies support links between transformational leaders and individual, group, and organizational outcomes, making it hard to deny the importance of this construct.

Yet despite its rich history, transformational leadership theory is at a crossroads. On the one hand, critics point out serious flaws in the theory and operationalizations, with some going so far as to call for the abandonment of the construct entirely (most notably, van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). On the other, researchers continue to invest efforts to explore new frontiers of this leadership paradigm (cf. Jiang & Chen, 2018; Jin, Seo, & Shapiro, 2016; Rosen et al., 2019). The purpose of this review is to explore potential explanations for how the current state of affairs came to be and offer a much-needed course correction to the transformational leadership research agenda.

Our review centers on the notion that follower transformation

represents the key conceptual foundation for transformational leadership theory. Regardless of the positive outcomes associated with this leadership construct, a leader isn't truly "transformational" unless followers are transformed. Moreover, the utility of transformational leadership hinges on follower transformation serving as a mechanism explaining the relationship between leaders and positive organizational outcomes. Reviewing the role of follower transformation in transformational leadership scholarship, we note its similarity to a linchpin: a critical and often undervalued fastener that holds a complex mechanical system together and whose absence or failure would cause an entire system to malfunction. In engineering parlance, it is critical to test the durability of linchpins early in the design process. We therefore ask: *Have researchers sufficiently tested the major linchpins of transformational leadership theory?*

In the section below, we review transformational leadership theory examining existing criticisms and explicating three fundamental assumptions related to the role of follower transformation. Next, we conduct a systematic literature review to explore whether the field has adequately investigated these assumptions. Finding insufficient evidence, we draw on Edmondson and McManus's (2007) theory-building framework to expose a radical leap in the transformational leadership literature as the field prematurely advanced from a *nascent* to *mature* stage of theory development.

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We conclude with an assessment of the implications of our findings. Combining our concerns with other critiques of transformational leadership theory, we propose a moratorium on theory-extending empirical research until scholars address a series of difficult-yet-necessary questions relating to the future of this construct. Finally, taking the stance that (a) transformational leadership theory is not dead but will require considerable efforts to revive and (b) there are enough redeeming qualities of this theory to justify a revival, we offer a future research agenda aimed at paving the way for a richer theory, more valid measures, and more actionable theoretical and practical applications of transformational leadership.

An overview of the state of transformational leadership theory

Forty years after James McGregor Burns introduced the concept of the transforming leader, his ideas continue to have a substantial impact on how we think about and apply leadership theory. Simply stated, Burns' (1978) thesis was that great leaders are transformational in that they "serve as an independent force in changing the makeup of the followers' motive base..." (Burns, 1978, p. 20, emphasis in original). In the decades that followed, leadership scholars sought to refine, expand, and empirically validate a theory of transformational leadership into what has become arguably the most widely researched leadership paradigm (Day & Antonakis, 2012; Dinh et al., 2014; Northouse, 2016). Most notable to the evolution of transformational leadership theory was the work of Bernard Bass and colleagues who helped clarify (a) the behaviors that leaders engage in to induce follower transformation; (b) the ways in which leaders transform followers; and (c) the nexus of outcomes influenced by leader-follower interactions (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

Empirical evidence of the predictive validity of transformational leadership has been most impressive. Hundreds of primary studies and dozens of meta-analyses have consistently produced moderate-to-strong relationships between transformational leadership and outcomes such as performance, engagement, satisfaction, commitment, and turnover (e.g., DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; G. Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). Comparisons to leadership approaches including authentic leadership, ethical leadership, servant leadership, and transactional leadership highlight both strong relative predictive validity and incremental validity of transformational leadership over and above other leadership constructs (Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, & Wu, 2016; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; G. Wang et al., 2011).

Despite an impressive empirical record highlighted by both the breadth of its nomological network and magnitudes of effects, transformational leadership theory is not without its critics. For instance, van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) liken transformational leadership to the Hans Christian Anderson tale of *The Emperor's New Clothes* where a community is blinded by what they expect to see (that transformational leadership is a viable construct) despite clear evidence to the contrary. They identify four blemishes marring transformational leadership scholarship: (1) the lack of a clear conceptual definition leading to ambiguities regarding the dimensionality of the transformational leader construct; (2) no clear understanding of the causal relationships between leader behaviors, follower responses, and performance outcomes; (3) operationalizations of transformational leaders that confound leader behaviors with effects; and (4) transformational leader measures that fail to reproduce the dimensional structure of the theories. The authors go as far as to label these issues as "fatal flaws" that are "fundamental and inherent" and call for "abandoning the construct" of transformational leadership entirely (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013, p. 2).

Indeed, several scholars have echoed the concerns raised by van Knippenberg and Sitkin (e.g., Barnes, Guarana, Nauman, & Kong, 2016; C. Li, Zhao, & Begley, 2015; V. Li, Mitchell, & Boyle, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2014), and while few have gone so far as to argue for abandoning

the construct entirely, it is clear that we do a disservice to the field by discussing the concerns in principle, but ignoring them in practice. Our goal in this review is to go beyond simply raising awareness of issues with transformational leadership theory (for this, see Antonakis, Bastardoz, Jacquart, & Shamir, 2016; Behrendt, Matz, & Göritz, 2017; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013) to clarify *how* these issues have pervaded the literature despite so much scholarship.

We present an epistemological assessment of transformational leadership theory based on a systematic review of the empirical literature. Our assessment leads to three major conclusions: First, the field has reached what Pfeffer (1993) refers to as *high paradigm development*, which is characterized by consensually shared beliefs about the nature of a theory and the appropriateness of methods of measurement and empirical validation. Pfeffer and others make the argument that paradigm consensus is a necessary—although not sufficient—condition for the systematic advancement of knowledge; fields with undeveloped paradigms are hampered by construct proliferation that obfuscates communication of new knowledge and makes comparing and accumulating findings problematic (Cole, 1983; Kuhn, 1970). As Webster and Starbuck (1988) note: the scientific value of consensus hinges on the correctness of the paradigm and consensus of a mis-specified paradigm could be more damaging than a lack of consensus as the former may result in the advancement of erroneous scientific claims.

A second insight from our literature review is that the field has been in what Edmondson and McManus (2007) refer to as a *mature stage* of theory development. This stage is characterized by "elegant, complex, and logically rigorous [research], addressing issues that other researchers would agree from the outset are worthy of study" (p. 1159). Importantly, Edmondson and McManus note that once a field reaches the mature stage of theory development, researchers typically rely heavily on existing constructs and measures and aim to contribute to the theory by adding specificity, introducing new mechanisms, or exploring boundary conditions. Related to the above concern regarding the relationship between paradigm consensus and correctness, a fundamental assumption of mature-stage theories is that the field successfully traversed through earlier developmental stages whereby (a) new theories are generated and explicated (*nascent stage*) and (b) provisional empirical support is found for major theoretical propositions and assumptions (*intermediate stage*). Our literature review exposes a radical leap of transformational leadership scholarship where the field prematurely advanced from a *nascent* to *mature* stage of development with paradigm consensus occurring before scholars exercised due diligence examining the major assumptions of transformational leadership theory.

Our third major conclusion is that there is a relative dearth of empirically rigorous research validating the claims that (a) transformational leaders transform followers in relatively enduring and specific ways and that (b) follower transformation explains the positive effects of leaders on organizational outcomes. Recognizing this oversight and its implications, we call for a program of research that takes transformational leadership theory back to previous stages (intermediate, nascent) where theoretical assumptions are validated and unsupported assumptions are examined and refined.

Transformational leaders and transformational leadership

Before reviewing the transformational leadership literature, a clarification on the distinction between the concept of *transformational leaders* and that of *transformational leadership* is necessary. Following the recommendations of Day and colleagues (Day, 2000, 2011; Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014), we recognize the importance of making a conceptual distinction between the intrapersonal study of *leaders* and the interpersonal study of *leadership*. We extend this observation to transformational leadership theory where we attempt to disentangle what we know about *transformational leaders* (i.e., the attributes and behaviors associated with people who fit this

categorization) from what we know about *transformational leadership* (i.e., the process through which leaders transform followers).¹

While scholars have created parallel models and alternate measures of transformational leaders (see Bass & Avolio, 1995; Conger & Kanungo, 1994; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004; Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, & Popper, 1998), previous reviews of the literature highlight the considerable conceptual and empirical overlap (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Ng, 2017; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). For the sake of brevity, we refer to the Bass and Avolio (1995) dimensional labels of transformational leaders unless otherwise noted as they are the most recognizable and are frequently synonymized with transformational leaders. According to this model, the extent to which leaders are considered transformational is a function of four leader dimensions: (1) *Idealized influence* (role modeling attributes and behaviors); (2) *Inspirational motivation* (articulations of compelling and inspiring visions of the future); (3) *Intellectual stimulation* (challenging existing assumptions and stimulating new ways of thinking); and (4) *Individualized consideration* (attending to followers' needs and concerns).

While much of the scholarship in this area focuses on studying the impact of transformational leaders' attributes and behaviors on work outcomes, original conceptualizations of the theory emphasize a process-oriented, leadership-oriented focus. In one of his earliest works on conceptualizing transformational leadership theory, Bass proposed transformational leadership as the process through which leaders "broaden and elevate the interests of their employees,...generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and...stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interests for the good of the group" (Bass, 1990, p. 21).

The stipulation that follower transformation is at the core of transformational leadership was further explicated by subsequent scholars. Podsakoff et al. (1990), for instance, in describing early attempts to define transformational leadership (e.g., Avolio & Bass, 1988; Bass, 1985; Bass, Avolio, & Goodheim, 1987; Bass, Waldman, Avolio, & Bebb, 1987; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House, Woycke, & Fodor, 1988), argued that a common theme among these early perspectives is that "[transformational] leaders transform or change the basic values, beliefs, and attitudes of followers so that they are willing to perform beyond the minimum levels specified by the organizations" (p. 108). As more recent scholars noted, the essence of transformational leadership theory is a process whereby the leader builds followers' commitment to organizational objectives and develops followers to be able to accomplish organizational goals (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013; Bass & Riggio, 2006; van Dierendonck, Stam, Boersma, de Windt, & Alkema, 2014; Yukl, 1998). Put simply, transformational leaders influence the development and transformation of their followers. The result, at least in theory, is the enhancement of follower performance, and subsequently, organizational performance, beyond expectations (Bass, 1985; Yukl, 1998).

¹ In van Knippenberg and Sitkin's (2013) critique of transformational leadership, the authors argue that disentangling the process of transformational leadership from the way in which transformational leaders are evaluated is difficult due to the dominance of the MLQ in transformational leadership research, stating, "transformational leadership is de facto defined as what the MLQ measures." (p. 5; emphasis in original). From this position, they provide a critique of transformational leadership that largely hinges on issues with conceptualizing and operationalizing transformational leader attributes and behaviors (through the MLQ). While we recognize the seriousness of the authors' major criticisms, we take the perspective that disentangling the concept of transformational leaders from transformational leadership theory is (a) possible, (b) necessary due to what van Knippenberg identify as "fundamental flaws" in the transformational leader paradigm, and (c) useful in guiding solutions to overcoming these concerns. We return to this issue in the Discussion section.

Follower transformation as the linchpin of transformational leadership theory

Despite so much scholarship of transformational leadership to date, the transformation of followers remains one of the most critical and understudied elements of this leadership paradigm. This oversight is unfortunate given Burns' assertion that "the extent of real change in [followers] must be investigated, not assumed." (Burns, 1978, p. 440, emphasis in original). Emphasizing the process-oriented focus of transformational leadership, our review centers on the notion that follower transformation represents an indispensable conceptual foundation of transformational leadership theory. Given the relative mileage of transformational leadership research, we propose that a critical evaluation of this linchpin is long overdue.

Drawing on Bass's (1985; see also Bass & Riggio, 2006) conceptualization of transformational leadership, we focus on follower transformation and identify three underlying assumptions of transformational leadership theory:

- 1) Leaders are responsible for relatively enduring change (i.e., transformation) in followers.
- 2) Followers are transformed in specific ways.
- 3) The systematic, relatively enduring change in followers explains the process through which leaders achieve positive workplace results.

In the sections below, we discuss each assumption and describe examples of evidence that would provide support. Then, we systematically review the literature to determine whether the field has garnered support for the underlying assumptions of transformational leadership.

Assumption 1. Leaders transform followers.

Transformational leadership theory is grounded in the assumption that followers transform as the result of their experience with certain leaders. Burns (1978) describes the qualities of transformation as involving "real change" in terms of (a) the magnitude of change: followers' attitudes and values need be transformed to a "marked degree"; and (b) persistence of change: change should be relatively enduring rather than fleeting. While this assumption is perhaps the simplest and most intuitive of the three, the difficulty comes in testing this assumption since it requires that researchers utilize study designs powerful enough to model change. This involves both complex analytical research methodologies and repeated measurement of variables that are expected to change—and remain changed—over time (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010; Singer & Willett, 2003). In this regard, our test of the first assumption involves identifying whether transformational leadership research has employed research designs suitable for assessing follower transformation.

Assumption 2. Followers transform in specific ways.

A second fundamental assumption of transformational leadership theory is that transformational leaders stimulate particular transformations in followers. As a historian and political scientist, James Burns' original conceptualization of transformational leadership laid the groundwork for how societal transformations might occur. Subsequent work by Bass and colleagues applied transformational leadership to organizational contexts and specified how employees are transformed. In particular, Bass (1985) described three specific aspects of a follower's self-concept that are impacted by transformational leaders (for detailed discussions, see Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013):

1. *Collective identification*: Followers develop a sense of belonging to the team or organization and see the collective as an important part of their personal identity.
2. *Value internalization*: Followers align their personal values with the

values of the team or organization.

3. *Self-efficacy*: Followers develop a heightened sense of their ability and potential to accomplish their task.

To test this assumption, we explore whether research has investigated the link between transformational leaders and these three specific constructs. It should be noted that several additional mediating mechanisms have been proposed and empirically investigated by leadership scholars. We do not intend to devalue the important work that has been done to extend transformational leadership theory beyond its original form. Rather, our aim is to explore what has not been done, in terms of empirically validating the foundational assumptions of this theory upon which paradigm consensus and subsequent theory-extending research is grounded.²

Assumption 3. Followers transformation is responsible for the effectiveness of transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership theory was designed to explain variance in leadership effectiveness. Whereas the previous two evaluations focus on validating the claim that transformational leaders create systematic and enduring changes in followers, the final assessment explores the extent to which the field has adequately tested whether these systematic, enduring follower transformations account for the benefits associated with transformational leaders. In other words, a key indicator of the effectiveness of transformational leadership would be evidence that the transformation of followers represents the process through which transformational leaders influence positive individual, group, and organizational outcomes. In sum, the veracity and utility of transformational leadership scholarship hinges on a few critical assumptions. In the next section, we explore three features of the literature:

1. Choices related to research design: Has the field employed appropriate research designs to capture enduring follower transformations?
2. Choices related to study variables: Has the field explored systematic follower change according to theory propositions (collective identification, value internalization, and self-efficacy)?
3. Choices related to data analysis: Has the field captured systematic, enduring follower transformations analyzed whether these transformations account for the effectiveness of transformational leaders?

To be clear, we do not intend to appraise individual scholars' choices or imply that investigations that do not test these assumptions are necessarily inferior. We assess the collective choices of the field to examine the (in)stability of the foundation upon which paradigm consensus and mature-stage, theory-extending research rests.

Method

A systematic literature search was conducted to identify relevant studies for inclusion in our review. Using "transformational leadership" as the keyword, we followed Fischer, Dietz, and Antonakis (2017) screening criteria by searching online databases (ABI INFORM Global,

Academic Search Complete and Business Source Complete via the EBSCOhost research databases, PsycINFO, and Web of Science) for articles that were published before February 2019 in twenty-five journals known to publish leadership research (see Table 1 for a complete list of journals in this review). While we could have limited our search only to studies published since 1985 (when Bass published his seminal book on transformational leadership), we did not want to exclude studies that may have also investigated earlier conceptualizations of the transforming leader (e.g., Burns, 1978). The initial screening yielded 1536 articles.

We then vetted full texts to confirm the relevance of each study. We applied three inclusion criteria during this screening process. First, the study had to be empirical and original research with transformational leadership being one of the focal studied variables (eliminating meta-analyses, reviews, and conceptual studies). Second, since the dimensions of transformational leadership are thought to be formative rather than reflective indicators (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Lee, 2003) where the "whole" is conceptually different from any subset of "parts", we excluded studies that only captured a partial set of transformational leadership dimensions. For instance, a study by Koseoglu, Liu, and Shalley (2017) was excluded because only intellectual stimulation was measured. We also excluded studies that examined transformational leadership as a context (e.g., transformational leadership climate) as they did not measure the direct effects of transformational leaders (e.g., Jiang, Jackson, & Colakoglu, 2016; Menges, Walter, Vogel, & Bruch, 2011).

Applying these criteria, we identified 320 primary studies reporting empirical tests of transformational leadership. Since the focus of our analysis is on follower transformation, we coded studies wherein a follower psychological transformation was directly measured. This excluded studies that measured transformational leader's direct influence on organizational outcomes (e.g., Vaccaro, Jansen, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2012; Zhu, Chew, & Spangler, 2005), studies that only examined antecedents of the leader's attributes and behaviors (e.g., Bommer, Rubin, & Baldwin, 2004; Reichard et al., 2011), studies that used transformational leadership as an element of the nomological network of other variables (e.g., Hu, Erdogan, Jiang, Bauer, & Liu, 2018; G. Li, Rubenstein, Lin, Wang, & Chen, 2018), and scale validation studies (e.g., Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Schriesheim, Wu, & Scandura, 2009).

We should also note that while the transformational leadership literature has been largely dominated by Bass's Full Range Leadership Model and the use of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; Bass & Avolio, 1995; Antonakis & House, 2013; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), we included studies that relied on other transformational leadership measures and models (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 1990; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004) to ensure we provided a complete representation of the state of transformational leadership research. Applying these criteria, we reduced our sample by 185, yielding a final sample of 135 relevant articles. In the next section, we discuss our approach for categorizing studies on follower transformation based on the three assumptions of transformational leadership theory.

Categorization

In Table 2, we present our categorization of the articles in this review. Note that the number of articles in the far-right column ($n = 185$) constitutes studies that did not meet our inclusion criteria of assessing follower transformation. We present this number to provide a more complete illustration of the transformational leadership research and to demonstrate the proportion of empirical research on follower transformation to the overall transformational leadership literature.

In order to more effectively and systematically evaluate the transformational leadership literature according to the three assumptions of transformational leadership theory, we categorized the articles in the following way. First, to address the first assumption, we focused on

² A post hoc assessment of our article database revealed that 90.4% of the empirical studies in our review cited at least one of the works that developed the three psychological mechanisms as key mediators in the transformational leadership process (Bass, 1985; Bass, 1998; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Shamir et al., 1993). Moreover, several studies explicitly identified these mechanisms as the unmeasured phenomena explaining the relationship between their measured transformational leader and outcome variables in the theoretical development of their work (see, for example, De Poel, Stoker, & Van der Zee, 2014; Dust, Resick, & Mawritz, 2014; Nemanich & Vera, 2009; Sun, Zhang, Qi, & Chen, 2012).

Table 1
Journals used for systematic literature review of transformational leadership research.

Journal	Number of article	Initial inquiry	Impact factor
Academy of Management Journal	24	67	6.700
Academy of Management Learning & Education	–	15	2.866
Academy of Management Perspectives	–	10	4.686
Administrative Science Quarterly	2	15	5.878
Group & Organization Management	25	99	3.104
Human Relations	8	71	3.043
Human Resource Management	3	59	2.474
Human Resource Management Journal	1	9	2.343
Human Resource Management Review	–	18	3.276
International Journal of Management Reviews	–	4	6.489
Journal of Applied Psychology	45	124	4.643
Journal of International Business Studies	2	27	6.198
Journal of Management	13	77	8.080
Journal of Management Studies	10	22	5.329
Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology	23	70	2.892
Journal of Organizational Behavior	33	126	4.229
Leadership Quarterly	108	505	3.307
Management and Organization Review	2	26	1.655
Management Science	–	2	3.544
Organization Science	2	34	3.027
Organization Studies	–	15	3.133
Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes	4	28	2.259
Personnel Psychology	14	98	5.523
Research in Organizational Behavior	–	7	3.238
Strategic Management Journal	1	8	5.482
Total	320	1536	

overall research design and assessed how scholars have treated or examined follower change. We applied Ployhart and Vandenberg's (2010) recommendations for analyzing change by categorizing studies based on the frequency and timing in which the focal follower transformation variables were measured. In particular, empirically capturing change requires a “longitudinal” study in which data related to the focal variable theorized to change is collected over three or more time points or waves separated by a sensible unit of time. Ployhart and Vandenberg provide two reasons for why fewer than three measures of a focal variable is insufficient to capture change (see also Singer & Willett, 2003). First, it takes at least three measures to accurately model the trajectory of change; with two or fewer measures, change is assumed to be linear. More critically, with only two measures of a focal variable, it is not possible to decompose true change from measurement error. Accordingly, we submit that “longitudinal” studies provide the strongest test of the first assumption of transformational leadership.

While not truly longitudinal by the most conservative definitions (Day, 2011; Day et al., 2014), Singer and Willett (2003) consider two-wave repeated-measure designs to be incrementally better than research that does not capture a focal variable across multiple time periods (see also Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). Therefore, for research that utilized repeated-measures, we differentiate “longitudinal” from “two-wave” quasi-longitudinal studies (see also Day, 2011; Day et al., 2014). Another form of quasi-longitudinal research design that provides only preliminary support for the theoretically argued longitudinal effects involves separating (across time) measurement of the focal change variable(s) from causes and/or effects (Day, 2011). In accordance, for studies that do not capture repeated measures of follower transformation, we differentiate those that include “temporal separation” of the

leader evaluation and focal follower transformation variable(s) from “single time” studies that assume rather than attempt to assess follower change.

Testing of the second assumption involved coding the follower transformation variables captured by each study. Particularly, we coded whether the study focused on examining follower transformation according to Bass's theoretical propositions—1) identification with the collective, 2) value internalization, and 3) self-efficacy—or whether the scholars attempted to extend this theory by testing additional follower variables.

The final assumption frames follower transformations as the explanatory mechanism of the relationship between transformational leaders and work outcomes. To test this assumption, we coded whether the study treated focal follower variable(s) as mediator and explicitly analyzed the mediation effect. In this regard, an “ideal study” testing the assumptions of transformational leadership would (a) incorporate a repeated-measures design powerful enough to capture enduring change in the follower; (b) measuring specific, theoretically posited follower changes; and (c) modeling follower change as a mediating mechanism explaining the relationship between transformational leaders and work outcomes.

Results

Table 2 presents a visualization of empirical evidence related to the assumptions of transformational leadership theory. Surprisingly, of the 320 primary empirical studies on transformational leadership from our literature search, only 35 studies (11%) directly assessed at least one assumption. Notably, we were only able to locate two studies that assessed elements of all three assumptions.

Tests of all three assumptions

In a field study of employees from a large multinational bank in Hong Kong, Schaubroeck et al. (2016) used a three-wave longitudinal design to explore whether employees' changes in beliefs about the benefits of customer service (proxy for value internalization) and perceived behavioral control (proxy for self-efficacy) mediated the effects of transformational leaders on employee work performance. Overall, Schaubroeck et al. (2016) found support for the assumption that transformational leaders change followers in specific and enduring ways. However, the authors only found partial support for the assumption that follower transformation explained the link between transformational leaders and job performance; the test of mediation was significant for follower value internalization, but not self-efficacy.

In another longitudinal field study involving multiple observations of follower psychological variables over time, Tims et al. (2011) assessed the extent to which transformational leaders impact followers' daily self-efficacy and optimism levels. Data on followers were collected over five consecutive days. While followers' perceptions of transformational leaders were found to be positively related to follower day-level optimism, the same effect was not observed for follower self-efficacy. In testing the mediating effects of these follower psychological variables, support was found only for follower optimism to serve as a mediator for the relationship between transformational leaders and follower work engagement.

Across the two direct tests of all three assumptions of transformational leadership theory, both studies failed to support the importance of follower self-efficacy. Equally important is that neither study tested the importance of follower collective identification in relation to transformational leaders. It must be noted, however, that theory-testing is a collective effort; our goal is to assess whether the field, as a whole, has sufficiently scrutinized the assumptions of transformational leadership theory. In this regard, along with the two above-mentioned studies, we were able to identify four additional studies that tested the first assumption regarding the dynamic nature of transformational

Table 2
Summary of primary empirical studies on transformational leadership (n = 320).

Follower transformation variable					No follower transformation variables
Research design	Bass mediators n = 26 (8.1%)		Other mediators n = 109 (34.1%)		
	Tested Mediation		Tested Mediation		
	<u>Yes</u> n = 20 (6.3%)	<u>No</u> n = 6 (1.9%)	<u>Yes</u> n = 68 (21.3%)	<u>No</u> n = 41 (12.8%)	
Longitudinal n = 6	n = 2 (0.6%) Schaubroeck et al. (2016) Tims et al. (2011)	n = 0 (0%)	n = 2 (0.6%) Breevaart et al. (2016) Breevaart & Zacher (2019)	n = 2 (0.6%) Bono et al. (2007) Breevaart et al. (2014)	n = 185 (57.8%)
Two-Wave n = 7	n = 1 (0.3%) Hannah et al. (2016)	n = 1 (0.3%) Dvir et al. (2002) ^a	n = 1 (0.3%) Lyons & Schneider (2009) ^a	n = 4 (1.2%) Barling et al. (1996) ^a Bommer et al. (2005) Hardy et al. (2010) ^a Hill et al. (2012)	
One-Wave, Temporal Separation n = 11	n = 3 (0.9%) Walumbwa et al. (2008) Walumbwa & Hartnell (2011) Wang & Howell (2012)	n = 0 (0%)	n = 8 (2.5%) Braun et al. (2013) Duan et al. (2017) Jung & Avolio (2000) ^a Kovjanic et al. (2012) Lorinkova & Perry (2019) Nübold et al. (2013) ^a Tucker et al. (2010) Zhang et al., (2011)	n = 0 (0%)	
One-Wave, One Time n = 111	n = 14 (4.4%)	n = 5 (1.6%)	n = 57 (17.8%)	n = 35 (10.9%)	

Note. Top left region represents studies that simultaneously test all three assumptions. Region along the diagonal represents studies that tested at least one assumption.

^a Experimental study.

leadership, but did so by testing mediators beyond those proposed by Bass.

Tests of Assumption 1

In a series of longitudinal field studies using daily diaries, Breevaart et al. (2014) found support for follower transformation in ways not theorized in previous transformational leadership literature. Breevaart et al. (2014) asked Norwegian naval cadets to complete daily diaries over a 34-day period. The researchers found evidence that follower perceptions of autonomy and social support are not only influenced by transformational leaders but that they also explain the association between transformational leaders and follower work engagement. In a follow-up study, Breevaart et al. (2016) relied on data collected from employees in the business service and healthcare sector once a week over the course of five consecutive weeks to extend the mediational pathway from transformational leadership to job performance through work engagement. A third study of employees from a large international brewer in the Netherlands again collected weekly measures of follower psychological variables over five weeks. This time, Breevaart and Zacher (2019) found followers' perception of transformational leaders to influence change in followers' trust in leaders.

In a final longitudinal study, utilizing experience sampling methodology where data were collected from health care workers four times daily for two weeks, Bono et al. (2007) found transformational leaders to positively impact change in followers' experience of positive emotions. On the other hand, transformational leaders had no impact on followers' experiences of negative emotions or reports of emotional regulation over time.

A few general observations regarding tests of the first assumption of transformational leadership theory deserve attention (see Table 2). First, of the 135 articles that directly measured variables associated with follower transformations, 111 (82%) relied on a measure of

follower transformation captured at a single time point and measured the transformational leadership variable at the same time. Second, across the 11 studies where researchers temporally separated measurement of leaders and followers and the 13 studies where repeated measurements were used to capture changes in the follower, results were generally supportive of the assumption that transformational leaders transform followers. Table 3 provides an overview of each of the longitudinal studies discussed above along with studies that employed either quasi-longitudinal or experimental research designs. This table includes only the 24 studies in our review that included tests capable of capturing or inferring change. Of the 51 distinct tests of follower psychological variables measured in a way that either directly captures change (e.g., repeated-measures) or allows for an inference of change (e.g., temporal separation), 33 (65%) were statistically significant in the hypothesized direction. Therefore, we find partial support or Assumption 1.

One potential moderator of this association may be the unit of time over which the relationship was observed. The separation of time between measures of transformational leaders and follower psychological variables ranged from minutes (Lyons & Schneider, 2009) to hours (Bono et al., 2007) to days (Tims et al., 2011) to weeks (Breevaart et al., 2016) to months (Schaubroeck et al., 2016). Of the four studies that tested the first assumption using repeated measures to assess changes in follower psychological variable(s) over the span of more than 6 months, two found support whereas two did not.

Tests of Assumption 2

The second assumption of transformational leadership theory refers to the specific ways that followers are expected to change according to Bass's dominant transformational leadership paradigm. While an abundance of articles use the mediating mechanisms proposed by Bass's theory-building work—collective identity, value internalization, and

Table 3
Studies from the systematic review of transformational leadership according to the three assumptions of transformational leadership theory.

Study	Assumption #1: Studied follower change	Bass Mediators	Assumption #2: Change in follower psychological variable	Assumption #3: Tested whether change in follower explains the effects of TFL									
Authors	Sample	Y?	Type of study	# of observ.	ID	VI	SE	Studied variable	Time between first and last measurement	TFL predicts change in studied variable	Y?	Outcome	Findings
Barling et al. (1996)	20 bank managers from different regional branches of a national bank in Canada	✓	Two-wave pre- and post-intervention field experiment	2				Organizational commitment	5 months	Supported			
Bommer, Rich, & Rubin (2005)	372 employees from three manufacturing firms in Midwestern United States	✓	Two-wave field study	2				Cynicism about organizational change (-)	9 months	Supported			
Bono et al. (2007)	54 ambulatory healthcare employees	✓	Longitudinal field study	40				Feeling positive emotions	2 weeks	Supported			
								Feeling negative emotions	2 weeks	Not supported			
								Faking positive emotions	2 weeks	Not supported			
								Hiding negative emotions	2 weeks	Not supported			
Braun et al. (2013)	360 employees from 39 academic teams (e.g., postdocs, Ph.D. students, technical assistants)		One-wave, temporal separation field study	1				Trust in the team	6 weeks	Supported	✓	Job satisfaction	Support for trust in the team as mediator of the relationship between TFL and follower job satisfaction. No support for trust in the team as mediator the relationship between TFL and team performance
													Team performance
													Trust in the supervisor was also examined as a mediator. However, this variable was assessed at the same time as follower perception of TFL
Breevaart et al. (2016)	57 employees from companies in the business service or the healthcare sector	✓	Longitudinal field study	5				Work engagement	5 weeks	Supported	✓	Performance	Follower work engagement mediated the positive relationship between TFL and follower job performance

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Table 3 (continued)

Study	Assumption #1: Studied follower change			Bass Mediators		Assumption #2: Change in follower psychological variable			Assumption #3: Tested whether change in follower explains the effects of TFL				
Authors	Sample	Y?	Type of study	# of observ.	ID	VI	SE	Studied variable	Time between first and last measurement	TFL predicts change in studied variable	Y?	Outcome	Findings
Breevaart et al. (2014)	61 naval cadets from a Norwegian Military University College	✓	Longitudinal field study	34				Perceived autonomy	34 days	Supported	✓	Work engagement	Follower perceived autonomy mediated the positive relationship between TFL and follower work engagement
Breevaart and Zacher (2019)	59 employees from a large international brewer in the Netherlands	✓	Longitudinal field study	5				Perceived social support	34 days	Supported			Follower perceived social support mediated the positive relationship between TFL and work engagement
Duan et al. (2017)	394 employees from private companies in finance, technology, food, and manufacturing industries in China		One-wave, temporal separation field study	1				Voice role perception	2 months	Supported	✓	Voice behavior	“transformational leaders elicited higher levels of leaders’ voice expectation, which indirectly facilitated voice behavior through employee voice role perception” (p. 663)
Dvir et al. (2002)	90 direct and 724 indirect subordinates in Israel Defense Forces infantry	✓	Two-wave pre- and post-intervention field experiment	2	✓		✓	Self-efficacy Collectivistic orientation Critical independent approach Extra effort Active engagement Internalization of moral values Self-actualization needs	6 months 6 months 6 months 6 months 6 months 6 months 6 months	Not supported Not supported Not supported Not supported Not supported Not supported Not supported			

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Table 3 (continued)

Study	Assumption #1: Studied follower change			Bass Mediators			Assumption #2: Change in follower psychological variable			Assumption #3: Tested whether change in follower explains the effects of TFL			
Authors	Sample	Y?	Type of study	# of observ.	ID	VI	SE	Studied variable	Time between first and last measurement	TFL predicts change in studied variable	Y?	Outcome	Findings
Hannah et al. (2016)	357 United States Army infantry personnel	✓	Two-wave field study	2		✓		Value internalization	~14 weeks	Supported	✓	Performance (leader-rated)	Follower value internalization and self-efficacy both mediated the positive relationship between TFL and leader-rated follower performance
							✓	Self-efficacy	~14 weeks	Supported		Performance (peer-rated)	Support for follower value internalization as mediator of the relationship between TFL and peer-rated follower performance. No support for follower self-efficacy as mediator of the relationship between TFL and peer-rated follower performance
Hardy et al. (2010)	85 UK Royal Marine recruits	✓	Two-wave time-series field experiment	2				Self confidence Resilience Satisfaction	10 weeks 10 weeks 10 weeks	Not supported Not supported Not supported			Intention to report peer transgressions
Hill et al. (2012)	531 government agency employees	✓	Two-wave field study	2				Affective commitment to change Normative commitment to change	12 months 12 months	Not supported			Follower value internalization and self-efficacy both mediated the positive relationship between TFL and follower intention to report peer transgressions
Jung and Avolio (2000)	194 students from upper business courses at a public university in Northeastern United States		Postintervention-only experimental study	1				Trust in the leader	~2 hours ^b	Supported	✓	Objective performance	Follower trust in the leader mediated the relationship between TFL on follower performance and satisfaction with the leader
								Value congruence	~2 hours ^b	Supported		Satisfaction with the leader	Follower value congruence mediated the relationship between TFL on follower performance and satisfaction with the leader
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Table 3 (continued)

Study	Assumption #1: Studied follower change			Bass Mediators			Assumption #2: Change in follower psychological variable			Assumption #3: Tested whether change in follower explains the effects of TFL			
Authors	Sample	Y?	Type of study	# of observ.	ID	VI	SE	Studied variable	Time between first and last measurement	TFL predicts change in studied variable	Y?	Outcome	Findings
Kovjanic et al. (2012)	442 employees from multiple organizations in Switzerland		One-wave, temporal separation field study	1				Autonomy need satisfaction	4 weeks	Supported	✓	Job satisfaction	All three mediators mediated the relationship between TFL and follower job satisfaction
								Competence need satisfaction	4 weeks	Supported		Occupational self-efficacy	Follower competence need satisfaction mediated the relationship between TFL and follower occupational self-efficacy
								Relatedness need satisfaction	4 weeks	Supported		Commitment to the leader	Follower relatedness need satisfaction mediated the relationship between TFL and follower affective commitment to the leader
Lorinkova and Perry (2019)	260 employees of a large skilled trade company in mid-Atlantic United States		One-wave, temporal separation field study	1				Helping behavior ^a	2 weeks	Supported	✓	Group performance	Follower helping behavior mediated the relationship between TFL and group performance
								Felt obligation to work unit	2 weeks	Supported			Follower felt obligation to the work unit mediated the relationship between TFL and group performance
Lyons and Schneider (2009)	214 students from a Midwestern university in United States	✓	Two-wave pre- and post-observation lab experiment	2				Positive affect	3 minutes ^b	Not supported	✓	Performance (objective)	Leadership style had a direct rather than an indirect influence on task performance.
			Postintervention-only lab experiment	1			✓	Negative affect	3 minutes ^b	Not supported			
								Social Support	3 minutes ^b	Supported			
								Task-specific self-efficacy	3 minutes ^b	Supported			
Nübold et al. (2013)	81 students from various study disciplines		Postintervention-only lab experiment	1				Motivation (Objective)	Not reported	Supported	✓	Objective performance	TFL interacts with follower state core self-evaluations to influence follower performance. The effects of TFL on follower performance through follower motivation alone was not supported
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Table 3 (continued)

Study	Assumption #1: Studied follower change			Bass Mediators		Assumption #2: Change in follower psychological variable			Assumption #3: Tested whether change in follower explains the effects of TFL				
Authors	Sample	Y?	Type of study	# of observ.	ID	VI	SE	Studied variable	Time between first and last measurement	TFL predicts change in studied variable	Y?	Outcome	Findings
Schaubroeck et al. (2016)	124 bank tellers from multiple branches of a large multinational bank in Hong Kong	✓	Longitudinal field study	3	✓			Behavioral beliefs	~12 months	Supported	✓	Service quality adherence	Follower behavioral beliefs mediated the relationship between TFL and follower service quality adherence. No support for follower perceived behavioral control as mediator
						✓		Perceived behavioral control	~12 months	Supported		Performance	Follower behavioral beliefs mediated the relationship between TFL and follower performance. No support for follower perceived behavioral control as mediator
						✓		Self-efficacy	5 days	Not supported	✓	Work engagement	No support for follower self-efficacy as mediator of the relationship between TFL and follower work engagement
Tims et al. (2011)	42 employees from two consultancy agencies in the Netherlands	✓	Longitudinal field study	5		✓		Optimism	5 days	Supported		Support for follower optimism as mediator of the relationship between TFL and follower work engagement	
Tucker et al. (2010)	183 team members from multiple teenage ice hockey teams	1	One-wave, temporal separation field study					Team aggression (-) ^a	~4 months	Supported	✓	Player aggression (-)	Team aggression mediated the negative relationship between coach's TFL and player aggression
Walumbwa et al. (2008)	437 bank employees	1	One-wave, temporal separation field study		✓			Identification with the work unit	6 to 9 months	Supported	✓	Performance	Follower Identification with the work unit mediated the relationship between TFL and supervisor rated follower performance
						✓		Self-efficacy	6 to 9 months	Supported			Follower self-efficacy mediated the relationship between TFL and supervisor rated follower performance
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Table 3 (continued)

Study	Assumption #1: Studied follower change			Bass Mediators			Assumption #2: Change in follower psychological variable			Assumption #3: Tested whether change in follower explains the effects of TFL			
Authors	Sample	Y?	Type of study	# of observ.	ID	VI	SE	Studied variable	Time between first and last measurement	TFL predicts change in studied variable	Y?	Outcome	Findings
Walumbwa and Hartnell (2011)	426 employees from a large automobile dealership		One-wave, temporal separation field study	1				Identification with the leader	3 weeks	Supported	✓	Performance	Follower identification with the leader partially mediated the relationship between TFL and supervisor rated follower performance Follower self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between TFL and supervisor rated follower performance Group identification did not mediate the relationship between TFL and group performance Group identification fully mediated the relationship between TFL and collective efficacy
Wang and Howell (2012)	200 employees from multi-industry company in Canada		One-wave, temporal separation field study	1	✓		✓	Group identification	2 weeks	Supported	✓	Group performance	Leader identification fully mediated the relationship between TFL and follower individual performance Leader identified the effects of TFL on follower empowerment
								Leader identification	2 weeks	Supported		Collective Efficacy	Leader identification fully mediated the relationship between TFL and collective efficacy Leader identification fully mediated the relationship between TFL and follower individual performance Leader identified the effects of TFL on follower empowerment
Zhang, Tsui, and Wang (2011)	973 employees from twelve Chinese companies		One-wave, temporal separation field study	1				Knowledge sharing ^a	1 month	Supported	✓	Group creativity	Knowledge sharing mediated the relationship between TFL and group creativity Collective efficacy mediated the relationship between TFL and group creativity
								Collective efficacy	1 month	Supported			Collective efficacy mediated the relationship between TFL and group creativity

Note. TFL = Transformational leaders; ID = identification with the collective or leader; VI = value internalization; SE = self-efficacy

^a Not a psychological mediator

^b Length of experimental session

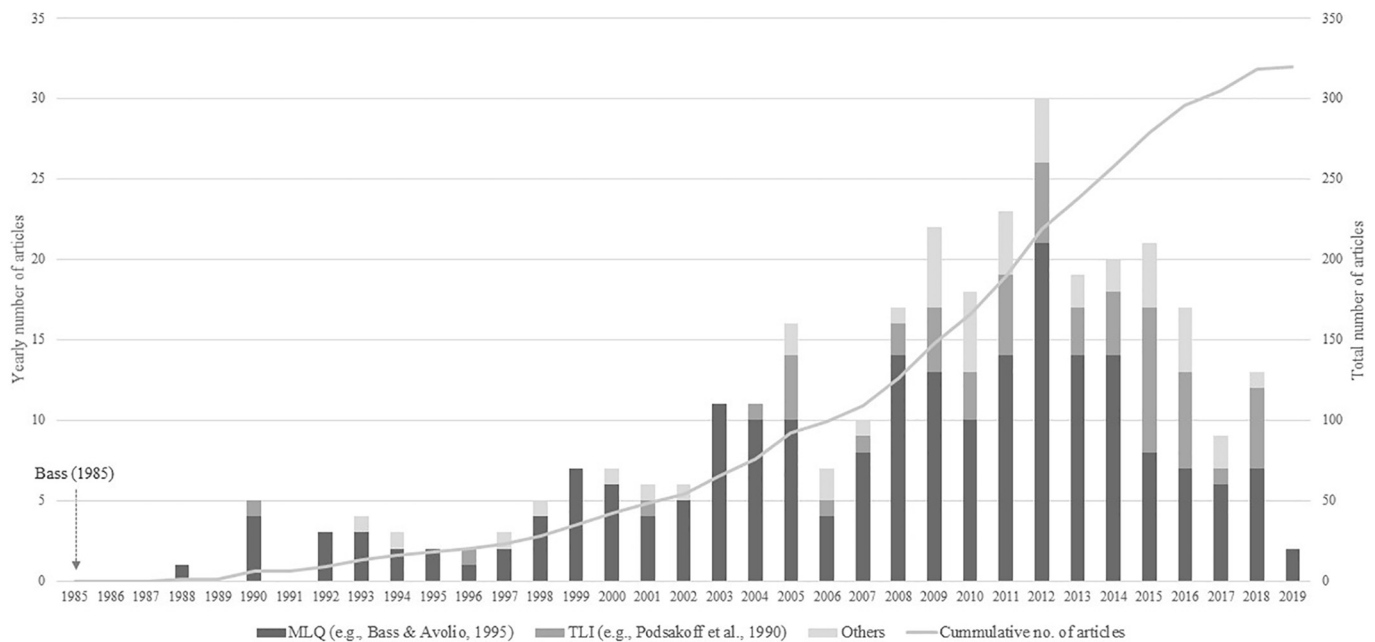


Fig. 1. Empirical research on transformational leadership by year since Bass's conceptualization.
Note. Numbers represent articles obtained from 25 journals.

self-efficacy—to ground extensions of transformational leadership theory to novel research questions (see, for instance, [Chun, Cho, & Sosik, 2016](#); [Kang, Solomon, & Choi, 2015](#); [Nahum-Shani & Somech, 2011](#); [Nemanich & Keller, 2007](#); [Richardson & Vandenberg, 2005](#)), in relatively few articles are these variables directly measured rather than assumed (26 out of 320 studies, or around 8%). Moreover, only eight of these studies employed a research design that involves either repeated-measures of follower transformation variables or temporal separation with measures/manipulations of transformational leaders, (three tests of collective identification, three tests of value internalization, and seven tests of self-efficacy).

In the only study to simultaneously explore all three of Bass's proposed follower psychological transformations, [Dvir et al. \(2002\)](#) conducted a field experimental study to assess the extent to which military leaders in Israel's Defense Forces who completed transformational leadership training would transform infantry subordinates. Their findings failed to support the second assumption concerning follower transformation. In fact, infantry personnel supervised by leaders who attended the transformational leadership intervention regressed in several of their personal developments over the 6-month timeframe.

On the other hand, [Hannah et al. \(2016\)](#) utilized a two-wave, repeated-measures field study design to explore the impact of transformational leadership on United States Army infantry personnel's value internalization and self-efficacy. Over the 14-week study window, [Hannah et al. \(2016\)](#) found evidence that not only did transformational leaders positively influence the development of these two follower psychological variables, but both self-efficacy and value-internalization mediated the relationship between transformational leaders and leader-rated followers' infantry performance.

Summarizing the set of articles from [Table 3](#), we find a general lack of support for the second assumption. Considering the four studies that rely on repeated-measures field study or experimental research designs to study Bass's proposed follower psychological transformation, the only one to explore collective identification ([Dvir et al., 2002](#)) failed to find support. Of the three that assessed value internalization, again one ([Dvir et al., 2002](#)) failed to find support. Finally, two of the four ([Dvir et al., 2002](#); [Tims et al., 2011](#)) assessments of follower self-efficacy were not supported.

Consistent with the notion that the field is in a mature stage of

theory development where theory extensions outpace tests of theory assumptions, the majority of articles that empirically assess follower change explore novel follower psychological variables (109 studies) as opposed to those proposed by Bass during early stages of theory development (26 studies). In [Table 3](#) alone, 34 different follower psychological variables are explored, including trust in leader ([Breevaart & Zacher, 2019](#)), felt obligation to the work unit ([Lorinkova & Perry, 2019](#)), and work engagement ([Breevaart et al., 2016](#)).

Tests of Assumption 3

Only seven out of 320 primary empirical studies on transformational leadership from our literature search directly test the third assumption: that the specific, enduring follower transformations explain a pathway through which transformational leaders produce positive work outcomes. While the results for value internalization and collective identification are generally supportive of this assumption, self-efficacy plays a more tenuous role. In four cases ([Hannah et al., 2016](#); [Lyons & Schneider, 2009](#); [Schaubroeck et al., 2016](#); [Tims et al., 2011](#)), researchers failed to find support for the role of this follower psychological variable.

Discussion

Our systematic literature review revealed a relative dearth of empirical attempts to validate all three major assumptions of the follower transformation linchpin of transformational leadership theory. Moreover, the limited evidence that does exist raises serious concerns with several generally accepted components of this theory. In light of our results, it is clear that we have not tested this theory with sufficient rigor and face inadequate evidence to justify paradigm consensus.

The distribution of studies in [Table 2](#) emphasizes transformational leadership's status as what [Edmondson and McManus \(2007\)](#) refer to as *mature-stage theory development*. This should come as no surprise given the theory's rich, forty-year history. We would, thus, expect the observation that the majority of recent empirical investigations build upon paradigm consensus by extending the domain of mediating mechanisms and outcomes associated with transformational leaders.

To further explore the historical development of this theory, we

present a visual depiction of the accumulation of empirical transformational leadership research in Fig. 1. Counter to expectations based on Edmondson and McManus's (2007) evolution of theory development was the anachronistic nature of the limited evidence that does exist regarding theory assumptions. Instead of testing assumptions early in the lifecycle of transformational leadership theory, in what Edmondson and McManus refer to as *intermediate-stage theory development*, almost all tests of assumptions related to the linchpin of follower transformation occurred in the last decade. In fact, of the 24 articles that measure variables related to follower transformation with a research design that captures change through either repeated-measures or temporal separation, only two were published during the 20-year period following publication of Bass's influential development of the modern paradigm of transformational leadership.

Our review paints a picture of a radical leap from nascent theory to universally accepted paradigm, where the predictive power of the theory overshadowed its explanatory power. Our critical evaluation of the linchpin of transformational leadership raises significant concerns about previous interpretations and future applications of this theory. Applying Kuhn's (1970) philosophical work on the structure of scientific revolutions, the transformational leadership literature seems to be in a crisis of confidence. As such, we recognize the need for an intervention characterized by directly confronting four difficult questions:

Is transformational leadership dead?

Before offering a proposed agenda for future research, we must first tackle the question: "is there a future in transformational leadership research?" Fig. 1 presents disconcerting trends regarding recent scholarship and the outlook of this leadership theory. First, following a period of exponential growth in the 1990s and 2000s, annual publications of empirical transformational leadership peaked in 2012. Over the last three years, the rate of publication has declined by over 50%. Moreover, while paradigm consensus at the theory-level remains strong, there appears to have been a substantive shift away from—rather than towards—paradigm consensus at the operational-level. No fewer than thirteen different operationalizations of transformational leadership were identified in our literature review. In 2004, more than 86% of empirical studies utilized a single measure of transformational leaders—the MLQ. By 2019, the number has decreased year-over-year to 68%.³ One might identify rational explanations for these trends. For instance, it could be that access to free, publicly available, and psychometrically sound measures of transformational leadership (e.g., Transformational Leadership Inventory; Podsakoff et al., 1990) have spurred the relative decline in MLQ popularity. However, it is hard to ignore the role that scathing criticisms of fundamental flaws in transformational leadership theory in conjunction with the introduction of newer, shinier leadership constructs have played in this precipitously declining trend. If transformational leadership is not dead, it is surely dying. If steps are not taken to address the conditions responsible for its decline, a full recovery to previous levels of activity seems a foolish prognosis.

Should we revive transformational leadership theory?

Given the issues raised in this and other reviews, we must consider

³ A further analysis of trends in operationalizations of transformational leadership warrants two observations. First, the decline in MLQ-usage was almost entirely offset by an increase in usage of Podsakoff et al.'s (1990) Transformational Leadership Inventory; no other operationalization of transformational leadership has been used in more than 2% of empirical studies of transformational leadership. Second, even when researchers use measures other than the MLQ, they often convert non-MLQ measures into the dimensional labels used by the MLQ or suggest scale equivalence (e.g., Hill et al., 2012; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Parr, Hunter, & Ligon, 2013; Seo et al., 2012).

the rationality in attempting to salvage transformational leadership theory. On the one hand, as Merton (1973) noted, the hallmark of science is in its self-correction in the pursuit of truth and knowledge. On the other hand, there is a sea of difference between correcting a single scientific claim and correcting a theory that enjoyed paradigm consensus for more than twenty years and has been referenced or directly tested in nearly all leadership scholarship outlets to date. Even if possible, reviving transformational leadership theory will involve a Herculean effort.

Up to this point, our findings and recommendations dovetail with van Knippenberg and Sitkin's (2013) critique of transformational leadership. Here, we note a first significant divergence. Weighing the damages, van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) recommend completely abandoning transformational leadership. We wonder whether such an approach represents "throwing the baby out with the bathwater". If it can be salvaged, we see redeeming qualities in the underlying foundation of transformational leadership theory as an explanation for the process through which leaders play a role in transforming followers into qualitatively superior employees. As Lewin (1943) famously quipped, "there is nothing as practical as good theory". It is our perspective that transformational leadership, as envisioned by Burns, is a good theory that has been part of the collective consciousness of organizational science for decades. This is perhaps due to the parsimony of its sentiment that leaders can transform followers, ultimately aligning the goals of the followers with the goals of the collective organization to incite greater performance at individual, group, and organizational levels. The foundation of transformational leadership theory—elegant in its simplicity—is strong. Yet our review highlights significant concerns with the structural integrity of the levels built upon its foundation, in particular, the specification and operationalization of (a) leader behaviors that elicit follower transformation and (b) systematic ways in which followers are transformed.

Reviews of similar leadership theories—most saliently, authentic leadership (see Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011) and servant leadership (see Van Dierendonck, 2011)—have highlighted these fields' difficulties progressing to mature-stage research due to the proliferation of parallel perspectives, propositions, and operationalizations during early stages of theory development (Gardner et al., 2011; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Despite the growing pains associated with the maturation process, alternative perspectives can create a "survival-of-the-fittest" research mentality which fosters opportunities for discovery and pruning weak ideas through competition for empirical support (Kuhn, 1970). We note that the transformational leadership field suffers from diametric issues: not enough competition of ideas and acceptance of major assumptions at face value. While we take the stance that transformational leadership is "good theory", we question whether we have satisficed along the way by bypassing the conflict often associated with typical early-stage research paradigms.

Can we revive transformational leadership theory?

van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013)'s criticisms rest on their assertion that it is impossible to disentangle operationalizations of transformational leader behaviors from the process of transformational leadership. A second significant diversion from their critique is that we see disentanglement as a difficult but necessary step to reviving transformational leadership. One doesn't have to stray far from the transformational leadership literature to identify an example of scholars working through the labors of reviving a construct that suffers from the lack of a clear separation between the attributes and behaviors of leaders and their theorized outcomes (Antonakis et al., 2016; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 1998, 1999). Using signaling theory as the foundation, Antonakis et al. (2016) re-conceptualized charisma as a set of signals, thus offering a more precise definition of charisma without the tautological risks inherent in previous definitions. Transformational leadership historically faces similar threats to its validity.

Antonakis et al. (2016) write, “Charisma is a values-based, symbolic, and emotion-laden leader signaling” (p. 310), thus strategically separating the intent of the leader from the real effect. Such segregation of leader behavior from the influence the leader actually wields is additionally noted in research detailing the process through which individuals claim leadership via behaviors and others grant those individuals leadership due in part to perceptions of effective influence (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). We must not forget that while follower transformation is central to transformational leadership, so too is the leader.

A final significant departure from van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) is that where they offer a description of major flaws in transformational leadership theory, we suggest reasons for the why these issues arose. Importantly, embedded in the “why’s” are opportunities to address these flaws:

- If the transformational leadership field made a radical leap from nascent theory to mature-stage research, then we need to change course by mandating a moratorium on extending transformational leadership theory until we accumulate sufficient evidence of the major theory propositions regarding follower transformation.
- If new evidence fails to support major propositions of transformational leadership theory, then we need to revert to nascent-stage research characterized by qualitative studies and iterative theory-building efforts.
- If we are revising major tenets of transformational leadership theory, then we need to make sure revisions address current shortcomings, most notably, conceptual ambiguity regarding the distinction between the process of transformational leadership and the qualities/actions of transformational leaders.
- If new theory is constructed, then we need to focus on devising and testing new operationalizations of theory constructs.

These suggestions are grounded in a systematic, deliberate de-evolution (from mature to intermediate to nascent) and subsequent re-evolution through Edmondson and McManus’s (2007) conventional stages of theory development.⁴ Through this journey, we are afforded the luxury of being able to learn from previous gaffes by valuing longitudinal research designs that allow for direct tests of follower transformation and assuring that the challenges of each developmental stage are met before advancing to the aims of subsequent stages. Admittedly, this is easier said than done.

How do we revive transformational leadership theory?

In this section, we offer several specific avenues of future research that could contribute to tearing transformational leadership down to its foundation and rebuilding stronger theory, better measures, and more actionable leader and leadership models. Until the major transformational leadership issues are rectified and new paradigm consensus is achieved, we think it is prudent to refrain from theory-extension research grounded in untested assumptions regarding both the

⁴ While Edmondson and McManus (2007) offer a useful prescriptive approach to paradigm development, we note that scientific philosopher Thomas Kuhn presents a more descriptive account of how “normal science” occurs. In his treatise on scientific revolution, Kuhn (1970) suggests that once researchers accept a paradigm, they typically take theoretical assumptions for granted until a crisis of confidence occurs. At that stage, scientists either probe assumptions until the crisis is resolved or abandon the paradigm for new paradigms, resulting in scientific revolution. Both approaches lead to a similar explanation for the current state of affairs uncovered in this review (insufficient evidence for paradigm assumptions) and offer a similar call to action to address anomalies that have been uncovered. However, according to Kuhn, the history of transformational leadership scholarship is closer to the norm than an exception. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

operationalization of transformational leaders and the process of follower transformations.

The most obvious extension of this literature review is the need for rigorous tests of paradigm assumptions. Our literature review is meant to guide researchers regarding choices related to research design, study variables, and analytic strategies. In particular, we hope that as future research drawing on longitudinal and experimental designs and modeling changes in follower’s collective identification, value internalization, and self-efficacy accumulate, the field can better assess anomalies in the transformational leadership paradigm. A meta-analysis of the transformational leadership process model would be an excellent way to probe major paradigm assumptions.

While our review differs from previous critiques in terms of its focus on the follower transformation process rather than transformational leader attributes and behaviors, it must be stated that rebuilding confidence in transformational leadership theory will require rectifying both issues. If, for instance, the MLQ and other measures of transformational leader dimensions are flawed, then interpreting evidence for follower transformation (based on associations between these flawed instruments and Burns’ mediating mechanisms) is ill-advised.⁵ In this regard, we suggest that even testing the assumptions of transformational leadership theory (as suggested above) may be premature. Instead, we call for a return to the nascent-stage of theory development, characterized by the application of inductive research methodologies.

In returning to the nascent stage, our goal would be to re-examine the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics between leaders and followers with a focus on (a) the ways that followers are transformed and (b) the behaviors that induce these transformations. A key advantage of going back to the nascent stage is that it requires the use of inductive research. Inductive studies would be particularly beneficial to the criticisms we present in this review because they allow researchers to capture and flesh out follower psychological variables that reflect the critical and enduring changes initiated by transformational leaders. These may include observations of leader-follower interactions to identify transformational leader behaviors and interviews with followers to pinpoint the ways in which followers internalize the transformational efforts of their leaders. By applying grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), transformational leadership scholars would stay as close to the natural phenomenon as possible, allowing themes to emerge organically. Through an inductive study of this theory, we may find that follower psychological variables alternative to the three that were originally theorized are transformed by leaders and new relationships among transformed variables more deeply explain how leaders transform their followers. Further, utilizing “member checks” (asking informants to read and provide feedback on grounded theory coding system) is the first obstacle to validity of this revived transformational leadership.

Another primary advantage of the grounded theory is the iterative approach between qualitative data and the literature because it can situate emerging concepts within the nomological framework of existing constructs. Doing so allows for inclusion of previously identified ways in which followers transform. For example, Bommer, Rich, and Rubin (2005) found that transformational leadership was able to reduce their followers’ cynicism about organizational change. Moreover, Duan et al. (2017) found that by strengthening follower perceptions that their voices mattered, transformational leaders were able to increase their likelihood that their followers would engage in voice behavior.

Perhaps an ideal nascent study to investigate follower transformations and begin to examine attributes and behaviors of transformational leaders is through a longitudinal qualitative diary study wherein participants are prompted to reflect each evening on daily experiences with their leader (Gover & Duxbury, 2018, for example of a longitudinal qualitative study). Such a study design presents an opportunity to

⁵ We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out

unveil how followers internalize the values espoused by the transformational leaders over time. Research on learning and development demonstrate that internalization may not be a one-time phenomenon; instead, repetition and practice encourage the internalization process (e.g., Moulton et al., 2006). Qualitative research, including a series of interviews or daily/weekly diary studies, are particularly advantageous in capturing this type of information.

Of course, in their daily reflections, followers would also identify particularly influential leader behaviors, allowing us to expand and refine our conceptualization of a transformational leader. In a similar example, Egri and Herman (2000) interviewed more than 70 leaders, conducted a content analysis of the responses and while they identified the notable “four I’s,” they also found evidence of additional transformational leader behaviors including collaboration, empowerment, and two-way communication. While these scholars used self-reported leadership styles, it is still illustrative of the opportunities for transformational leadership scholarship provided by inductive research.

A solid foundation built via grounded theory provides the stability for transformational leadership theory to evolve. The next hurdle for this theory is to replicate and extend the relationships found using inductive research. Though this review does raise awareness that replications of transformational leadership assumptions are lacking, it does not address more systemic problems related to the lack of incentives to publish replications. As Koole and Lakens (2012) note, unless journals become more open to publishing replications and scholars begin citing replications, there is little incentive for researchers to allocate efforts to replication studies. In this regard, we applaud recent efforts from editors of management science journals to communicate the value of replications and create avenues for replication studies to be published (e.g., Antonakis, 2017a, 2017b; Bamberger, 2019).

Scholars also need to test and refine main assumptions on the path to new paradigm consensus. Mixed-methodologies are best equipped to do this. An example mixed-method study focusing on follower transformation would test potential mediators identified via inductive studies, complementing traditional quantitative approaches to theory-testing with qualitative interviews to open up the black box of follower transformation. Rarely have we considered the dynamic process through which follower transformation occurs.

A hallmark of these types of studies (intermediate studies; Edmondson & McManus, 2007) is the integration of distinct and relevant theories to help explain previously or currently unexplainable processes and organize theoretical predictions. Scholars have previously recommended theories such as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), and social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) to explain why transformational leader behaviors result in positive follower psychological changes. Inherent in these are social experiences and while there is no doubt that leadership is interactive, the effects of leadership, those Bass and others have proposed transform followers, are likely less intrapersonal and more interpersonal. This distinction introduces opportunities to integrate other established theories to further illustrate how leaders influence followers (see Kovjanic et al., 2012), such as self-regulation theory (Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010) and theories about emotions (e.g., affective events theory; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

Addressing the myriad issues with this theory will be a time-consuming journey requiring a collaborative effort. However, we recognize the opportunity inherent in remodeling a theory with such a simple, intuitive, and practicable base. We hope that by drawing on previous leadership research, focusing on follower transformation as the nexus of our understanding of the transformational leadership process during nascent theory-building phases of research, and remaining cognizant of the important milestones in the development of theoretical paradigms, we may create a richer theory of transformational leadership.

Conclusion

In closing, our systematic literature review raises concerns about the development of transformational leadership theory and the lack of empirical evidence for fundamental assumptions regarding follower transformation. Given the current state of the literature, we hope to stimulate difficult conversations about the future of transformational leadership scholarship. The trajectory of the programmatic research efforts will depend on navigating through these issues.

Declaration of Competing Interest

All authors contributed equally to this work.

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