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The locus of leader character

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Discussion

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Available online 8 September 2011	Character is an indispensable component of leadership and its development, and thus warrants future research focus. Before a purposeful research stream on character can proceed, however, it is critical that we fully define and conceptualize the character construct (the ontological basis) and then consider how we might best measure this construct and test it across a diverse array of contexts (the epistemological basis). We pursue these ends by first unpacking the definition of leader character and then by posing a series of questions. Following our initial thoughts related to the locus of character and how leader character is transmitted to and received by followers, we proceed by discussing how character relates to or serves as an antecedent to exemplary leadership styles, how character is contextualized, and how character is developed. Published by Elsevier Inc.

According to Bass and Bass (2008, p. 219), "character of a leader involves his or her ethical and moral beliefs, intentions and behaviors." Bass and Bass further suggest that leader character is linked to virtuous traits such as integrity, justice and fairness. In their definition, we can see that character is defined as a disposition or trait, a way of thinking, being guided by a set of rules or principles, and a behavior or action. We suggest that there is a need to unpack this and other similar definitions of character, so that the field of leadership has a clearer starting point for advancing both theory and research on what constitutes leader character.

Few would disagree that character is an indispensable component of sustainable leadership performance. We therefore wholeheartedly agree with Wright and Quick (in press) that there should be greater investment in further developing our understanding of this construct. Yet, we also must keep in mind that character is necessary but not sufficient for effective leadership. Many leadership roles have relatively little to do with ethics, virtues or values, such as setting a goal to be more efficient with resource usage, which may not originate from a leader's character. Leaders must also demonstrate they are competent with regards to leadership tasks, the group tasks they assign, and goals they set in order to earn followers' respect and trust. We propose that character and competence are the raw building blocks of effective and sustainable leadership.

By engaging in this dialog with Wright and Quick (in press), we hope to energize leadership scholars to place more attention on examining what constitutes the leader character construct and how character and competence serve to foster sustainable leadership performance across contexts, cultures and challenges. We agree with Wright and Quick (in press) in recognizing that leader competence has been more extensively studied—through theories focusing on decision-making, expertise, skills, and adaptability—as compared to leader character, which has lagged in theory development and empirical research (Wright & Goodstein, 2007).

In this paper we respond to Wright and Quick's first letter by addressing the following two points: 1) how should character be defined and conceptualized (the ontological basis) and 2) operationalized for testing (the epistemological basis). We address

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these two points by examining five questions, each noted in a separate subheading below, and then ask Wright and Quick in their next letter to respond by helping us to deepen our mutual understanding of what constitutes leader character and how can it be best tested. We begin by addressing what we will call the locus of leadership with respect to a leader's character.

1. Is character a locus of leadership?

We address the ontology of character as a leadership construct by using a meta-framework that distinguishes between the *locus,* the *transmission,* and the *reception* of leadership. We define the locus of leader character here as representing internal aspects of the leader such as his or her personality, values, moral reasoning and identity (Eberly, Johnson, Hernandez, & Avolio, 2010; Lord, Hannah, & Jennings, 2011).

Originating from the activation of those loci, *transmission* entails the ensuing behaviors the leader employs in any particular situation whereby they "transmit" their leadership to others; i.e., the actions exhibited by the leader. *Reception* concerns how those transmissions are received by the targets of leadership. Reception includes what is perceived, interpreted and the attributions that observers make as to the locus of those behaviors; e.g., "does this leader care about me" or "are they authentic or trustworthy."

When defining the leader character construct it is important to start with the category of locus, which would represent an individual difference that influences and shapes, but is distinct from the transmission or reception of what would constitute a full leadership episode. Therefore, we suggest that it is important to first distinguish "character" from "character-*based* leadership." Returning to Bass and Bass (2008) earlier definition of leader character, we see that they have included without distinction both locus and transmission in their definition. Moreover, since Wright and Quick (in press) use both "character" and "character-based" leadership seemingly interchangeably in their paper, we ask for greater clarity around this distinction as we move forward in our discussion of what is character and how it can be measured.

Beyond offering greater clarity, distinguishing leader behaviors from their locus can not only improve how each is measured, but also how leader character can be developed. For example, researchers have suggested that transformational leader *behaviors* can either stem from an authentic basis where the leader truly desires to inspire, stimulate, develop and positively transform followers; or those same exact behaviors can emerge from a self-serving locus where the leader uses transformational behaviors to manipulate followers. This latter condition has been referred to as being *pseudo* (or *personalized*) transformational leadership (Avolio & Gibbons, 1988; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Similarly, Brown, Treviño, and Harrison's (2005) theory of ethical leadership conceptualized ethical leaders in part as *managers* of ethical conduct who practice various transactional leader behaviors to gain ethical compliance. Those transmissions of transactional behaviors could stem from a locus other than the leader's character and could therefore add to the example presented earlier where we described goal setting as not necessarily being character-based. Thus, there are three possibilities for interpreting leaders' transmission of the same behavior. First, the setting of transactional goals may be *character neutral* in that there is no intended linkage to the locus of the leader's character. The second possibility is that the leader is driven to act consistently with aspects of their core character, and therefore the behavior is *character positive*. Finally, the leader could exhibit those same behaviors for extrinsic or self-serving reasons (e.g., "I am getting followers to pursue goals and objectives that will make me look good even if it is as the expense of my followers"), which would be *character negative* and may fall into the category of pseudo leader character.

By advancing leader character as a locus of leadership, we suggest that the field of leadership can begin to develop a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of who a leader of character *is*, separate from what they *do* or *transmit*. This can fill an important gap in the literature as most current leadership theories such as leader member exchange or ethical leadership do not include an in-depth discussion of character or other locus that drives such leadership. Moreover, the survey measures associated with these theories tend to focus more on the transmission of leadership than on its source or locus. In sum, by integrating the character construct, we can effectively expand the nomological network of current leadership theories to include character as an antecedent to exemplary leadership transmission and reception.

Establishing where character resides amongst locus, transmission, and reception is also critical if we are to precisely define and investigate how it manifests in different contexts. For example, at one point in their discussion, Wright and Quick (in press) state that character is present when a leader "exhibits" moral discipline, moral attachment, and moral autonomy which make them "an agent of social change" (p. XX). This may suggest a view similar to that of Aristotle who argued that character is represented through action, in stating that character "is that which reveals choice, shows what sort of thing a man chooses or avoids in circumstances where the choice is not obvious, so those speeches convey no character in which there is nothing whatever which the speaker chooses or avoids" (Nussbaum, 1992, p.117). These statements clearly demonstrate an orientation towards defining character though transmission.

Yet at another point in their article, Wright and Quick discuss character as akin to values, stating that "…morally-based values (what we call character) make up only a small subset of the entire values domain…", going further to state that character differs from general values-based leadership in that character focuses more on selfless interest and the betterment of society. These statements place leader character as being associated with individual differences, consistent with it being a source of locus. This position is reinforced when Wright and Quick discuss the work of Peterson and Seligman (2004), and describe one's character as being represented by virtues and associated character strengths or traits. In sum, in advancing a new line of research on what constitutes leader character it will be critical to reach consensus in the field as to what aspects of leader character resides in the individual (locus), their behavior (transmission), or in the eye of others (reception). To clarify some of the 'construct blur' in the literature, it will be helpful to distinguish where a leader's character as locus ends, and transmission and reception begin.

2. What are the linkages between character locus, transmission, and reception?

Distinguishing character from character-based leadership is important as a leader's character may or may not always manifest into the actual transmission of behaviors. Separating the two thus allows us to study the processes through which character links to behavioral transmissions, and ultimately reception by observers. We know that attitudes and judgments in general (Ajzen, 1991), as well as ethical judgments in particular (Blasi, 1980; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999), have generated relatively weak relationships in predicting actual ethical behavior. For example a summary of research using the Defining Issues Test, the most commonly used measure of cognitive moral development, showed that moral development levels typically explain less than 20% of the variance in actual ethical choices or behavior (Rest et al., 1999, p. 101). While character is not moral development, attitudes, or judgments per se, these findings suggest there is some form of "process loss" between the locus and the transmission of ethical leader behavior. This suggests that leaders may act without any connection to their character, i.e., character neutral; or counter to their character based on situational constraints and contingencies or internal factors such as fatigue or distraction, i.e., character negative. A leader, for example can use tactics such as moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999) or self-deception (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004) to self-justify their acting inconsistent with their character. Future research is clearly necessary to determine the mechanisms whereby *character* (positive, negative and neutral) formulates and drives *character-based* transmissions of leadership.

We must also proceed by linking character to other factors that drive exemplary leader behavior. We have proposed elsewhere that cognitive moral development is insufficient and that leader moral development requires moral courage, moral efficacy, and moral agency (a sense of moral psychological ownership); what we have called *moral potency* (Hannah & Avolio, 2010, 2011). We proposed that moral potency reduces the "process loss" noted above by providing the required psychological resources leaders need to draw from to create the conation (impetus to act) along with the capacity to carry forward one's judgments through to character-based action (e.g., the moral courage to overcome peer pressure).

Peterson and Seligman's (2004) theory of character strengths and virtues includes, for example, courage (which we consider a source of potency) as well as wisdom and knowledge (which we consider a source of moral cognition). Consistent with our proposed focus, Peterson and Seligman place character as residing within the individual (locus), serving as a source of behavior. Stemming from our earlier comments, it is clear that we will need to determine how these drivers operate, and further, how they operate through both cognitive and conative "channels" to influence the transmission of leadership, while also including in our research how the context impacts the links between locus, transmission and reception.

Going beyond a simple within-person focus on process loss to a between-person focus, character-based leadership would be distinguished in leader and follower interactions when character produces action (transmission) as well as when it is perceived in the eye of the observer (reception) as being character-based. Here additional process loss may potentially occur at any stage of the character locus-transmission-reception process based on individual differences of observers and a variety of contextual influences on observers' perceptions and attributions. Such individual differences might include the moral reasoning capacity of the observer, cultural values, or cognitive complexity. Whereas, some of the contextual influences might involve the nature of the challenge being confronted, the risks associated with action, time pressures, and various cultural and social norms.

Future research therefore needs to examine how these individual and contextual differences shape how character-based leadership is perceived and interpreted as well as its impact on performance. One interesting avenue for future research to pursue could involve examining the "character markers" observers pick up on and the attributions they make to the leader's character as a function of the context and the characteristics of the observer.

3. Is character-based leadership a general or specific term?

Wright and Quick (in press) state that their view of character-based leadership "draws on a number of philosophies, including servant… spiritual… values-based, and authentic leadership", but is "distinguished by its fundamental adherence to a core moral framework" (p. XX). From this quote we can derive two interpretations. First, Wright and Quick do not see those other forms of leadership as being necessarily morally-based. Second, character-based leadership draws from but is distinct from these other philosophies of leadership.

We believe that distinguishing the locus (i.e., character) from the transmission and reception phases (i.e., character-based leadership) provides some insights into the distinctiveness of the term character-based leadership from specific forms of leadership such as ethical or authentic leadership. Are ethical (Brown et al., 2005) or authentic leadership (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004), for example, forms of character-based leadership? One of the four components of authentic leadership, for example, is "internalized moral perspective" which is defined as leader behaviors that are guided by internal moral standards as opposed to external pressure such as from peers, organizational and/or societal pressures (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Does this single component of the higher order construct of authentic leadership make it a character-based leadership theory in terms of locus? This brings up the important question of whether some leadership theories are character-based, or what we have called character-positive, by definition; and which theories may be character-positive, negative or neutral based on the nature of the linkages between locus and transmission.

We take the position that character-based leadership is a general construct somewhat agnostic as to any specific leadership style, and therefore character may drive a variety of different models of exemplary leadership as an antecedent. Leader character could therefore be used to build out our understanding of transformational, ethical, authentic, servant, spiritual, or other

leadership models based on two factors: 1) the character makeup of the specific leader, and 2) what aspects of their character makeup is active in a certain context. This leads us to our next question.

4. How is leader character contextualized?

From a personality perspective, leaders' identities are complex structures and each unique leadership context activates distinct personality signatures (Hannah, Woolfolk, & Lord, 2009; Lord et al., 2011). Leader behavior can thus show within-situation consistency due to repetitive sources of priming within a particular situation, yet large between-situation variance also exists (Mischel & Shoda, 1998). From this perspective, it is plausible that there are subsets of activated character strengths related to each of the various potential transmissions of character-based leadership. That is, unique "character signatures" may predict transformational leadership, while others may predict ethical, authentic, and other forms of leadership. Importantly, these antecedents or "signatures" could stem from a combination of individual leader or between leader differences, as well as the specific aspects of character activated in one situation versus another (i.e., within-person differences). Studying these within and between-leader differences could deepen our understanding of the source of character-based leader transmissions across different contexts.

While Wright and Quick (in press) do not discuss within-person variability of character activation across contexts as we have above, they do discuss their work with MBA students that suggests there are between-person differences in character strengths deemed most beneficial for leaders operating in specific occupations (e.g., politician or entrepreneur). With respect to contextual differences, Wright and Quick propose that character is particularly critical for leaders operating in extreme contexts, which we support (see Hannah, Campbell, & Matthews, 2010; Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009). Specifically, we suspect that in extreme contexts where life and death may hang in the balance based on a leader's actions, certain character signatures may be evoked that differ from those in less extreme contexts. For instance, the character strength of courage may only be activated in more extreme situations calling for one's courage to act. Further, it is likely that followers look for specific character markers in their leaders in different contexts, such as courage in extreme contexts. This suggests that future leadership research should investigate whether the effects of signature character strengths on transmission, reception and leadership outcomes vary as a function of the level of extremeness.

Overall, bringing the context front and center into our dialog of leader character raises numerous research questions including: Do certain occupations attract, socialize and retain certain leader character profiles among members? How does the leader's character develop and what are the differences in the developmental process across different contexts? Of course, beyond differences across contexts, we also need to ask whether there are some universal character signatures that transcend contexts in terms of their contribution to leadership.

5. Is character developable?

The contextualization of character poses another set of questions not specifically addressed in Wright and Quick's (2010) first letter. That is, to what extent is character developable and through what means? Peterson and Seligman (2004) take a position that character is somewhat malleable. Further, leadership research has shown that leader personality and leader emergence is a function of both hereditary influences and life experiences, suggesting it can be developed (Arvey, Zhang, Avolio, & Kruger, 2007; Avolio, Rotundo, & Walumbwa, 2009). To the degree that one's personality and/or character is malleable, it leads us to question how might character be best developed, and whether such development differs for different character strengths? Along these lines, Wright and Quick proposed that character is akin to "morally-based values". This may suggest that character is a *system* or organizing structure for one's values. Such a systemic view would be consistent with conceptualizations of personality as being a complex hierarchical structure comprised of subordinate personality facets (Hannah et al., 2009; Mischel & Shoda, 1998; Wood, 2007). Viewing character development from this perspective might entail the development of increasingly more complex value structures over a leader's lifespan, with layers of values (and perhaps ideals, beliefs and other structures) nested to form complex structures that guide behavior when activated. Taking this view might offer some insights into why at earlier points in one's life-span the type of decisions that one might make that in hindsight 'lacked character' would not be the decision made later in life once this system of signature characters is more thoroughly rooted in the leader's self-concept.

Our position on leader character development is also consistent with the constructive developmental theory proposed by Kegan (1982), which suggests that individuals construct increasingly more complex understandings of their world through the accumulation and cataloging of experiences, and through this cognitive and moral maturation process identify regularities across experiences which over time form the *deep structure* of moral perspective. As these cognitive structures become more complex, individuals increasingly accrue the ability to view their experiences more objectively and better assess the adequacy of their actions and their impacts on others. Building on this body of work, Kuhnert and Lewis (1987) used Kegan's theory to argue that transformational leaders have achieved higher stages of constructive development, prompting them to be guided by their core values, to self sacrifice for the good of their group, and to view the development of their followers into leaders as important outcomes.

What is important to take away from our discussion is that if character is comprised of some form of a values system or personality structure, then character strengths should not necessarily be studied separately. This again reinforces that leaders' overall *character signature* may best inform what constitutes character-based leadership within and across contexts.

6. Conclusion

We close by thanking Tom Wright and Jim Quick for engaging with us in this important discussion on character and character-based leadership. We appear aligned in mutual belief that character is a (if not *the*) critical component of leadership. To date, however, purposeful research efforts have yet to provide the levels of theoretical and empirical advancements needed for the importance of this construct to be realized. Many unanswered questions need to be addressed if we are to advance a research stream on character as called for by Wright and Huang (2008). We sought to advance the theoretical basis for character by first unpacking the definition into locus, transmission and reception, as well as by asking five critical questions to guide our discussion.

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