SELF-DISTANCING: A KEY TO LEADERSHIP SUCCESS?

by

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ABSTRACT

ELEANOR BLISS WILLIAMS. Self-distancing: a key to leadership success? (Under the direction of DR. STEVEN ROGELBERG)

This study adds to the limited body of research on self-leadership—at the heart of which is self-talk—and it's impact on leaders' performance. The research that has been done on leaders' self-talk has not yet looked at the promising effects of self-distancing in one's self-talk, which has only been examined in the clinical literature. Consistent with the research that does exist on self-distancing, the researcher hypothesized that higher levels of self-distancing would be associated with stronger leader performance along with better self-awareness and that these relationships would be moderated by managerial status (such that the relationship would be stronger for first-time managers, when self-leadership is especially critical during the transition). The results for all three hypotheses were not significant. Even though there was a lack of promising findings, there were some limitations to this study that likely inhibited the ability to uncover relationships: namely the distal outcome of job performance, the secondary nature of the data, and the limited coding scheme. The researcher puts forth ideas for overcoming these limitations with the hopes of continuing to explore this promising line of research.

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my Dad, Thomas B. Williams.

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I would like to acknowledge several people who made this project possible. First, I'd like to acknowledge the tremendous amount of support, both professionally and personally, that I received from my advisor, Dr. Steven Rogelberg. I would also like to recognize my other committee members, Dr. Eric Heggestad and Dr. William Gentry, with an extra thank you to Dr. Gentry for supplying me with data and for being open to what I wanted to do with said data.

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INTRODUCTION

A successful leader impacts more than the organization's bottom line: a great leader can positively influence those people around them and serve as a role model within the organization (George, 2003). Not only is maximizing the potential for leader success important, but the cost of failure is also significant: research indicates that managers who derail can cost their organization up to 20 times their salary, which can be extremely expensive at upper levels of management (Gentry, Mondore, & Cox, 2007). Given the importance of leadership effectiveness, there is a host of research and theory informing what leaders can do to be successful. This research generally focuses on how leaders lead the organization, their subordinates and peers, and the self. In this paper, we focus on how leadership of self—in particular self-distancing—relates to leadership effectiveness.

Leadership Theory

Scholars conduct leadership research from a variety of perspectives. Thus, there is a wide range of leadership theories: from the more traditional contingency model of leadership (Fiedler, 1967), to transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), to authentic leadership (George, 2003), and even e-leadership (Zigurs, 2003), among numerous others. Some scholars (e.g. Boal & Hoojiberg, 2001) have argued that the aforementioned theories of leadership are "supervisory," in that they focus on task and person-behaviors that leaders employ as they lead; these supervisory theories are said to focus on leadership "in" an organization as opposed to leadership "of" an organization. In order to better understand leadership of an organization as a whole, Boal and Hooijberg (2001) argue that scholars today should concentrate on strategic leadership

theories. One strategic leadership theory that has recently entered the academic literature is transcendent leadership theory, which addresses challenges that leaders face today in a tumultuous, global environment (Crossan, Vera, & Nanjad, 2008).

Unlike some of its aforementioned counterparts, transcendent leadership theory is truly a strategic leadership theory. Some of the more micro-focused, supervisory leadership theories focus on the leader-follower relationship, along with specific leadership behaviors; whereas transcendent leadership goes further to incorporate the three levels at which a leader must excel. Simply put, a transcendent leader is "a strategic leader who leads within and amongst the levels of self, others, and organization" (Crossan, Vera, & Nanjad, 2008, p. 569). Today's leadership literature includes a good amount of research on the "others" (e.g. leader-member exchange and servant leadership theories) and, to a lesser amount, "organization" levels (e.g. Upper Echelons Theory), but the under-researched piece is leadership of self; even though theories have touched on elements of self-leadership (such as authentic leadership theory), self-leadership still lags behind the other levels of strategic leadership theory.

Self-Leadership

It is imperative that leaders are able to manage their subordinates and contribute to the leadership of the organization; but in order to do so, a leader must also have good leadership of self (Rogelberg et al., 2013). Self-leadership, which first appeared in the mid-1980s, is "a comprehensive self-influence perspective that concerns leading oneself toward performance of naturally motivating tasks as well as managing oneself to do work that must be done, but is not naturally motivating" (Manz, 1986, p. 589). Essentially, self-leadership theory explains the process through which leaders motivate themselves

and employ self-direction, which is necessary in order to lead others and the organization (Lovelace, Manz & Alves, 2007).

There are numerous behavioral and cognitive strategies that one can use to promote self-leadership. These strategies can be grouped into three categories: behavior-focused, natural reward, and constructive thought pattern strategies (Manz and Neck, 2004 as cited in Neck & Houghton, 2006). First, behavior-focused strategies increase self-management; these strategies, like self-observation, self-goal setting, and self-cueing are helpful when it comes to performing unpleasant tasks because they focus on increasing self-awareness, which is essential to behavior management (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Next, in order to maximize self-determination and competence, one should try to create situations that are naturally rewarding. These natural reward strategies can involve making the task itself as rewarding as possible, perhaps by giving oneself rewards for completing parts of the task along the way and focusing on the most enjoyable aspects of a task (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Finally, leaders should use constructive thought pattern strategies; examples of these strategies can include identifying and replacing dysfunctional thoughts with constructive ones, along with positive mental imagery (Neck & Houghton, 2006). For example, instead of focusing on an upcoming challenge as something that is impossible and ruminating about how difficult it will be, using constructive thought pattern strategies would include thinking of the upcoming challenge as a task that is achievable, and perhaps using behavior-focused strategies to set smaller goals in order to overcome that challenge. Underlying constructive thought pattern strategies is the concept of constructive self-talk, which is at the core of the present study.

Self-Talk

Scholars have defined self-talk as "dialogue through which the individual interprets feelings and perceptions, regulates and changes evaluations and convictions, and gives himself/herself instructions and reinforcement" (Hackfort & Schwenkmezger, 1993 as cited in Rogelberg et al., 2013). Self-talk is a multi-disciplinary topic: sports psychologists have long been studying the relationship between self-talk and athlete performance (e.g. Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Galanis, & Theodorakis, 2011), clinical psychologists have documented the negative relationship between constructive self-talk and depression (e.g. Burnett, 1994) and anxiety (e.g. Kendall & Treadwell, 2007), and education scholars have shown positive associations between self-talk and academic performance (Dembo & Eaton, 2000); it is only recently that organizational scholars have come to realize the importance of self-talk for leaders in order to be more effective at work (e.g. Rogelberg et al., 2013).

In the short time that researchers have been studying individual self-talk in organizational setting, the research is promising. With its emphasis on improving individual effectiveness, productive self-talk can help employees and leaders face challenges and thrive in their daily work roles. For example, Lovelace, Manz, and Alves (2007) posited that practicing self-leadership strategies like constructive self-talk can help "leaders gain more positive control in their work roles," (p. 379) which could be helpful especially in times of leadership transition. Although there are many different types of self-talk, researchers by and large agree that there are two main types: constructive and dysfunctional. Constructive self-talk is distinguished by elements of positivity while also being realistic, motivational, and instructional; dysfunctional self-talk is largely obstacle-

focused, negative, and ruminative in nature (Rogelberg et al., 2013). For example, a manager who is about to lead a meeting who has constructive self-talk might say to him or herself, "You've got this. This might be a tough meeting because of all the ground we have to cover, but it's doable. Just stay focused, stick to the agenda, and do what you can." This self-talk is motivational, has elements of instruction, but is also realistic in that he/she is acknowledging that the meeting will likely be challenging. Dysfunctional self-talk in this situation might sound like, "This is going to be awful. There's too much to do and there's no way we're going to get through it all. You might as well just cancel the meeting because it is pointless." Obviously this self-talk is starkly different, and it is important to realize that this person is focused on the upcoming meeting as an insurmountable obstacle rather than a challenge to be tackled; it is also pessimistic and overly negative in tone.

In the realm of leadership research, Rogelberg et al. (2013) recently found an empirical connection between constructive self-talk in leaders with more effective leadership of others. Specifically, they found that constructive self-talk was positively related to the leadership of others, while dysfunctional self-talk had a negative relationship with leadership, as evidenced by lower subordinate ratings of leaders' performance. They speculated that the reason for these relationships could be that constructive self-talk enables leaders to better tackle challenges, whereas dysfunctional self-talk does not empower leaders in this way, which leads to lower ratings. Rogelberg et al. also found that constructive self-talk was positively associated with innovation, while the opposite was found for dysfunctional self-talk, because "constructive self-talk is inherently linked to optimistic or opportunity thinking…and trying a myriad of

approaches to seek effective resolution" (p. 187). Finally, they found support for a negative relationship between constructive self-talk and job strain, likely due to the heightened ability to combat anxiety. All of these positive outcomes are not only important for the leaders' individual success, but they are also critical for the leadership of others and organization as a whole. Thus, if an organization wants to be as high functioning as possible, a useful focus could be improving the self-leadership skills and self-talk of its employees, and especially its leaders. Some scholars go so far as to say, "increasing our understanding of the self-talk process, and how it can be improved for all members of organizations, might be described as the ultimate key to employee and organizational effectiveness" (Manz & Neck, 1991, p. 94). Overall, self-talk appears to be important for improving individual's well-being and ability to contribute to the organization—making leaders as effective, unstressed, and innovative as possible—as well as the leadership of others.

Self-Distancing

Although previous research shows that constructive self-talk is helpful for individual success in an organization, there are still gaps in the self-leadership research, especially as it relates to organizational outcomes. Specifically, there have been calls in the self-leadership literature to "directly examine the extent to which self-leadership processes operate within the larger theoretical contexts of self-regulation…and self-control theories" (Neck & Houghton, 2006, p. 287). This call to integrate self-leadership and the self-regulation theory is currently being answered in other literature streams, namely in clinical and social psychology (e.g. Kross et al. 2014; Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006). The scholars in these realms have recently pointed out a critical

missing piece to understanding self-talk, one that leadership scholars have yet to examine: self-distancing. Self-distancing is the ability to analyze one's cognitions objectively; as we will explain, this ability could an important, unrealized piece for effective self-talk, and self-leadership.

It turns out that self-distancing has associations with important outcomes similar to those of self-talk, such as depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco & Lyubomirsky, 2008 as cited in Gruber, Harvey, & Johnson, 2009) and anxiety (Kross et al., 2014), yet the potential, positive outcomes have not been examined in the leadership context. It should also be noted that in the self-leadership literature, at least thus far, constructive self-talk has largely been treated as a broad category of self-talk. The research has shown that, as a whole, constructive self-talk is associated with positive outcomes; however, by examining other constructs that could improve one' self-talk, like that of self-distancing which has strong theoretical and empirical grounding, we could better understand what may be driving the effects—both positive and negative—that have observed to date. Understanding self-talk at a more granular level is not only useful from a practical perspective (e.g., identifying what specific self-talk skills should be trained), but also from a theoretical perspective of advancing our knowledge about self-leadership—and transcendent leadership more broadly—by integrating relevant research streams and examining the mechanisms through which self-talk can be beneficial.

To explain further, self-distancing, which has its roots in self-regulation theory, is the process by which people "transcend their egocentric viewpoint" (Kross et al., 2012). Beck (1970) first described self-distancing as the ability to objectively analyze one's cognitions; it makes sense, then, that distancing is central to cognitive behavioral therapy,

because objectively recognizing one's cognitions is the first step in being able to change them. Furthermore, Mischel and Rodriguez (1993) connected self-distancing with self-control and delay of gratification; in order to be able to control natural impulses, one must think of the bigger picture, which involves realizing that thoughts and feelings are not facts, but rather "mental events" (Kross et al., 2012).

Central to the construct of self-distancing are the different perspectives that people can take when reflecting on situations. Kross, Ayduk, and Mischel (2005) distinguished between the self-immersed perspective and the self-distanced perspective: taking a self-immersed perspective involves visualizing experiences through one's own eyes, while a self-distanced perspective entails taking an observer's point of view and providing instructions to oneself as another might do. According to Kross et al.'s (2005) research, self-immersion is associated with recounting experiences while self-distancing can instead encourage "reconstruing" experiences where someone can gain insight and learn more from the situation. This simple shift from the self-immersed perspective to a self-distanced one can allow people to be more reflective: by taking the fly on the wall approach, one can analyze the situation from an outside perspective, which promotes problem solving instead of rumination (Gruber, Harvey, & Johnson, 2009).

Joining Self-Distancing and Self-Talk

In terms of the connection between self-distancing and self-leadership, Kross et al. (2014) found that "the language people use to refer to the self may influence self-distancing" (p. 305). Specifically, through a series of studies, they found that participants who used non-first person pronouns and one's own name when referring to themselves during introspection—a time where self-talk is extremely prevalent—enhanced self-

distancing. There are two important issues with the work by Kross et al. (2014) that we would like to address in the current study: first, Kross et al. forced participants in a laboratory setting to use self-distancing in their self-talk, instead of examining spontaneous self-distancing—that is, self-distancing that naturally occurs during one's self-talk. Second, they were focused on clinical outcomes, such as stress and social anxiety. Thus, we wish to build upon their findings by focusing on spontaneous self-distancing and leadership outcomes, to which we now turn.

Although the propensity to engage in self-distancing has not been examined in the organizational space, there is some empirical literature that laid the foundation for our forthcoming hypotheses, in addition to the conceptual rationale presented above. Specifically, there are numerous beneficial outcomes to self-distancing: first, Gruber, Harvey, and Johnson (2009) found that self-distancing can buffer against the harmful effects of bipolar disorder. Ayduk and Kross (2010) also found that participants who self-distanced more experienced less cardiovascular reactivity—which is important for cardiovascular health. Finally, Kross and Ayduk (2009) found that self-distancing is associated with lesser amounts of rumination, which has translational benefits for depression. Although these health findings might seem unrelated, the important takeaway that is common across the clinical literature is that self-distancing is positively related to adaptive self-reflection and self-regulation (Kross & Ayduk, 2009). Being able to reflect on one's experiences in a healthy way is a core component of self-leadership (Neck & Houghton, 2006); as previously mentioned, being able to lead oneself effectively is an important element of effective, transcendent leadership (Rogelberg et al., 2013). This pattern of evidence leads us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Leaders who self-distance in their self-talk will be more likely to be effective leaders, as evidenced by their superiors' ratings of their job performance.

Beyond job performance, another reason that self-distancing is critical for leaders is because of its connection to self-awareness. Indeed, in their review of the derailment literature, Shipper and Dillard (2000) concluded, "a lack of self-awareness appears…to separate derailers from successful managers" (p. 332). A lack of self-awareness could mean arrogance or lack of empathy, both of which are counterproductive for managers. Similarly, Hogan et al. (2009) concluded that one key to successfully mitigating against management derailment is self-awareness; managers who do struggle can recover if they are able to evaluate their performance, learn from their failure, and improve. Although researchers have not yet specifically looked at the connection between self-distancing and self-awareness, Kross and Ayduk (2009) *did* find that self-distancing is positively related to self-reflection and self-regulation, which are seemingly synonymous—or at least related—to self-awareness. Thus, in addition to examining leadership performance, it is also important to examine the potential connection between self-distancing and self-awareness.

Hypothesis 2: Leaders who self-distance in their self-talk will have better self-awareness, as evidenced by low rating discrepancies between self and subordinate ratings of leadership.

First-Time Managers: When Self-Distancing is Critical

Gentry (2014) recently explained that first-time managers make up the majority of leaders in an organization, and that they are charged with leading up to 2/3rds of

employees. The transition from serving as an individual contributor to becoming a manager is extremely stressful (Plakhotnik, Rocco, & Roberts, 2011): employees must switch their mindset from focusing on their own work to motivating subordinates to do theirs. Success during this transition is critical for future leadership achievement: according to Kovach (1986), it is during this transition that the "derailment of fast-track managers generally occurs" (p. 41); thus, it is especially important to understand what factors can make these first-time managers successful.

The existing research on first-time managers shows that the difficulty with the transition largely stems from a change in role expectations: as Hill (2007) points out, the "the skills and methods required for success as an individual contributor and those required for success as a manager are starkly different" (p. 51). At the broader level, the derailment literature—which is more robust than the existing research on first-time managers—shows that the reasons managers fail largely have to do with poor leadership and relationship management (Gentry, Mondore, & Cox, 2007). Importantly, researchers have also concluded, "these [leadership and relationship management] problems are often exacerbated by major change and periods of increased stress," (Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2009).

The research on self-talk shows that self-talk is especially critical and prevalent during times of challenge, like the time of stressful transition to becoming a first-time manager. For example, Hatzigeorgiadis et al. (2009) found that constructive self-talk is critical for dealing with anxiety, and that the two are inversely related. Furthermore, Rogelberg et al. (2013) found that constructive self-talk is positively related to creativity and problem-solving, which are critical in times of transition and challenge. Thus, even

though self-talk is constant in leaders' minds, it is important to be aware of and control one's self-talk during stressful periods like the transition to being a first-time manager. Finally, we know from the clinical literature that self-distancing is related to self-regulation (Kross & Ayduk, 2009), and this self-regulation piece has been shown to be critical for stress management (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000).

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between self-distancing and leadership effectiveness ratings will be moderated by managerial status, such that the relationship between self-distancing and effectiveness rating will be stronger for first-time managers.

Before turning to the methodology of the current study, it is important to summarize the contributions of this work. As previously mentioned, self-leadership—at the core of which is self-talk—is a critical piece of transcendent leadership that researchers have yet to fully understand; research has shown that productive self-leadership can contribute to both leadership of others and of the organization, which is why it is so critical. In terms of the research on self-talk, researchers thus far have focused on the overall type of self-talk that leaders use; there has been very little research at a deeper level. Furthermore, the researchers who *are* examining self-talk at a more granular level—by focusing on the under-researched self-distancing—are largely focused on clinical outcomes. Thus, in order to more fully understand leadership success, the current study will integrate these two research streams. Finally, although understanding the possible benefits of self-distancing is fruitful for employees and leaders alike, it could be especially critical for first-time managers. In their research on fast-track managers, Shipper and Dillard (2000) concluded that early intervention is more successful than later

intervention, which could ultimately improve leadership success and reduce turnover. Given that the transition time is so critical, it is important to understand everything that can make these managers successful, like a simple, overlooked cognitive strategy of switching the target of one's self-talk.

METHOD

Sample

For this study, we used data collected by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) during a series of leadership development programs—"Maximizing Your Leadership Potential" (MLP) programs—from May of 2012 to December of 2013. Our sample consisted of 231 first-time managers and 234 non first-time managers; these managers were from Greensboro, NC, San Diego, CA and Brussels, Belgium. The average age was 39 years old, (*SD* = 8.31), they were mostly male (60.6%), and well-educated (57.6% had a least a college education). Most (54.2%) leaders were middle-level managers, with additional 24.3% in first-level managerial roles. The sample contained leaders from diverse industries, largely in the private sector (e.g., computer software, consumer products, insurance, and pharmaceuticals).

Procedure

Before the participants attended a MLP Program, each leader participated in a 360-degree feedback assessment, which we used for our outcome measures. Also during their pre-program work—approximately one week before attending—the leaders were asked by those at CCL to write a letter to themselves; the prompt for the letter was simple: "What one thing have you learned about leadership [since becoming a manger] that you would convey to yourself if you could go back in time?" The managers were not given any guidance on how long the letter was supposed to be, what format to write it in, or how to address themselves. On the first day of the MLP Program, the leaders had the opportunity to read their letters aloud—an opportunity they were unaware of when

writing the letters—in small groups and to formulate common themes as part of a team-building exercise. All participants agreed to have their letters used for future research.

Measures

Self-Distancing

Self-distancing was assessed in two ways using the letters leaders wrote to themselves: via content analysis coding and the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count text analysis program (LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, and Booth, 2001).

Coded letters: As previously mentioned, prior to attending the MLP Program, each leader—whether they were first time managers or not—was asked to write a letter to themselves reflecting on their transition to the role; these letters served as the self-talk corpus which we then coded for self-distancing. There is precedent in the small amount of existing literature on self-distancing that personal pronouns (such as you, your, he/she, etc.) are good indicators for distance. For example, in the work by Kross et al. (2014), the authors acknowledged that people use non-first person pronouns when referencing other people, "thus if people use these parts of speech to refer to the self, this enhances self-distancing by leading people to think about themselves as though they were someone else" (p. 305). In another recent study by Zell, Warriner, and Albarracín (2012), the authors coded self-talk along several dimensions including distancing; statements that included self-references in the form of "you" were coded as second person/distanced.

Given these aforementioned studies, we followed similar guidelines and coded each letter for the extent to which the manager used non first-person perspective, on a scale from 1-5 (where 1 = to no extent to 5 = to a great extent). An excerpt from a response that received a high score on self-distancing was:

> You began this journey wanting to change the business, implementing all of your ideas and lessons from past lives. It only took a few months for you to learn that you do not know all that you thought you did. You had to learn to listen to your peers, your superiors, and often most importantly your team. When you were trying to implement the new shipping notification process, initially you started force-feeding the plan to your team and suppliers. This didn't work very well for you and after a week of frustration, you came to the realization that your team understood the current process better than you and knew the roadblocks that you would encounter when implementing your new process. By listening to the people that "do the job", you were able to better understand the implications of your decisions and you ended up putting a process in place that ultimately enabled, you, your team and the suppliers to be successful.

The participant in this response goes onto reflect on himself/herself further using more of the pronoun “you,” without any mention of “I,” “me,” or “my”, etc, which is why we gave him/her a high score on our rating scale of non-first person pronoun use/self-distancing.

The coders were the first author on this paper along with an undergraduate coder who was trained on the task. In order to assess interrater agreement (IRA), we chose the r_{wg} index since we had multiple judges rating a single target—that is one letter—on a single variable using an interval scale of measurement (James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984). Recently, researchers have concluded that it is best practice to use a slightly skewed distribution as the null distribution for comparison when calculating the r_{wg} for each letter (LeBreton & Senter, 2008; Smith-Crowe, Burke, Kouchaki, & Signal, 2012), thus we

chose to follow these guidelines. As for a minimum for IRA, we set a cutoff for the r_{wg} of .70 (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). In cases where the r_{wg}s were lower than this criterion—of which there were 20/493—we invited a third, trained coder to decide on the best interpretation (Schreier, 2012). That is, the third coder read the passage, and gave a rating himself; in all but two cases, the third coder's ratings were in line with one of the other two coders, and in the couple cases where there still was not agreement, we discussed the letter and came to a final agreement.

Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count: In addition to coding the letters manually, we also analyzed them using the LIWC program. This computer program analyzes text by comparing the files on a word-by-word basis to a dictionary containing almost 6,400. The text analysis software produces the analyzed text as a percentage of total words found along certain language categories; in the present research, we solely used the program to code for the percentage of non first-person pronouns—you, your, yourself, he, she, they, itself, and their plural and possessive forms—which signal self-distancing. The reason for analyzing the letters using the LIWC in addition to manually coding them was to achieve methods triangulation, which is a best practice in qualitative research (e.g. Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2000). The LIWC has been used in other types of research such as communication studies (e.g. Hajek & Giles, 2003), political science (e.g. Heberlein, Adolphs, Pennebaker, & Tranel, 2003) and social psychology (e.g. Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2012).

Leader Performance

In order to assess leader performance, leader's supervisors, the leaders themselves, and leader's subordinates were asked to give their ratings on five items (e.g.

Sosik, Gentry, & Chun, 2012), which were used at independently at different points throughout the analyses. The five items were: 1) how would you rate this person's performance in his or her present job (1 = among the worst to 5 = among the best) 2) where would you place this person as a leader relative to other leaders inside and outside your organization 1 = among the worst to 5 = among the best) 3) what is the likelihood that this person will derail in the next five years as a result of his or her actions or behaviors as a manager (1 = not at all likely to 5 = extremely likely; reverse-coded) 4) to what extent does this person contribute to the overall effectiveness of this organization (1 = not at all to 5 = to a great extent) and 5) rate this person's overall level of effectiveness (1 = deficient to 5 = exceptional). Cronbach's alphas for these measures were .88, .91, and .90 for supervisor, direct report, and self-ratings of performance respectively.

Self-Awareness

There has been a debate in the literature surrounding how to empirically examine self-other congruence, and self-awareness more broadly, particularly as 360-degree feedback has gained popularity (Fletcher & Bailey, 2003). For decades, difference scores were popular when examining congruence between two constructs, but there have been numerous articles that have pointed out their methodological flaws (e.g. Atwater, Ostroff, Yammarino, & Fleenor, 1998; Edwards, 2001). In response to the issues surrounding difference scores, polynomial regression has been developed as a solution. Polynomial regression "uses components of difference scores supplemented by higher-order terms to represent relationships of interest in congruence research" (Edwards, 2001, p. 265), but the difference scores can actually be tested empirically. Polynomial regression, according to Shanock, Baran, Gentry, Pattison, and Heggestad (2010), can be used in

situations in which the researcher is interested in how combinations of two predictor variables—in this case, self- and subordinates' ratings of leadership ability (Sosik & Megerian, 1999; Moshavi, Brown, & Dodd, 2003)—relate to an outcome, like self-distancing. Given that we are interested in self-awareness and have access to multisource feedback, we examined self-observer—in our case leader-subordinate—performance-rating discrepancies (Sosik & Megerian, 1999; Moshavi, Brown, & Dodd, 2003) via polynomial regression as laid out in Shanock et al. (2010).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables are presented in Table 1. It is important to note that self-distancing was actually not significantly correlated to any of the focal outcome variables—it was only related to age and word count as previously mentioned. It is interesting that subordinate ratings of performance were correlated with both self ($r = .12$, $p < .05$) and supervisor ratings ($r = .41$, $p < .01$), but self and supervisor ratings of performance were not significantly related in this study.

Since our ratings of non-first person—our indicator of self-distancing—were correlated strongly with the LIWC results for non-first person, ($r = .72$, $p < .05$), and given their strong conceptual similarity, we decided to combine these ratings in order to create more robust indicator of self-distancing to be used throughout the analyses. We created the composite score of our ratings and LIWC ratings by first transforming both of them into z-scores and then taking the average to create a single score for each leader; the alpha for this composite was .85.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1

In order to test Hypothesis 1, we ran a multiple regression analysis. We used this analysis to test if self-distancing significantly predicted leaders' performance ratings—as rated by their supervisor. The results of the regression self-distancing accounted for less than 1% of the variance in performance ratings ($R^2 = .008$, $F(1, 463 = 3.76)$, $p = .13$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2

As for our second hypothesis, that self-distancing would be predictive of leaders' self-awareness, we ran a polynomial regression (Shanock et al., 2010). Before running the regression, which requires self (leader) and subordinate ratings of performance, we needed to create composite scores of subordinate ratings for those leaders with multiple subordinates. In order to create these composites, we checked the *ICC(1,K)* because we were interested in the stability of mean ratings, among multiple targets (i.e. leaders), as rated by a different set of judges (i.e. different subordinates of each leader) (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). The *ICC(1,K)* value was .89, which means that approximately 89% of the variance in the subordinates ratings was systematic. In addition, we also ran a series of r_{wg}s in order to assess agreement among subordinates about their leader's performance. Using the aforementioned minimum cutoff of .70—when comparing to a slightly skewed distribution which is appropriate for performance ratings given known biases (Conway & Huffcutt, 1997)—we removed 45 leaders from the polynomial regression analysis because there was a lack of meaningful agreement from their subordinates about their performance; this left us with a final group of 321 leaders.

Following the steps outlined in Shanock et al. (2010), before running the polynomial regression, we first centered the variables and then verified that there were enough discrepant values (e.g. subordinate ratings higher than leader ratings or vice versa) to proceed with the analysis. Indeed, more than half of our sample (58%) had values of performance ratings that were different (at least .5 SD) by group in one direction or the other. After confirming the existence of discrepant scores, we proceeded with conducting the polynomial regression analysis; we regressed the outcome variable

(self-distancing) on the centered leader and subordinate ratings, the product of the centered predictor variables, the centered squared subordinate ratings, and the centered squared leader ratings, controlling for age and word count.

The results of the polynomial regression analysis are reported in Table 3. Given that the overall model did not explain a significant amount of variance in self-distancing (R^2 = .03 F(5, 316 = 1.87), p = .10), it is not surprising that the four surface test values were also not significant, which resulted in a largely flat three-dimensional response surface graph (see Figure 1). Overall, self-distancing was not significantly related to self-awareness, thus Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3

Finally, for Hypothesis 3 we ran a moderated multiple regression to assess whether or not managerial status moderated the relationship between self-distancing and performance. In the first step, self-distancing and managerial status were included. These variables accounted for a significance amount of variance in leader's performance, as rated by their supervisor (R^2 = .013 F(2, 462 = 2.78), p = .05). After centering the variables, an interaction term between self-distancing and managerial status was added to the regression model, which did not account for a significant proportion of the variance in performance (ΔR^2 = .003, ΔF(3, 461) = 1.17, p = .28), meaning that managerial status did not explain a significant amount of variance in performance over and above self-distancing, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Supplemental Analyses

After finding a lack of results, we ran several post-hoc analyses in order to be thorough. First, since some of the letters were extremely short (the shortest being only 5

words), we checked to see if word count was distributed normally. We found the mean to be 277.28 words with a standard deviation of 139.24 words, with skewness and kurtosis values within normal ranges (.27 and -.9 respectively); the histogram and box plots also appeared normal. Nevertheless, we also tried running the analyses—all three hypotheses—after dropping word counts lower than one standard deviation away from the mean and the results were still not significant.

Although we hypothesized linear relationships—except for the self-awareness piece that is taken care of by the polynomial regression—we also tested after the fact to ensure that there were no non-linear effects. We tested for quadratic and cubic effects and neither result was significant.

We were curious as to whether we should combine non-first person with first-person to create a stronger index of self-distancing. Namely, we wondered if our coded ratings of non-first person and first-person, along with the LIWC ratings of non-first person and first-person could be combined into a single index (we actually took first-person out of the paper because non-first person is how we defined self-distancing, but we still coded/performed LIWC on first-person along the way). Thus, we performed a principle components factor analysis with Oblimin (oblique) rotation on these four items. The analysis yielded only one factor explaining a total of 69.80% of the variance. The fact that these items load onto a single factor could be initial evidence for creating a single index of self-distancing in the future using a combination of ratings; however, since we our theory and hypotheses were built upon non-first person only, we will leave this for future studies.

Finally, we also performed an extreme groups analysis. In this analysis, we created two groups: the first group contained those leaders whose letters were high on non-first person (scored a 5 on the 1-5 scale) and low on first-person (scored a 1 on the 1-5 scale). The opposite extreme were those leaders whose letters were low on non-first person and high on first-person, which would signal a self-immersed perspective. We decided to do an extreme groups analysis as a supplement in order to ensure a lack of a relationship; if there is no relationship between those that used non-first person pronouns—signaling self-distancing—to the greatest extent, then we could be more confident about our lack of results in the current study. Furthermore, we also performed this analysis because it can be used to detect "promising trends that may warrant further investigation" (Preacher, Rucker, MacCallum, & Nicewander, 2005). Even when solely focusing on those with the highest levels of non-first person/lowest levels of first-person, there were no significant relationships with performance (or managerial status; r = .08, .03 respectively).

DISCUSSION

Given the promising research in the clinical literature on self-distancing, we sought to extend these findings to the organizational realm and examine how leaders' use of self-distancing might be related to job performance and self-awareness. Even though we pre-determined that we had adequate power to detect relationships if they indeed existed, the results did not show support for our hypotheses: self-distancing, as it was operationally defined in this study, was not related to leader performance or self-awareness, and these relationships were not dependent on managerial status.

In reflecting on the reason for the lack of findings, there are numerous possibilities. First, it is possible that self-distancing is simply not an important predictor of leader's job performance. There have been previous studies that show a host of positive outcomes associated with self-distancing. Namely, research has shown self-distancing to be associated with adaptive behavioral outcomes such as diminished hostility (Grossmann & Kross, 2010); it has also been associated with lessened levels of depression, bipolar disorder, negative affect, and cardiovascular reactivity (Ayduk & Kross, 2008, 2010). The common thread between these outcomes is that they are largely physiological and/or limited to well-being. Thus, it is possible that the positive results that come from someone self-distancing are solely limited to the clinical realm and do not extend to outcomes such as job performance in the organizational space, which was the focus of this study. However, given the host of promising results associated with self-distancing, and the theoretical connection laid out in the beginning of this study—which focused on self-regulation as the connecting link between self-distancing and self-leadership—it is still possible that there *is* an unfound connection between self-distancing

and leader performance. The reason for the lack of findings could be due to a host of limitations with this study, to which we now turn.

Limitations

First, one of the main reasons for the lack of findings is the fact that the outcome of job performance was too distally related to self-distancing. While it was good to attempt to extend the findings from the clinical literature to a new context of organizations, an outcome more closely related to previous findings might have been appropriate. For example, Kross and Ayduk (2011) concluded, "self-distancing may facilitate adaptive self-reflection" (p. 189). Thus, perhaps organizational outcomes that involve adaptive self-reflection would have a relationship with self-distancing; one construct that comes to mind in this vein could be learning agility. Learning agility, which is a fairly new topic in the organizational literature refers to "the importance of developing different, more appropriate and possibly counterintuitive ways of doing things. It also captures a person's ability to learn quickly within a particular experience and to be flexible in moving across ideas and understandings" (DeRue, Ashford, & Meyers, 2012, p. 262). The ability to reflect on ways of thinking, troubleshoot, and be flexible would likely involve high levels of adaptive self-reflection; therefore, perhaps an outcome like learning agility would be proximal enough to self-distancing that they would be significantly related, as opposed to job performance, which is much broader and more distal.

A second limitation with the current study has to do with our narrow focus on self-distancing as the sole predictor. Namely, we made the decision to operationalize self-distancing as the extent to which the leaders used non-first-person pronouns when

reflecting on their experiences—based on similar work by Zell, Warriner, & Albarracín, 2012—and we only focused on this pronoun usage's relationship with job performance. When analyzing the letters, we did not code them for the extent to which they were constructive or dysfunctional; previous research has shown the importance of leader's self-talk being constructive for positive organizational outcomes (Rogelberg et al., 2013). Thus, it is possible that we were focusing on self-distancing in a vacuum and hoping to find a link between this small aspect of how leaders reflect and their performance, when in reality we perhaps should have combined self-distancing with a rating of how constructive/dysfunctional the leader is when engaging in self-talk. The decision to only focus on self-distancing operationalized in this way made for a clean study, but it is possible we should have considered other factors in the leaders' letters as well.

The last several limitations with this study both have to do with the fact that we used pre-collected data for the current study that came from a leadership development program. The first issue with this is that we did not have the opportunity to add in a self-rating of self-distancing. It is possible that some leaders chose not to write using a self-distanced perspective in this particular instance, but normally *do* reflect on their experiences using this perspective. Thus, it would have been prudent to be able to ask leaders to rate themselves on the extent to which they normally self-distance when self-talking to capture this possibility. Kross et al. (2012) included two items that asked participants to rate their self-distancing when analyzing their feelings, and these items indeed correlated with the positive clinical outcomes. Therefore, it is possible that the self-rating of self-distancing is important and could be used in combination with the coded corpus—or in lieu of—in the future. A second problem with our use of pre-

collected data is that we did not have any control over the prompt that the leaders responded to with their letters. The prompt simply read, "What one thing have you learned about leadership [since becoming a manger] that you would convey to yourself if you could go back in time?" While this prompt leaves room for the leaders to have creativity, it does not convey to them that they *had* to reflect on a challenge—which is when self-talk is particularly important and prevalent (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009)—or even that they had to refer to themselves using pronouns at all. In fact, in ~5% of the letters, the leaders did not use any pronouns at all and were purely instructional with their self-talk. Perhaps, if leaders were instructed to specifically reflect on a challenge—or even several different types of challenges like work *and* social ones—and refer to themselves with pronouns that they would normally use throughout their responses, then we would have seen a cleaner relationship to self-distancing and self-talk, and their ability to do these things the letters might have been related to their leader performance. Finally, given that we only had one instance of self-distancing behavior—and we do not even know if that single instance is typical of how they normally refer to themselves—it was likely difficult to predict a multi-dimensional outcome such as job performance from a different point in time (for a discussion of this issue see Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974). Thus, since we were only able to gain access to one instance of behavior in this study, our lack of relationships are not surprising. Overall, although the theoretical framework for the present study was logical, it is possible that the numerous limitations masked our ability to see the connection between self-distancing and performance.

Future Directions

Future research should continue to investigate the potentially positive outcomes of self-distancing in the organizational realm. In terms of specific avenues for future research, which build on our limitations, it would perhaps be beneficial to focus on outcome variables that are more proximal to self-distancing and were unavailable to us in the current study. One aforementioned outcome is learning agility because it requires a high level of self-reflection (DeRue, Ashford, & Meyers, 2012). Another specific outcome that could have a negative relationship with self-distancing could be job-stress since previous researchers have found a relationship between self-distancing and stress in the clinical setting (Ingerslev, 2013). Though it is possible that job performance is still a fruitful avenue for future research, outcomes such as learning agility and stress, among others, are also promising given their close connections with self-reflection and self-regulation.

Since several of the limitations with the current study had to do with the fact that we had previously collected data from a study focused on leader performance, it would be ideal for future researchers to carry out a quasi-experimental design. In the quasi-experiment, researchers would specifically instruct one group of leaders in an organization to self-distance in their reflections—by using non-first person pronouns—and the other group would be instructed to take a self-immersed perspective, by particularly focusing on the use of first-person pronouns. This is particularly important because the majority of existing research on self-distancing involves forced self-distancing (e.g. Zell, Warriner, & Albarracín, 2012; Kross et al., 2014), as opposed to "spontaneous" self-distancing where the participants are not *instructed* to self-distance

(e.g. Ayduk & Kross, 2010). In this setup, it would also be ideal for the leaders to reflect on challenges specifically—when self-talk is prevalent and crucial—and even include several different types of challenges inside and outside of work. Finally, it could be beneficial for future researchers to obtain ratings of a leader's ability to self-regulate and adapt—again, using a 360-degree feedback assessment—in addition to the other job performance items. These items could be important to add to our somewhat broad measure of leader performance, and there is previous research that shows a relationship between self-adaptation/regulation and self-distancing (Kross & Ayduk, 2011), which means they could be interesting outcomes on their own as well.

The final avenue for future research stems the fact that the only predictor we included in the present study was self-distancing. As previously mentioned, we were solely focused on leader's choice of pronouns—our operationalization of self-distancing—in this study. When analyzing the letters, we did not code them for the extent to which they were constructive or dysfunctional. Future researchers should therefore also code leader's reflections for the extent to which they use constructive/dysfunctional self-talk; perhaps self-distancing is a moderator between self-talk and leadership outcomes whereby those leaders who use constructive self-talk and self-distancing have better organizational outcomes as compared to leaders who only use constructive self-talk, and vice versa for dysfunctional and the self-immersed perspective. It would also be beneficial to broaden the definition of self-distancing to examine more than just pronoun usage; though they were an appropriate proxy in this situation given the previous research, there are also measures of self-distancing that could either be given to

leaders or the items could be coded for in their reflections (Mischkowski, Kross, & Bushman, 2012).

Conclusion

Understanding self-leadership is critical for maximizing leader's success in today's complex organizations. Although researchers have recently made great strides in understanding the importance of self-talk, there is still work to be done in order to fully understand the role this constructive thought pattern strategy. In this study, we explored the possibility that self-distancing was an undiscovered key to productive self-talk—and self-leadership more broadly—but we were unable to make the empirical connection. Nevertheless, future researchers should continue to pursue the construct of self-distancing outside of the clinical realm by learning from our limitations and pursuing more appropriate organizational outcomes.

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